

“African Unity” and the Failure of Regional Integration, Current Geopolitical Changes

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In this long-ranging and insightful interview conducted by our media executive Kester Kenn Klomegah with Dr Mohamed Chtatou, a senior professor of Middle Eastern politics at the International University of Rabat (IUR) and Mohammed V University in Rabat, Morocco, focuses largely on accelerating, advancing and sustaining decades-old dream of Africa’s unity.

Dr Chtatou discusses at length the significant development processes and obstacles, the participation of foreign players and the emerging new world order, as well as the implications for Africa. Here are the interview excerpts.

Kester Kenn Klomegah: At the United Nations in March, African representatives were sharply divided over resolutions against Russia for invading its neighbouring republic, Ukraine. Some experts say this seemingly threatens Africa’s unity. What are your views, as a political scientist, about Africa’s “unity” today, and secondly especially Russia’s confrontation with United States and Europe in Africa?

Dr Mohamed Chtatou: Strengthening African unity has long been a sought-after goal that has never been achieved. As the need for regional integration and the reasons for past failures become better understood, new efforts are being made to strengthen economic and political ties among the continent’s many countries.

The main challenges to achieving integration are to expand trade among African countries, build more roads and other infrastructure, reform regional institutions, increase transparency and public participation, and coordinate private and public sector initiatives more closely.

Integration has many benefits. Expanding regional markets gives African producers and consumers more opportunities, well beyond the sometimes small markets of their own countries. There are two virtues of regional economic integration:

It can reduce the costs of building essential infrastructure, such as transportation, communications, energy, water supply systems, and scientific and technological research, which one country often cannot finance alone; and

At the same time, integration facilitates large-scale investment by making African economies more attractive and reducing risks.

The desire for integration does not come only from the top. At many levels of society, Africans are striving to forge more ties with each other. For some, these relationships already exist. For others, they have yet to be forged.

Regional integration of the continent has been a dream of many African leaders and led to the creation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1963. Over the years, many other institutions have been created in different parts of Africa. But on the whole they have done little to increase trade or other exchanges between African countries. In many cases, many countries continue to have the most extensive relationships with their former colonial powers.

The record of regional integration in Africa is so far poor, and many regional alliances are characterized by uncoordinated initiatives, political conflicts, and little intra-regional trade. However, analysts note that some of the external and internal factors that have hindered Africa's integration in the past have abated somewhat in recent years, and there is therefore reason for cautious optimism.

Africans have also learned from the failure of their previous initiatives. Many integration advocates are now taking a less ambitious and more practical approach. In their view, Africa needs to unite not only to strengthen its presence on the world stage but also to address the practical needs of its people.

Faced with the obstacles to regional integration efforts in Africa, proponents of greater unity identified several conditions to be met:

- More active involvement of civil society associations, professional groups, managers, and other sectors in any integration program;
- Achieving a balance between public and private sector economic initiatives;
- Reconciling the sometimes conflicting interests of countries of different sizes, natural resources, and economic performance;
- Proceeding with integration at a pace that is both ambitious and realistic; and
- Streamlining Africa's many regional institutions to reduce duplication of effort and inefficiency.

The economic crises that hit much of Africa in the late 1970s and early 1980s further undermined integration efforts. They also provided an opportunity for donor countries and international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank to call for major economic policy reform. The structural adjustment programs that African countries then adopted under pressure led to the privatization of hundreds of public enterprises, widespread liberalization of domestic and international trade, and a significant contraction of Africa's public sectors.

As in other regions of the world, regional integration is primarily constrained by the great diversity of African countries, which differ in size, natural resources, level of development,

and linkages to global markets.

In 1880, the Berlin Conference authorized and legitimized the “assault on Africa,” not to say its rape, known as the **Scramble for Africa** under the excuse of bringing “*the light of civilization to the savages of Africa* (sic)”, which was, in fact, nothing but giving permission to European powers to steal everything and in the process destroying traditional homespun cultures and replace them by the European alien civilization. Today, both the Western world: the USA and Europe, and its Eastern counterpart: China and Russia have an eager eye on Africa under the excuse of helping develop the economy of this part of the world, but, in reality, it is just another manifestation of the **Scramble for Africa**. These powers are interested in minerals and rare earths that are in Africa.

Yes, Africa is rich in rare earths and minerals that are highly desirable for many industries, including electronics, renewable energy, and defence. As a result, many great powers, including China, the United States and Russia, are interested in securing access to these resources.

However, it is important to note that while the presence of valuable resources can be a source of economic opportunity, it can also lead to exploitation, corruption, and political instability. It is essential that African nations have the ability to manage their resources in a sustainable and equitable way, to ensure that the benefits of these resources are shared by all citizens and that their extraction does not come at the expense of the environment or human rights.

How can Africa develop itself away from the greed of some developed nations? There is no easy answer to this question, as it is a complex issue that involves many different factors. However, there are some steps that Africa can take to promote sustainable development and reduce the influence of developed nations:

Promote good governance: African nations should work to establish transparent and accountable systems of governance that promote the rule of law, protect human rights, and combat corruption.

Invest in education and human capital: Developing the skills and knowledge of the African people is crucial to building a sustainable and prosperous future for the continent. Investing in education, health care, and other social services can help to build a strong and healthy workforce.

Support local industries: African nations can promote economic development by investing in local industries, rather than relying solely on exports of raw materials. This can create jobs, generate income, and promote sustainable growth.

Foster regional integration: African nations can work together to promote regional integration and reduce dependency on external actors. This can involve developing common trade policies, investing in regional infrastructure, and promoting cooperation on issues of mutual interest.

Encourage foreign investment on African terms: African nations should strive to attract foreign investment on their own terms, by negotiating fair and equitable deals that benefit both the investor and the host country. This can help to promote economic development and reduce dependency on aid.

In view of its abundant resources, its ambitious youth, its vibrant society, and its geostrategic potential, Africa needs to achieve unity and full integration, at once, to face the immense greed of the developed world and to defend its interest in the best possible ways.

KKK: With the current geopolitical changes and from several perspectives, French-speaking African countries are noticeably against France and a few English-speaking countries are working against neo-colonial tendencies in the continent. To what extent these could affect the future continental unity?

DMC: For the past twenty years, France has seen its economic importance with Africa shrink sharply; this is particularly true for French-speaking Africa, despite the fact that it is a historical partner of French capitalism.

In twenty years, France has lost nearly half of its market share in Africa compared to its competitors, going from 12% to 7%. *"French exports have doubled in a market that has quadrupled, hence a division by two of our market share,"* says former minister Hervé Gaymard in a report delivered in 2019.

Today, one is far from the image of the reserved domain, the French decline being even more pronounced in Francophone Africa. Not only is France losing market share to India and especially China, but in 2017 it also lost its status as the leading European supplier to the African continent, overtaken by Germany. France's market share in Africa represents 7.35% far behind China (27.75%), which is waging a hidden informational war against France. Indeed, one of the causes of this French decline is an irrational factor that continues to present France, the former colonial power, as "plundering" the continent's wealth (even if the economic facts partly contradict this reality).

From Rabat to Djibouti, via Niamey, Ouagadougou, Dakar, Bamako, N'Djamena, Yamoussoukro, Yaoundé, Libreville, Bangui, Antananarivo, Tripoli, and adding, in spite of all the window-dressing, Algiers and Tunis, Paris is losing its grip on a large part of Africa.

The year 2022 is the culmination of this divorce, now consummated, between several African countries, once friends and partners of France, which has shown great feverishness in the management of its bilateral, and continental relations with Africa. The truth of the matter is that Africa has changed its face, has evolved, and has decided for at least a good decade, now, to take its destiny into its own hands and reject any form of guardianship whatever its origin is.

A paradigm shift so profound that it has escaped the declining acuity of old-fashioned and receding French diplomacy. This has given substance to ruptures without return, as is the case with Mali, and Burkina Faso which sent the French ambassador home. Everywhere, from the Red Sea to the Atlantic through the western side of the Mediterranean, the multiplication of signs all display a clear and unambiguous message: *"France get out! /France degage!"*

At issue, and without ambiguity, the aggressive and unacceptable policy of President Emmanuel Macron, who blows hot and cold, with regard to a part of this Africa that today has other ambitions, and which sees the future of its populations outside the French sights, by concluding partnerships with other powers, notably China, Russia and Morocco, which, for 23 years, has made Africa a political, social, cultural and human national priority.

This translates into a simple rejection of the *modus operandi* of the French policy with its African “partners”, even to the point of irritating to the utmost loyal and allied as Senegal, which aligns itself with Mali, with Burkina Faso, with the Central African Republic, with Cameroon, with the Ivory Coast, with Niger, with Chad, with Libya and even with a country such as Djibouti, a favourite of Paris, which is also demanding its independence. In the wake of the protest and rejection movements that are spreading from one region to another like a contagious trail, likened to an awakening, that many consider to be late, since France has been unfair in its relations with its former colonies for age, and still intends to dictate their policies.

All of this is mixed with outdated lessons that Africans no longer want to receive from anyone, especially from a France bogged down in endless political and social crises, not to mention the deep and serious economic stagnation that pushes it to want to tap into the African reservoir that has served as an emergency valve and milking cow for over a century and a half.

This rejection on the part of African political leaders today also reflects the opinion of the African populations who categorically refuse the interference of Paris in their internal affairs, serving itself as it pleases, giving lessons at every turn, intervening militarily wherever it decides, and plunging entire countries into chaos. This raises the specter of a Libyan-style bankruptcy over countries such as Mali, Niger, Burkina, Chad, and the Central African Republic, among other states weakened by decades of exploitation by large French companies that are making huge profits while the populations of these countries are becoming poorer every day.

Overexploited raw materials, coveted rare earths, natural resources plundered for very long years, not to mention the millions of Africans subjected, mistreated, made into slaves by a France that gives lessons on the rights of humans to be equal, brothers, and free! Not to mention the fate reserved for all the deportees, for all those who fought by force to liberate France, and for all the victims of atomic testing in the Sahel desert. A very long list of injustices committed by France and inflicted on Africans who have endured enough and who, today, are saying: *“Enough!”*

A whole African youth today says *“No”* to France. No to visa blackmail, as if it were an entry ticket to paradise! No to arm wrestling on local markets and on the lion’s share reserved for French companies. No to cultural guardianship with this so outdated Francophonie that looks more and more false and misleading. No to the politics of the twisted hand to bend all those who want to decide for themselves their future and their development. No to double game. No to duplicity. No to profits of any kind. No to privileges. No to exploitation. No to discrimination. No to racism and xenophobia, two scourges that are today taking on a very worrying dimension in a French society that is both divided and weakened.

Even more remarkable is the fact that France’s decline can be observed first in French-speaking countries. France’s main African trading partners are now Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia, followed by Nigeria and South Africa. The former West African countries now account for only 1% of France’s market share.

It must be said that anti-French sentiment has never been so strong. Starting in Mali, it has spread to the Central African Republic and Burkina Faso, where opinion leaders accuse the former colonial power of wanting to profit from their resources.

KKK: Is it appropriate when we use the term “neo-colonialism” referring to a number of foreign players in Africa? What countries are the neo-colonizers, in your view? Do you think Russia is a virtual investor as some experts describe it... as it has marginal investment and economic footprints in the continent?

DMC: The use of the term neo-colonialism first became widespread, particularly in reference to Africa, shortly after the decolonization process following the end of World War II, which came after the struggle of several national independence movements in the colonies.

Colonialism is a policy of occupation and economic, political or social exploitation of a territory by a foreign state. Neo-colonialism refers to a situation of dependence of one state on another. This dependence is not official, as is the case between a colony and a metropolis.

The brutal exploitation of the populations as well as the appropriation of the resources of the continent by the countries of the North are at issue. This is what justifies that today, France and other Western countries are implementing actions, notably by helping the development that colonization had slowed down.

Neo-colonialism in Africa refers to the indirect and continued domination of African countries by former colonial powers, or by other external powers, through economic, political, and cultural means. Some aspects of neo-colonialism in Africa include:

Economic exploitation: African countries are often forced to rely on exports of raw materials, while importing manufactured goods at higher prices, leading to a one-sided economic relationship.

Political interference: External powers often interfere in the political affairs of African countries, supporting leaders who are favorable to their interests, and opposing those who are not.

Cultural domination: The cultural influence of former colonial powers can still be felt in Africa, as Western cultural values and norms are often seen as superior to traditional African values.

Debt dependency: Many African countries are burdened by debt, which often originated from loans given by external powers. These debts can lead to dependency and compromise their sovereignty.

Land and resource grabbing: External powers or corporations often acquire large amounts of land or resources in African countries, often displacing local populations and leading to environmental degradation.

The “new” Russian presence in Africa, after a disengagement of nearly 30 years, is evolving rapidly and can confuse several cards as long as it asserts itself as a counterweight to Chinese ambitions and Western neo-colonialism.

Somewhat like a cat out of the bag, the Russia-Africa summit in October 2019, where Putin gathered some 30 African heads of state in Sochi, struck the media opinion, overlooking the Soviet roots of this interest. Despite the absence of an overarching ideological rationale as in the days of the USSR, Putin’s Russia can take advantage of this legacy and bring a pragmatic approach to it.

KKK: What are the historical roots and what is the nature of this legacy? What logic drives Russian interests and which African actors are its privileged partners? Finally, what are the consequences for Russia, for its African partners, and for the world order?

DMC: Russia's re-engagement in Africa began with President Putin's visits to South Africa and Morocco in 2006, followed by his interim successor Medvedev's visits to Egypt, Angola, Namibia, and Nigeria in 2008, in both cases accompanied by delegations of businessmen to finalize private deals. This did not go unnoticed by Western analysts of Russian politics, who quickly detected a desire to score economic and symbolic points. Putin set the tone: *"Russia notes without jealousy that other countries have established ties in Africa, but it intends to defend its interests on the continent"*. However, at the same time, another strategy was at work at the state level.

In 2006, President Putin canceled the Algerian state's debt (of about \$4.5 billion) in exchange for lucrative arms deals. A similar strategy was implemented in Colonel Gaddafi's Libya: railway and gas contracts to Gazprom in exchange for the cancellation of Libyan debts. The fall of the dictator thwarted the plans somewhat, but Russia tried to remain influential, especially with Commander Haftar and contracts obtained by the Russian security firm Wagner. In Egypt, the former darling of Soviet cooperation during the Nasser era, there will be arms sales contracts (in excess of 3.5 billion dollars) with President Al-Sissi's regime, coupled with an agreement between the Russian nuclear energy agency Rosatom and the Egyptian government for the construction of a power plant in the Dabaa region, as well as the opening up of a market for Russian grain in the context of an embargo.

This give-and-take approach seems to have little ideological content but is certainly not without strategic vision in that the links with the Al-Sissi regime help to maintain a presence with Haftar in eastern Libya and to reaffirm Russian interests that were scorned when Gaddafi fell. It should be remembered that the cancellation of African debt was a policy put forward by the G8, of which Russia was a member at the time, but which Putin's regime applied to specific partners in exchange for concrete benefits.

During the period 2009-2018, Russian exports to Africa totalled nearly \$100 billion. However, 80% of this trade was concentrated in 7 countries: Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Nigeria, Sudan, and South Africa. As most of these are long-standing partners, two-thirds of this trade was directed to two countries in particular: Algeria (\$25.8 billion) and Egypt (\$37.5 billion). In 2019, the majority of all products exported by Russia to African countries could be grouped into five categories: arms, grain, oil products, ferrous metals, and shipbuilding.

The preponderance of Soviet interests in North Africa is more than evident. In contrast, with countries on the economic upswing such as Ethiopia, the DRC, and Angola, trade amounts to only tens of millions of dollars annually. Russia is also targeting bauxite mining in Guinea, platinum mining in Zimbabwe, and diamond mining in Angola. The creation of a Russian industrial zone in Egypt could not only ensure the preponderance of Russian firms in the Egyptian market but would also allow them to carve out a place of choice in the Sub-Saharan economic space.

From a comparative perspective, trade between the Russian Federation and African countries remains modest, with Russia being the 6th largest trading partner of Africa, after Turkey, and far behind China. But Moscow is progressing rapidly: 17.2% increase between

2018 and 2017. Also growing rapidly, Russian investments rose to 5 billion in 2018, but represent very little compared to Chinese investments estimated at 130 billion per year.

As a symbol of the new age of Russian capitalism, economic activities in Africa are carried out by a combination of private actors and large state-owned companies. The giant Gazprom signs most of the cooperation contracts in the oil and gas sector and wants, for example, to connect Nigeria's gas resources to Europe, while Rosneft is mainly active in North Africa and Lukoil in Nigeria and Ghana. The state agency Rosatom has nuclear cooperation projects with Egypt, Algeria, Nigeria and Zambia.

Although Russia has benefited from some of the ties forged during the Soviet era, the delay created by its disengagement, the aggressiveness of the Chinese offensive, and the context of international sanctions mean that the Eurasian giant has few means to develop its African strategy, and is taking an approach that combines military cooperation and media influence. To its credit, it has no colonial past and relies on anti-French sentiments, for example in Mali or the Central African Republic, in public relations campaigns in which it presents itself as the guarantor of the sovereignty of its African partners, with whom it exchanges services without any political or moral interference with regard to democratic norms.

Moreover, an important aspect of Russian soft power in Africa comes from its experience in Syria. It presents this as proof that it can guarantee the sovereignty and economic independence by freeing itself from the effects of Western sanctions and being less hegemonic than Beijing in its appetite for resources. For African leaders wishing to diversify their economic partners, these assets should not be overlooked.

Thus, the Sochi summit in October 2019 brought together representatives from each of the 54 African countries, including 43 heads of state. China, India, Turkey and Brazil are also already holding their African summits, as are the United States, the EU and Japan. We must therefore see in this exercise not a sign of the hegemonic designs of Putin's geopolitics, but rather the fact that Russia must do like all the major economic partners of Africa itself. The media impact was somehow more important than the economic and diplomatic impact. Some bilateral and multilateral treaties were signed, but no aid programs. The summit should be held every three years and if Russian forecasts come true, there should be a doubling of Russian-African trade by then, aiming to reach the French level.

Because the list of African countries with security agreements with Russia is rather long, because these cooperation projects are multiplying quite rapidly, especially in recent years, and because the foreign observer has somewhat forgotten that the USSR has had sustained interests and contacts with Africa for several decades, it is easy to be suspicious of Russian ambitions in contemporary Africa. Some of the implications are in line with the logic of the Soviet presence in Africa (North Africa, Portuguese-speaking Africa, South Africa and Ethiopia), others are born of new circumstances (Central African Republic). However, in economic terms, Russia does not carry much weight compared to players such as China, the United States or France.

KKK: South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA), in its latest reports warned African leaders about Africa being used as pawns by external players for achieving their geopolitical interests. What should be the Africa's collective position and their approach towards external players? What should be the role of the African Union?

DMC: The relationship between Africa and the West has always been strained, especially

because of colonialism, slavery, the Cold War, and now immigration and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Africa (as a continent) has taken an ambivalent stance on the war.

The “conquest” of Africa, a continent rich in raw materials (oil, gold, cobalt, coltan, diamonds, wood, uranium), is a major issue at the beginning of the 21st century. It is, moreover, at the heart of an increasingly aggressive game of influence, often to the detriment of the African countries themselves.

From the Baltic to Africa via the Mediterranean. Vladimir Putin’s Russia is back in the world. In Africa, it wants to re-establish the situation it had during the time of the Soviet Union, but also to increase its relations, in mutual respect.

After having been largely absent from Africa since the implosion of the USSR, Russia is still only taking timid steps to intervene in what is the new great game of the 21st century between great powers. Even if it is very far from China, India, the United States, and even the former European colonial powers, which are trying to maintain their position. But, to succeed in its comeback, Moscow wants to play its trump card: to put forward its past relations with African countries.

During the Cold War, the USSR appeared in the midst of decolonization as an alternative to Europe and had become one of the main suppliers of arms to African countries. The other strong point of Soviet influence was the university cooperation, which allowed many young Africans to study in Moscow.

At the time, this influence worried Western countries, which even wondered if the Soviet Union was not “*taking control of what was called the Third World,*” according to specialist journalist Christophe Boisbouvier (“Jeune Afrique,” October 20, 2017).

The Russia of the 21st century is far from playing this role on the continent today. Nevertheless, to give a signal of its re-engagement, the president, Vladimir Putin, decided last year to cancel some 20 billion dollars of debts of African countries contracted during the time of the USSR. In addition, Moscow has proposed to African countries still in debt a system of exchange “shares for debt”, in particular to invest in energy and natural resources. In industry, particularly in Guinea in bauxite, or in railroads in Ghana, Russian companies are now competing with the Chinese and the French.

Sixty years after independence, the continent remains the object of covetousness among the great powers. Africa represents about 8% of the world’s oil reserves, 7% of the world’s gold, 53% of the world’s diamonds, 75% of the world’s platinum and at least 60% of the world’s uncultivated arable land. If cultivated, it could feed a large part of the world’s population, which by the end of this century could reach 11 billion people.

What has changed profoundly, however, are the players and the geography. The “Great Game” is no longer between Russia and the United Kingdom in Asia, as it was in the 19th century, but between the new emerging countries, America and Europe in Africa. And the spur of the rivalry is China.

The fact remains that, faced with Russian, Indian, European or American ambitions, China has an advantage. It is ready to largely finance public and private operations in Africa. The difference between China and a country like France is that China provides long-term

financing. Even if the risk for African countries is to see their debt explode.

The AU, the new institution, has the ambition to renovate and strengthen the economic and political integration projects that were the basis for the creation of the OAU. It must, among other things, promote cooperation and strengthen social, economic, and political relations between member states to avoid warlike relations. Moreover, it wishes to put in place a stable institutional framework to enable African states to participate effectively in the global market and in international negotiations on trade, finance, and other international issues (AU Constitutive Act, Articles 3 and 4). By replacing the OAU with the AU, the heads of state wanted to modernize the old institution and initiate a new page in the integration of African states following the example of the European Union.

However, several years after its creation, and despite the efforts made, the African Union, the largest regional organization on the African continent, has not produced the expected results. Armed conflicts, including numerous civil wars, prevent the establishment of a climate of peace and security among the member states. At the political level, the continent is marred by numerous coups d'états. The social situation is just as chaotic and the continent is facing repeated health crises. In addition, famine and poverty are part of the daily life of the citizens and the economic situation of the continent is not more glorious. Indeed, the African continent is the one that contributes the least to world trade. It is heavily dependent on imports and continues to trade raw materials for finished goods at the expense of local processing industries.

In other words, the African Union is far from its objectives and, contrary to its reference model, is not prospering. This sad fact raises several questions, both about African integration and about the legitimacy and usefulness of the African Union.

The topic seems all the more relevant as African nations see regional integration as an important opportunity to introduce political stability and increase trade. In this regard, Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana and one of the founding fathers of African unity said:

“There can be no real independence and economic independence and true economic, social, political and cultural development of Africa without the unification of the continent”.

But how should this unification take place? Is the African Union, based on the European Union model the only solution for Africa? Is it capable of curing Africa of all its ills? What if regional integration under the European model is not adapted to Africa?

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Kester Kenn Klomegah, who worked previously with Inter Press Service (IPS), is now a regular contributor to Global Research. As a versatile researcher, he believes that everyone deserves equal access to quality and trustworthy media reports.

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