

U.S. Policymakers Need to Mind the Gap between Think Tanks and Geographic Seams: Policy Recommendations for Improving Research Studies and Expert Commentary on Africa and the Middle East at American Think Tanks

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In the *United States Strategy toward Sub-Saharan Africa*, the Biden Administration [declared](#) transcending geographic seams to be a national security priority. However, this declaration does not appear to have spurred systematic changes in the production of research studies and expert commentary on African affairs within the United States think tank community.

An exploration of the metatags used to label commentary articles published on an African affairs blog by a major United States think tank serves as case in point. During the first three years of the Biden Administration, there were 293 articles that provided general commentary on policy relevant issues published on the *Africa in Transition* blog of the Council on Foreign Relations. These articles were indexed using 1402 metatags. Remarkably only one of these articles was labeled with a single metatag that points to a North African country. Assuming that these metatags provide a reasonably accurate description of the geographic themes in the underlying content, then the [Africa in Transition](#) blog seems to reinforce the artificial bureaucratic division that has long existed between North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa in the context of United States foreign policy making.

Far from transcending the geographic seams, this publication appears to be rife with geographic bias that directs the attention of politicians, policymakers, and regional experts away from these very seams. The authors not only expect that such geographic bias is widespread in the research studies and expert opinions produced within the United States think tank community since the last U.S. presidential election. They also expect that these will not be limited to the geographic seams that exist between North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa. If the Biden Administration is serious about making progress on transcending geographic seams, then the authors argue that the White House should take immediate action to tackle this problem.

A successful response requires a collaborative effort between the United States government and the think tank community. On the one hand, American think tanks need to start producing more knowledge on important geographic seams. This almost certainly would require more critical reflection on the root causes of their geographic bias. On the other hand, the United States government needs to start requiring think tanks to produce knowledge on important geographic seams when it funds their research studies and expert commentary. This would not

only require incorporating such requirements not only into federal funding solicitations. It would require evaluation and monitoring down the road.

The United States Department of State (State Department) almost certainly would need to play an important role in affecting these systems-level changes. This could start with the convening of think tanks that receive funding for research studies and expert commentary on U.S. national security and foreign policy issues. This would provide an opportunity for both sides to explore how the think tank community is approaching geographic seams as well as their awareness of geographic bias in their own work. Such a convention would help to survey the questions that are needed for an independent rapid review to be conducted to determine the current state of geographic bias that exists in research studies and expert commentary produced by American think tanks. Once that baseline has been established, then State Department could lead the development of a national action plan for addressing gaps in knowledge about geographic seams in federally funded work by American think tanks. This would provide a much needed pathway for achieving short-term and long-term outcomes that would help policymakers be able to better transcend geographic seams in U.S. national security and foreign policy activities.

Geographic Seams

In the context of American foreign policy, the concept of geographic seams is neither well-defined nor sufficiently researched. At this exploratory stage, a geographic seam might be said to be a location of policy-relevant interaction between two or more regions. Logically, these interactions could occur on land, at sea, or in space. They could also occur at a particular point in time or over a period of time. In other words, geographic seams are context-sensitive phenomena.

As noted, these geographic seams depend on the existence of regions. These regions are essentially social concepts that tend to be brought into existence within social institutions (e.g. foreign services, defense ministries, intergovernmental organizations). They are not ontologically objective phenomena. This becomes immediately evident when one considers Djibouti. In some social institutions, it is [treated](#) as a Middle Eastern and North African country. In others, it is treated as a Sub-Saharan country. In these cases, regions count as institutional facts. What counts as a geographic seam for the State Department does not necessarily count as a geographic seam for the United States Department of Defense. Nor does it necessarily count as a geographic seam within the The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China.

The Biden Administration has [declared](#) that it is a national security priority for the United States Government to transcend these geographic seams in its national security and foreign policy activities. Moreover, it has placed special emphasis on transcending the geographic seams that exist between the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs and the Bureau of African Affairs. Specifically,

the geographic seam that exists between North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa. The *United States Strategy toward Sub-Saharan Africa* even refers to this location of policy interaction as an “[artificial bureaucratic division](#).” This makes sense when one considers the Greater Sahel. This subregion clearly straddles the [Line in the Sand](#) that exists between North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa. (Note, it also functions as a [shoreline](#) between Africa and the Middle East. That appears to be overlooked in the national strategy.)

These geographic seams are extremely relevant to U.S. national security and foreign policy interests. To illustrate this point, consider the following examples:

- **Chad:** U.S. Ambassador Alexander Laskaris [points out](#) that illicit gold trafficking is a cross-regional phenomenon. It starts with artisanal and small-scale gold mining in Chad. However, these producers depend on traffickers in Libya to get the gold to markets in the United Arab Emirates.
- **Sudan:** Talal Mohammad observes that the Sudanese civil war has become a [proxy war](#) involving Middle Eastern and North Africa powers. Prominent examples [include](#) Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

In both cases, one cannot fully understand the policy issue by simply understanding the dynamics at play in Sub-Saharan Africa. One must also understand 1) the dynamics at play in the Middle East and North Africa; 2) the interactions between the dynamics at play in the Middle East, North Africa, and Sub-Saharan Africa.

One of the major problems with these artificial bureaucratic divisions is that they promote the drawing of orientalist hardlines in the minds of national security and foreign policy stakeholders. These hardlines can reduce the quality of decision-making. Interconnected issues can become invisible. Or they can be overlooked. Lessons can be forgotten. The maneuvers of competitors can slip beneath the surface. Reaction times can slow. It is therefore remarkable that more attention has not been paid to the geographic bias that exists in the evidence base that is available to U.S. policymakers on African affairs. It is not as if the scholarly community is not aware that this geographic bias exists. Prior researchers have [shown](#) that there are far more knowledge gaps about some policy issues in smaller African countries than in larger African countries.

Within American think tanks, these hardlines have resulted in a stovepiped network of regional studies programs. It is therefore not surprising that the American think tank community struggles to make sense of empirical phenomena that transcend geographic seams. In practice, these regional programs tend to try to make sense of empirical phenomena on the basis of dynamics at play in their own region. However, they tend to gloss over the interactions between the dynamics at play in their region and the dynamics at play in other regions.

Exploratory Study

Over the last few months, we have been conducting an exploratory study of the geographic bias that exists in the articles that were published on a single blog platform about African affairs by a single U.S. think tank over the first three years of the Biden Administration. Specifically, we have sought to answer whether there is significant geographic bias in the metatags that are used to label the commentary articles that are published on this website. These metatags are important because they help to make it easier for the blog's audiences to understand what the content is all about. Of course, this presents a double-edged sword. If the knowledge claims that are made on those platforms are infected with geographic bias, then there is a risk that human audiences and large language models will end-up learning to misunderstand the relationships that exist between different concepts, categories, and topics that exist out there in the world. This includes diplomats, policymakers, and soldiers who are responsible for conducting African affairs on behalf of their respective governments.

Our study examined the 293 general commentary articles that were published on the Africa in Transition blog of the Council on Foreign Relations between 21 January 2021 and 20 January 2024. Remarkably, our preliminary findings show that only 1 of the 1402 metatags (0.07 %) that were used to mark-up the selected articles pointed to a North African or Middle Eastern country. Specifically, that metatag pointed to Morocco. In comparison, 174 metatags (12.41%) pointed to Sahelian countries. (For the purposes of our analysis, these [include](#) Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, Chad, and Sudan.) Of the Sahelian countries, 121 metatags (8.63%) pointed to Nigeria, the vast majority of all metatags pointing to an [independent state in the world](#). Meanwhile, 19 (1.36%) pointed to Sudan. Combined, the 175 metatags, which refer to the total number of metatags for either a Sahelian country or a Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs country, constituted 12.48 percentage of all of the metatags used across the selected articles

We found this pattern of metatag usage to be remarkable. With respect to the matter of geographic seams, it appears to suggest that the selected publishing platform not only places great emphasis on foreign policy issues that are situated along the geographic seam between North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa. It tends to make sense of these issues through the dynamics at play in Sub-Saharan Africa. Problematically, it does not place similar emphasis on the dynamics at play in the Middle East and North Africa, let alone the interactions between the dynamics at play in the Middle East, North Africa, and Sub-Saharan Africa.

While these are preliminary findings that are based on a single case, our hunch is that there is considerable geographic bias in the research studies and expert commentary published by American think tanks. In adjacent domains of knowledge, prior researchers have shown that. For example, prior scholars have found that there is a bias against [content related to Africa](#) on Wikipedia. Furthermore, media representations have shown bias by perpetuating [geographic, population and poverty myths](#) about Africa. Furthermore, we are not aware of industry guidelines and standards to mitigate against geographic bias in the research studies and expert

commentary published by American think tanks. That suggests that there is not a widespread recognition that geographic bias is a serious problem that merits management.

Policy Recommendations

Given the serious risks of misunderstanding geographic seams posed to U.S. national security and foreign policy interests, the authors believe that much more should be done to manage the risk of geographic bias in research studies and expert commentary published by American think tanks. In search of improvement, the authors therefore propose the following four-step iterative process that could be used to produce near-term results:

1. **Define the problem:** The United States Department of State should be directed to establish a cross institutional working group that brings together the users and funders of knowledge production by think tanks within the United States government and the management, researchers, and publishers who are involved in knowledge production at American think tanks. This working group should be tasked with providing an overall set of problem statements, principles, priorities, and initial actions related to the production of think tank knowledge about geographic seams. Within this working group, sub-working groups should be established that would enable each of the stakeholder groups to explore their perceptions, understandings, and assumptions about geographic bias within their own community of practice.
2. **Identify the actual extent of the problem:** After the working groups have produced their initial outputs, a rapid evaluation should be undertaken to establish the extent of knowledge that exists about geographic seams across the research studies and expert commentary published by American think tanks. This would establish two baselines. The first would be the baseline for all research studies and expert commentary published by American think tanks. The second would be the baseline for all research studies and expert commentary published by American think tanks that have been funded by the United States government. It would also reveal patterns of geographic bias, explore existing policies related to transparency and metatags, and identify existing funding incentives that encourage or discourage knowledge production about geographic seams.
3. **Develop an action plan:** Once the evaluation has produced its findings, the working group should be tasked with developing an action plan for achieving a set of clearly defined short-term and long-term goals and objectives. At a minimum, this action plan should identify near term objectives, describe, and prioritize the activities, set incentives, allocate the required resources, set realistic deadlines and milestones, specify how the impacts of the activities will be measured, and outline the conditions under which the action plan will be reviewed and updated.
4. **Follow-up and review:** Once the action plan has been developed, the working group should be tasked with actively monitoring and evaluating its implementation. This should

revolve around the principle of continuous improvement. Whenever the achievement of goals and objectives goes off course, the working group will need to ensure that lessons are learned and adjustments are made.

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