Executive Summary

Our Common Strategic Interests:
Africa’s Role in the Post-G8 World

A Chatham House Report

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June 2010

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African countries are playing a more strategic role in international affairs. Global players that understand this and develop greater diplomatic and trade relations with African states will be greatly advantaged. For many countries, particularly those that have framed their relations with Africa largely in humanitarian terms, this will require an uncomfortable shift in public and policy perceptions. Without this shift, many of Africa's traditional partners, especially in Europe and North America, will lose global influence and trade advantages to the emerging powers in Asia, Africa and South America.

A strong diplomatic and trade engagement with Africa matters. Africa is the foundation of the global supply chain – a strategic source of almost 40% of the raw materials, agriculture, fresh water and energy essential for global growth. Its rainforests play a central role in the planet's climate. Its population of one billion are increasingly important consumers. Africa is strategically placed between time zones, continents and hemispheres. However, the overwhelmingly humanitarian interest of many Western countries and traditional partners has led to stereotyped perceptions of Africa in terms only of problems. These views are increasingly patronizing, recursive, out of touch, and a deterrent to serious business interest. Meanwhile the emerging economic powers of the G20 see Africa in terms of opportunities – as a place in which to invest, gain market share and win access to resources.

The re-emergence of China as a principal partner of many African states has renewed interest in engagement with Africa among many business people and politicians in the West. Sometimes this interest has been expressed via a sense of amorphous threat to Western interests. Yet China's re-engagement is for the most part welcome, as is that of the increasing numbers of emerging powers such as Turkey, South Korea and Brazil that have forced Africa's traditional partners to think again about the mutual value of investing in the continent's growing consumer and skills base. Crucially, however, this approach needs to be balanced with respect and support for a regulatory and governance framework that ensures such investments deliver long-term benefits to all. Too often Africa's emerging partners pay lip service to the rhetoric of 'win-win' and 'South-South cooperation' while reproducing the worst excesses of colonial and neo-colonial exploitation.

The G8 has played a valuable role in clarifying and anchoring a more strategic, coordinated and consultative approach to Africa's development needs among most Western countries. This approach grew out of the failures of the 1990s and from the vision and determination of a few African leaders – President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa, President Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika of Algeria and President Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal. They recognized that African states needed to change both their approach to international engagement and their domestic agendas, and they worked to build an international consensus around this.

The consensus exists around the need to develop a system of mutual obligations and incentives between African governments and their international partners to foster good governance and democratic reform in return for the financial and political support necessary to pull African countries out of poverty. Whatever the controversy around their domestic records, these leaders deserve recognition for having achieved this consensus, which has lasted for almost 10 years and delivered much-needed change to the lives of many people across Africa.

Yet in recent years G8 progress on Africa has slowed, and discussing Africa as a separate stream at G8 summits has increasingly become a substitute for meaningful action. The over-promising of what aid can deliver, and the emphasis placed on aid to the exclusion and deterrence of considerations of business and private-sector links, have diminished the relevance of the G8 for Africa,
mirroring the more general shift in the global balance of power from West to East. Development assistance has played, and will continue to play, an important role for many African countries, but economic fortunes across the continent are now diverging. This makes it less meaningful to treat Africa as a single entity in international economic negotiations.

So on the one hand, the G8 has played a role in supporting engagement with Africa based on enlightened mutual self-interest and agreement on shared rules and principles. On the other hand, the emerging economies of the G20 have brought entrepreneurialism, energy and recognition of mutual benefits that are increasingly attractive. A key task for the G20 will be to fuse the best of the approaches of both the traditional and emerging partners of Africa to the benefit of all.

Those best placed to effect this change are the continent’s own leaders. Africa has never been in such a strong bargaining position in international affairs, with increasing numbers of suitors. However, African leadership is at present insufficient and the activism and vision that characterized the first few years of the twenty-first century are less in evidence now. This is dangerous because without strong, effective leadership the competition for Africa’s resources may degenerate into the kind of colonial exploitative scramble from which much of the continent has only recently begun to recover. Governance institutions in general – from national governments to regional bodies and the African Union itself – are stronger than they were, but they need to be far stronger still. It is in the interest of all Africa’s international partners to support their further consolidation. African states must further merge their economies with those of their neighbours if the advantages of scale are to be sufficient to satisfy the largest investors. All this requires leadership from within Africa, reinforced by strong diplomatic support from outside. To this end it is in the global interest that the African Union should be granted a permanent place at the G20.

The citizens of Western countries are understandably weary of continued calls for more aid to Africa, particularly in the aftermath of the recent global financial crisis. They must be reassured that aid works and that delivering growth for Africa will deliver real economic benefits to them. Aid is a very necessary safety net, but it is not a springboard. It will ultimately deliver the development Africa needs only if it is used in support of private-sector-led growth and stability. Emerging economies are capitalizing on this. Western countries ought to benefit too; indeed it should be a strategic imperative for them. Yet thus far there is insufficient evidence that they recognize this.

Most Western countries still enjoy a comparative, if diminishing, advantage over emerging powers in policy and academic understanding of Africa. Yet resources and expertise on Africa have been allowed to wither in Western governments, academia and the news media. The advantages many former colonial powers enjoyed in terms of expertise, trade links and cultural affinity are now far fewer than many policy-makers assume. Beneath the rhetoric of the importance of Africa, diplomatic and trade resources devoted to it are still being cut in many Western capitals, leading to a downward spiral of ignorance and thus marginalization in strategic awareness. Reversing this trend will require time and investment, but the rewards should be considerable. The financial crisis challenged Western claims about the superiority of the democratic and free market model. Western countries should welcome the opportunity to demonstrate the advantages, dynamism and resilience of their economies and governance systems, and export them to Africa for common benefit, in an increasingly competitive multipolar world.

This report was funded by the Stavros Niarchos Foundation.
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