
Africa's choice of partners

Mineral rich with untapped markets, this is the continent the world is now courting, Nicholas Westcott writes

Summits with Africa are in fashion: in August, President Obama hosted America's first; in April, the European Union staged the fourth EU-Africa summit in Brussels; the BRICS countries – Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa – held one in Durban in March last year; and in June 2013 Japan hosted its five-yearly conference on African development in Yokohama. Next year will see the sixth China-Africa summit. South America, South Korea and Turkey, which have all held summits with African leaders in recent years, have pledged return matches in Africa.

Such is the profusion that African leaders are reviewing whether they can spend so much of their time cruising from summit to summit given their domestic priorities, the bi-annual African Union summits and the regular African regional meetings that demand their attendance.

What is the substance behind these summits? Is this a signal of Africa's coming of age as a continent that the rest of the world takes seriously? Or is it simply a reflection that Africa has what the rest of the world wants: a rapidly growing population of consumers and an abundant stock of natural resources?

The first in the field, interestingly, was Japan, which held the inaugural Tokyo International Conference on African Development in 1993, though only four heads of state turned up. The conference has always focused as much on business partnership as on traditional development and has always, until now, been held in Japan. Despite the country's recent slower growth, Africa remains an important export market for cars, electronics and machinery and a source of raw materials – though two thirds of the latter come to Japan from a single country, South Africa.

China and the EU came next, inaugurating summits in 2000. China has held them every three years since, alternating between Beijing and Africa. Its own trade with Africa has grown dramatically in the past decade: from about \$5 billion each way in 2001, to more than \$110 billion imports (almost all raw materials) and \$85 billion exports (predominantly transport, clothing and machinery) by 2012.

Many see its rapidly growing economic engagement with Africa as redressing the balance for a continent hitherto hitched too closely to former colonial powers and western multinationals. Others argue China is behaving exactly as western countries

do – using Africa as a source of raw materials and destination for exports, the only difference being that they are 'politically blind' and give no lectures on governance.

In practice, this approach is changing. China has recognized that political turmoil does not serve its commercial interests. In Sudan and South Sudan, for example, its concern to broker a political peace is as great as that of the West. In Zambia, it has had to adapt to the unexpected changes in government a democratic system brings; and in Zimbabwe, it recently demonstrated the limit to its willingness to bail out even an old friend. So as China's engagement with Africa grows, its interests grow closer to those of the rest of the world. It was one of the first to provide medical help to tackle the ebola crisis in West Africa.

The European Union and its member states still have the closest, deepest, broadest and most complex relations with Africa. The shadows of history lie long and sometimes dark over the relationship. Though there have for many years been regular EU meetings with the African, Caribbean and Pacific nations under the 1975 Lomé Convention, the first EU-Africa summit took place in Cairo in 2000. It then took seven years before the second summit, in Lisbon, could agree a joint EU-Africa strategy to guide the relationship for the future.

This year's summit marked a turning point. It was the largest, with 40 African and 20 European leaders present. Disappointingly for the press, it was harmonious, business-like and productive.

The economic relationship continues to grow – not as fast as that with emerging economies, but the EU remains Africa's largest economic partner. In 2011, Europe provided nearly half of Africa's total investment stock, worth around €200 billion. Trade has continued to grow and in 2012 the EU imported €186 billion from and exported €152 billion to Africa. A significant proportion of European imports from Africa (around 35 per cent) were value-added food, drink or manufactured goods, indicating that Europe is moving away from the traditional view of Africa as merely a source of raw materials.

Both trade and investment, therefore, combine with more traditional EU development cooperation, worth about €4 billion a year, plus EU member states bilateral programmes, to contribute to the continent's economic transformation. An integral part of the summit was the Busi-



President Obama helps organize the 'family photo' at the end of the US African leaders summit in August which was attended by 45 countries

ness Forum, which gathered 1,000 businessmen from the two continents.

An increasingly close area of EU-Africa partnership is security. As Ghana's President John Mahama said, if your neighbour's house is on fire, you help him to put it out. The growing threat both from terrorism and the collapse of law and order in several states pose a risk to both continents. The EU is the largest funder of Africa's own peace support operations, as well as the provider of training missions and protective deployments in a number of countries. In Somalia, in Mali and the Sahel, and now in the Central African Republic, the EU and African Union are working hand-in-hand with the UN to combat terror and disorder.

The only other partnership that deals with the human and security issues in such depth is that between Africa and the United States. Despite the signing by the US Congress of the African Growth and Opportunity Act in 2000, the trade rela-

'The growing threat from terrorism poses a risk to both continents'

tionship has declined. Though annual US exports to Africa have stayed steady at more than \$30 billion since 2011, imports from Africa have declined from \$90 billion in 2011 to \$50 billion in 2013. US investment in Africa also lags behind both the EU and China. One of President Obama's motives in holding the Washington summit was to stimulate a renewed interest in African markets among US businesses.

Even though the US was accused of playing catch-up on Africa, it did illustrate the wider significance of the relationship. The US commitment to help Africa fight terrorism as well as achieve development was clearly reaffirmed by the summit conclu-

sions, with assistance to African security and peacekeeping as well as an increase in development assistance.

For the others – Brazil, South Korea and Turkey – the interest in Africa remains economic. Competition for markets is growing, but from the African countries' point of view, the potential access to increased investment and trade is welcome. For each partner, the growing economic links will increase their interest in the continent's stability, likely to be reflected in continued support to achieve that goal.

The reality is that Africa has more freedom and choice than ever before. Money is available – if African countries can guarantee their own stability and economic openness. Far from trying to control them, the world wants African nations to take charge of their own destinies.

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