

The Scramble for Africa: Another U.S. Battleground To Challenge, Supplant China

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Global Research, August 08, 2012

[Voice of Russia and Stop NATO](#) 8 August 2012

Region: [sub-Saharan Africa](#)

Theme: [Global Economy](#)

While the US was flexing its muscles in Iraq and Afghanistan (later, in Libya, currently in Syria, and further on other nations), taking a much less outspoken but nonetheless more effective approach of “soft power” penetrated the abandoned regions. The role of the frontrunner among new patrons of the developed world was unambiguously taken by China, which has established itself as the number one trade partner and a prominent investor not only in Africa but also in the region that for centuries had been regarded as the US’ “backyard” – Latin America.

[W]hat is surprising, though, is the fact that a call to Africa not to fall prey to “new colonialism” comes from Washington. Or do US political and business leaders think that the “forgotten continent” is also forgetful and that the people of Africa have forgotten what real colonialism and neocolonialism is, and who were the main bearers of the phenomenon?

As reported by The Wall Street Journal, a high-ranking delegation of US officials and representatives of huge American companies including Boeing and General Electric is currently in South Africa with the aim of boosting trade and investment in what until recently was called a “forgotten continent”.

The delegation is headed by Fred Hochberg, chairman of the Export-Import Bank of the US and one of the highest-ranking business leaders in the Obama administration.

The task facing the US business leaders is not a simple one. For decades, Africa was looted by colonial and later neo-colonial powers, the US being the leader among the latter. Then, for some reason, the West largely lost interest in the continent (at least in its sub-Saharan part). The tendency became more than obvious during George W. Bush tenure – he was so preoccupied with the idea of establishing US dominance in the “Greater Middle East” that he left other regions virtually unattended – Africa being the most obvious but not the only among them.

But as is widely known, there is no such thing as a vacuum in nature. While the US was flexing its muscles in Iraq and Afghanistan (later, in Libya, currently in Syria, and further on other nations), taking a much less outspoken but nonetheless more effective approach of “soft power” penetrated the abandoned regions. The role of the frontrunner among new patrons of the developed world was unambiguously taken by China, which has established itself as the number one trade partner and a prominent investor not only in Africa but also in the region that for centuries had been regarded as the US’ “backyard” – Latin America.

The basic statistics quoted in the WSJ speak for themselves. In 2011 the US was only the third largest exporter to Africa after China and former colonial power France, while exports from numbers 2 and 3 on the list (France and the US) combined together do not even match those from China.

Barack Obama's administration has realized that the narrow focus on the Broader Middle East is fraught with too many risks – both domestically and internationally.

At the end of 2011, the administration proclaimed the Asia-Pacific as the area of core US interests. The move was universally recognized as aimed at containing China's influence. But as it turns out, China's growing influence is not limited to the adjacent regions only. China has established itself as a marine power with perpetual presence in the Indian Ocean, and, as has been said above, is successfully positioning itself as the main partner on other distant playgrounds.

So, the task of containing China becomes the administration's obsession – whoever occupies the chair in the Oval Office. And the task is a multi-faceted one. Today, the US finds itself in a position of a pursuer in the scramble. And it is not only China that is the only contender the US has to catch up with. Africa has become the focus of attention of many important global players, including India, Brazil – that is, not to mention former colonial European powers.

In this context, the visit of the US business delegation cannot be regarded as an isolated event. Not surprisingly, about a week ago, US State Secretary Hillary Clinton also paid a visit to a number of sub-Saharan African countries. During the visit, she took all pains to persuade her African partners that the relationship with the US is more beneficial for them than relations with China. Among the arguments Ms. Hillary put forward were the usual appellations to the “respect for democracy and human rights that accompany US investments” . The Secretary of State also warned African countries of the risks of falling prey to “new colonialism” with was just a barely veiled reference to China's policy on the continent.

It is true that the methods China is using in Africa (an elsewhere) are far from being truly respectful of the local partners and more often than not violate basic socio-economic, environmental and other humanitarian principles. A recent incident in Zambia, when a Chinese manager of a mine was killed during a local workers' riot is just one of numerous examples showing the real nature of China's relationship with its partners.

But what is surprising, though, is the fact that a call to Africa not to fall prey to “new colonialism” comes from Washington. Or do US political and business leaders think that the “forgotten continent” is also forgetful and that the people of Africa have forgotten what real colonialism and neocolonialism is, and who were the main bearers of the phenomenon?

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Tue Aug 7, 2012 3:53 pm (PDT) . Posted by:

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