

7. Africa

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In the new millennium, sub-Saharan Africa has rapidly turned into an increasingly attractive playing field for international powers. Having put the general disinterest in the region that typified much of the 1990s behind them, both old and new actors have found economic interests and geopolitical reasons to turn to – or return to – the continent, launching a veritable scramble to expand their presence and conquer new spheres of influence. The “China in Africa” narrative is undoubtedly the best-known one, as well as the most important new development in terms of its scope. Beijing served as a trailblazer as early as the end of the last century, when it began to buck global trends. Starting in the early 2000s, however, various emerging and advanced economies developed their own strategies to follow in China’s footsteps or to hinder its advance, launching the competitive phase that is still ongoing today. These ranged from the United States to Russia, from India to Turkey, and from Japan to the Gulf countries. Europe, both through the European Union and in terms of national policies, has also begun an attempt to revive and revise its relations with countries south of the Sahara.

A Playing Field with New Dimensions

The post-2000 “African moment” was sustained by a lengthy and highly positive economic phase for the region. Between 2000 and 2018, the economies of sub-Saharan Africa grew at an average rate of 5% a year. The end of the commodities super-cycle in 2014 slowed down this growth – hitting oil-producing

countries particularly hard – but it has not stopped it. Of the 20 countries worldwide that are expected to grow the fastest between 2020 and 2024, over half (11) are in sub-Saharan Africa¹.

External actors played a decisive role in fuelling this expansionary phase, which in turn became a major pull factor. For example, foreign trade in goods with Africa between 2006 and 2018 grew by 292% for India, 220% for China, 224% for Indonesia, 216% for Turkey, 108% for Saudi Arabia, and 41% for the European Union, which as a whole continues to be Africa's largest trade partner². Meanwhile, the continent has undergone a series of rapid transformations in a wide array of fields, from explosive population growth correlated with rapid urbanisation to the surprisingly wide adoption of new technologies and the advancement of regional integration (the new continent-wide free trade area brokered by the African Union entered into force in 2019), and including the gradual renewal of political systems and leaders³.

The renovated international relevance of the sub-Saharan playing field is also explained, in part, by purely geopolitical reasons. The terrorist attacks of September 2001 immediately reawakened Western fears about Africa and renewed interest in the region, especially in geopolitically strategic areas where state presence was weak, which were identified as a fertile breeding ground for new radical movements. This dovetailed with energy security issues and the desire to diversify energy supplies, making them less dependent on the Middle East. The growing number of natural gas and oil-exporting countries south of the Sahara could help fulfil this goal. In the meantime, the complex rivalries in the Middle East began to have repercussions on the

¹ International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook database (October 2019 version)*.

² “The new scramble for Africa”, *The Economist*, 7 March 2019.

³ See G. Carbone, “Mapping change, transformations and trajectories towards 2030”, in G. Carbone (ed.), *A vision of Africa's future*, Milano, Ledizioni-ISPI, 2018; and G. Carbone (ed.), *Leaders for a new Africa. Democrats, autocrats and development*, Milano, Ledizioni-ISPI, 2019.

eastern half of the continent, especially in the Horn of Africa. Finally, the matter of immigration from sub-Saharan Africa, long a priority at the European level, acquired immediate political urgency with the so-called “migration crisis”, fuelling new initiatives to find agreements with African countries in order to manage migration flows.

A series of factors thus focused international attention on Africa, while a growing number of external players turned their eyes towards the continent. Their presence and influence in turn generated additional interest on the part of their competitors, launching a cycle that shows no signs of slowing down. Over time, all the elements in play evolved: the external actors involved, their motivations, the conditions in the contexts where they are intervening, opposing narratives of ongoing processes, and implications for the sub-Saharan countries themselves.

Chinese Africa

Beijing’s presence in Africa is not a new arrival as much as a return. China had already established close ties with several sub-Saharan countries in the 1960s and 1970s, mostly for political and ideological reasons. In addition to sending Chinese doctors, engineers, and technicians to foster the development of newly-independent sub-Saharan states, and contributing to the construction of a number of infrastructure projects, China also showed its solidarity by providing weapons and support to allied liberation movements. After turning inwards in the 1980s, China began looking to Africa anew in the 1990s, portraying itself as a “reliable friend” for “mutual development”, and guaranteeing it would not interfere in the internal affairs of sub-Saharan countries.

Ever since, Beijing has pursued a combination of economic and political goals in Africa. On the economic front, it has aimed to acquire access to a wide array of energy and mineral resources (oil, gas, and coal especially, but also iron, copper, aluminium, and much more) it needs to fuel its domestic industrial

development and growing urbanisation. At the same time, it was efficiently penetrating African markets with Chinese investments and manufactured products. On the political front, the sub-Saharan region served as a testing ground for China's "great power" moves, allowing Beijing to expand its presence and influence (through diplomacy, the military, business, investments, the Chinese diaspora, the media, etc.), form new alliances, and take on new responsibilities.

Since 2000, this new relationship is showcased every three years through the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), during which the Chinese leadership, in concert with its African counterparts, steers the development of the economic, political, security, and cultural relations that tie the two regions together. During the 2006 summit, then-President Hu Jintao floated the ambitious and inviting idea of a partnership to establish "a just and equitable new international political and economic order". From the outset, the near-totality of Africa's leaders enthusiastically embraced the opportunity arising out of Beijing's interest in the continent, albeit with some relatively isolated criticisms, and a few episodes of social resentment. Testifying to evolving priorities in the relationship, 2018 saw the inauguration of the first China-Africa Defence and Security Forum. The Chinese government is increasingly feeling the need to guarantee stability and security for China's investments, businesses, trade routes, expats, and workers.

Economic growth in sub-Saharan countries received a substantial boost from Chinese investments and demand for resources. While China's trade with Africa amounted to US\$10 billion in 2000, it was 15-20 times larger between 2011 and 2018. Chinese investments multiplied, and extended from the energy and mining sectors to infrastructure, manufacturing, and services. Along with the exponential growth in Chinese firms working in Africa, the Chinese diaspora in the continent also grew, and is claimed to have reached a million people.

The resounding success of Chinese-led development has made the Beijing model a potential alternative to the Western

one. This model relies first and foremost on (a return to) the single-party state and to highly centralised economic policy. Western observers have had no shortage of criticism and concerns, and have underscored the Chinese support given to authoritarian and corrupt regimes, the risk of increased dependence and loss of sovereignty, the negative economic effects that have also arisen (such as African infant industries having to compete with Chinese businesses, or the growing indebtedness linked to strategic assets such as mines or ports), steps backwards in terms of working conditions and environmental regulations, and fears of a Chinese takeover of local media. But for African countries where progress remains fragile and incomplete, and for whom good relations with Beijing bring significant economic benefits, the Chinese alternative is highly alluring. The United States has realised this, and is beginning to take measures.

The United States and the New Strategy for Africa

After the Bush administration (which spearheaded several unexpected initiatives in Africa, beginning with opening a military base in Djibouti and significantly increasing trade and development aid) and the Obama administration (when the previous momentum essentially ground to a halt), the arrival of Donald Trump in the White House generated pessimistic expectations for Africa. As former Assistant Secretary of State Johnnie Carson put it, “realistically, perhaps the most the continent can really hope for under Trump is benign neglect”. Other analysts were more optimistic, pointing to the fact that the previous Republican President, G.W. Bush, had arrived in the White House without any apparent concern for Africa but then quickly changed his approach, and highlighting the opportunity for a turning point after the Obama administration, which had been deemed a disappointment for the continent. The first two years of the Trump administration saw a rather disparate series of actions and statements inspired by Trump’s “America

first” principle, stepping away from some of the cornerstones of the West’s approach to Africa: from multilateralism and co-operation (with funding cuts to United Nations peacekeeping operations, for example), to the promotion of democracy and human rights, the fight against corruption (with laws deregulating the petroleum lobbying sector), the climate change challenge (the United States pulled out of the Paris Agreement in 2017), non-reciprocal trade agreements with poor countries, and more.

It was not until December 2018 that the US unveiled a *New Strategy for Africa*⁴, with a speech by National Security Advisor John Bolton. Albeit in rather generic terms, the strategy outlines some of Washington’s guidelines for the region. In Africa, America’s leadership seems to lag behind that of China, Russia, Turkey, the Gulf states, and others, but it also launches an era of harsh competition between the great powers on the continent. The main target is China, of course, with Russia in the background. In the words of an observer, “The new US Africa strategy is not about Africa. It’s about China”⁵. The sub-Saharan region is little more than a new battlefield with Beijing, the last in a long series that includes economic espionage, the trade war, China’s military presence in the South China Sea, and more. On the face of it, the rhetoric that is being used is hostile. China is depicted as a rogue donor in Africa, a predatory and neo-colonialist force that is invariably detrimental to the continent’s development. The New Maritime Silk Road and the increasing share of African debt held by China are considered the most dangerous tools in China’s hegemonic strategy.

In spite of an emphasis on this danger and the need to take steps against it, the type of commitment Washington has made to the continent keeps it at a certain distance. In its response to jihadist threats and continuing conflicts, the US stresses the

⁴ *Remarks by National Security Advisor Ambassador John R. Bolton on the The Trump Administration’s New Africa Strategy*, 13 December 2018.

⁵ C. Tremann, “[The new US Africa strategy is not about Africa. It’s about China](#)”, *The Interpreter*, 20 December 2018.

positive role played by African initiatives such as G5 Sahel, which are much preferred to the United Nations' harshly criticised peacekeeping operations.

In the commercial sphere, the US's goal is to negotiate bilateral agreements that leave behind the principle of trade concessions in favour of more "equitable" and reciprocal trade openings that would favour the expansion of American exports and investments in African markets. The Prosper Africa initiative was adopted to support this expansion by coordinating the various tools made available to American businesses by US federal agencies.

There are two key problems with the New Strategy for Africa. The first is that it is a strategy that focuses almost exclusively on American interests, as opposed to African ones. For example, democracy is not even mentioned, while it had been the first of the four pillars of Obama's 2012 Strategy for Sub-Saharan Africa (the actual pursuit of these goals notwithstanding). For all intents and purposes, African states are being asked to choose between the United States and China, following a logic that harks back to the Cold War, and making it clear that countries that regularly vote against Washington in international fora will no longer receive aid, explicitly tying aid to cooperation with foreign policy. "Under our new approach", said Bolton, "every decision we make, and every dollar of aid we spend will further US priorities in the region"⁶. The second problem is that the strategy itself remains quite vague. So far, the wait for a written document that clarifies and expands upon Bolton's remarks has been in vain. This confirms a certain lack of interest in the sub-Saharan region, especially at the highest levels of the administration, as exemplified by the fact that Trump has not made a single visit to the region, and that numerous key appointments were very late in the making (the Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs was not nominated until 2018, and several key ambassadorships remain vacant). If the challenge is China's ascent on the continent, Washington must

⁶ *Remarks by National Security Advisor Ambassador John R. Bolton...*, cit.

not forget the old saying “you can’t beat something with nothing”. In fact, an ephemeral presence in the region could easily turn into an additional opportunity for the US’s competitors.⁷

Other Players’ Moves

International hierarchies have been partially upended south of the Sahara. Chinese activism has meant that Beijing is ahead of the United States on many fronts in Africa: in terms of foreign trade, infrastructure, the presence of Chinese businesses and a Chinese diaspora, and visibility in African and international media, Washington lags far behind. The United States arrived in today’s Africa late, and still has a relatively limited presence there, but its stature is to some extent guaranteed by its role as a superpower.

Meanwhile, an increasing number of actors are actively attempting to preserve their influence or gain new ground. Narendra Modi’s India, fearful of being encircled by China’s “string of pearls” strategy and the China-Pakistan economic corridor, is trying to break through this obstacle by looking to East African countries on the Indian Ocean seaboard, with which it has longstanding relationships and an influential diaspora. African oil and gas are crucial for New Delhi, and make up the bulk of India-Africa trade. Russia, on the other hand, does not have such needs, but it has also tried to build on historical relationships to re-establish its presence in Africa – where it is the leading arms exporter – including through the ostentatious celebration of new ties during the Russia-Africa Summit that was held in Sochi in late 2019, the first of its kind for Moscow. Alliances with African countries also aim to circumvent the partial isolation generated by European and American sanctions. Although Moscow can provide some support to its allies in the UN Security Council, the relationship with Russia is not particularly attractive for most African countries, partly in light

⁷ R. Standish, “[Putin has a dream of Africa](#)”, *Foreign Policy*, 25 October 2019.

of the size and structure of its economy. Turkey and the Gulf states are also continuing their African “offensive”, with a focus on the nearest area, that of the greater Horn of Africa, although Turkey in particular is ranging much further afield. Among the latter’s advantages are the many flights Turkish Airlines has to African destinations; these quadrupled in number from 13 in 2009 to 52 in 2017.

In the new scramble for Africa, the Old Continent can count on a head start in both geographic and historical terms (resentments dating back to the colonial era notwithstanding), and on its unique exposure to phenomena originating on the south shore of the Mediterranean. These longstanding ties have led to laborious attempts to establish new terms for the Africa-EU relationship. The two parties have adopted new tools for dialogue, including a series of summits organised every three years starting in 2000, and currently known as the African Union-European Union Summit. In 2007 a new Joint Africa-Europe Strategy (JAES) was launched that heralded the emergence of a new type of partnership, broader and more “political” compared to relations traditionally centred on development issues. Europe is looking with growing interest at the African market, in which it still plays an important role. But for Europe, the leading priority right now is undoubtedly that of migrant flows from Africa. Together with security issues, this is the key theme around which recent European initiatives such as the Partnership Framework on Migration and the External Investment Plan have revolved. With an Africa that has its own priorities – which rarely include the control of migratory flow – and a very varied array of potential foreign partners that are less likely than the Europeans to impose conditions, the main problem is to arrive at a set of shared goals between Europe and Africa.

Individual European countries have also attempted to give new shape to their relations with sub-Saharan Africa. The United Kingdom in particular attempted to do this under Labour’s leadership, especially after 2000, with a rare military

intervention in Sierra Leone and a substantial increase in development aid. While Tory governments maintained the same aid levels, their overall approach was more lackadaisical, and the initial momentum ran out. Brexit and the need to establish trade agreements with new partners could well bring about an additional revision in relations with Africa. Over the last five years, both Germany and Italy have focused new attention on Africa, which is perceived both as the source of a crucial problem – migration flows and their management – and a potential market for exports and investments. Nevertheless, the country that stands out the most is still France, often encouraged by its European allies. As the former colonial power that has maintained the strongest presence in Africa, Paris still enjoys privileged political and economic relations with its former colonies, which it has doggedly maintained even as the pre-independence days fade into the distant past. French military forces have openly intervened during several recent crises, in Mali, Ivory Coast, and the Central African Republic. Of course, the context is no longer that of decades past, when Paris had more freedom of movement, since other external subjects now have a foothold in the area, including in some cases a newfound military presence. Since 2014, France has had a particularly strong troop deployment in the Sahel with Opération Barkhane: 4,500 soldiers operating in Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Chad. The scope of this intervention is explained only in part by the threat of terrorism that legitimised the French presence in the area, or by the uranium reserves that are of strategic importance to France's nuclear industry. In fact, France's involvement reflects a broader geostrategic competition with new external actors who are able to make tempting offers to their African partners (first and foremost, the promise of non-interference in domestic affairs and major investments in infrastructure), thus jeopardising what's left of its privileged relationship with *Françafrique*.

Gradually, sub-Saharan Africa is now once again at the centre of international attention – from both old and new actors – as

it had not been for quite some time. The density of external actors seems destined to remain high, at least in the medium term, and fuelled by geopolitical motives that remain as relevant as ever. The main implications to be monitored include both rivalries and potential friction between external actors with different agenda and approaches, and more importantly their impact on development processes in an emerging area that remains fragile and vulnerable.