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[New Approaches in Development Cooperation](#)

# Authoritarian Donor States and Their Engagement in Africa

A Focus on Strategic Power and Exporting Political Systems?

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As the world shifts into a new geopolitical phase, Africa is gaining importance – as a trading partner and investment destination, a contender in addressing global challenges, but also as an arena for external actors to flex their military and strategic muscles. These actors include China, Russia, and Turkey, three authoritarian regimes with regional and great power ambitions. From a European perspective, their activities in Africa are viewed with scepticism and concern. Not only because they are economic competitors, but because they also embody competing values and social models.

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Europe is confronted with three “re-emerging empires”. This is how Josep Borrell, the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, referred to China, Russia, and Turkey at the European Parliament in September 2020.<sup>1</sup> In a guest editorial for the newspaper *Le Journal du Dimanche*, he wrote: “Over and above their specificities, Russia, China and Turkey share three common characteristics: they are sovereignist vis-à-vis the outside world and authoritarian within their own borders; they are intent on having their zones of influence recognised and are determined to shield them from all outside eyes [...]”<sup>2</sup>

Borrell’s statements were prompted primarily by Russia’s position in the Belarus crisis, China’s handling of the Hong Kong issue, and Turkey’s activities in the Mediterranean region. But it is also worth focusing on these three countries as external actors in Sub-Saharan Africa. All three have recognised the strategic importance of the continent and are intensifying their activities there. While China’s involvement has been monitored and debated for many years, the increase in Russian and Turkish activity in the area is a more recent observation and has received less attention to date.

### **Africa through a Geopolitical Lens**

The three countries are in good company: global interest in Africa and the engagement of external actors on the continent have never been

greater. As early as March 2019, *The Economist* reported on a “New Scramble for Africa”.<sup>3</sup> This is not just a race to gain access to the continent’s raw materials and markets and open up opportunities for its own investors, products, and technologies. It is also about security threats and migration flows, geopolitical spheres of influence and strategic alliances, the 54 African votes at the United Nations, and joint efforts to address global challenges.

This involvement of other countries in Africa challenges “traditional” Western donors in many ways. The attractive alternatives offered by other donors mean that Western development aid has lost much of its potential as an incentive and lever for instigating reform and good governance. Ultimately, more is at stake than competing economic interests. The West has always viewed development cooperation as an instrument for promoting its values and marketing its own social model. Now, however, authoritarian countries like China, Russia, and Turkey have arrived on the scene with some fundamentally different values. Will the donor’s engagement in Africa become the vehicle for a new systemic competition? Let us take a closer look.

### **China: The Big Player in Africa**

From a European perspective, the massive engagement of its “systemic rival”<sup>4</sup> China in Africa has been a matter of controversy for many



years. And changes in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic have once again turned the spotlight on this issue.

Over the past two decades, China has become one of Africa's most important investors and trading partners. Cooperation with Africa has been institutionalised through the establishment of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, which has taken place every three years since 2000 and at which China regularly announces new, steadily increasing funding packages. These packages grew from five billion

US dollars in 2006 to 60 billion US dollars at the last summit in 2018 (50 billion US dollars of which was government funding). China's trade volume with Africa has also multiplied. From merely ten billion US dollars in 2000, it recently passed the 200 billion US dollar mark.

Since 2013, the New Silk Road initiative has formed a central pillar of Chinese foreign policy under Xi Jinping. The aim is to build a comprehensive trade network between Asia, Africa, and Europe – but also ultimately to expand China's global influence. African countries, too, are



All roads lead to Beijing? Chinese involvement in infrastructure development, as here in Kenya, closes a gap left by Western donors. Source: © Thomas Mukoya, Reuters.

being lured by investment and development projects under this economic and geopolitical mega project. Most of the money flows into large infrastructure projects and the exploitation of raw materials. However, Europe is also particularly concerned about China's dominance in the IT and communications sector and the huge dependence of African networks and systems on Chinese technology.

### **For some time now, more and more voices, including in Africa, have been warning of a new debt trap.**

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Many African governments find the Chinese proposals very appealing. The emphasis on large-scale infrastructure development closes a gap also caused by the Western donors' focus on poverty reduction, education, and health. They also like the speed and simplicity of the Chinese projects. China's economic aid is mainly in the form of cheap loans, usually without conditionalities, and does not ask questions about democracy and human rights. Beijing emphasises strict adherence to the principle of sovereignty and, unlike Western donors, presents itself as a "true friend of Africa" without a colonial past or paternalistic intentions.<sup>5</sup> However, critics are sceptical of China's engagement, with some even viewing it as a new form of "colonialism".<sup>6</sup> China's own economic and strategic interests are paramount: it is about opening markets for Chinese companies and products, securing (long-term) access to vital resources, expanding the geopolitical sphere of influence, and mobilising support for Chinese concerns in multilateral institutions.

China's engagement has afforded new opportunities to African nations, but it also threatens to create new dependencies. For some time now, more and more voices, including in Africa, have been warning of a new debt trap. There are growing concerns that China could seize control of key infrastructure if African countries are unable to pay their debts.

In addition to economic investment, China's engagement in Africa has taken on an increasingly military and strategic dimension over recent years. In 2017, China opened a military base in Djibouti. This first, and to date the only, permanent troop base outside China is located close to the existing US and French bases. Beyond this military presence, China is the largest contributor to financing and equipping UN peacekeeping troops in Africa. It is increasing its bilateral engagement in training and equipping the armed forces of its African partners.

### **Russia: A Latecomer with Big Ambitions**

After around 25 years of ignoring the continent, Russia has made something of a comeback in Africa in recent years. When the Cold War drew to a close, Russia had largely withdrawn from its geostrategic ventures in Africa. But over the last five to six years, Russia has been noticeably ramping up its engagement on the African continent. The first Russia–Africa Summit in Sochi in October 2019 represents a milestone in this respect. At least as far as the media was concerned, this summit catapulted Russia to the forefront among Africa's donors and strategic partners. It was attended by 43 heads of state and government. President Putin announced 20 billion US dollars in debt relief to African countries and signed bilateral investment agreements totalling 12.5 billion US dollars. Since then, Russia has become much more aggressive and visible in Africa and is steadily expanding its engagement. It should be noted, however, that in terms of financial aid and trade volume, Russia appears somewhat dwarfed by Africa's largest partners in quantitative terms – the US, China, Europe, and India. Europe does not so much view the extent of Russia's engagement with concern but rather the way it is being conducted.

The Russian narrative on Africa sounds similar to that of China. In an interview ahead of the Sochi summit, Putin declared that he wanted to step in where Europe and the US have disappointed. He claimed that Western countries were resorting to "pressure, intimidation and blackmail against sovereign African governments".



Largest arms exporter to Africa: Russia is responsible for nearly half of all arms exports to the continent.  
Source: © Sergei Chirikov, Reuters.

Russia, on the other hand, was helping them without any preconditions.<sup>7</sup> But it goes without saying that Russia – like the other countries – is not acting altruistically in Africa. Economically, the focus is on access to resources like oil and gas, plus rare earths, and diamonds, and expanding export markets in the key sectors of agriculture, energy, and defence. Visible, formal cooperation often overlaps with informal or even clandestine

ventures. Russia has no qualms about working openly with despots, or about entering legal grey areas and conflict zones. As a result, Russia's engagement in Africa is extremely varied, ranging from bauxite mining by state-owned Russian corporations in Guinea, offshore gas extraction in Mozambique, diamond mining in Angola, and gas liquefaction in Congo to mining in Zimbabwe and nuclear energy for Egypt, to

name just a few. The key to the door is often Russia's willingness to not only give their political backing to authoritarian rulers but to equip their armed forces, too.

## Observers believe that hundreds of mercenaries from Russian security firms are active on the continent.

Russia delivers more arms to Africa than any other country, and indeed is responsible for nearly half of all arms exports to the continent. 21 African states signed military cooperation agreements with Russia between 2015 and 2019. The largest Sub-Saharan recipients are Angola, Nigeria, and Sudan. Beyond the arms trade, Russia exerts significant influence on the security sector through training and the deployment of military experts and advisors. Observers believe that hundreds of mercenaries from Russian security firms are active on the continent.<sup>8</sup> The precise way in which these companies operate is largely shrouded in mystery, but they must be understood as part of Russia's overall strategy. The security firms are known to have close ties to the Kremlin. On the ground, they contribute towards securing Russian interests, provide centralised security services to local governments – such as in the Central African Republic – and are particularly active where access to valuable mineral resources is at stake.<sup>9</sup>

### Turkey: Africa as a Playing Field for Erdoğan's Strategic Ambitions?

By dint of its geography alone, Turkey sees itself as an interface between Europe, Asia, and the African continent. But it is only over the last 15 years that Turkey has emerged as a significant player in Sub-Saharan Africa. Until around the turn of the millennium, Turkey's foreign policy engagement was largely limited to the Mediterranean region and Gulf states. Turkey's Africa policy only really took off in 2003 under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the then prime minister. The

first Turkey–Africa Cooperation Summit in 2008 was a landmark event in this respect. The African Union has listed Turkey as a “strategic partner” since then. Under Erdoğan's leadership, political and economic relations with African countries have gone from strength to strength. The Turkish Foreign Ministry defines relations with Africa as a key foreign policy objective. Erdoğan has personally made more than 40 trips to the continent to date. The increased interest is reinforced by further statistics: in 2003, Turkey had twelve embassies in Africa, whereas now there are 42. Trade volume between Turkey and Sub-Saharan Africa increased from one billion US dollars in 2002 to 7.6 billion US dollars in 2019. Ankara has become a hub for flights to and from Africa. The partly state-owned airline Turkish Airlines flies to 52 destinations in 34 African countries. The “Turkish footprint in Africa is getting larger than most European countries”, as tweeted by Carlos Lopes, former head of the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), in March 2021.<sup>10</sup>

Initially, Turkey's Africa policy was dominated by trade, humanitarian aid, and development cooperation. Somalia plays a key role in Turkey's engagement in Africa. It is no coincidence that the world's largest Turkish embassy has been located here since 2016.<sup>11</sup> Back in 2011, when the country shaken by civil war was largely shunned by the rest of the world, Erdoğan travelled to the capital Mogadishu and promised a comprehensive aid package. As a result, Turkey became the largest donor there beyond the OECD DAC countries. Yet, if we look behind the facade of benevolence, Turkey's military and strategic agenda becomes increasingly apparent. Whereas many other international actors – including the US, China, and France – have concentrated their military bases in neighbouring Djibouti, Turkey has exploited its engagement with Somalia to establish a military presence in the country. Turkey's largest overseas military base has been at Mogadishu airport since 2017. Along with historical and religious ties, Turkey's focus on the Horn of Africa can be largely explained by its geopolitical interests and regional competition with the Gulf states in

a struggle to control the “Red Sea arena”. Turkey’s military engagement should also be viewed against the growing importance of its arms industry, which is being expanded as part of an increasingly aggressive foreign policy. In 2020, Turkey signed important agreements with Nigeria to equip and train the military there.

### **It is difficult to unpick Ankara’s economic, political, humanitarian, and military objectives.**

Turkey still plays a minor role in Africa compared to China, and although it seems to be following China’s example in terms of making larger investments in African infrastructure projects, it does not shy away from positioning itself as a direct competitor. Turkey has prevailed over its Chinese competitors with a number of contracts, including the construction of a railway line in Ethiopia, a conference centre in Rwanda, and the parliament building in Equatorial Guinea.

As with other external actors in Africa, it is difficult to unpick Ankara’s economic, political, humanitarian, and military objectives. In its rhetoric, however, the Turkish government emphasises the charitable nature of its engagement and its “brotherly” ties with African countries. It also likes to bring up historical references and push an anti-colonial narrative. Unlike the major Western donors, it stresses that Turkey has no “colonial baggage”.<sup>12</sup>

But while Erdoğan presents himself as the “true friend” of Africa, critics underscore how Turkey, too, is ultimately driven by its own interests.<sup>13</sup> Its engagement in Africa must be understood in the context of the struggle for regional supremacy, and particularly with its adversaries in the Middle East. Regardless of how realistic Erdoğan’s fantasies of being a great power – the dream of a “new Ottoman Empire”<sup>14</sup> – may be considering Turkey’s economic and political problems

at home, he has understood that a stronger presence in Africa – including Sub-Saharan Africa – will help Turkey to be perceived as a global player. Besides geopolitics, however, there are also domestic concerns, such as the demand for natural resources and energy. By early 2020, Turkey had signed 17 mineral exploration and extraction agreements with African nations.

### **Interests and Values: Promoting Autocracy as a Countermodel?**

Despite all the differences between the three actors, they have certain common features:

- their rhetoric actively distinguishes them from “traditional” donors, and they present themselves as a countermodel to the alleged paternalism of the West;
- their clear focus on large-scale infrastructure projects and systematic development of access to raw materials;
- their deliberate linking of economic, military, and diplomatic objectives and the creation of corresponding dependencies, while at the same time emphasising the sovereignty of their African partners;
- the relinquishing of political conditionalities and minimum standards of democracy and human rights.

Even though Western donors may often exhibit inconsistent demands, they always give centre stage to their values in terms of democracy and the rule of law as part of development cooperation. In contrast, China, Russia, and Turkey embody an authoritarian countermodel to liberal Western democracy under their current leaders. They seek to create the impression that their foreign and economic policy is pragmatic and largely free of ideology. In reality, though, it is easy to see through this facade. On closer inspection, the supposed non-conditionality is an illusion. The assistance provided by authoritarian states is still tied to conditions, even if they are not explicitly articulated. The

geopolitical conflict is not only about markets and raw materials but also about values and the donors' own concepts of state and society – and thus ultimately about systemic competition.

## The development of democracy in Africa is mired by setbacks, despite occasional glimmers of hope.

So, is there a countermodel to the Western approach of democracy promotion in the context of development cooperation? Do authoritarian donor countries have a common approach to promoting autocracy? It is not possible to discern a clear leitmotif, let alone a set of principles, analogous to the Western model, which is based on clearly defined principles of democracy, the rule of law, as well as universal human rights. In a 2017 study, researchers at GIGA in Hamburg concluded that “genuine promotion of autocracy in the sense of actively supporting and strengthening a ‘positive’ ideological project – of any kind – is almost non-existent in the 21<sup>st</sup> century”.<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, the commitment of these states should be viewed with concern by the defenders of liberal democracy. A glance at current political developments worldwide reveals that this model is increasingly on the defensive. The development of democracy in Africa is also mired by setbacks, despite occasional glimmers of hope. Autocracies are becoming entrenched, hybrid regimes are sliding ever closer towards authoritarianism, and very few democracies can be described as consolidated. Against this backdrop, the proposals of authoritarian donors can place a key role in setting the course for African countries.

Even without explicitly seeking to promote autocracy, the engagement of the three above-mentioned actors reveals a range of activities that directly or indirectly undermine the efforts of Western partners or are intended to sell their

own ideas of state and society and embed them in those countries. These include:

### 1. *Discrediting the Western Political Conditionalities and Abandoning Democratic and Human Rights Standards*

The availability of seemingly “unconditional” offers from authoritarian donors is probably the main factor impairing the West’s efforts to promote and uphold democratic and human rights standards. African governments with dubious track records here are offered “convenient” alternatives for funding their vital development projects and thus compromising the potential of Western donors to leverage such funding.

### 2. *The Deliberate Acceptance and Instrumentalisation of Opaque Procedures and Corrupt Practices*

Not only do authoritarian donors waive political conditionalities, but they also accept the absence of rule of law, lack of transparency, and corruption or deliberately use them for their own ends. For example, many of the unconditional loans undermine the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), which aims to combat patronage and corruption in the oil industry, for instance. Transparency, fair tendering, and binding rules fall by the wayside. Deals offered by China, Russia, and Turkey often deliberately exist in grey areas or are designed so opaquely that it is almost impossible for them to be monitored by the judiciary, the media, or civil society. There are also repeated accusations that they do not merely tolerate corrupt practices but actively exploit them to eliminate international competitors. Whether through active participation or passive tolerance, the practices undermine the efforts of other development partners to strengthen the rule of law, fight corruption, and build strong administrative procedures in the recipient countries.



### 3. *The Export of Authoritarian Instruments*

Autocracies learn lessons from each other. African autocracies and hybrid regimes can learn a great deal from China, Russia, and Turkey. They can tap into their wealth of experience in the repression of the media, civil society, and the opposition. Many African countries are experiencing a trend towards shrinking spaces for civil society, opposition movements, and freedom of expression. It is striking that instruments used in this process – whether it be stricter laws, the abuse of executive power, or the instrumentalisation of the security apparatus – are often modelled on the examples of authoritarian donors. Recommendations for action may be accompanied by the practical means to carry them out, such as equipment for security forces and the provision of surveillance technology so that governments can spy on their own citizens. But it is also possible to discern a quasi-ideological component when African governments point to the “success stories” of authoritarian donors and deduce that the democratic standards demanded by Western donors are “unnecessary”.

**Authoritarian donors and many African partner countries have in common the lack of distinction between state and ruling party.**

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### 4. *Direct Influence on Policymakers*

The toolkit also includes influencing policymakers at the national and the local level outside formal negotiation channels. Decision-makers – from mayors to senior civil servants and ministers – are specifically targeted via training courses or delegations to foster personal ties and communicate the donors’ own values.

A key common feature between authoritarian donors and many African partner countries is the lack of distinction between or fusion of state and ruling party. For some time now, China, in particular, has been focused on providing direct support for political parties in Africa. The networks range from old links to socialist parties to more recent, pragmatic links to ruling parties, irrespective of their ideological stance.<sup>16</sup> Critics see the training offered by China to cadres and officials of African political parties as another vehicle for ideologically entrenching the authoritarian Chinese model of society and development among Africa’s political elites.<sup>17</sup>

### 5. *The Weakening of Democratic Processes through Disinformation and Manipulation*

In the digital age, the instruments of authoritarian regimes also include the targeted manipulation of public opinion through disinformation and direct attacks on the integrity of electoral processes using digital means. Accusations against Russia in this regard made headlines not only in Europe and the US, but also in Africa. There is evidence of Russia’s deep involvement in training and equipping authoritarian states in digital election manipulation, the operation of bots and troll factories, and the targeted dissemination of fake news.<sup>18</sup> China’s propaganda machine also has enormous reach and a major impact on public opinion in Africa through both traditional and social media.<sup>19</sup>

A recent report by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung’s Media Programme Sub-Saharan Africa reveals the wide range of instruments employed by China, Russia, and Turkey. These include investment in African media houses, technical equipment, journalist training, and inserting their own formats and content in order to exert a huge influence on the African media landscape and disseminate their own narratives.<sup>20</sup>

## 6. *The Use of Soft Power to Communicate Values*

As instruments of soft power, culture, language, and education also help countries to gain influence and communicate their values. China, Russia, and Turkey are also progressively incorporating this aspect into their Africa strategies. The state-funded Confucius Institutes, with close ties to the Communist Party, promote Chinese language and culture abroad. There were no Confucius Institutes in Africa until 2004, whereas now they number more than 50. Russia is also venturing into this area with its equivalent, the Russkiy Mir Foundation.

All three countries are also expanding their scholarship programme in Africa. China has become the largest provider of scholarships for African students and the number one destination for education and training. Russia tries to exploit its historical ties by reviving alumni associations and building on the loyalty of politicians and officials who studied there during the Soviet era.

In the case of Turkey, there is another key element of soft power: religion. Under Erdoğan, the country also consolidates its influence by investing millions in the construction of mosques in the Sahel and from the Horn of Africa to South Africa. In Africa, religion is seen as an effective way of gaining influence, and mosques are particularly useful for spreading one's ideology.<sup>21</sup>

### **A Challenge for Western Democracies**

The involvement of actors such as China, Russia, and Turkey poses a major challenge to Western donors. Increased competition makes it more difficult to gain access and influence. There is a risk of falling behind in the race for

crucial resources and of missing out on important investment opportunities. The programmes and practices of authoritarian donors also undermine efforts to foster democratic progress in Africa, something that is seen as a key factor



Religion as an element of Turkish soft power in Africa: Somali Koran students await President Erdoğan in Mogadishu. Source: © Feisal Omar, Reuters.

for ensuring economic development and stability on Europe's neighbouring continent.

Germany and other European donors – plus the US, with its new stance on Africa under

Joe Biden – would be well advised to face this challenge head-on while questioning their own practices and strategies in the process. This is not a matter of watering down standards and expectations regarding aspects that can be



lumped together under “good governance”. For Western donors, giving in to their authoritarian counterparts’ false narratives about paternalism and relinquishing their own principles and conditionalities would set the wrong tone and be tantamount to abandoning their core values. Instead, they should be even more consistent in setting these preconditions as a basis for strong cooperation with African countries. In the fight for democracy and human rights, we should not overlook the strongest ally: the African people. Most people in Africa are unhappy with their political situation and long for more democracy. It is, therefore, vital that Western donors continue to actively promote democracy through actions such as strengthening a free and independent media and an active civil society – precisely in the knowledge that other actors are committed to doing the opposite.

It is important to take a resolute stance against the way Beijing, Moscow, and Ankara exert their power and present themselves as a “benevolent friend”. If they are to have success with their African partners, Western donors need to find better ways of communicating the attractiveness of their programmes. Alongside official development cooperation, this must also involve the private sector. German companies, in particular, are still strongly reluctant to invest in Africa. Greater commitment on their part would not only present economic benefits, but also strengthen Germany’s voice in the partner countries. However, it is all too often the European protagonists themselves who do not succeed in exploiting the whole package that Europe can offer; hence they fail to convey how various sectors involved in the engagement are interlinked and to emphasise Europe’s overall weight. The EU’s engagement in Africa is stymied by the problem of perception and visibility. While China et al. are pushing ahead with prestigious infrastructure projects and, for example, have taken advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic both diplomatically and in the media to promote themselves as strong supporters, Europe’s far more comprehensive engagement tends to be obscured by convoluted procedures and complex constellations of actors. When the

contributions of all the member states and the various joint instruments are added together, the EU provides more than half of all foreign investment in Africa (57 per cent in 2018, compared to around ten per cent from China). The public – and particularly the African public – is largely unaware of this obvious discrepancy. In this respect, it is important to take stronger joint action, such as the “Team Europe” approach to providing special funding in the context of COVID-19.

The draft Joint Africa-EU Strategy presented by the EU Commission in early 2020 has a stronger focus on mutual interests and offers a range of approaches for providing a new, robust foundation for relations with the neighbouring continent. Unfortunately, the EU’s much-heralded Africa Year in 2020 was overshadowed by the pandemic, and a planned EU-Africa summit did not take place. Europe must act quickly and make tangible progress in this respect, otherwise, the major summits organised by China and Russia will once again take centre stage.

*- translated from German -*

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