



AFRICA AND THE NEW COLD WAR

Africa finds itself increasingly at the center of new global geopolitical balances, with the return of a pattern of rival blocs of countries: a sort of new Cold War involving a complex web of economic, military and diplomatic interests. In this rapidly evolving scenario, the risk of conflict over Africa between these powerful actors, fostered in part by the instability and fragility of many of its countries, is not insignificant.

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THE SCRAMBLE FOR AFRICA

The term “scramble for Africa” was coined to describe the process towards the end of the 19th century by which the European powers of the time sought to claim parts of the African continent for themselves.¹ For almost two decades now there has been talk of a “new scramble for Africa” and its resources². There has also been talk for years of a “new cold war”, different from the one generally considered to have begun in the aftermath of WWII and ended with the fall of the Soviet Union, but still characterized by a clash between two rival blocs: “the West” versus Russia and China. Initially, this “new cold war” was discussed primarily with reference to the rivalry between the United States and China in matters of trade and technology,³ but Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has made the international political situation, including the “new cold war”, even more complex.

NEW PLAYERS IN THE SCRAMBLE FOR AFRICA

This time around, many powers, both large and medium-sized, are taking part in the “scramble for Africa”, from China to France, Turkey to Brazil, India to Malaysia and more. Russia has also been involved for at least a decade, after apparently losing interest in the continent for some time following the fall of the Soviet Union⁴. Russia’s clout in Africa is negligible in the areas of trade and aid, but significant in the military sphere; indeed, it is the biggest seller of arms to the continent. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) reports that between 2015 and 2019, 49% of the armaments purchased by African countries came from Russia (alongside 14% from the US, 13% from China, and the remainder from other countries)⁵. Since 2015, Russia has entered into military cooperation agreements with 21 African countries, with plans to establish permanent military bases in six of them: the Central African Republic, Egypt, Eritrea, Madagascar, Mozambique and Sudan.⁶

DIVISIONS BETWEEN AFRICAN COUNTRIES

On 2 March 2022 the UN General Assembly voted on a resolution

to condemn Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Of the 193 member states, 141 voted in favor of the resolution, 5 voted against it, and 35 abstained. There was a significant rift among African countries: Eritrea voted against the resolution, aligning itself with Russia, China, North Korea and Syria; 28 other African countries voted in favor of it; 17 abstained; and 8 were absent at the time of the vote.⁷ In April, the UN General Assembly voted to suspend Russia from the UN Human Rights Council; of the 54 African countries, only 10 voted in favor of the motion, 9 voted against, and 35 abstained or were absent⁸. This phenomenon of abstention or absence may be an attempt to underscore a kind of equidistance between the Western bloc and the Russia/China bloc.

INSTABILITY AND FRAGILITY IN AFRICA: A BREEDING GROUND FOR DANGEROUS FOREIGN INTERVENTIONS

According to recent World Bank assessments, 13 African countries are currently affected by medium-intensity conflict, 1 (Somalia) by high-intensity conflict, and 5 by a high degree of institutional and social fragility.⁹ The International Monetary Fund, in turn, describes 21 African states as being in a state of fragility.¹⁰ Fragility, instability and rifts between countries provide fertile ground for foreign interventions, and Africa is the continent with the highest number of the latter on its territory, with at least 13 countries maintaining permanent military presences there: Saudi Arabia, Belgium, China, the United Arab Emirates, France, Germany, India, England, Italy, Japan, Russia, the United States and Turkey. The United States operates 34 military outposts in Africa and France has at least 7,550 military personnel spread across various theaters of war. The Horn of Africa alone hosts 13 foreign military bases,¹¹ and six of the twelve active UN Blue Helmets peacekeeping operations worldwide are based in Africa.¹²

THE AFRICAN UNION’S UNHEEDED WARNINGS

As far back as 2016 the African Union’s Peace and Security Council expressed concern about the proliferation of foreign military bases in Africa and the lack of capacity of host countries to control their actions and movements of arms or understand

their true objectives. It urged its member states to be more "circumspect" about entering into agreements to establish such bases on their soil,¹³ bases from which countries would then seek to protect their own interests as well as those of "friendly" governments, heightening the level of competition between the global powers.

THE CASE OF DJIBOUTI

Djibouti deserves special mention in this context. With an area of only 23,200 square kilometers and just over 1 million inhabitants, it hosts the overseas military bases of eight non-allied countries. It is the only country in the world to host both a U.S. and a Chinese base, in addition to those of France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Italy, Spain and Saudi Arabia¹⁴; Russia, India and Japan are also negotiating to join. Djibouti's strategic position is key: it faces the Arabian Peninsula and is close to the strait of Bab-el-Mandeb, through which a significant portion of international maritime traffic, including oil traffic, passes. Djibouti earns about \$300 million a year thanks to the presence of the foreign military bases, not much in absolute terms but equivalent to almost one-tenth of the small country's GDP (\$3.371 billion in 2021).¹⁵

THE CASES OF MALI AND BURKINA FASO

Also telling are events in Mali, where France withdrew its troops, in the country since 2013, after bitter clashes with Colonel As-

simi Goïta's military junta. Now military personnel from the Wagner Group, a private company owned by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a close confidant of Putin, are there in place of the French troops. England and Germany will also be withdrawing their troops (which are part of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, or MINUSMA, in the country with about 14,000 personnel since 2013) earlier than expected. Something similar has happened in Burkina Faso, where the military carried out two coups in the space of a few months, hailed by Prigozhin as the "completion of the decolonization process".¹⁶ In both Mali and Burkina Faso, the citizenry greeted the military's seizure of power with jubilant demonstrations, expressing anti-French and anti-Western sentiments and singing the praises of Russia. The arrival of a Wagner contingent in Burkina Faso is likely. Individuals from the Wagner Group are also present in the Central African Republic, Sudan, Libya, Madagascar and Mozambique. The use of this private group enables the Russian government to intervene at the same time that it denies any such involvement.

THE DIPLOMATIC SCRAMBLE FOR AFRICA

Recent months have seen a whirlwind of diplomatic activities in Africa. China organized the first "China-Horn of Africa Peace, Good Governance and Development Conference" in Addis Ababa with representatives from Ethiopia, Djibouti, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan and Uganda.¹⁷ The event marked a shift in the country's approach to Africa, featured by a new willingness to complement its traditional infrastructural, financial and commercial interventions with a stronger diplomatic role. A few

NOTES

¹ St John's College, University of Cambridge, The Scramble for Africa, https://www.joh.cam.ac.uk/library/library_exhibitions/schoolresources/exploration/scramble_for_africa, accessed on 1 December 2022.

² Carmody P., *The New Scramble for Africa*, 2011, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2011.

³ A new kind of cold war, *The Economist*, 16 May 2019.

⁴ Stronsky P., 16 October 2019, *Late to the Party: Russia's Return to Africa*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/10/16/late-to-party-russia-s-return-to-africa-pub-80056>

⁵ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), March 2020, *Trends in International Arms Transfers*, 2019, <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2020/sipri-fact-sheets/trends-international-arms-transfers-2019>

⁶ Daily Sabah, 4 August 2020, *Russia to build military bases in six African countries: Report*, <https://www.dailysabah.com/world/africa/russia-to-buildmilitary-bases-in-6-african-countries-report>

⁷ Tawat M., 8 March 2022, *Russia-Ukraine war: decoding how African countries voted at the UN*, *The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/russia-ukrainewar-decoding-how-african-countries-voted-at-the-un-178663>

⁸ Deutsche Welle, 26 July 2022, *Russia's reengagement with Africa pays off*, <https://www.dw.com/en/russias-reengagement-with-africa-pays-off/a61064011>

⁹ World Bank, FY 2022, *List of Fragile and Conflict-Affected Situations*, [FCSListFY22.pdf](https://www.worldbank.org/FCSListFY22.pdf) (worldbank.org), accessed on 3 December 2022.

¹⁰ International Monetary Fund, April 2022, *Regional Economic Outlook: Sub-Saharan Africa*, [SUBSAHARAN AFRICA ECONOMIC OUTLOOK IMF 2022.pdf](https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/REO/SSA/Issues/2022/02/22/ssa-2022)

¹¹ Atta-Assamoha A., 2019, 27 August 2019, *Proceed with caution: Africa's growing foreign military presence*, *Institute for Security Studies (ISS Africa)*

¹² United Nations Peacekeeping, *Where we operate*, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/where-we-operate>, accessed on 4 December 2022.

¹³ African Union, Peace and Security Council, 30 May 2016, 601st Meeting, *Press Statement, auc-601st-psc-meeting-on-early-warning-30-may-2016.pdf* (peaceau.org).

¹⁴ Yimer N.A., 17 March 2021, *Politics Today*, *How Djibouti surrounded itself with military bases*.

¹⁵ World Bank, *Gross Domestic Product 2021*, <https://databankfiles.worldbank.org/data/download/GDP.pdf>, accessed on 5 December 2022.

¹⁶ *The Conversation*, 11 October 2022, *Burkina Faso coup raises questions about growing Russian involvement in West Africa*, <https://theconversation.com/burkina-faso-coup-raises-questions-about-growing-russian-involvement-in-west-africa-191909>

¹⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 22 June 2022.

weeks later, China's Foreign Minister also announced that his country would waive 23 interest-free loans to 17 African countries, and promised food assistance as well.¹⁸

In a virtual meeting with representatives of 50 African countries, Japan's Foreign Minister made clear his own country's readiness to help the continent cope with the economic consequences of the war in Ukraine;¹⁹ in addition, the 8th Tokyo International Conference on Africa Development (TICAD) was held in Tunis, presenting ideas and plans to counter Chinese expansion in Africa.²⁰ In July, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov visited Africa, cautioning against the West's global "hegemonic plans" and stating that his country would help the continent "complete its process of decolonization." In the same period French President Macron, who labeled Russia "the last colonial empire," also traveled to Africa, followed shortly afterwards by U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

INCREASINGLY FORCEFUL AND EXPLICIT AFFIRMATIONS

In April, the U.S. Congress passed the "Countering Malign Russian Activities in Africa Act"²¹; there are also negative considerations vis-à-vis Chinese and Russian interventions in Africa in the U.S.'s "Strategy Document Toward Sub-Saharan Africa" that was

published last August.²² NATO's "Strategic Concept", published last June, states that "(...) insecurity and instability in Africa and the Middle East" are a threat to its members and defines North Africa and the Sahel as "our southern neighbors."²³ Some have interpreted this statement as a re-enactment of the "Monroe Doctrine", named after the president who declared it in 1823, calling Latin America "our backyard" and claiming undisputed supremacy there.²⁴ A French diplomat has stated that "The longer the war in Ukraine continues, the more vigilant we will need to be on the African front".²⁵

A CONCRETE RISK

The distinction between the "new scramble for Africa" and the "new Cold War" may soon lose all meaning. The military aspect is becoming more and more important in both the battle over African resources and the competition for the diplomatic support of the 54 African countries that collectively account for 28% of the votes at the UN General Assembly. There is a concrete risk that the tensions between the blocs might turn into out-and-out conflict, with new proxy wars in Africa – just what happened, with disastrous and long-lasting effects, during the first Cold War. The instability and fragility of many African countries will only increase this risk.

Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa Affairs of the Foreign Ministry Xue Bing attends the Horn of Africa Peace Conference.

https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/202206/t20220623_10708778.html

¹⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 19 August 2022, China and Africa: Strengthening Friendship, Solidarity and Cooperation for a New Era of Common Development,

https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202208/t20220819_10745617.html

¹⁹ Nikkei Asia, 28 March 2022, Japan vows to boost post-covid development cooperation with Africa.

²⁰ Africanews, 27 August 2022, African and Japanese delegates meet to promote continent's growth.

²¹ Congress.gov, Library of Congress, 28 April 2022, H.R. 7311, Countering Malign Russian Activities in Africa Act, Text - H.R.7311 - 117th Congress (2021-2022).

²² Executive Office of the President National Security Council, August 2022, U.S. Strategy Toward Sub Saharan Africa, U.S. -Strategy-Toward-Sub-Saharan-AfricaFINAL.pdf (whitehouse.gov)

²³ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 29 June 2022, NATO 2022 Strategic Concept, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/290622-strategic-concept.pdf

²⁴ Tricontinental, 3 November 2022, Africa does not want to be a breeding ground for a new cold war: The forty- fourth Newsletter (2022), <https://thetricontinental.org/newsletterissue/africa-new-cold-war/>

²⁵ Bensimon C., Chatelot C., Le Monde, Comment la Russie avance ses pions en Afrique, du Mali au Burkina Faso (lemonde.fr).