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Africa, the not-so-marginal chessboard of the great powers



Sources: New Tribune

If in any region of the world the anti-Russian front is weaker or less compact, it is Africa. The continent where more than half of the poorest population on the planet lives, however, offers no less attraction for the powerful of the Earth.

These days several political and diplomatic initiatives coincide on the continent: the most visible are the tours of French President **Emmanuel Macron** and Russian Foreign Minister **Sergei Lavrov**. More discreetly, the Chinese authorities are acting steadily on the ground. The United States, in apparent retreat, maintains its military assets without neglecting the economic ones. The EU, which delegates leadership in the region to Macron, launched an attempt at the beginning of the year to recover the lost ground.

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Africans are suffering the **consequences of the war in Ukraine**, less mediatically, but much more forcefully than in the West (1). There the problem is not only the rise in the prices of necessities, but the shortage of food itself. More than three hundred million people are at serious and imminent risk of hunger. **Of the 13 countries on red alert, 11 are African**, according to **Christopher Barrett**, an agricultural policy specialist at Cornell University. The thesis of this researcher is that, in reality, the current global food crisis predates the war in Ukraine and has its roots in a mistaken and insufficient world and particularly Western policy (2).

But while poor people are literally starving or seem condemned to a hopeless life, the great powers and economic conglomerates are embarking on a frantic race to control their mineral, energy and natural resources, playing their cards in **the countless local armed conflicts and securing military bases to entrench their geostrategic positions**. (3). After the end of the Cold War, the West seemed to exercise almost absolute control of the continent. The elites of the countries once in Moscow's orbit tried to maintain their status by negotiating various formulas of accommodation with the Western world.

CHINA'S ECONOMIC LEADERSHIP

At that time, China hardly had a marginal presence in the region. Thirty years later, the conjunction of China's public and private power has gained leadership in some sectors of continental development, especially infrastructure. The acceleration has been outstanding over the past decade. **Beijing** already controls almost a third of the projects (31%), while the West exceeds a tenth (12%). Just ten years ago, those percentages read the other way around. The weight of the great infrastructures determines the whole of the continent's trade balance with the great powers. Exchanges with China total 250 billion dollars, while with the West they add up to a quarter of that amount (4). Chinese power is hampered by structural problems. The most relevant is the debt of the countries receiving Chinese capital, which generates a new type of dependence. This delayed bomb also weakens Chinese companies and financial institutions, which are looking for new formulas to make penetration in Africa more sustainable.

After the pandemic, the authorities in Beijing have incorporated a broader vision of their relations in Africa, which transcends economic benefit in the medium or long term.

Chinese diplomacy seems determined to engage, not without caution, in political mediation efforts to try to resolve regional or local conflicts that can be very bad for business (5).

Beijing's new approach undoubtedly influences the Western attempt to win over the leaders considered most likely. The clearest case is that of Zambia, the country with the highest debt to China. The new president, Hakainde Hichilema, promised a more independent policy from Beijing and even canceled some projects. Biden rewarded him, inviting him to his *Summit of Democracies* late last year. Macron has now decided to make a stop in Lusaka to strengthen the good mutual *feeling* appreciated at the Euro-African meeting last February. But China's leaders have moved quickly and have already offered Hichilema a debt reduction plan. Similar initiatives have been undertaken in other countries (6).

The case of Russia is different, due to its lower economic capacity. The Kremlin's great asset in the area is the military. Its arms industry finds a very profitable market in Africa's troubled political and ethnic landscape. And not just weapons; also soldiers, mercenaries. The Wagner group, which is related to the Russian tycoon Prigozhin, a veteran associate of Putin since the times of St. Petersburg, extends its penetration throughout the continent (7). The most striking case has been that of Mali, where the new local military authorities showed the door to France, sealing the fate of the *anti-jihadist* operation *Barkhane* (8).

EUROPE: MAKING UP FOR LOST TIME

Macron's current tour circumvents the critical triangle (Mali, Burkina Fasso, Niger) and focuses on Cameroon, Benin and Guinea Bissau, countries that are on the Sahel route to the center of the continent, where the other pole of the French presence is located (9). The French president tries to revive the interests of power (neocolonial, for some local observers), and to set himself up as a European delegate. In February, the [EU acknowledged that it had lost too much ground in Africa](#) and launched an investment programme worth €150 billion through 2027. The figure may seem huge, but several African analysts and leaders estimate that it falls far short of the continent's needs. And yet, some European states were wary or skeptical. The priorities set by the war in Ukraine are very likely to reduce the scope of the Community plan (10).

USA: SCALE TO THE EAST

The United States has lost economic interest in Africa. Direct investment is down a third, from the peak of \$69 billion in 2014 to \$46 billion in 2020. Trade has also lost value: in the last decade it has fallen to a third. A summit with African countries is planned for the end of this year (11). Apart from the insufficient and belated [COVID](#) health aid, Washington contemplates the African drift with fundamentally military lenses. He is concerned about Chinese economic penetration, of course, and is uncomfortable with Russia's margin of influence. The objective is to strengthen the network of bases and alliances with which to support the deployment in the Mediterranean, Middle East and Indian Ocean. Sometimes alarms go off, such as an alleged Project of a Chinese naval base in West Africa, which the Pentagon itself was responsible for deactivating (12).

Washington exerts an active but less apparent influence than in other areas. It pays special attention to [the most dangerous conflicts, such as ethiopia](#), because of the strategic importance of the country. Another priority country is Congo, the world's leading producer of lithium, an essential mineral, among other things, for the development of electric cars in the coming decades. The great country in the heart of Africa aims for oil power, following the decision of the Kinshasa government to offer multinationals exploration on lands of great ecological value (13).

Africa, an immense open-air human cemetery, treasures a great booty. Six decades after the last wave of decolonization, the mechanisms of dependence have changed face, but they continue to dominate the lives of its 1.3 billion souls, as many as those living in India, the most populous country on earth.

NOTES

(1) "L'Afrique paie déjà le prix de la guerre en Ukraine". *LE MONDE*, 22 March.

(2) "The global food crisis shouldn't have come as a surprise". CHRISTOPHER BARRETT (Cornell University). *FOREIGN AFFAIRS*, 25 July.

(3) "Rebels without a cause. The new face of African Warfare. JASON K. STEARNS (Director of the Congo Research Group at the Center for International Cooperation, New York University). *FOREIGN AFFAIRS*, May-June 2022, "Africans caught in the geopolitical crossfire". *FOREIGN POLICY*

AFRICAN BRIEF, 25 May.

(4) "How Chinese firms have dominated African infrastructure". *THE ECONOMIST, 16 February.*

(5) "Quand la Chine joue les médiatrices diplomatiques en Afrique et au Moyen-Orient. *SOUTH CHINA MORNING POST (reproduced in COURRIER INTERNATIONAL), 26 March.*

(6) "Where China is changing its diplomatic ways (at least a little)". JANE PERLEZ. *NEW YORK TIMES, July 25.*

(7) "Small bands of mercenaries extend Russia's reach in Africa. *THE ECONOMIST, 15 January;* " Nostalgie et Kalashnikovs. Why Russia wins some sympathy in Africa and the Middle East. *THE ECONOMIST, 12 March.*

(8) "Mali, Lybie, Soudan, Centrafrique et Mozambique: récit de cinq ans d'avancée russe en Afrique". *LE MONDE, 28 January;* "The future of Russia-Africa relations". JOSEPH SIEGLE. *BROOKINGS, February 2;* " La poutinophilie d'une partie des africains relève d'un rejet de l'Occident. (Interview with PAUL-SIMON HANDY, Cameroonian researcher in Ethiopia). *LE MONDE, 9 March,* "Russia has big plans for Afrique". SAMUEL RAMANI (University of Oxford). *FOREIGN AFFAIRS, February 17;*

(9) "Emmanuel Macron au Cameroun et Bénin, une tournée à risqué". *LE MONDE, 26 July.*

(10) "Sommet UE- Afrique: Paris et Bruxelles veulent rattraper le temps perdue. *LE MONDE, 16 February.*

(11) "Will Biden deliver on his commitment to Africa in 2022?". WHITNEY SCHENEIDMAN. *BROOKINGS, Jan. 10.*

(12) "Fears of a Chinese naval base are overblown. COBUN VAN DEN STANDEN (SOUTH AFRICAN INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS). *FOREIGN POLICY, 3 March.*

(13) "Congo to auction land to oil companies: 'our priority is not to save the planet'". *NEW YORK TIMES, July 24.*

(2) Source: <https://www.nuevatribuna.es/articulo/global/africa-tablero-neoliberalismo-potencias-expolio-colonialismo/20220727135108201171.html>

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