



Comments on Africa

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Africa Traction

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This commentary argues that the re-emergence, penetration, and presence of China in Africa is largely responsible for a new wave of western interest in Africa.

Background

The end of the Cold War impacted the international system in several ways. In Washington DC and other western capitals the euphoria of victory seemed hard to resist. Western liberal democracy and capitalism had emerged as 'the best' amongst all political and economic systems that had been tried – a thesis that was articulated by Francis Fukuyama's provocative book 'End of History'. Global politics had to adjust to accommodate the era of 'unipolarism'.

The impact on the African continent, was profound, not least the region's relationship with its Western allies. Western super power patronage declined; African states no longer had the strategic capital of the Cold War era and they mostly disappeared from the radars of major western capitals. This in part explains the descent to chaos in and horrific atrocities Liberia, Sierra Leone, Burundi and Rwanda among others particularly in the period from 1990-1995. Africa re-emerged as a potential priority security concern only after September 11, 2001.

Though Western support for African conflict management efforts eventually came largely under the auspices of the United Nations, the challenges posed by these conflicts remain daunting as their root causes remain largely unaddressed. More worrying is the absence of considerable action to support African development

efforts. While on the one hand, declared Western support continually comes in the form of donor aid, on the other hand, there is a scandalous neglect of the effects of capital flight while trade barriers continue to hurt African economies.

The Emergence of China

In hindsight, it is plausible to suggest that in the euphoria that followed the demise of the former Soviet Union, the West did not expect that in less than two decades its economic dominance of the global market would be challenged so fiercely. With two decades of sustained economic growth, the Chinese economy has increased its appetite for a range of commodities, from hydrocarbons to iron ore and titanium, among other things. In so doing, it has provided producers based in Africa with a growing demand base. While Africa was disappearing from American and European radars, Beijing was focusing its attention on the continent. In October 2000 the first China–Africa Cooperation Forum was held in Beijing with a very impressive attendance. Since 2000 there have been continued high-level official exchanges and an increase in trade and general cooperation.

The merit of the Sino-Africa relationship is best captured by Senegal's President Wade, who, noted that:

"When it comes to China and Africa, the European Union and the US want to have their cake and eat it . . . China is doing a much better job than western capitalists of responding to market demands in Africa. The battle for influence in the world between the West and China is not Africa's problem. Our continent is in a hurry to build infrastructure, ensure affordable energy and educate our people."

The Return of the West

This re-emergence and penetration of China in African markets has generated a new wave of Western interest in Africa. This western interest has been characterised by two main approaches.

The US Approach

In line with its current global war on terror and the need to meet growing American demands for hydro carbons, America's response to the Chinese surge in Africa is the creation of a United States African Command (AFRICOM). Launched in February 2007, AFRICOM was conceived as an inter-agency structure [Pentagon, the State Department and USAID] with its main objective to support African states in areas of security and development. How it intends to achieve these objectives is not clear, since its launch in 2007 AFRICOM seems to be undergoing a continual metamorphosis.

The EU Approach

The European Union response has taken more of an organisational approach, focusing attention on the potential for partnership with the African Union. After years of negotiations and several multilateral meetings, the EU-Africa Lisbon conference held in December 2007 (preceded by an earlier EU-Africa Meeting: Cairo 2000) adopted two major documents – a Strategic Partnership and an Action Plan geared towards implementation of the strategy. With eight partnership areas, amongst which are peace and security, governance, climate change, trade and migration. Going forward the partnership hopes to address these areas of common concern.

Issues, Problems and Prospects

This commentary is by no means giving a blanket approval to China's Africa policy. China's continued support for the Sudanese government is a major drawback on the efforts of the AU and the UN to end the atrocities in Darfur. However, the commentary argues that growing attention and involvement of the West particularly the EU and the US in Africa is a response to the last decade of Sino-African relations.

Second, as demonstrated by the forgoing analysis there is a striking difference in the manner and structure of the engagement. While the United States has made

AFRICOM, an inter-agency United States military command the focal point of its Africa policy, the European Union has engaged African nations under the multilateral umbrella of the African Union, in a joint partnership with an action plan for its implementation.

It is difficult to understand how a developed, advanced organisation (EU) can engage on equal terms with an organisation (AU) that is still trying to find its footing, without the process being reduced to the age-old structure of a donor driven relationship. The responses from African countries suggest that though flawed, the EU approach carries more merit, as the American approach is simply dismissed as a militarisation of 'US-Africa' policy. In other words, while China sees Africa as an opportunity, AFRICOM suggests that through an American lens, Africa is a threat.

In the final analysis, the EU, the US, China and all other major players in Africa, are driven by their interests. African governments, Regional Economic Communities and the AU must redefine their engagement with all interested parties; they need to appreciate that they have varied levels of political, economic and strategic capital. As such, they will need to operate from positions of strength as opposed to weakness. It is possible to get the best of all the deals on the table. ■

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