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Reconfiguring U.S.-Francophone Trade Relations: Challenges, Opportunities, and Policy Pathways

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Abstract:. This review analyzes trade and economic engagement between the U.S. and Francophone Africa. The paper highlights barriers that have plagued trade relations between the U.S. and the Francophone region. However, with an abundance of critical minerals, which serve as the base for manufacturing technological parts and products, the region cannot be ignored. Apart from its mineral resources, there are potential investment opportunities in agriculture and digital technology. Francophone Africa attains another level of importance with the need for the U.S. to secure its supply sources for its most critical needs and explore additional avenues for supplying essential raw materials. The review found that for the U.S to remain a competitive partner in the region, it must maximize the advantages that the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) offers. Policies and actions that support the full implementation of AfCFTA will not only give the U.S. access to a market of 1.7 billion people by 2030 but also reap the benefits of an integrated market where trade barriers have been significantly reduced or eliminated. The benefits to U.S. businesses with trade and investment interests in the Francophone Africa region and the continent are immense. Apart from AfCFTA support, the review found that the U.S. support for the financial policy reforms in the CFA Franc-dominated region will promote a more conducive environment for U.S.-Francophone Africa trade.

Keywords: U.S.-Francophone Africa, Trade Relations, Afcfta, Trade Barriers, Trade Potentials.

INTRODUCTION

The Francophone Africa bloc is resource-rich and possesses a market with great promise for lucrative trade. However, commercial engagement between the bloc and the U.S. has not been explored to the level capable of bringing substantial benefits to the two parties. As such, the full benefits of a trade relationship are yet to be realized. In 2022, the International Monetary Fund reported that six Francophone countries were among the seven fastest-growing economies in Africa (Oluwole, 2022).

Of the $6.5 billion raised by startups in Africa, Francophone Africa contributed $631 million, which targeted debt and equity financing (Danho, 2024; Partech, 2022). In 2024, against a drop in funding across Africa and parts of the world, Francophone Africa raised $226.2 million in venture capital funding (Partech, 2024).

Unlocking U.S.-Francophone Africa trade is significant because it can serve as an avenue to expand export destinations for U.S. goods, and unearth investment prospects for U.S. firms in sectors like energy, technology, and agriculture (U.S. International Trade Commission [USITC], 2020). With China's influence on the continent, evidenced by sprawling, capital-intensive infrastructural projects (Lew, *et al.*, 2021), it is imperative and strategically prudent for the U.S. to deepen trade relations with Francophone Africa to counter China's vast footprint in Africa. The emergence of the Sahelian alliance and the waning of the influence of the U.S. and France within segments of the Francophone Africa bloc (Schmitt, 2024) has necessitated the employment of an economic diplomacy strategy that would not only ensure mutual benefit but could repair and restore some of the United States' influence within the bloc.

This literature review will examine research from academic and policy institutions to highlight shortfalls and suggest approaches that would lead to enhanced trade and commercial relations to offset the gains made by America's rivals, ensure the protection of America's interests, and enhance security at home and abroad. The review will center on geopolitical, logistical, and institutional hindrances to improved trade between the U.S. and Francophone Africa. The findings will add to knowledge and understanding about America's trade and commerce relationship and dealings with Africa. This will enhance economic growth, expansion, and critical national objectives.

Recent scholarship has examined the diplomatic dimensions of U.S.-Africa economic engagement, highlighting how economic diplomacy tools such as AGOA, the Millennium Challenge Corporation, and Prosper Africa have shaped bilateral relations (Dafong, *et al.*, 2025). Building on this diplomatic framework, the present analysis extends the discussion to focus specifically on trade barriers

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and commercial opportunities within the Francophone Africa bloc.

BACKGROUND

According to the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (2024), the following countries have French as an official language or one of the official languages: Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Comoros, Congo, DR Congo, Ivory Coast, Djibouti, Gabon, Guinea, Equatorial Guinea, Madagascar, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Rwanda, Senegal, Seychelles, Chad, Togo, Tunisia, and Benin. However, other African countries do not have French as their official language, but large sections of their populations use it daily. These countries comprise the Francophone Africa bloc (Harsh, 2024).

Francophone Africa does not just present potential; the economic performance of some Sub-Saharan members indicates an actual economic upturn, which improves the outlook of the entire bloc as a viable and critical trade and investment destination. The World Bank (2025) projects that Sub-Saharan Africa will grow by 3.7% in 2025 and 4.2% in 2026 to 2027 (depending on security, inflation, and other external factors). Francophone Africa has a relatively stable inflation because 14 countries within the bloc use the CFA franc fixed to the Euro and backed by France's fiscal regulation (Doshi, 2024). 8 Francophone countries form the Union Economique et Monétaire Ouest Africaine (UEMOA), the West African Monetary Union. This organization was established to promote trade and economic integration among its member countries (West African Economic and Monetary Union, n.d.).

The Francophone African bloc is endowed with economic prospects. The francophone African economies have grown at more than 5% per year on average, thanks to agricultural exports, services, and urban consumer markets in the cities of these countries (Signé, 2018). In addition, the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is anticipated to boost intra-African and intercontinental trade if the continent's leaders can show a commitment to harnessing all the benefits of economic integration that it presents (World Economic Forum, 2025). However, the region also struggles with infrastructure deficiencies, political upheavals, and inadequate integration into global supply chains.

U.S. TRADE RELATIONS WITH FRANCOPHONE AFRICA

Initiatives

AGOA (African Growth and Opportunity Act), which came into effect in 2000 and was amended in 2015 to extend to 2025, is the primary trade engagement framework for Sub-Saharan Africa. AGOA offers approximately 6,500 duty-free products to the United States from eligible African nations. Although a few Francophone countries have experienced minimal benefits, the general level of participation from Francophone countries has been lower than that of Anglophone countries. In many instances, capacity limitations, language barriers, and bureaucratic bottlenecks may demotivate them from maximizing the full benefits of the initiative (Léautier, 2023).

To minimize these challenges, the Prosper Africa initiative was launched in 2019 to boost trade and investment between the U.S. and individual African countries (two-way trade) through simplifying services and access to financing tools. Nevertheless, analysts say Prosper Africa has failed to target Francophone countries specifically, where firms cannot manage U.S. trade systems with the same ease due to their inadequate expertise in language, law, and administrative processes pertaining to the U.S. trade networks (White House, 2022). Deeper engagement with Francophone Africa might simultaneously serve U.S. economic diplomacy and be a gateway for American businesses to emerging markets.

The effectiveness of these economic diplomacy initiatives has been critically evaluated by Dafong *et al.*, (2025), who argue that while programs like Prosper Africa were designed to counter Chinese and Russian influence, their implementation has been hampered by inadequate targeting of Francophone-specific challenges and the absence of a differentiated strategy from France's historical approach.

Trade and the United States' Global Rivals

To place the U.S.-Francophone Africa trade relationship in a broader context, it is important to consider how it compares with other large trading relationships. According to the European Commission, by 2024, bilateral trade volumes with Africa were valued at 346.1 billion Euros (European Commission, Directorate-General for Trade and Economic Security, 2025). There are historical ties, preferential trade agreements, including Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs), and large development cooperation

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programs that ease market access and capacity building (Bilal, 2021).

China has surpassed other actors to take the lead in trade partnerships with Francophone Africa and the rest of the continent. Capital-intensive flagship projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) signal Beijing's intent to continue to deepen trade, economic, and diplomatic ties with Africa as part of its overall strategy to assert its global influence (McBride, Berman, and Chatzky, 2023). Madagascar, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Cameroon, Benin, Togo, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, and Mali are among the beneficiary countries of this initiative. Trade volumes between China and Africa do not look set to slow in the foreseeable future. After 16 years of being Africa's leading trade partner, the China-Africa trade continues to generate significant value, with 2023 trade amounting to $262 billion (China Africa Research Initiative, n.d.), $295.6 billion in 2024 (Ouyang, 2025), and $134.16 billion from January to May of 2025 (Ecofin Agency, 2025). Chinese exports to Africa range from machinery, garments, and electronics, while Africa exports iron ore, copper, cobalt, and crude oil. Consequently, there is a significant trade deficit with Africa (Ecofin Agency, 2025). Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Africa, in 2023, was $3.96 billion, with the Republic of Congo and Niger among the top five beneficiaries (China Africa Research Initiative, n.d.).

Marin-Egoscobal (2020), points out that the European Union's trade strategy towards Francophone Africa focuses on broad sectoral integrations, two-way trade, and capacity-building in technology. China offers Francophone Africa a market to export raw materials while they supply Francophone Africa with finished products (Moses, Muchai, Engel, & Kedir, 2024). According to Moses, Muchai, Engel, and Kedir (2024), China's trade relations with Francophone Africa are heavily tilted towards government engagements. These are differences in how the European Union and China approach trade with Francophone Africa.

Conceptual Frameworks

The conceptual underpinnings of U.S.-Francophone Africa trade relationships are derived from various disciplines, including international trade theory, development economics, and foreign policy analysis. These theories and concepts clearly define the boundaries of understanding the complexities involved in bilateral economic engagement. They also act as fundamental bases that can inform policy-making and long-term strategic blueprints.

Classical trade theory, especially the principle of comparative advantage, still defines how we think about U.S.-Francophone Africa trade relations. According to the Ricardian model, countries should gain by specializing in goods with a comparative advantage and still ensure benefits to both trading parties (Krist, n.d.). Situated within the U.S.-Francophone Africa trade engagement, the Ricardian theory rationalizes why Francophone Africa can trade minerals and agricultural products with the U.S. Simultaneously, the U.S exports finished products, technology, and financial services. Economic theories have been modified to factor in the complexities of modern trade. As such, considering the constant movement of capital, workforce, and technology across countries and manufacturing products with components from different countries, gives an understanding of the potential benefits of trade between two countries.

Trade facilitation theory helps to understand the hindrances to U.S.-Francophone Africa economic engagement. "Trade facilitation encompasses policy measures that aim to reduce the costs of border crossing trade outside traditional market access policy tools such as tariffs. It examines how processes governing the movement of goods across national borders can be improved so that trade costs are minimized while, at the same time, safeguarding border protection objectives" (Grainger, 2011, as cited in Go, 2018, p. 5). This framework underscores the necessity of cutting down the costs of transactions, improving productivity at the borders, and streamlining customs procedures. These measures will contribute to increasing the volume of trade and trade cooperation.

The improvement in the standard of living of people in developing countries is at the center of development economics theory (Yusuf *et al.*, 2008; World Bank, 2024). This theory is essential for U.S.-Francophone Africa trade analysis because it provides a comprehension of the structural impediments and potentials in Francophone African economies. Development economics is critical because of its emphasis on aspects such as human capital development, financial sector enhancements, and technology deployment as key drivers of robust international trade cooperation.

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With the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU), the regional integration theory is in practice. According to Obadare and Patel (2024), ECOWAS is a successful example of regional integration on the continent. Aboagye (2025), points out that the breakaway of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger to form the Alliance of Sahel States is a classic example of the pitfalls of regional cooperation attempts and the greatest challenge to ECOWAS since its inception.

WAEMU received critical commendation from the International Monetary Fund for its ability to withstand shocks, reduce inflation, and achieve growth in 2023, as further growth was projected for 2024 and 2025 (International Monetary Fund, 2024). WAEMU's blueprint details understanding fiscal cooperation and its consequences for trade engagement. It also promotes a better appreciation of U.S. firms' peculiar difficulties when doing business with Francophone African economies that transact business with the CFA.

Trade and commercial engagement often serve larger strategic interests. Economic diplomacy and soft power provide the foundation for comprehending the relationship between trade and the furtherance of broader interests. The theory of soft power (Nye, 2017) provides insights into how the U.S. can optimize two-way trade relationships through educational, cultural, and technological transfer. These can also help U.S. companies that want to invest in Francophone Africa by enabling them to access opportunities in these economies.

Barriers to Trade with the United States

U.S.-Francophone-Africa trade is plagued by complicated challenges that hinder trade and commercial cooperation. These barriers are financial, administrative, infrastructural, and regulatory. The layered complexities inherent in these barriers, with profound appreciation of what they entail, and methodical approaches to tackle them, will improve trade relationships.

An important structural barrier to increased U.S.-Francophone Africa trade is the inadequacy of infrastructure. Significant infrastructure deficits in transport, energy, and information and communication technology raise the costs to trade (UNCTAD, 2024). These shortcomings undermine competitiveness and providing serious impediments to American exporters' access to French-speaking Africa. According to UNCTAD (2024), Africa has an estimated annual infrastructure financing requirement of $130-$170 billion. These infrastructure challenges have ripple effects that raise transaction costs, lengthen delivery times, and make French-speaking African markets unattractive for U.S. firms.

According to ElGanainy *et al*., (2023), among the non-tariff barriers that have become major institutional and regulatory hurdles to enhanced trade are cumbersome regulatory procedures, human capital shortages, institutional bottlenecks, infrastructure shortfalls, and immigration requirements, all of which hinder trade between the U.S. and Francophone Africa. Devermont and Harris (2021) identify the inability to deal with misconceptions about investing in Africa, the lack of deliberate action by the U.S. government to assist companies to invest in Africa, the absence of a conducive business environment, and corruption as some of the challenges that affect U.S. investments in Africa. Complicating further, many bureaucratic actors already have weak institutional capacity, limited enforcement mechanisms, and poor coordination. These combine to compound risks to U.S. exporters.

The monetary restrictions provided by the CFA franc systems further isolate Francophone Africa from trading with much of the rest of the world. The CFA franc system has been faulted for discouraging growth. It hinders structural transformation and industrialization by user nations. According to Sylla (2017), the CFA cannot promote trade integration between member states or facilitate bank lending from local banks. The Francophone monetary system denies French-speaking African countries sovereignty over their currency. It prevents member states from financing their development through self-credit and freely disposing of foreign exchange earnings (Zhang & Poulin, 2023). This has special implications for US companies wanting to establish trade connections, as the currency system severely curtails Francophone African partners ' financial freedom and makes these countries reliant on French financial institutions.

This monetary constraint intersects with broader diplomatic challenges, as Dafong *et al.*, (2025) demonstrate that France's diminishing influence in the region, coupled with the rise of alternative partners like China and Russia, has created a complex geopolitical environment that complicates U.S. commercial engagement efforts.

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Political instability and security issues are stifling growth in some Francophone African nations and complicating their trade relationships with the United States. Instability, political upheavals, and security threats in places such as Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger (Council on Foreign Relations, 2025) continue to generate uncertainty that stifles U.S. business investment. The insecurity in this region increases the risk of trade and investment in such jurisdictions. With the breakdown of the rule of law, there are no guarantees to safeguard trade and investment agreements.

The impact of cultural and linguistic hindrances is sometimes downplayed. However, they are key barriers to the increase of U.S.-Francophone Africa trade. Where there is non-uniformity in language skills between parties, it can create a lopsided advantage for proficient speakers compared to non-speakers of the language (Lecomte & Szymanski, 2025). In the context of U.S.-Francophone Africa economic engagement, relationships are affected adversely when cultural subtleties are lost on one another. This can fracture trade relationships and lead to a breakdown in communication. When two trade partners share underlying language and cultural features, it positively impacts their ability to engage in trade. The parties' ability to appreciate nuances and communicate effectively improves trade relations (Egger & Toubal, 2016, as cited in Seglah *et al.*, 2024). U.S. businesses must make deliberate efforts to understand these cultural nuances to thrive in the Francophone Africa business environment.

Opportunities for Trade

While much needs to be done to overcome the obstacles outlined in the preceding section, U.S.-Francophone Africa trade holds significant potential for the benefit of all parties. Adomako *et al.,* (2024) emphasize the abundance of trade and investment opportunities in Francophone Africa, especially considering its demographic of young people and abundance of mineral resources.

One of the greatest potentials in U.S.-Francophone Africa economic engagement lies in the extractive sector. And with China as the largest off-taker, Africa holds substantial reserves of global critical minerals for national and energy security (Baskaran, 2023). Research into commercially valuable rare earths used to make semiconductors, flash memory, and consumer electronics that can be found in the African continent could provide alternative supply options for Western governments. Private sector players can also explore alternative supply chains for these minerals (Simmonds & Hargis, 2023). The International Energy Agency forecasts that demand for lithium and graphite will increase among clean energy technology producers to about forty times the demand in 2040 (Soulé, 2024). The United States can establish economic cooperation with Francophone African nations with these minerals (Soulé, 2024).

Another prominent area that offers substantial potential for enhanced U.S.-Francophone Africa trade engagement is agriculture. Francophone countries of sub-Saharan Africa hold comparative advantages in agricultural production (cocoa, coffee, cotton, and tropical fruits), and there is rising demand for US agricultural technology, machinery, and processed food products (Arslan *et al.,* 2022). Today's global food security challenges have demonstrated the necessity for cooperation between American agribusiness and Francophone African producers and consumers.

Digital technology and the development of telecommunications infrastructure provide one of the best opportunities for American corporations to aid in Africa's digital transformation and develop new trade lanes. The uptake of digital financial services and smartphone technology boom across Francophone Africa reveals the market demand for American technological solutions, software, and digital services (Aker & Carroll, 2022). These are opportunities for U.S. companies experienced in fintech, e-commerce platforms, and digital infrastructure to achieve market presence while advancing African digital inclusion goals.

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) was created in 2018 (Okoli & Atelhe, 2021, as cited in Debrah *et al.,* 2024). It was established to enhance trade within Africa and remove impediments to trade among African countries (Habte, 2020). AfCFTA allows American firms to tap into interconnected African markets by cooperating with Francophone countries. China and the U.S. need critical minerals for development (Tucker, 2025). AfCFTA could prove highly beneficial for the mining and extractive sector in promoting investment partnerships between African countries and U.S. firms (Tucker, 2025). Thus, American businesses can utilize the AfCFTA and make Francophone African countries the hub of their production and distribution networks, while expanding into other African markets.

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The renewable energy sector also holds vast potential, especially regarding partnerships to develop renewable energy projects across Francophone Africa. The vast untapped solar, wind, and hydro resources of many Francophone African countries serve as investment opportunities in the development of American infrastructure as well as contributing to global climate goals (IRENA & AfDB, 2022; Matondo *et al.*, 2025).

Benefits of Enhanced Trade for Francophone Africa

AGOA is set to expire in 2025. The current U.S. administration has offered no indications about the future of the policy. In order to accelerate development, Francophone African countries must be deliberate and consistent with their strategies to strengthen their engagement with the U.S. in trade and commerce. With the U.S. now adopting a "trade not aid" strategy that will evaluate their envoys based on the volumes of business deals they broker (U.S. Embassy in Côte d'Ivoire, 2025), Francophone countries can benefit from this policy shift to promote to U.S. businesses the mutual benefits of industrialization and infrastructural development in critical and viable sectors of their economies.

According to the *2022 Africa Tech Venture Capital Report* (Partech, 2022), Francophone Africa attracted $613 million of debt and equity financing on the continent. With thriving technology startups across the financial technology, electronic commerce, and other digital solutions sectors (Danho, 2024) there is real potential for significant mutual benefit as the result of deepened commercial engagement between Francophone Africa and the U.S. in this sector.

There has been an overemphasis on trade in the extractive sector. Agriculture holds substantial benefits for Francophone Africa in the areas of job creation and industrialization. This is employment generation potential is crucial for the bloc, which has a youthful population (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2025). An enhanced trade relationship with the U.S. in the agricultural sector which could be U.S. market access for raw and processed agricultural products will bring enormous benefits to beneficiary economies in the Francophone Africa bloc.

Policy Recommendations

Policy interventions to enhance U.S.-Francophone Africa trade must adopt a holistic approach to addressing structural challenges. In addition, it must explore avenues of maximizing trade opportunities. Broad stakeholder involvement will be required for these policy recommendations to enhance trade between the U.S. and Francophone Africa effectively.

AGOA is due to expire in 2025. Its modernization and renewal are the most pressing policy issues that will continue strengthening U.S.-Francophone Africa trade relationships. Broad proposals from Congress to extend the program by 16 years through at least 2041 are critical for boosting investor confidence and providing U.S. investors long-term certainty (Schneidman, 2024). The modernized Act should emphasize thriving alongside AfCFTA (Rauch-Mannino, 2024). The eligibility criteria must be streamlined, goods expanded, and coverage aligned to boost America's supply avenues and cater to the evolving economic needs of Francophone African countries (Rauch-Mannino, 2024). Thirty-two sub-Saharan countries qualify for AGOA benefits as of 2024, with ten of these countries in the Francophone Africa region (Office of the United States Trade Representative [USTR], n.d).

Public-private partnerships serve as important mechanisms to overcome the lack of infrastructure that stifles trade relationships. African Development Bank (2024). According to the Africa Investment Forum (2024), agreements, commitments, and transactions across Africa underscored the need for collaboration to deepen the pool of infrastructure financing with development finance institutions, insurers, and export credit agencies. The U.S. should focus on developing new funding mechanisms to attract private sector capital and hedge investment risk for infrastructure projects in Francophone Africa.

AfCFTA is projected to have a market of 55 countries, 1.7 billion people, with a total value of $6.7 trillion by 2030 (World Economic Forum & Friends of the AfCFTA, 2024; Signé & Van der Ven, 2019). The AfCFTA strategy presents an opportunity for the U.S. to offer policy support to this continent-wide trade integration agenda in furtherance of its economic and business interests. The policy should include constructing liaison offices in the top Francophone markets to ease AfCFTA-related trade. There is a need to introduce capacity-building programs for African

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countries to maximize AfCFTA opportunities while setting up subsidized financing vehicles for U.S. companies collaborating with African firms in cross-border value chains.

These policy interventions align with the diplomatic engagement strategies outlined by Dafong *et al.*, (2025), who emphasize the importance of high-level diplomatic engagement and intentional policymaking that distinguishes U.S. approaches from historical French involvement while leveraging AfCFTA as a strategic platform for enhanced commercial relations.

Financial sector reforms that address challenges with the CFA franc system require diplomatic engagement that respects African sovereignty but advances monetary policies conducive to enhanced trade relationships. U.S. policy should support African-led initiatives for monetary reform while providing technical assistance for financial sector development that increases trade finance availability and reduces transaction costs for bilateral commerce. Kalu-Mba (2024) advocates for the extension of Prosper Africa to provide financial support for trade-related transactions.

CONCLUSION

This review examined the sectors with significant potential for U.S.-Francophone Africa trade. Critical minerals, technology, and agriculture are some areas that can be explored for enhanced trade engagement. In the same vein, regulatory barriers, administrative and institutional limitations, and infrastructure deficits have been identified as some of the barriers to improved trade between the U.S. and Francophone Africa.

The analysis found that for trade to flourish between these parties, the United States must leverage the opportunities that AfCFTA offers to establish itself as a formidable trade partner in the Francophone Africa region to advance its economic and geopolitical interests. Other initiatives, like Prosper Africa and AGOA renewal, can be repurposed to enhance trade between Francophone Africa and the United States. In addition, the U.S. must offer support in areas like infrastructure financing to help improve the infrastructure base of these Francophone African countries. This is a critical barrier hindering trade, and any targeted support to reduce the infrastructure challenges will ultimately be favorable to the business and economic interests of the U.S.

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