The African Union at 20: Building Partnerships for Africa's Strategic Autonomy

By:

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The lack of international cooperation and coordination during the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of African efforts to enhance resilience and agency in international relations. While the African Union (AU) continues to face challenges in achieving greater continental integration, it has embarked on several important measures, including efforts to reform the AU to make it fitter or more efficient. Some of these efforts include reforms aimed at reducing the AU's dependence on external donors and the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AFCFTA), a flagship project of the AU's Agenda 2063.

Many of the efforts embarked on by the AU over the past twenty years have sought to achieve a greater degree of strategic autonomy and sustain the funding of its various operations through the domestic mobilisation of resources and international partnerships for development. Research undertaken in recent years has highlighted that Africa is a net capital exporter but through illicit means. Closing the gaps in the illicit financial flows, which are not limited to public institutions but involve multinational enterprises taking advantage of regulatory loopholes through, for example, base erosion and profit shifting, will thus be important in addressing Africa's efforts to mobilise domestic resources and to achieve a higher degree of strategic autonomy in an evolving global order.

Given its historical and contemporary circumstances, the 'geostrategy' pursued by the AU and its member states has largely been preoccupied with an aspirational 'continental sovereignty' on the one hand, in terms of strategic autonomy at the level of the AU in conjunction with its regional

economic communities (RECs) and, on the other hand, continental and regional integration to avoid continental fragmentation.

The COVID-19 pandemic has, amongst other things, accelerated the urge for greater African integration to build the continent's resilience in the face of global crises through growing geopolitical tensions, pandemics, and climate change. This has ensured a greater demand for the development of regional value chains, with the implementation of the AFCFTA and the various regional indicative strategic frameworks acting as a catalyst for achieving the AU's overall aims of building strategic autonomy and managing the continent's strategic partners. (Sub-Saharan) African trade only forms about three per cent of global trade, whereas intra-Africa trade still sits at roughly 16-18 per cent of the continent's overall trade. It is also important to consider that an increasing number of African countries currently see the African market as either their most important export destination or their second most important market. This is a positive trend that requires a closer examination in a disaggregated manner in order to understand what is happening beyond the export of commodities, especially at a sub-regional level.

The real test for achieving *Agenda 2063* is whether African stakeholders are themselves committed to its implementation and to muster the necessary political will, accompanied by rigorous and systematic monitoring and evaluation mechanism to hold each other accountable for implementation. It is thus important to understand the extent to which African stakeholders align their engagement with external powers toward achieving the key regional and continental priorities and expanding the continent's policy space and strategic autonomy.

What is important from an African point of view is how the continent will or can be an active agent in shaping the evolving global order. Given how prevalent academic scholarship on geopolitics tends to knowingly and without knowing to imagine Africa as a passive passenger in a changing geopolitical order, this is an important endeavour. This will surely remain important for a continent being courted by various actors and experiencing a demographic and technological transformation that will only enhance its relevance in the changing geopolitical and economic landscape. Some external actors that have courted Africa over the past twenty years and institutionalised their relations through various summit diplomacy initiatives include China, India, Turkey, South Korea, and Japan. The European Union (EU) and the United States (USA) have also sought not to get left behind in the summit diplomacy efforts. The responsibility will, however, continue to lie with the AU and its member states to ensure that the continued interest in the continent is converted into partnerships that enhance Africa's development efforts through the implementation of Agenda 2063 and its flagship projects.

Looking towards the next twenty years, the aim of enhancing the role and effectiveness of the AU and the RECs will have to be closely aligned with the bilateral engagements of individual African countries. The large economies on the continent must take on greater responsibility in organising Africa's relations in a changing geopolitical and geo-economic landscape. Leading African economies will need to play a proactive role in creating and safeguarding the strategic autonomy of the African continental and maritime space. The imperative of greater regional and continental integration must thus be seen not only as important from an ideological and historical point of view but also from a dispassionate and strategic calculation of Africa's aspirational role in the world. Indeed, a more integrated continent is of paramount importance to the strategic interests of the continent in a changing international landscape. The key priority thus remains greater integration and how Africa can leverage its external relations and partnerships to advance this overriding goal.

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