

AFRICA: THE EAST INSPIRING AND THE WEST FADING

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 Analysis

If there is one thing for sure, it is the reality of Africa's rising positive image in global political arena. Despite the U.S. President Donald Trump's controversial negative 'shithole' remark about the continent, Africa continues to preserve its strategic position between the East and the West. For Trump, this massive continent is still "dark" and just an immigrant producing "shithole".¹ However, this is not what the rest thinks. As a matter of fact, for some countries as China, India and Turkey, the continent signifies fresh new opportunities for cooperation and investment.

One of the prominent indicators referring to Africa's rising strategic importance on global scale is definitely the rise in the high level visits that African nations are getting. Non-African leaders both from the West and the East have paid successive official visits that attracted global mass media coverage during the last couple

of month. As it can be remembered, during a short the period African countries have arranged warm welcome parties and dance performances for global leaders from China, India, Turkey, Germany, Britain, and France.

Among the traditional Western partners of Africa, Immanuel Macron, Barack Obama, Theresa May, Angela Merkel, Prens Harry have recently toured several countries in the continent. On the other hand, it was not limited to only the traditional partners, but the leaders from the new emerging partners of Africa also appeared during the latest summit of BRICS in Johannesburg in July. Before and after the summit, Narendra Mondî, Xi Jinping, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan officially visited several African nations as well.

Now, it is turn for the First Lady of the U.S. Melania Trump to tour Africa. The first lady has already started her first international solo



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trip heading Ghana, Malawi, Kenya and Egypt. Following President Trump's impolite comments about the continent, Melania Trump might try to fix the American image by doing some charity work in front of press. However, the problem is deeper than restoring the image of America or building a more positive image instead. On the deeper level, it is all about inspiration and bringing hope and new approach to Africa's longue durée problems of infrastructure and poverty.

Despite the high level visits, it should be noted that while attention to Africa have escalated globally during the last decade, the Western influence on the continent has been gradually fading in certain areas. Especially in the trade arena, the West has been losing the trade battle. Chinese, Indian and Turkish commercial products have already dominated the markets in Africa. The evaluation that claims obvious setback for the Western influence on Africa is a fact accepted by commentators like Reuben Brigety rather than a bare observation. Obviously, what is seen from Turkey is also seen from the West. In his recent article, Brigety openly declared that "the U.S. is falling behind" in Africa since it failed to shape any serious and long-term agenda engaging with the continent.² However, the missing part in the Brigety's article is that not only the U.S. but also rest of the West fell behind.

Nowadays China is becoming the center of non-Western block in Africa. It is usually portrayed in the Western media as a neo-colonialist power and resource hungry nation seeking markets for Chinese products. It might be an exaggerated approach taking China as a neo-colonialist country but what China does in Africa is just filling the vacuum and taking advantage of the continent's chronic problems in order to spread its influence.

Victorious powers of the colonialism and the Cold War have obviously failed in their engagement with Africa during the post-colonial period for two reasons: they tried to commence their asymmetric relation pattern with the new-born African nations and they could not offer any

sustainable development program to deal with efficiently the chronic problems of Africa. The continent has been neglected for a long period of time. Additionally, the Western foreign aid programs have failed again and again.

Now, Africa is leaning towards the new emerging global actors for investment and bilateral trade relations. Since 2008, China has been the biggest trade partner to Africa. China's trade volume with Africa has already reached 200 billion dollar level. In addition to trade, China one of the largest foreign direct investment (FDI) provider to African nations. South Africa, Democratic Republic of Congo, Algeria, Zambia, Nigeria, Sudan, Ghana, Tanzania, Angola, Zimbabwe are amongst the nations with whom China has already developed special relations during the last two decades.

However, the diversity of African states' foreign relations is not limited to China. India, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and even North Korea amongst the other partners of Africa in the Eastern bloc. Other active partners of Africa such as Brazil, Russia, Turkey, Iran, UAE, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia might be included in this bloc as well. It is a generally accepted notion that at this junction new partners of Africa offer different approaches than that of the traditional partners. At least, they inspire people and promise better future.

While the Western countries stay in the circle of security, terrorism and immigration issues, the Eastern countries bring infrastructure projects, education opportunities, new hospitals, railways etc. For instance, illegal immigration from Africa to Europe and other security issues dominated Angela Merkel's last Africa visit, in the same days China offered 60 billion dollar aid package for African nations regarding development and infrastructure plans during the last China-Africa summit called FOCAC. Another fact is that in the last 30 years Theresa May has been the first British Prime Minister visited Kenya recently and her visit destined for sub-Saharan Africa was the first after David Cameroon's attendance to Nelson Mandela funeral in 2013

in South Africa.³ As mentioned before, Trump administration does not still consider Africa seriously, either.

Balance between the East and the West in the Horn of Africa, one of the strong posts of the U.S. in Africa, is about to change. While Turkey has become one of the most active actors in Somalia since the devastated famine in 2011, China has been building itself up militarily in the region. According to experts like Josh Rogin, China's expanding influence in Djibouti locating China's first overseas military base presents a daunting challenge for the United States.⁴ Even, the strong cultural impact of the West on spoken and written languages of Africa has no guarantee. Nowadays more African people learn foreign languages such as Mandarin, Urdu and Turkish

as business, job and education opportunities get diversified. The state-owned newspaper Times of Zambia publishing in English has recently started to give place to Mandarin in its pages for Chinese readers in Zambia.⁵

For a while, some academicians and policy experts in the West draw attention to the tendency of declining influence of the West in Africa. New emerging non-Western bloc in Africa is generally considered an important challenge to Western values and interests. For me, it is not an issue related to Africa solely. Rather, it has been a sign of changing balance between the West and the East in more general terms. By engaging with the non-Western bloc, Africa is just adjusting its new direction.

Endnotes

- ¹ Ali Vitali, Kasie Hunt & Frank Thorp V, “Trump referred to Haiti and African nations as ‘shithole’ countries”, NBC NEWS, 12 January 2018,
<https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/trump-referred-haiti-african-countries-shithole-nations-n836946> (02.10.2018).
- ² Reuben Brigety, “A Post-American Africa”, Foreign Affairs, 28.08.2018,
<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/africa/2018-08-28/post-american-africa> (02.10.2018).
- ³ Dan Sabbagh, “Theresa May to make first trip to sub-Saharan Africa by UK leader in five years”, The Guardian, 26 August 2018,
<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/aug/26/theresa-may-to-make-first-trip-to-sub-saharan-africa-by-uk-leader-in-five-years> (08.10.2018).
- ⁴ Josh Rogin, “China is challenging the U.S. in the Horn of Africa-and Washington is silent”, The Washington Post, 27 September 2018,
https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/china-is-challenging-the-us-in-the-horn-of-africa--and-washington-is-silent/2018/09/27/6b5b5d10-c288-11e8-a1f0-a4051b6ad114_story.html?utm_term=.23a3db23d458 (03.10.2018).
- ⁵ “Zambia state-owned media publishes article in Chinese”, The New Times, 03 October 2018,
<https://www.newtimes.co.rw/africa/zambia-state-owned-media-publishes-article-chinese> (03.10.2018).

