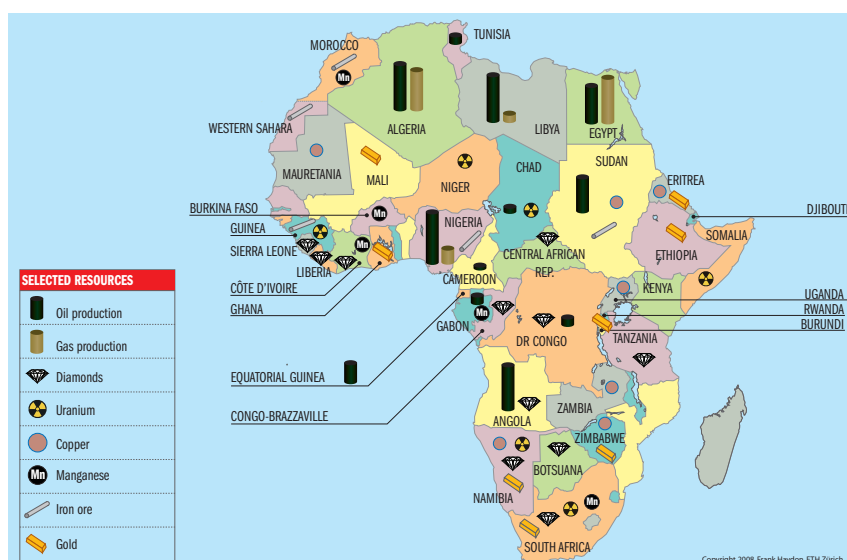


# AFRICA'S GROWING STRATEGIC RELEVANCE

After decades of marginalization, Africa has gained in strategic relevance in recent years. The abundance of natural resources, the proliferation of Muslim extremist groups, and the increasing South-North migration have prompted external powers to re-engage in Africa. Warnings of an upcoming Sino-American geopolitical confrontation in Africa seem premature. Both the external powers and the African countries have a role to play in making sure that the growing inflows of aid and investment become a force for economic growth and political stability in Africa.



Africa: Natural resources

Africa has long been viewed as the “forgotten continent” and is commonly associated with poverty, conflict, and limited strategic relevance. After 1945, the continent became a playground in the Cold War, with the US and the Soviet Union vying for allies and influence. Nevertheless, the strategic significance of the African theater remained modest compared to some other regions in the developing world. Conversely, super-power involvement in the region and the numerous resulting proxy wars contributed to the fact that after the withdrawal of the European colonial powers, much of Africa became characterized by lack of economic development, political instability, and poor governance.

In the 1990s, Africa’s marginalization increased further. While the US largely disengaged from the region and, together with its European allies, focused on dealing with

the consequences of the end of the Cold War in Eastern Europe and the Balkans, Africa witnessed a proliferation of violent conflicts. As Western leaders perceived these to be of little strategic relevance and remained reluctant about the notion of “humanitarian intervention”, some of these conflicts became extremely deadly, with the Rwandan genocide in 1994 causing between 500,000 and 1 million deaths. Partly because of the persistence of political instability, Africa was also largely left out of the process of globalization. Contrary to large parts of Asia, for example, most African countries continued to attract very little foreign direct investment and remained largely outside the world economy.

In recent years, however, two main developments have suggested that the process of Africa’s marginalization is gradually being reversed. On the one hand, there has been

some progress towards political stability and economic growth on the continent. Democracy and the rule of law are advancing – even though events in countries like Kenya and Zimbabwe indicate that such progress continues to be fragile. Also, African economies on average have grown by 5 per cent or more during the last five consecutive years, with private capital inflows to the continent increasing rapidly. Although challenges such as violent conflicts, insufficient education and healthcare, and the HIV/AIDS pandemic continue to prevent economic development on a scale that would reduce poverty significantly, there is a growing sense of economic opportunity in Africa. It is also a positive sign that Africa is increasingly being given responsibility for its own development, as reflected by the gradual emergence of an African peace and security architecture under the leadership of the African Union and its efforts to promote African economic integration.

On the other hand, the relevance of Africa in the strategic calculations of external powers has notably increased lately. This is mainly because of its abundance of natural resources, the growing presence of political violence movements on its soil, and the increasing flows of “illegal” migrants trying to reach Europe. As China is establishing itself as a major new external power in Africa and the US and the Europeans are re-engaging, one may ask what impact this will have on Africa’s future development.

### Thirst for resources

The growing demand for natural resources is one of the main factors driving Africa’s strategic and economic growth. In terms of energy, the continent has 10 per cent of the world’s proven oil reserves, about two thirds

of which are situated in Nigeria, Algeria, and Libya, and 8 per cent of proven gas reserves, about 80 per cent of which lie in Nigeria, Algeria, and Egypt. While the amount of proven energy reserves may seem small compared to the Middle East, Africa has become the fastest-growing oil producing region worldwide.

Not only does it produce oil that is easily refined, but many experts also be-

lieve that there are still large undiscovered oil fields with immense potential. A particular advantage of West Africa is that much of its oil is located in offshore areas that are easily accessible, and where extraction is cost-effective and relatively safe. In addition, as far as energy security is concerned, many African countries are much less characterized by petro-nationalism than other oil-producing countries and offer foreign investors contracts that stipulate favorable profit sharing arrangements and little regulation.

Possessing 60 per cent of the world's diamonds, 40 per cent of its phosphate, and 30 per cent of its cobalt resources, Africa's abundance in mineral resources, coupled with the current commodity boom, has also contributed to recent growth. While this suggests that a downturn in commodity prices would have a strong negative impact on the economic development of many African countries, it would certainly not diminish the race among external powers to secure their share of Africa's natural resources.

### Weak states and terrorism

A second issue that has become a strategic concern is the proliferation of African-based Islamist national and transnational terrorist groups. While the 1998 US embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania provided early evidence of transnational terrorist activity in Africa, it was the attacks of 11 September 2001 that fostered awareness of the challenge and triggered a flood of counter-terrorism funding into the region. Many African states are still characterized by corruption, porous borders and illicit markets, and their citizens (many of whom may harbor grievances against their own governments as well as supportive, external state actors) could sympathize with politically violent movements. As a result, there has been much concern, particularly in the US, that such weak states could become increasingly important strongholds for terrorist movements like al-Qaida.

Areas considered particularly prone to becoming militant bases include the Horn

of Africa and the conflict-ridden region of Sudan and its neighbors. Somalia, a failed state close to the Arabian Peninsula with a majority Sunni Muslim population, is frequently considered the main candidate for becoming a haven for terrorism. Militants

### ***“China's growing presence has intensified competition for Africa's natural resources”***

Somali Transitional Federal Government and Ethiopia since 2006. Osama bin Laden has publicly identified the country as an important base for Salafi-jihadist activity and for al-Qaida's general strategy of using the Sahel for its operations. However, there is also a resurgence of terrorist activity by several Islamist movements in North Africa, the most prominent of which is the Algerian-based al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which went from being a nationalist insurgency to a member in the global jihad, has claimed responsibility for a number of attacks in the region and declared its intention to attack Western targets.

### South-North migration

A third element explaining why Africa has gained more attention recently is the fact that more and more Africans attempt to migrate illegally to the developed world, and particularly to Europe. The lack of economic perspectives and the prevalence of violent conflicts, as well as other factors such as rising food prices and environmental degradation, have prompted increasing numbers of young adults to seek a better future outside Africa. Migration from Africa to developed countries has risen by about one third since the 1990s and, according to the UN Population Division, now stands at about 400,000 migrants per year. Migration routes are constantly shifting due to countermeasures by the EU. While previously, the most popular route was across the Straits of Gibraltar, the narrowest crossing in the Mediterranean, trafficking networks currently focus on moving from Mauritania and Senegal to the Spanish Canary Islands and, to a lesser extent, from Tunisia and Libya to Italy and Malta.

Due to Europe's geographic proximity to Africa and its colonial history, a reported 8 million African immigrants live throughout the EU, compared with nearly 1 million in the US. Immigration is increasingly being treated as a security issue in Europe, and African migrants are being sent home again wherever possible. A growing number of them does not even make it to Europe, however. Many

eager to turn Somalia in a Muslim state based on Sharia law have been involved in an armed conflict with forces of the

of them die on the ever longer and more dangerous maritime routes to Europe. Others strand in North African countries, which are increasingly becoming transit countries for people from Sub-Saharan regions. The rapidly growing number of so-called transmigrants in North Africa is not only associated with much human misery, but could also lead to increasing socio-economic tensions and political instability in these countries.

### China's growing presence

In analyzing the policy responses of some key external actors to Africa's growing strategic relevance, China presents the most striking case. Driven by its enormous quest for natural resources, China has been working towards a strategic partnership with Africa since 1996. In recent years, Sino-African trade has grown with breathtaking speed and amounts to over US\$70 billion today, making China Africa's second largest national trading partner after the US. About two thirds of Chinese imports from Africa consist of oil, the main African suppliers being Angola, Congo-Brazzaville, Equatorial Guinea, and Sudan. While China obtained about one quarter of its oil from Africa in 2004, the figure has already risen to one third in 2008 and is likely to increase further in the foreseeable future.

In exchange for energy and raw material supplies, China provides African countries with generous aid packages, trade deals, and assistance to build key infrastructures such as roads and power plants. At the 2006 China-Africa summit, Beijing vowed to double development aid to Africa until 2009 and to extend US\$3 billion in soft loans and US\$2 billion export credits. The presence of 43 heads of states at this summit indicates that China's growing engagement in Africa is regarded as a welcome development by African leaders. What makes China a particularly attractive partner to the African governments is the fact that Beijing works with them without demanding political and economic reforms.

China's policy of non-interference in domestic affairs and its close relations with authoritarian regimes in Sudan, Zimbabwe, and elsewhere has nourished concerns in Western capitals that their efforts at promoting democracy and good governance are gradually being undermined. International pressure may prompt Beijing to adapt its policies occasionally, as had been the case in Darfur. But the larger problem of China and the West pursuing different models of development remains unresolved.

## A new US military command

China's growing presence in Africa has intensified competition among external powers for Africa's natural resources. The fact that Japan has recently doubled its aid to Africa and that India has announced large-scale investment projects for the continent are clear indications of this development. Securing energy supplies and checking China's influence are also factors that have contributed to the noteworthy re-engagement of the US in Africa in recent years. US oil imports from Africa have increased by two thirds since 2000 and account for about 20 per cent today, the main suppliers being Nigeria, Angola, Algeria, and Gabon. This figure is expected to rise further as the US is seeking to diversify its energy resources and reduce its dependency on oil from the Middle East. Another significant factor, however, is the war against terror that has prompted the US to reconsider the strategic importance of Africa.

To combat African-based transnational terrorist activities, Washington has begun training African military officers and troops while also providing foreign military sales support and military assistance. As part of the Combined Joint Task Force – Horn of Africa, there are about 1,800 US troops in Djibouti whose main task is to disrupt terrorist activities in this region. With the Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Initiative, the US assists several countries in preventing terrorist safe havens from emerging on their territories. The US has also established numerous bilateral military and intelligence programs with African countries, and it has expanded its naval presence in the region, particularly in West Africa, to secure trade routes and oil platforms. Furthermore, there are speculations that Washington is in the process of creating a network of small military bases in Africa.

The creation of a unified military command for Africa (AFRICOM), announced in February 2007, seems to confirm the trend of a growing US military presence on the continent. In view of strong criticism of countries like Nigeria, South Africa, and Libya, Washington has so far refrained from identifying a location for AFRICOM's headquarters in Africa, running the command from a base in Germany instead. But it is worth noting that AFRICOM, unlike other commands, contains a major civil component, which points to a comprehensive US approach to security in Africa. Still, some analysts have warned that AFRICOM and other US military measures may compel China to militarize its African

policy too. While talk of a looming new Cold War in Africa appears highly exaggerated at the moment, the effect of the vigorous re-engagement of the US remains to be seen.

## Europe in search of a role

The European Union, too, has expressed its willingness to take a more strategic approach towards Africa. Efforts at forging an effective African policy are still in embryonic stages, however. The Joint EU-African Strategy signed at the second EU-Africa summit in December 2007 may well take European-African relations to a higher level symbolically. But the EU Action Plan with eight thematic partnerships is as yet vague and lacks a clear identification of priorities. This is not surprising, given that 27 EU member states with diverse interests have sought to forge a common framework for dealing with 80 countries and have even invited their African partners and the public to participate in the drafting process.

As Africa's biggest donor, the EU continues to focus on development assistance and regards the achievement of the UN Millennium Development Goals as a key objective. It has also taken some measures to deal with the arrival of African migrants, such as tightening immigrations laws, strengthening border controls, and assisting North African capacity building to cope with the growing number of trans-migrants. Conversely, it finds it difficult to define a common external energy policy vis-à-vis Africa, from which it gets about 20 per cent of its oil and 15 per cent of its gas. With regard to counter-terrorism activities, the EU provides some assistance to Morocco and Algeria and may now expand its efforts to the Sahel region. It also seeks to project stability through peace operations in countries like Congo and Chad in the context of its European Security and Defense Policy and through assisting the African Union in operationalizing the African peace and security architecture, most notably the African Standby Force and the Continental Early Warning System. Overall, however, these security-related measures have remained modest so far.

Although Europe has more trade with Africa than any other continent, it may well lose influence in this region in the coming decades. EU preferential trade agreements with former colonies are incompatible with WTO rules and must be discontinued by the end of 2008. Negotiations about new trade relations as well as other issues, such as human rights and political reform, have caused frictions with a number of Af-

rican states lately. As African leaders seem eager to strengthen ties with emerging economies such as China, India, and Brazil, a new pattern of South-South partnerships is becoming discernible, the consequences of which are as yet unclear.

## What it means for Africa

If the degree of external engagement is clearly on the rise again in Africa, the question is what this means for the continent's own future. There have been warnings of a new era of neo-colonialism, with China, the US, and others carving up Africa to exploit its resources. Such a development would likely carry over great-power rivalries to this region as well. Others have argued that the growing role of African countries for international (energy) security is increasing their freedom of maneuver and may accelerate their economic development.

To some extent, it is in the Africans' own hands to shape the future course of their continent. While the growing inflow of external aid and investment can provide an opportunity for many African nations to foster economic growth and political stability, such progress may be short-lived if they choose to take advantage of China's engagement to escape political reform. Yet, it is the external powers that carry the main responsibility for rendering their engagement in Africa a positive force for the Africans. One option that would serve this purpose is to increase the transparency of those companies that are engaged in the extractive industry in Africa. Even more importantly, the Western powers should stick to the conditionalities they have attached to their assistance and resist ideas to weaken them for the sake of defending their economic interests against the Chinese, as currently discussed in the French government. It is understandable that France as a former colonial power, which has still some 10,000 soldiers stationed at four bases in Africa, is concerned about the fact that "there are now 900,000 Chinese in Africa, but less than 300,000 French," as one official put it. However, moving away from the focus on good governance will do no good to either the West or Africa.

Author: Jennifer Giroux  
giroux@sipo.gess.ethz.ch

Responsible editor: Daniel Möckli  
moeckli@sipo.gess.ethz.ch

Other CSS Analyses / Mailinglist:  
www.isn.ethz.ch

German and French versions:  
www.ssn.ethz.ch