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Africa in the Emerging New World Order: Opportunities, Challenges, and Nigeria's Strategic Position

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Abstract

The post-Cold-War unipolar world is evolving to a competitive multipolar order, where America, China, the European Union, Russia, India and a cluster of assertive mid-tier powers contend over markets, influence, resources. Increasingly a pivot in this transition is Africa: her young, growing world – Africa commands world's fastest growth, the bulk of minerals required by energy transition and what can eventually be the world's single largest market by population via the African Continental Free Trade Area. This paper addresses a nexus where Africa's changing geopolitical significance within new world order; a structural challenge that this rise represents; the nature and dynamic of the external partnerships (China, the U.S., EU, Russia, Gulf, Turkey, India) determining this transition; and Nigeria, its largest black democracy and largest black economy, whether can translate scale of population and economy to strategic influence. African structural centrality is moving upwards without agency of one or any state; Nigeria has right kind of material-population, economy and diplomacy-to provide leadership to continent, but it cannot effectively use it due to its security and economic insecurity; infrastructure deficit and institutional frailness. Nigeria's, and in fact Africa's, strategic influence in new world order will turn less to the external powers than endogenous policy and governance reforms.

Keywords: Africa, multipolarity, new world order, critical minerals, AfCFTA, Nigeria, foreign policy, strategic partners, Africa regional power

1. Introduction

According to those observing the international sphere, the order which developed from the Cold War with unchallenged US preeminence has already moved into a stage of structural transition (Allison, 2020; Mearsheimer, 2021). Such a trend is marked by the emergence of China as an economic and eventually military equal, Russian ascendance through traditional and irregular ways, the growing claims of the middle powers including India, Turkey and the Gulf states, and the increasing weight of institutions for the middle powers like African and South states (Ikenberry, 2020). In the transition of world order to the multipolar order, the position of Africa is experiencing an unprecedented acceleration in the past ten years. Being a silent but important actor in the realm of international relations, with which analyses long regard as objects of humanitarian relief, aid and intervention, now Africa are being courted as subject of competitive interest both for its mineral wealth, demographics, vote at international institutions and market value for goods (Cheru, 2022; Taylor, 2021). The joining of African Union as a permanent member of G20 in 2013 serves a clear indication to that effect. In evaluating Africa's trajectory, Nigeria would inevitably become the critical position of the continent. Nigeria with its largest population, second or first largest economy (subject to exchange rates), has been labeled- by both national policymakers and outside world- as the logical leader not only of Africa but of the world. Nevertheless, Nigeria’s unrealized leadership position has also been an important topic of research and policy; thus, this paper attempts to analyze this dynamic, including the expanding strategic significance for African at the world stage and Nigeria’s position. It aims to determine what must be done to realize its potential into tangible power.

2. Africa's Changing Geopolitical Importance

Underlying Africa’s increasing geopolitical importance are three structural trends. The first, demographic. The UN projects that Africa's population, already the youngest in the world, will increase significantly to mid-century while most other continents plateau or shrink (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2022:). Such a demographic dividend is good for economies, creating a surplus workforce and, geoeconomically, lending power to markets, diasporas and votes within multilateral institutions.

The second factor of "resource geopolitics"-deeper discussion of this later in Section 3-is Africa’s over-proportionate share of the minerals essential for renewable technology and batteries, which places it at the very center and not as a sideshow of the current global transition to renewable energy sources.17(IEA, 2022) The third is institutional and economic integration. Even in its very early and faltering stages of implementation, the establishment of the AU's African Continental Free Trade Area, which began its operational stage in 2021, is symbolic of a continent seeking not to bargain as individual units with external great power interests, but as a unit to a market of 1.3 billion people and potentially the largest FTZ in terms of population; a marked change that immediately alters how external powers are prompted to engage (AU, 2021; UNCTAD, 2021).

These three factors combined make it clear that it is structural, not specific, advantages such as winning the trust of a particularly ambitious diplomat or achieving an early breakthrough in peace talks, which guarantee Africa an increasing role in the evolving world order; population, geology and geography promise an expanding role no matter which external powers actively try to court the continent. The question this paper seeks to answer is whether these structurally given positions for Africa, and specifically Nigeria, can be translated into negotiated strategic dividends or whether such structural import positions the continent for new, extractive great power rivalry.

3. Natural Resources and Strategic Value

Of the several materials critical to renewable-energy and battery supply chains that Africa has significant reserves in-an overriding share of global cobalt (almost all of which is concentrated in the Democratic Republic of Congo); important concentrations of lithium and rare-earths throughout Zimbabwe, Namibia, and other states; and extensive concentrations of copper, manganese and platinum-group minerals (International Energy Agency ; World Bank, 2023)-African states holding mineral wealth are acquiring a type of structural advantage over other states which, at times during the twentieth century, oil-exporting states also possessed; such advantage may however not always translate readily into successful national developmental outcomes (Cheru, 2022). Similarly, hydrocarbon wealth still has considerable weight; oil-exporting countries on the continent such as Nigeria, Angola, Algeria and Libya are still major players in that domain, despite the predicted tapering of long-term global hydrocarbon demand over the course of the energy transition (International Energy Agency, 2022). Furthermore, Africa possesses a significant land endowment in the agriculture sector, boasting much of the world's remaining uncultivated land resources, making the continent one of the potential food security-ensuring stakeholders of a world grappling with increasing climate-based food disturbances (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2022). Whether Africa's resource endowment will ever contribute to value-addition processing and manufacturing locally, or continue being extracted as a raw material for use in processing beyond the continent (as theorized through 'enclave economies' without broader beneficial spillover effects in the literature, on resource-curse and dependency theories) is the central question regarding policy: a number of African governments like the Democratic Republic of Congo have in recent times sought to institute requirements to benefit from the value of its mineral resources and mining contracts renegotiation so as to retain more value locally, a new emerging trend in policy which might likely influence the transformation of the continent's mineral resources from sources of dependence or strategic autonomy (World Bank, 2023).

4. Strategic Partnerships and Great-Power Competition

Clearly, Africa's relations with external powers extend far beyond its colonial relationship with former European colonial states. Its largest trade partner is China, its largest investor, which through the forum on China-Africa cooperation (FOCAC) and the Belt and Road Initiative has established itself as major infra-finance lender in Africa though raising concerns for many client states over debt sustainability (Taylor, 2021; UNCTAD, 2021). The USA wants to re-engage Africa through initiatives such as Prosper Africa, the Summit of the US-Africa Leaders that are periodically convened, and through on-going

security cooperation via U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), although U.S. Trade preferences offered through the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) were put under doubt through renewed uncertainty about their renewal, and this has caused concern amongst African traders ((Hannatu, Benson. Mahmud, & Iya, 2023). The EU's own efforts to compete include the Global Gateway initiative, offering similar levels of infrastructural investment and finance along the lines and in overt contradistinction to the lending provided by China; migration ties remain a strong part of EU-Africa relations (however fraught their dynamics can become). Other than this, it can be said to have a growing role insecurity partnership, in particular with West African States, with the Sahel proving especially attractive where military governments had pushed out western security advisors, giving way for Russian presence in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger (Taylor, 2021). Beside these giants of Sino-American competition there has been massive increase in the diplomatic presence, security links, and economic engagement of, namely the Gulf states (UAE, Saudi Arabia, especially), but also of Turkey, India and of most of the middle-sized powers that since the end of the 20th century are increasingly interacting with the entire African continent as their interlocutor, rather than its mediator between the giants. This diversification of Africa's partners may have its potential for African strategic advantage allowing a room to negotiate terms and make a choice on behalf of competition of different external interests ('non-alignment' or 'omni-balancing', term sometimes used today for describing the postcolonial world of the Global South) (Ikenberry, 2020). The danger underlying the process now, extensively dealt in the literature about a "new scramble for Africa", is that the coordination challenge in the individualistic pursuit of advantages by a few, considerably weaker states, can lead back to the extractive relations and it should rely more on the coordination in favor of multilateral policy for Africa, carried out via the institutions (African Union and AfCFTA) of Africa as such (Taylor, 2021).

5. Opportunities for Africa

Indeed, there is no shortage of opportunities that may flow from these structural changes noted above. The AfCFTA presents a chance for structural economic transformation through intra-African trade and value chains. Such a process is in principle capable of producing more significant developmental benefits than raw commodity exports – but it demands that tariff liberalization be accompanied by investment in cross-border infrastructure and regulatory coherence (African Union, 2021; UNCTAD, 2021). There is now also a genuine opportunity for states rich in relevant minerals in African countries and regions to demand local beneficiation and/or manufacturing in the access to such resources, in accordance with (for example) the precedent for extracting local benefits from cobalt in the DRC (World Bank, 2023). The reality of multipolarity should itself be viewed as an opportunity: a number of external actors will compete against one another for African partnership, enabling African states and institutions to acquire better terms for loans, technology transfer and market access than in an earlier unipolar era (Ikenberry, 2020[DOI unverified - verify before submission]). Finally, Africa's demographic outlook, in conjunction with a sustained investment in, for instance, health, education and job opportunities, is itself a long-horizon asset unique in an aging international order (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2022).

6. Challenges

There are severe challenges for Africa's ability to translate its structural importance to strategic agency. The extreme political fragmentation between fifty-four states with varying national interest undermine the coordinated collective bargaining which, in principle, is provided by AfCFTA and the AU (and is exemplified by the difficulty of attaining pan-African positions on global issues (Cheru, 2022). Intense insecurity has permeated parts of the continent, especially the Sahel where a string of recent military takeovers between 2020 and 2023 in Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Niger, combined with an increased rate of jihadist incursions into Sahelian countries, and an abandonment of previous security partnerships with the West, has threatened the stability of a strategically significant region (Taylor, 2021). Increased insecurity in maritime zones (Gulf of Guinea), high numbers of African countries being affected by debt distress in the wake of the mid-2022 to mid-2023 increase in rates on loans to African nations, lack of infrastructure, and Weak institutions & governments across states has inhibited the continent's ability to engage in negotiations as a unified strategic actor (International Monetary Fund, 2023).

Climate exposure exacerbates all the aforementioned factors: on one hand there is a minuscule contribution of global greenhouse gasses from the continent, but simultaneously a much greater impact of agricultural and infrastructure damage due to climate change and variable weather patterns, with a commensurate negative impact on bargaining positions in debates surrounding global climate finance (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2022). Without coordination in continental negotiations and commitment on national level governance, the concern in the “new scramble” literature is certainly real, that an increase in foreign interest leads to rather than provides reciprocal benefit; but rather that it leads to extraction rather than mutual gain (Taylor, 2021).

7. Nigeria's Strategic Position

It is Nigeria’s combination of tangible assets that, combined, provide a basis for claims of strategic importance. Demographically, the country is now Africa’s most populous state, with some projections indicating it will stand as the world’s third largest between India and China in the midpoint of the 21st century with population estimates over 220 million people. Economically, Nigeria has competed and jostled with South Africa and Egypt for Africa’s top economy slot at any given time based on the size of its nominal GDP, and despite long having depended upon oil and gas, Nigeria possesses a significant and growing technology and fintech sector that is already well entrenched in Lagos, and which accounts for a non-trivial amount of African business output.

Diplomatically Nigeria possesses some impressive history as an African leader: she was a founding and leading member of the Economic Community of West African states (ECOWAS), spearheaded the ECOMOD peacekeeping interventions that were undertaken by West Africans to promote peace in Liberia and Sierra Leone in the 1990s, and has served numerous turns on UN Security Council non-permanent seats giving her a significant record in this arena, making her one of the more consistent proposers of the need for greater African representation at the reformed security council envisioned by AU with regard to Ezulwini Consensus (Hannatu, Benson. Mahmud, & Iya, 2023).

Culturally Nigeria is influential via Nollywood- Africa's successful film sector and by far the most recognized in the international community, and Afrobeat’s is rapidly becoming one of the most

prominent and globally accepted African musical sub-genres which is the very model of modern African soft power influence as understood within the international studies discourse. These assets-demographic weight; economic heft; the tradition of continental leadership through institutions, and burgeoning soft power-provide the fundamental, objective, structural foundations for the national strategic and regional/global posture Nigerian policy-makers have been touting for generations ((Hannatu, Benson. Mahmud, & Iya, 2023).

8. Constraints on Nigeria's Strategic Aspirations

Nigeria also faces an array of internal limitations to transforming its inherent assets into actual strategic power. Internal insecurities – ranging from the Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province conflict in the North-East of Nigeria to the ongoing farmer-herder clashes in the Middle Belt and widespread banditry and kidnapping, the most recent of which included an incident in Nigeria's South-Western Ondo state (International Monetary Fund, 2023) – have direct economic costs as well as making it difficult for Nigeria to provide strategic influence both externally and internally to an array of struggling nation-states across the continent (International Monetary Fund, 2023). The Nigerian economy also faced enormous economic fluctuations; reforms designed to correct the notorious, over-used fuel subsidy and to float Nigeria's Currency at some point in 2023 imposed immediate inflationary pressures, despite they corrects long-standing fiscal imbalances – indicative of the delicate trade-offs of Nigerian economic reform (International Monetary Fund, 2023); Nigeria’s dependence on oil earnings however meant that while the technology and service sectors continued their rapid rise and made it an attractive market and location for outsourcing and e-commerce, the overall Nigerian economy continues to suffer from vulnerability to global energy price fluctuations in an environment where, as outlined in Section 3, a shift away from fossil fuels continues over the long haul.

Indeed Nigeria continues to suffer from deficits in infrastructure, namely its electricity generation capacity and distribution networks which continues to hinder manufacturing competence and thus serve as impediment to becoming the industrial anchor state for the implementation of the AfCFTA at West African levels; corruption and poor quality of public services constitute another hindrance and affect both Nigeria's overall development status and the credibility of its attempts to advocate governance reform among developing nations across Africa ((Hannatu, Benson. Mahmud, & Iya, 2023). The long and short of it is Nigeria suffers from a chronic disjuncture between its objective potential and its empirical performance; it is a recurrent theme within Nigeria’s debates on its foreign policy and externally, it is part of the recurrent debates on Nigeria, which the new Nigerian economic reforms are intended to address.

9. Conclusion and Recommendations

Africa's growing importance on the emergent multipolar order operates on structural foundations (demographic, mineral, institutional) that are independent of individual diplomatic achievement or will soon continue to function regardless of which external actor most effectively woos the continent. Whether this heightened significance will turn into genuine African agency and not a reconfigured form of extractive scramble via larger numbers of external partners largely remains dependent on the strength

of pan-African coordination, including the African Union and AfCFTA, and the governance capacity of the continent's most populous and most economically relevant states.

Africa's, as represented in the case of Nigeria, promise and predicament in this transition is quite pronounced. A genuine opportunity for Africa to have greater influence on continental and global affairs rests on its demographic size, economy scale, and the diplomatic know-how of its leadership in international forums such as Nigeria's diplomatic track record, as compared to Nigeria's historic deficits in security, economic stability, infrastructure, and governance capacity that undermine its ability to turn potential into power. The paper recommends Nigeria as an example for Africans overall: Nigeria should focus on: sustained economic diversification toward manufacturing and technology to take advantage of AfCFTA's possibilities; coordinated security sector reform in which issues like insurgency, banditry, and kidnapping are approached as both domestic priorities and tools for asserting Africa's standing; Nigeria should undertake public investments in power and transport infrastructure as building blocks for a stronger and more impactful manufacturing center of West African integration; finally, Nigeria should leverage the continental diplomatic muscle of its democratic and cultural soft power in pan-African and global forums as demonstrated by Nigeria's continued role in advocating for African representation on an expanded UN Security Council.

These policy prescriptions apply to Africa more generally: African states individually have a significant choice about how they handle the emergent multipolar order. Will they participate as coordinated blocs and negotiate agreements based on the continent's growing structural weight, or will they remain pieces of the board in a larger power game played with other states as active rather than passive participants? The latter choice threatens Africa with the potential emergence of renewed forms of colonial dependency that is simply conducted by new powers in new formats, undermining a once in a generation chance for the continent to stand up as an influential player on the global stage that will contribute to new global power configurations given the continent's and within its Nigeria's demographic and resource heft.

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