

Africa's Economic Development: Exploring Geopolitical Complexities and Contradictions

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Within the context of rapidly geopolitical changes and the Russia-Ukraine crisis, African leaders have to absolutely rethink and take strategies to save their straddling economy. Both situations have created increasing problems across the world. The underlying causes are well-known and therefore allowing its possible effects to largely influence the already-stressed economic development processes will spell disaster and tragedy for Africa and its 1.4 billion population.

Several years have elapsed after the United Nations declared Africa's political independence. Archival records show that Russia not only supported African countries in liberating themselves from the yoke of colonialism and attaining political independence but also facilitated in the UN General Assembly adopting in 1960 the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples. It was precisely May 25, now more 60 years ago, but still Africa is far away from attaining its economic freedom despite the huge natural and human resources there. The resources are untapped, development remains shabby while about 60% of the population impoverished.

Some say leadership attitudes and approach are holding back development in Africa, others blame external factors including the opaque relations adopted by foreign players. Without an effort to negotiate and identify development priorities, without an effort to cut off self-centric attitudes we will be prolonging our economic development and growth for another century. If we attribute our under-development to imperialism and colonialism, why not then primarily blame African leaders, their executive cabinets and the legislative organs. Does Africa need weak these public institutions and civil society, and leaders with obsolete and parochial ways of managing our economy?

At this stage of Africa's development, is it necessary to examine thoroughly how the geopolitical changes are influencing Africa's unity and development, how it is impacting on African countries across the continent. In practical terms, the time has arrived to look at the development processes and review obstacles, control and monitor the participation of

foreign players and now think of our role in the emerging new world order, as well as the implications for Africa.

On the other hand, a number of external players are swiftly dividing Africa and its desire for sustaining unity that has already been attained these several years by using anti-Western slogans and rhetoric, using political confrontation and consistently urging African countries to employ hatred for some foreign entities' participation in Africa's economy. There are glaring indications that Africa is sharply divided, diverse conflicts are taking its heavy toll on developments there.

The African Union simply lacks a unified approach to the continent's development. Strengthening African unity has long been a sought-after goal that has never been fully achieved.

As the need for regional integration and the reasons for past failures become better understood, new efforts are being made to hold economic and political ties between countries. In order to foster an integrated development, regional organizations have been created in different parts of Africa. But on the whole, they have done little to improve developments in their respective regions. In many cases, African leaders continue to have most extensive bilateral relationships with their former colonial powers. On the opposite direction, Russia and China are critical of Western and European connections to Africa. At least, China has given appreciably huge support especially upgrading infrastructure. Russia has now embarked on fighting "neo-colonialism" which it considers a barrier on its way to regain part of Soviet-era influence in Africa.

In terms of working with Africa, Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman **Maria Zakharova**, during her weekly media briefing on March 23, indicated that African countries need to consolidate their political independence and sovereignty while overcoming acute socioeconomic issues and development. She expressed appreciation and respect for the sovereign equality of states and non-interference in their internal affairs. But on the other side, lashed at the aggressive policies of the United States, its approach towards Africa. She also blamed African leaders for their inability to employ "common sense" and in their own interests and, most importantly, within the principles of the supremacy of international law, especially in the current geopolitical changes rapidly shifting from the unipolar system to multipolar world order.

She said:

"Russia's active work on the African track is a significant part of the entire scope of measures to develop constructive cooperation with a great number of countries that pursue an open and balanced foreign policy guided by common sense and their own interests and, most importantly, within the principles of the supremacy of international law and indivisible security with the central and coordinating role of the United Nations."

According to her explanation, Russia advocates for a more equitable and democratic international order that will promote reliable security, the preservation of unique cultural-civilizational identity and equal opportunities for the development of all states. This can only be guaranteed within the framework of a multipolar system of international relations and cooperation based on a balance of interests of developing world. In a nutshell, Africa's future has to be in line with this overall global development.

Due to its Western and European dreams which it has pursued for the past three decades following the collapse of the Soviet era, Russia is shifting while charting multipolar configuration and now moving to Africa. It is consistently expressing the desire to fight growing neo-colonial tendencies, obviously the most difficult task reminiscent of the Cold War times, in the continent to win support and sympathy from African leaders and among the 1.4 billion people, while Russia has invested little in the development of infrastructures, in the industrial sector and other employment-generating sectors across Africa.

In the context of development processes, African leaders are aware of the necessity to prevent the revival of neo-colonialism, the destructive attitude towards resources. The fight against neo-colonial tendencies should remain exclusively as a challenging task for African leaders, the regional organizations and the African Union. Russia should focus on what it could concretely do in the various economic sectors rather than continue accusing the United States and Europe for the under-development, economic obstacles and political problems across Africa. Experts say African leaders, with the political mandates from their electorates, should take the sole responsibility for African problems and find African solutions within their professional skills and competencies.

It implies that Russia is under-rating, down-grading African leaders and their development policies for allowing the growth of neo-colonialism. By advising African leaders what political direction is necessary to adopt, Russia is directly interfering in the internal politics of Africa. In practical terms, African leaders are answerable to their electorate, and the electorates have the duty of making objective assessment of their governments' performance. It is widely acknowledged that state institutions are weak, and most high-level decisions relating to mega-projects first have to be discussed by parliament, or get the necessary approval from the cabinet. The system of checks and balances are still questionable in many African countries.

Some experts say the world needs cooperation rather than fragmentation. Cooperation rather than confrontation is the basis for emerging multipolar world. For instance, Ivan Timofeev, Russian International Affairs Council's Director of Programs and also Head of "Contemporary State" program at Valdai Discussion Club, writing under the headline "Can Russia Really Break Away from the West?" argued that long before relations between Russia and the West spiralled into a comprehensive political crisis, Russian leadership and officials were enthusiastically voicing ideas about developing ties with the rest of the world.

After the Soviet collapse, especially from the 1990s, **former Foreign Minister Evgeny Primakov** pursued most activities within the framework of a multi-vector foreign policy. The gradual growth of contradictions with the West accelerated the formation of 'pivot to the East' ideas, although their implementation was slow. However, the current crisis in relations between Russia and the West, for all its appearances, is irreversible, and has driven an increase in the number and quality of ties with countries which are outside the control of the United States. Nevertheless, Russia itself is unlikely to be able to cement and consolidate them alone. However, it exemplifies the very possibility of challenging the political West on fundamental issues. Not everyone is ready to follow the same path, but the very fact of its presence is an event which has a global dimension.

The task is to create reliable opportunities for modernisation through interaction with the non-Western world. Here, success is far from guaranteed. The 'world majority' is closely embedded in Western-centric globalization, although the existing system has its own

problems. Russia's links with its Western neighbours have been accumulating for centuries. Even such a powerful crisis like today's cannot cut them overnight. Within the West itself, there is both an ideological and a purely material stratification. Behind the facade of general political slogans lies an extremely heterogeneous political and mental space.

According to Ivan Timofeev, it is necessary to take into account the fact that the countries of the world majority which are friendly to Russia, still have their own national interests. They are unlikely to sacrifice them simply for the sake of friendship with Russia. Many non-Western countries maintain close relations with the West. A considerable number of them still benefit from Western-centric globalization. Moreover, many use a modernising process according to the Western model, preserving their cultural identity, and if possible, political sovereignty, but do not hesitate to use Western standards in the fields of economics, production, management, education, science, technology, et cetera. Rather, Russia will have to engage with a variety of cultures and ways of life.

Last year, I attempted to have an insightful understanding of the geopolitical changes, the emerging multipolar configuration and its implications for Africa. Whether it means Africa has to break away from the United States and Europe? During the discussions with Dr. Mohamed Chtatou, an experienced professor of Middle Eastern politics at the International University of Rabat (IUR) and Mohammed V University in Rabat, Morocco, told me how Africa can develop itself away from the greed of some developed nations and still maintain contacts with them. He clearly underscored the system of approach, noting further that there is no easy answer to this question, as it is a complex issue that involves many different factors. However, there are some steps that Africa can take to promote sustainable development and reduce the influence of developed nations. Here are a few of the steps **Dr. Mohamed Chtatou** suggested:

Promote good governance: African nations should work to establish transparent and accountable systems of governance that promote the rule of law, protect human rights, and combat corruption.

Invest in education and human capital: Developing the skills and knowledge of the African people is crucial to building a sustainable and prosperous future for the continent. Investing in education, health care, and other social services can help to build a strong and healthy workforce.

Support local industries: African nations can promote economic development by investing in local industries, rather than relying solely on exports of raw materials. This can create jobs, generate income, and promote sustainable growth.

Foster regional integration: African nations can work together to promote regional integration and reduce dependency on external actors. This can involve developing common trade policies, investing in regional infrastructure, and promoting cooperation on issues of mutual interest.

Encourage foreign investment on African terms: African nations should strive to attract foreign investment on their own terms, by negotiating fair and equitable deals that benefit both the investor and the host country. This can help to promote economic development and reduce dependency on aid.

In view of its abundant resources, its ambitious youth, its vibrant society, and its geo-

strategic potential, Africa needs to achieve unity and full integration, at once, to face the immense greed of the developed world and to defend its interest in the best possible ways.

Dr. Mohamed Chtatou further discussed the question of increasingly growing neo-colonialism and related tendencies in Africa. The use of the term neo-colonialism first became widespread, particularly in reference to Africa, shortly after the decolonization process following the end of World War II, which came after the struggle of several national independence movements in the colonies. Colonialism is a policy of occupation and economic, political or social exploitation of a territory by a foreign state. Neo-colonialism refers to a situation of dependence of one state on another. This dependence is not official, as is the case between a colony and a metropolis.

The brutal exploitation of the populations as well as the appropriation of the resources of the continent by the countries of the North are at issue. This is what justifies that today, France and other Western countries are implementing actions, notably by helping the development that colonization had slowed down. Neo-colonialism in Africa refers to the indirect and continued domination of African countries by former colonial powers, or by other external powers, through economic, political, and cultural means. Some aspects of neo-colonialism in Africa include:

Economic exploitation: African countries are often forced to rely on exports of raw materials, while importing manufactured goods at higher prices, leading to a one-sided economic relationship.

Political interference: External powers often interfere in the political affairs of African countries, supporting leaders who are favorable to their interests, and opposing those who are not.

Cultural domination: The cultural influence of former colonial powers can still be felt in Africa, as Western cultural values and norms are often seen as superior to traditional African values.

Debt dependency: Many African countries are burdened by debt, which often originated from loans given by external powers. These debts can lead to dependency and compromise their sovereignty.

Land and resource grabbing: External powers or corporations often acquire large amounts of land or resources in African countries, often displacing local populations and leading to environmental degradation.

There may be some contradictions and complexities when discussing and analysing Africa within the context of geopolitical changes. In terms of business, the United States and Europe stand as the traditional markets for Africa's exports, earn significant revenues from these markets, and therefore difficult to abandon over night. Most of the European capitals and the cities in the United States are popular holiday destinations for the African elites and the middle-class and business people. The diaspora is closely knitted by family culture. These are the essential features that unite them. The relationships were distinctively different during the political independence struggle, and now much relates to economy.

In most cases, it is further argued that Africans speak most European languages, more or less understand the Western and European culture, with all the diversity of the West. This is

one greatest ultimate advantage for preserving their cultural identity, and if possible, political sovereignty. It simply facilitate establishing and maintaining ties with friendly ties with Western and European countries.

The design for an alternative has to significantly address development concerns and the population's living standards, these are the primary task of African leaders. Obviously, Africans are making fundamental decisions in the areas of economic development, thus external players with investment capital and entrepreneurial partnership are seen likely able to cement and consolidate their desires for strong society in the global dimension. These have to be located within the frame of the African Union concept.

In other words, the African Union is far from its objectives and, contrary to its reference model, is not prospering. This sad fact raises several questions, both about African integration and about the legitimacy and usefulness of the African Union. The topic seems all the more relevant as African nations see regional integration as an important opportunity to introduce political stability and increase trade. In this regard, **Kwame Nkrumah**, the first president of Ghana and one of the founding fathers of African unity said:

“There can be no real independence and economic independence and true economic, social, political and cultural development of Africa without the unification of the continent”. But how should this unification take place? Is the African Union, based on the European Union model the only solution for Africa? Is it capable of curing Africa of all its ills? What if regional integration under the European model is not adapted to Africa?

Most African experts believe that for Africa global stability is a necessary factor for growth, but it must first take control over its own growth agenda. Of course, Africa has to forge an intra-African trade and investment, modern agriculture and focus on industrialising as basis for the newly created single market. As Jakkie Cilliers, Head, African Futures and Innovation, ISS Pretoria, in April 2023 argued “the continent will suffer if current efforts to instrumentalize Africans in this divided world continue.”

In his view, especially at this new stage, “Africa needs debt relief, Chinese trade and investment, expanded relations with the EU, capital from the US and more trade with the rest of the global south. It needs an agricultural revolution to ensure food security and accelerate trade integration to provide a larger, more attractive domestic and foreign capital market. Fully implementing the African Continental Free Trade Area agreement can unlock more rapid growth than any other scenario.” Meanwhile, as the elephants fight, the grass suffers, according to Jakkie Cilliers, Head of African Futures and Innovation at the Institute of Security Studies, Pretoria in South Africa.

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