

12. Major External Players in Africa: A “Competitive Chain”?

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Around 15 to 20 years ago, when the United States under the leadership of George W. Bush suddenly discovered that sub-Saharan Africa “had growing geo-strategic importance” and was a “high priority for the Administration” – a belief that in practice was effectively dropped by subsequent presidents – essentially two underlying reasons could be found: the “long war” against terrorism, in which the threat from the Sahara also spread down the continent, and the US energy strategy, where increased diversification in sources was essential. China was not about. It was not even considered. Well, in truth, China was about, but it was not visible in the leading reasons for Washington turning its gaze to Africa. Yet, it did not take long for it to become clear Beijing had begun, from about the turn of the century, the systematic, vigorous penetration of the continent, running hand in hand with increased Chinese momentum across the globe. The American view was of China projecting its shadow across Africa. Despite taking slightly varying practical forms, this is essentially the paradigm adopted by the United States in recent years when looking at Africa. It has sought to regain lost ground in this part of the world and chase the dragon to prevent further expansion, especially now the competition is pretty much across the board. These two major powers are not the only countries in this race. As Washington has its mind on chasing Beijing, it is being stalked by Moscow, which is looking

– albeit with new methods and on a completely different scale – for new ways to trip up and harm the West. One could call it a competitive chain in which China, having decided largely on its own to enter Africa early on, is dragging the US and Russian reactions behind it.

Clearly this is an overly simplistic image. First, sub-Saharan Africa is crowded with external players, well beyond the three mentioned above. The cause is international competition, but one of the consequences is the inevitable fuelling of the challenges and the struggles between these non-African powers. The players moving around and watching each other are not only American, Chinese or Russian. France is trying to keep its historically leading role in a large portion of the region. Beijing has also awakened reactions from other rivals that are concerned about China's rise, especially Japan and India. Closer to Africa, a number of nations in the greater Middle East are increasingly exposed to sub-Saharan Africa, taking with them their complex tangle of antagonisms.

The proliferation of external players in Africa is a good reason to try and make some sense of such a complex picture, perhaps dividing the countries into groups – could one call them “generations” of countries? – based on when they arrived or returned to the continent. One could have the traditional powers (that, at the end of the Cold War, were effectively France, the United States and Great Britain), the first wave of emerging powers (China, of course, but one should include India, Japan, Brazil and Russia) and, now, a second generation of emerging powers (Turkey, South Korea, Indonesia, the Gulf States and a few others). Alternatively, one could group the countries into the great global powers or, at least, those with global aspirations (America and China, with Russia a bit behind) and those regional powers whose projection into Africa is inevitably more limited (the Gulf States and Turkey are the obvious cases, but France is probably in this category as well, as it sees west and central Africa largely as home ground).

Providing a more comprehensive picture of the African scenario would also require some recognition of the actions of those states that actually make up the continental map. Such countries undoubtedly have asymmetric power relations with external players – and among themselves – but they are certainly not entirely passive lands. For starters, basically no states are completely or largely aligned with one of the foreign powers in a way that would keep the door firmly closed to all others. African states generally have political and economic ties to major foreign players that are rivals, although they might favour (or be dominated by) some rather than others, depending on the space this gives them for action.

Given the above provisos and especially the incomplete nature of the picture that will be drawn below, reconstructing and comparing the strategies, commitments and trajectories of China, the United States and Russia can help to understand the form the rivalry among the great foreign powers in Africa is taking and how it might develop.

China and Africa

In 2000, it became clear just how much China was focusing on Africa, after a short period in which it moved a little under the radar. From then, China's presence and story in Africa has grown richer, with innumerable developments and nuances, and increasing attention and preoccupation from the West and beyond. First, it has been about the centrality of mineral and energy resources along with the rapprochement with autocracies of which the Americans and Europeans are not fans. Next comes the unstoppable increase in trade (imbalanced, clearly, but not totally in one direction), followed by the controversial question of land grabbing and the large-scale funding for the enormous infrastructure projects in multiple corners of the continent (ports and airports, dams, roads, railways and so on). The latter bringing the feared "debt trap" – i.e. an African country becoming so indebted to China it has to "handover"

strategic assets to Beijing, although this has never materialised in practice. Additionally, one has to include a range of slightly different aspects, from participation in UN peacekeeping to Chinese inroads into the world of African media. Since being launched in 2013, China's Belt and Road Initiative has been the framework for some of this.

The seemingly unstoppable expansion of China in Africa has no equal, but it definitely has political implications both for the many states in which all this has unfolded and for the broader power relations between China and its international competitors. One cannot rule out the possibility that China has reached the height of its African expansion and that the future will hold a contraction or at least stabilisation of Beijing's efforts.¹ In mere financial terms, for example, the US\$60 billion put on the table at each of the China-Africa summits in 2015 and 2018 was cut to US\$40 billion at the equivalent forum in November 2021. This drop is even more evident when looking at the number of projects in each of the sectors China has focused on and at the bursaries and scholarships offered to African students. Such reductions probably cannot be disentangled from the pandemic and the slowdown in Chinese growth – one can easily find spheres in which collaboration has actually grown, particularly the battle against the pandemic and climate change – but they also hint at a strategic shift.

The current readjustment has both quantitative and qualitative hues, at least temporarily. The Chinese strategy long focused on developing – and funding – African infrastructure, but it now seems to be more about promoting trade, especially a better trade balance to help cut Africa's commercial deficit.

Some observers see China as setting aside its concentration on the structural transformation and industrialisation of Africa, which it aided through infrastructure development, in favour

¹ See, for example, Y. Sun, *FOCAC 2021: China's retrenchment from Africa?*, Brookings, 6 December 2021; "China cuts finance pledge to Africa amid growing debt concerns", *Financial Times*, 30 November 2021; "Africa's ties to China and the West are starting to look more alike", *The Economist*, 4 December 2021.

of seeing the continent as a consumer market for its own products, in a manner not unlike what many other donors do.² Should this change prove to be correct, it will be important to understand the broader implications and, for the other major powers, determine the consequences. Yet, on many fronts, China is still the playmaker.

United States and Africa

As touched on above, the United States strode into the new century with an unexpected renewal of interest in Africa. The dual motive of the international war on terrorism and the need to diversify energy procurement drove the G.W. Bush Administration to back the increase in political and diplomatic attention with a series of significant military initiatives (notably, opening a military base in Djibouti and the creation of an Africa Command at the Pentagon) and a substantial increase in development aid. When the next president took office, Barack Obama, expectations were raised, but largely disappointed, with a few exceptions (Power Africa, Trade Africa, US-Africa Leaders Summit) and the first attempt to actually put the overall US strategy down on paper.³ In general terms, once the framework provided by the Cold War had dissolved, successive US Presidents struggled to outline and adopt an African policy that went beyond a succession of unrelated programmes, such as the African Growth and Opportunity Act (Agoa) in Bill Clinton's time, President's Emergency Plan For AIDS Relief (Pepfar) under Bush, Power Africa from Obama and Prosper Africa in the Donald Trump Administration.⁴

² C. Lopes, *High level readout on FOCAC 2021: Expert view on the evolution of the Chinese commercial footprint in African markets*, Atlantic Council, 30 November 2021.

³ The White House, *U.S. Strategy toward sub-Saharan Africa*, June 2012.

⁴ A. Hrubby, "*It's time for an Africa policy upgrade*", *Foreign Policy*, 30 November 2021.

In much the same way as happened on other foreign policy fronts, Trump's election to power marked an effective "pivot away from Africa"⁵ by Washington, with this new era of disengagement enshrined in the 2018 New Africa Strategy. As the national security axis shifted from fighting terrorism to great-power competition, Africa gained a new role as terrain for the US and China to face off, frankly and directly, without getting overly lost in the kind of flattery and promises of equal partnership that so often characterise the efforts by foreign players to court Africa. Washington did not mince its words in determining that "great power competitors, namely China and Russia, are rapidly expanding their ... influence across Africa ... China uses bribes, opaque agreements, and the strategic use of debt to hold states in Africa captive to Beijing's wishes and demands ... Such predatory actions are sub-components of broader Chinese strategic initiatives, including 'One Belt, One Road'... with the ultimate goal of advancing Chinese global dominance".⁶

So, the priority was China, not Africa. The continent was simply swallowed up in the growing clash between Washington and Beijing, which was already playing out in a number of matters and parts of the globe. American leadership had to become central once more and being aligned to Washington at international fora became an explicit condition for African countries, under threat of having their development aid cut. From that moment on, every dollar spent in Africa would serve US priorities.

When the United States became aware of just how much ground it had already lost, it effectively led to a further American retreat, rather than bringing the expected new momentum to this revival. Instead of encouraging increased focus and growing investment, the Administration preferred to reduce the troops and resources in the region, such as those used to battle jihadists

⁵ M. Hicks, K. Atwell, and D. Collini, "Great power competition is coming to Africa", *Foreign Affairs*, 4 March 2021.

⁶ U.S. Embassy in Senegal, *The Trump Administration's New Africa Strategy – Remarks by National Security Advisor Ambassador John R. Bolton*, 13 December 2018.

in Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon and Somalia.⁷ Over this time, trade with Africa was 1.5% of total US foreign trade, down from 3.6% in 2010. The failure of Trump to make even a single visit to Africa was clear proof of this disengagement, the first American President since the time of Ronald Regan not to set foot on the African continent at all. Thus, in complete contrast to the idea of regaining ground lost to China and its harsh criticism of the Chinese approach in Africa, the United States provided absolutely no viable alternative⁸ – not even defending democracy was discussed – that could compete with the coherent, concrete strategy adopted by Beijing. America merely had guidelines. In this case, losing ground is likely, so holding what you have is highly improbable.

The growing intensity of global competition is precisely why it would have been necessary to respond to the challenges and to defend, in Africa, those traits that the West likes to see as its own, distinctive aspects: democracy and freedom, free trade and market economy. The US exit was a simplistic response to the evidence that what happens in Africa often goes beyond its borders, from terrorism to migration and the pandemic.⁹

Joe Biden has accepted as one of his leitmotifs, right from when he was on the campaign trail that led him to the White House, a commitment to restoring American global leadership and respect for democracy. Although the President has not yet set foot on the continent in person – partly because of the restrictions imposed by the pandemic – his Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, did go to Africa in November 2021 for a three country tour during which America's draft new strategy was made clear. In a speech entitled *US and Africa. Building a 21st century partnership*, the backbone of Washington's guidelines for the continent was set out, ready to move beyond a first year in office in which the Administration largely limited itself to

⁷ M. Hicks, K. Atwell, and D. Collini (2021).

⁸ J. Temin, "Africa is changing – and US strategy is not keeping up", *Foreign Affairs*, 8 October 2021.

⁹ Cf. M. Hicks, K. Atwell, and D. Collini (2021).

the two big questions: the Tigray crisis in Ethiopia and regime change in Sudan.

The rhetoric is definitely new. China is not mentioned directly even once, confirming the United States does not want to limit the partnerships of African countries with others, but reinforce its own – “We don’t want to make you choose. We want to give you choices”.¹⁰ – recognising that the competitive context makes its necessary to position itself as the “partner of choice”.¹¹ This also explains the need to flatter African leaders – “The United States firmly believes that it’s time to stop treating Africa as a subject of geopolitics – and start treating it as the major geopolitical player it has become”¹² (far easier to swallow than Trump’s label of shithole countries) – and to promise to put values at the centre, particularly the defence of democratic values and the institutions that produce them. This is one of the five priorities identified – along with other rather predictable ones (pandemic, climate change, inclusive global economy, peace and security). The visit to Nigeria, Kenya and Senegal was designed to reward three virtuous cases of “democracies, engines of economic growth, climate leaders, drivers of innovation”.

For now, though, this new US “strategy” stops here. It is little more than a sign of a change of course – and, if nothing else, greater willingness to remember Africa, starting with proposing the US-Africa Leaders Summit once again in 2022 – before more concrete steps to follow. A return to defending democracy is an essential change in trying to have as many African countries as possible as allies to combat the return of authoritarian practices supported or even actively promoted by countries like China, Russia, Turkey and the Gulf States in Africa and around the world. However, doing this in a coherent, credible manner will have a cost and it will be necessary to make choices, including as to how to deal with established autocracies in the region. This is where the new course will be measured.

¹⁰ U.S. Department of State, A. Blinken, [The United States and Africa. Building a 21st century partnership](#), Abuja, Nigeria, 19 November 2021.

¹¹ M. Hicks, K. Atwell, and D. Collini (2021).

¹² A. Blinken (2021).

Russia and Africa

Russia might not have an official “African strategy” – the region does not have a central role in Russia’s global strategy¹³ – but for a number of years it has shown renewed involvement in sub-Saharan Africa. The clear goal is to affirm, defend or reinforce its positioning and projection of power globally, investing to increase the country’s influence and reputation, avoiding the danger of isolation, forging alliances that can be used in multilateral bodies, opening up new frontiers for arms sales, and accessing strategic resources. As Moscow seeks to affirm a multipolar system, it is looking to challenge the West’s role and influence in Africa, building alliances and breaking those between African countries and other nations, especially the United States and France. At the United Nations, there has been a clear attempt to build a block of African countries. This has been seen in the voting at the General Assembly on matters like the annexation of Crimea in 2014, support for Syria and, more generally, affirming the principle of non-intervention at times when the West was pushing for condemnation of various authoritarian regimes that were violating freedoms. Russia has vetoed any moves to officially condemn human rights or impose sanctions for war crimes, thus effectively shielding the regimes in countries like Sudan, the Central African Republic and Zimbabwe.

Comparing the Russian approach with the Chinese one is enlightening. In Africa, Beijing is known to have a long-term strategy that is carefully backed and controlled by the State. Thus far, at least, one of the economic cornerstones has been the investment for infrastructure development in Africa. For politics, it focuses on the principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of African partners. Moscow is on the opposite side in many senses. It lacks a systematic strategy (not only an official one) and institutional support from the government. By

¹³ E. Bonnier and J. Hedenskog, *The United States and Russia in Africa*, FOI (Swedish Defence Research Agency), Stockholm, 2020, pp. 53 and 57.

contrast, there is short-term opportunism. It has not invested in African development – partly because of a lack of available resources – but it has entered into agreements and been part of focused military action. And behind the principle of non-intervention lies spontaneous political interference.

In many ways the two approaches are opposing. While Russia cannot compete with the weight and (economic) appeal of China, Moscow shares the formally “blind” approach to what happens internally in its partner countries (principle of non-intervention). It builds on a kind of shared nostalgia for the anti-imperialism and Pan-Africanism from bygone times. Although it does not have any sort of alliance with China at the moment, one cannot rule out some form of anti-American cooperation developing in the future.

Russia has intervened or tried to intervene in various regions in sub-Saharan Africa: from central Africa (in the Central African Republic) to east Africa (Sudan), from west Africa (in Mali) to southern Africa (in Mozambique). The common thread for all this is fertile ground for deterioration in the relations with Western countries. Moscow seems to act when three conditions are met at the same time:¹⁴ Are weapons needed? Are mineral resources involved? Would it challenge the West? An affirmative answer to all three questions leads to Russia entering the fray, positioning itself as an alternative partner for security cooperation. Given its limited availability of financial and commercial resources, Russia seeks military cooperation agreements (it has signed about 30 with countries in the region since 2014) and provides weapons that are relatively cheap, reliable and available to controversial autocrats (from 2015-19, Moscow was the largest weapons exporter to the sub-Saharan area, with 36% of total imports).¹⁵ In a number of high profile, much discussed cases, its use of mercenaries (notably the Wagner Group and the Rsb Group) has provided a low-risk, low-cost

¹⁴ P. Bax, “Russia in Africa”, *Hold your fire!*, Podcast, n. 15, crisisgroup.org, 10 December 2021.

¹⁵ E. Bonnier and J. Hedenskog (2020), pp. 53 and 57.

tool for achieving political influence. This is the core of Russia's unofficial action in Africa. The Wagner Group is far and away the best known and most active of such paramilitary groups, with a presence in the Central African Republic, Mozambique, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo and perhaps also Mali. Created in 2014, this mercenary group has links that lead to the Kremlin, funding from a much disputed oligarch close to Vladimir Putin, Yevgeny Prigozhin, and a network of mining companies controlled by the latter. Its presence on the ground is flanked by promoting an anti-Western and anti-French narrative in extensive propaganda and disinformation campaigns. Using this *modus operandi* has not avoided tension with the Americans (in Sudan, for example) or the Europeans (with France in the Central African Republic and Mali). Indeed, such tension is not only a natural consequence of how Moscow operates, but actually part of the goals it pursues.

Still, Russia is no China or America. Its resources and stature are quite different – in absolute and comparative terms – so its goals and strategies must remain within its scope, favouring opportunistic action that is designed, as mentioned, to maximise yields with minimal costs.

Although moments of rediscovery, acceleration and disengagement are not uncommon in Africa, overall the continent is drawing increasing attention from the world's major powers. Their competition is also flowing into the sizeable, accessible sub-Saharan area, guided by interests and shaped by strategies that vary significantly between themselves. In Africa, China, the United States and Russia look like they are chasing each other in order to challenge each other, thus compounding the increasingly dense web of external economic and political rivalries that run through the region.