

Here are Four Things the West gets Wrong about Africa

Nina Wilén

External powers are intensifying their efforts to woo African states and their leaders in a context of Great Power Competition. Russian, Chinese and Western leaders are upping their game with new visits, initiatives, investments and strategies aimed at increasing their influence on the continent. Yet, while Western states spend comparatively large financial and human resources in Africa, these investments do not always seem to translate into the intended effects. This brief looks at four things that the West gets wrong about Africa and argues that to create long-term and credible partnerships with African partners there is a need to go beyond the Great Power Competition lens, lower the ambitions, and dial down on the normative language. This, while realising that presence does not equal influence, but absence almost certainly excludes it.

The current great power competition has pushed Africa to the forefront of international relations as a terrain of influence for diplomatic, demographic, and economic reasons. Diplomatically, it has 3 of the non-permanent seats on the UN Security Council and constitutes one of the largest regional blocks with 28% of the votes. The exponential demographic increase which according to [most previsions will double the continent's](#) population in the coming three decades implies both a non-neglectable future global market, but also increased migration. Economically, Africa is host to the largest reserve of natural resources in the world which are, just as the votes in international institutions, gaining in value in the current Global Power competition. These developments are pushing great powers to lobby middle and small powers for supporting votes, while trying to

maintain and increase access and influence in Africa. It is not a coincidence that the US Foreign Secretary Blinken visited the African continent an unprecedented three times last year, nor that the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergueï Lavrov travelled to more than ten African countries since the start of the Russian invasion in February last year.

The EU's establishment of two new military missions in Mozambique and in Niger, as well as the promise of the provision of lethal equipment through the [European Peace Facility to Niger and Somalia](#) should also, at least partly, be seen through the prism of a quest for influence on the continent. While some of these developments may have been underway during a longer time, the intensification of the Global Power competition has nevertheless increased their importance. However, despite significant efforts from Western states to maintain and increase leverage in the region, some African states have chosen to change security partners, while [others have decided to abstain from voting against Russia](#) in the UN General Assembly's Emergency Sessions, provoking disappointment and frustration from Western partners. Yet, these choices should be seen against some persistent misunderstandings from the West, four of which are outlined below.

1. AFRICA IS NOT A COUNTRY

Africa is a continent composed of 54 highly different states with over a billion inhabitants, more than 3,000 ethnic groups speaking approximately 2000 languages, with vast differences when it comes to living standards and development indexes. Take Gabon for example

where [91,6% have access to electricity and compare it to the 7,2%](#) in South Sudan, or the maternal mortality ratio where Chad scores a staggering [1,140 deaths per 100,000 live births, while the Seychelles have a relatively moderate 53](#). Politically, Africa hosts a disproportionately high number of non-democratic and [not-free countries](#) as a continent, yet their diverse political orders are informed by even more distinct histories, pressures (internal and external), and ideologies, making it deceptive to clump them together under a common geographical label.

Despite these differences, Africa is continuously treated as a country rather than as a continent in Western press, and at times even by Western institutions. This goes from national or regional “Africa strategies” to conferences or seminars where “Africa”, or regions in Africa, are compared to, or given the same space as one country. The many ‘lessons learned’ seminars organized in the aftermath of the withdrawal from Afghanistan, which compared the latter to the Sahel *region* in Africa, is a case in point here. Rarely however, do we here about an Asia strategy, bringing together countries like India, Japan and China in the same approach, simply because it does not make sense. Despite some important regional trends in Africa, erasing crucial differences and nuances between states to fit them all under the same label does not make sense here either.

2. AFRICANS ARE NOT PASSIVE VICTIMS

The colonial period has left long-lasting structural scars in many African states, some of which still affect the countries and their populations in important ways. The governance structures developed by colonial powers were for example largely aimed at extracting resources, pacifying communities and suppressing dissent, meaning that many post-colonial states in Africa inherited large, well-trained militaries and powerful traditional leaderships but nascent, [cypher-like legislatures and minimal public health or education facilities](#). These damaging legacies should nevertheless not be confounded with a perpetual, continental victim status, nor as lack of agency on the part of Africans more broadly. Indeed, underestimating the strategic competences of leaders on the continent, or belittling local civil society movements

may result in erroneous previsions and policy making. In particular, some authoritarian leaders on the continent have managed to exemplify the notion of extraversion, understood in the [Bayart sense](#) as mobilizing resources derived from their possible (unequal) relationship with the external environment.

Uganda and Ethiopia’s troop contribution to the African Union Mission in Somalia, AMISOM, did for example not only provide a closer relationship with key Western partners and [shield the two authoritarian regimes from donor criticisms and aid cuts](#), but also resulted in an increase of the status and importance of both countries in Western foreign ministries, chancelleries and presidential mansions. This has, at least in part, been the result of sustained efforts by both governments to persuade Western policy-makers of their continued indispensability in the fight against terrorism in Somalia, and of AMISOM as the model solution to the Somalia “problem”. Rwanda’s Kagame regime has repeatedly sponsored rebel groups since the 1990s while at the same time [accessing donor counter terrorism funds and military support for peacekeeping](#) training, whereas Chad’s former dictator Déby’s export of oil to strategic partners and heavy involvement in military and peacekeeping operations in the region has made [the country a key ally of Western states in the fight against terror](#). These are just a few examples of how African autocratic leaders manage to both respond to internal logics and needs, while simultaneously influence partner states and steer external funds and images to bolster their own agendas. They are however rarely representing the will and needs of the African populations that they govern.

3. AFRICAN POPULATIONS ARE NOT ALWAYS REPRESENTED BY THEIR LEADERS

Many African states have been experiencing a liberal deficit of democracy during the past decade, with political elites manipulating electoral mechanisms to gain access or stay in power, adopting legal restrictions on key civil and political rights, and curbing free media. While national and local media are the prime targets of these developments, they also touch external journalists, most recently in Burkina

Faso, [where two French journalists were expelled](#) in the beginning of April, while a French broadcaster was suspended only a week earlier. In 2022, only 15% of African states were considered as free by the [Freedom House Index annual report, 45% partly free and 44% not free](#). At least 10 African countries faced internet shutdowns or social media blocks in 2021, exemplified by Ethiopia's Tigray region which witnessed the [longest uninterrupted shutdown since November 2020](#), while a 'state of emergency' was declared or maintained in a number of states, granting broad powers to the security forces.

Military take-overs in what the UN Secretary General termed a 'coup epidemic', starting with the coup d'état in Mali in August 2020, has since then seen a constitutional coup in Chad in April 2021, a "coup within a coup" in Mali in May 2021, a coup in Guinea in September 2021, a new "coup within a coup" in Sudan in October 2021, a coup in Burkina Faso in January 2022, and another "coup within a coup" only 9 months later in the same state. These seven coups imply that over 120 million citizens in these states are living under military rule since 2020. While some of the coups were welcomed by parts of the population, the extensive transitional periods imposed by the military juntas were not. An increasingly urbanized, educated, and globalized African population is today the driving force for political change on the continent. [Political participation has also increased significantly since the start of multiparty elections in the 1990s](#), with a consistently growing number of civic associations and interest groups. Yet, this development has so far not managed to transform the tendency of political elites that use the electoral mechanism to gain access to power, but thereafter resist checks on that power. Some civic associations are being co-opted or subject to extraversion in authoritarian states, while in other states, the civil society is not always that civil. Western states' insistence on [bringing the state back in](#), or (re)installing state authority and control in conflict affected countries, might therefore be misguided, or at worst, counterproductive. Confounding the will of African rulers with those of African populations in (semi) authoritarian states is therefore problematic and risks translating misconceptions into policy.

4. WESTERN STATES ARE NOT PERCEIVED AS THE SAMARITANS THEY WOULD LIKE TO BE

Support for changes in democracy, human rights, and good governance in Africa has emerged as a key goal in relations between the European Union (EU), EU member states, the United States and Canada since the early 1990s. In particular the EU, in its role as a '[normative power](#)', has attempted to influence the behavior of others by exporting its core norms (peace, liberty, democracy, rule of law and respect for human rights) through a broad range of instruments. The organization is for example the largest donor of development aid to Africa, much of it channeled through the [EU development fund \(4,4 billion Euros\)](#), while its Trust fund for Africa is covering 26 states in three regions, with a budget of over €5 billion. The EU is the leading [direct contributor to the AU's mission in Somalia](#), contributing over €2.3 billion since 2007, whereas it [provided €50 million](#) to the newly created G5 Sahel Force in 2017. This is in addition to the 9 CSDP missions the organization is deploying to Mali, Niger, Central African Republic, Mozambique and Somalia, each one with a multimillion-euro budget. The EU (and its member states) are also Africa's first [partner in trade and foreign investment](#), and it has Economic Partnership Agreements with 48 countries under the previous Cotonou agreement. The organization is contributing substantial financial humanitarian aid to different regions in Africa, most recently reaffirming its solidarity with vulnerable people in countries in West and Central Africa through a [€175 million humanitarian budget in 2022](#). To these figures bilateral investments, budget support, development aid and security collaborations should be added from individual states.

Yet, despite the quite large sums that are spent by Western states on diffusing normative values and establishing relationships with African countries and regions, this does not seem to translate into influence, let alone norms adoption by the partners. In many instances, the large budgets provided appear to feed into systems of corruption that maintain (semi) authoritarian leaders in power by getting them out of accountability demands through continuous funding of core state functions. The somewhat condescending moral superiority that is underlying many of the partnerships

between Western states and African partners is thus falling short of establishing stronger relationships. Instead claims of hypocrisy taint them, as while Western states preach the supremacy of democracy (for good reasons), they often do this at the same time as they endorse African leaders that have come to power through [blatantly rigged elections](#). Multilateral institutions like the UN and the EU are also experiencing increasing resistance on the continent, as [impossible mandates, lack of local buy-in, and challenging contexts](#) have shattered high expectations. Instead of setting high, almost impossible, (normative) objectives, Western states and multilateral organizations may be better off lowering the ambitions to feasible achievements, while dialing down on the normative language and be more direct about their interests. This does not equal a surrender of support for democratic governance and human rights, but these values can at times be reinforced more efficiently through the stimulation and support of creative and critical thinking, not necessarily sponsored by state structures or imposed from the outside.

GETTING IT RIGHT?

How then, should Western states avoid strategic errors and maintain relationships with their African counterparts in the face of increasing competition from non-Western actors? There is clearly no one-size-fits-all solution, as relationships are built on a case-by-case basis and context matters. Yet, a few broader suggestions can serve as guidelines.

Western states need to decide under what conditions they can and want to maintain partnerships and with whom they are willing to collaborate. Red lines have been drawn in the sand to demarcate what is acceptable and what is not in different partnerships. Examples include threats of withdrawal when states collaborate with Wagner, suspended assistance in relation to rigged elections etc. Yet, as the red lines have been crossed, collaboration continues, and the bluff is called. If any red lines are to be drawn, then they must also be adhered to, otherwise both the credibility and the position of leverage are weakened, giving leeway for further transgressions. Thorough reflection about weighing presence against principles need thus to precede condition setting, while being mindful that presence does not equal influence, but absence almost certainly excludes it.

The current global power competition is increasingly used as rationale for starting new relationships with African states. The reasoning goes along the lines of: “If we don’t, the others will”. While this type of thinking is understandable given the context, it is not necessarily the most effective way to build partnerships. No one wants to start a relationship knowing that the main reason for it is to block other partners. Such relationships risk being purely instrumental and superficial on both sides which are not conducive to building long-term and reliable partnerships. Enhancing and expanding existing collaborations pre-dating the present context, or exploring new affiliations based on genuine mutual interests are safer bets for efficient and durable relationships.

Finally, African states’ voting pattern during the UN General Assembly’s Emergency Sessions on the Russian invasion, has provoked confusion and irritation from Western partners. Africa was by far the continent with the largest number of abstained votes (17) and absents (8) for resolution ES-11/1 condemning the aggression against Ukraine. Yet, Western states’ putting pressure on their African partners to vote in accordance with them, has similarly [incited frustration with the latter, who dispute double standard](#) in the focus – mainly – on African states, while recalling their sovereign rights to vote strategically. Pushing too hard for voting alignment might therefore be counterproductive, leading to even further abstained votes. Focus should instead be to maintain African states’ right to choose their partners, be the transparent and democratic alternative, and remember that the majority of the continent did, in fact, align with the rules-based world order which to a large degree has been established by Western states in the aftermath of the World War. Yet, the fact that this order is not embraced by the states it initially was meant to protect, should also trigger reflection about why, and how, it needs to be reformed to ensure that support.

Nina Wilén is Director of the Africa Programme at the Egmont Royal Institute for International Relations and Associate Professor at the Department of Political Science at Lund University, as well as a Research Leader at IOB at the University of Antwerp.

The author is grateful for comments from colleagues on earlier versions of this brief.





The opinions expressed in this Publication are those of the author(s) alone, and they do not necessarily reflect the views of the Egmont Institute. Founded in 1947, EGMONT – Royal Institute for International Relations is an independent and non-profit Brussels-based think tank dedicated to interdisciplinary research.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the permission of the publishers.

www.egmontinstitute.be

© Egmont Institute, April 2023

© Author(s), April 2023