

# Preserving the diversity visa helps the U.S. counter Chinese and Russian influence in Africa

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Vice President Harris visited Zambia, Ghana, and Tanzania in March for a one-week diplomatic trip through Africa. During her visit, Harris announced billions in clean energy and infrastructure investments from the private sector and the U.S. government, met with heads of state, and hosted events on American priorities in the region. The trip was the latest in a string of high-profile trips made by U.S. **officials** and came on the heels of the historic **U.S.-African Leaders Summit** held in Washington last year.

At the time, a senior Biden administration official noted, ~~the~~ U.S. “relationship with Africa cannot, and should not, and will not, be defined by competition with China.” But to many **onlookers**, enhanced U.S. focus on Africa appears to be – at least partly – an effort to counter Russian and Chinese influence on the continent.

**Conventional wisdom** sometimes casts the U.S. as inherently disadvantaged in this arena of soft-power competition. This line of thinking theorizes that African nations now prefer or will prefer Chinese and Russian aid since it comes without the **conditions** of democracy and human rights promotion often tied to American assistance. Comparatively, little thought is given to the built-in soft-power advantages the U.S. has over China and Russia, particularly in immigration.

Niskanen has **previously written** on the intersection between immigration, diplomacy, and foreign policy and how links created through immigration programs and links severed by immigration restrictions alter soft and hard power. The U.S.-Africa relationship is based on more than just immigration. Nevertheless, migration plays a unique role in the attitudes between governments and their people, and the battle over influence in the region is no different.

# The Diversity Visa Program

The Diversity Visa Program (DVP) is one of our most effective tools in strengthening U.S. ties in the region. It is also one of the most **maligned** and **consistently imperiled**.

The DVP issues 50,000 visas each year to nationals of countries with low rates of immigration to the United States. Its goal is to diversify the flow of U.S. immigration, providing a dedicated stream of annual immigration from countries that send few migrants to the U.S. The DVP is often called the visa lottery because the visas are distributed in a computerized lottery among the millions of applicants who apply each year.

The DVP has been one of the **biggest drivers** of annual African migration to the United States over the past two decades — accomplishing the goal of strengthening economic and cultural ties to the continent through orderly immigration pathways. Still, it often meets pushback from Republicans and is wielded as a negotiating concession by Democrats. As insecurity about the program's future mounts and Chinese and Russian influence in Africa grows, abolishing the program without preserving pathways for Africans would be a strategic mistake.

From 1995 to 2016, **Africa** received 39 percent of DVP visas. Scholars at the Migration Policy Institute **wrote**, "It is not surprising that African immigrants are overrepresented in the diversity program, given that they are underrepresented in the general immigrant population and the program is designed to promote pluralism in immigration flow." **Since 1995**, more than 400,000 people from nearly every African country have received diversity visas. In FY 2023, Africa was issued more diversity visas than any other region.

The following map shows the number of recipients and their derivatives on the continent from that cycle.

## Chinese & Russian advances in Africa

Policymakers are ignoring the soft power benefits the diversity visa offers in Africa just as China and Russia's influence and investments on the continent are increasing. The interest in Africa stems from a history of ties with some nations dating back to the Cold War, Africa's

**growing population** and resulting elevated importance, **increasing demand** for rare minerals, and opportunities in the agricultural sector.

Recent Chinese investment in Africa has been extensive, with over **\$155 billion** invested via the **Belt and Road Initiative** over the past two decades. These have reached **52 out of 54** African states, with some observers expressing concern about the **potentially predatory nature** of some of these loans. Cultural and political strategies have accompanied Chinese economic influence to increase the presence and soft power capital in Africa.

Moreover, these efforts have proved successful. Only one country, Eswatini, **has strong ties with Taiwan** after most other African nations have aligned with China in exchange for economic investments. African public opinion polls reveal that Chinese economic involvement is also viewed roughly as favorably as American economic involvement at **59% to 58%**, respectively. Indeed, among 34 countries surveyed by Afrobarometer, public opinion favors China in 17 cases, is tied in three, and favors the U.S. in 14.

Meanwhile, Russia has favored an asymmetric approach that reflects its comparatively limited financial resources. The war in Ukraine has hampered Russia's **long-term economic prospects**, making it unlikely to rise far beyond **even one percent** of the total foreign direct investment in Africa in the short-term. Recent **statements** by the Kremlin regarding grain shipments at a Russia-Africa summit further underscore Russia's struggle to balance economic fallout from their war with their influence efforts in Africa.

While Russia has made **significant inroads** in Africa's energy market, the bulk of its success has come from a geostrategic approach that relies on embracing **turbulent states**, framing Western powers as **neo-imperialist** in its information **campaigns**, and expanding its **unofficial presence** via entities such as the Wagner Group. The success of this irregular soft-power strategy can be seen to some extent in the **recent coup in Niger**, and more broadly through the **disproportionately high number** of African states who abstained from condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine in a key UN Assembly vote.

## The U.S. advantage

Despite these trends, the U.S. still maintains an inherent advantage regarding immigration and soft power. **China** and **Russia** each have African diaspora communities far smaller than the **2.1 million Africans** living in the United States.

There is also some modest evidence that the African diaspora in America has boosted pro-U.S. sentiment in the largest countries of origin among migrants. Among the African countries with public opinion data and more than 100,000 migrants in the U.S. (Ethiopia, Kenya, South Africa, Ghana, and Nigeria), attitudes comparing the U.S. and China in a **recent survey** favor the U.S. by an average of 5.4 points.

In contrast, net attitudes favor China by 2.94 points among all African countries surveyed. This 8.34 spread indicates a correlation between having a large diaspora community in the U.S. and feeling more favorably towards it.

Indeed, the five nations most favorable to China in this survey (Eswatini, Mauritius, Mali, Tanzania, & Sudan) total a U.S. diaspora of only roughly 130,000. The two nations most favorable to China (Eswatini and Mauritius) have diasporas so small in the U.S. that no reliable estimate of their size exists. In contrast, the five nations most favorable to the U.S. (Zimbabwe, Liberia, Namibia, Ghana, & South Africa) have a collective diaspora of at least 500,000.

While the diversity visa may not be able to significantly increase these numbers, it nevertheless offers a legal pathway for individuals from these countries to immigrate to the United States, therefore becoming counter-programing to any anti-American propaganda their relatives back home might be subjected to. Immigrants also send remittances home, which underscores the merits of the American economic model at a time when citizens of many African countries are looking to China as an alternative.

## Conclusion

While it is not a silver bullet, the diversity visa still constitutes a helpful part of the American soft power toolkit at a time of increasing Chinese and Russian influence. The DVP provides a significant scale of new ties to the region, ones that by their very nature wouldn't happen without the program.

Certainly, improvements can be made to the diversity visa. Making it more merit-based would help increase support among Republicans, who tend to favor high-skilled immigration. This could also help the visa counter China by ensuring America retains its edge in attracting skilled immigrants. Some ways to do this could be to reserve spots within the program for nurses from diversity visa countries or alternatively provide a few thousand visas to nationals studying in STEM fields.

Russian and Chinese investments in Africa are made with long-term political and economic goals in mind. For the U.S. to do the same, it must promote its image as a welcoming destination for all Africans. Doing so signals that for the U.S., global leadership and welcoming individuals from around the world are complementing priorities.