

France new approach in Africa in the context of Russian hybrid operations

Partnership and solidarity instead of Francafrigue

On 27th of February President Emmanuel Macron announced a new approach in French policy on Africa, stressing an end of Francafrigue. The new policy would be based on the logic of partnership and solidarity instead of logic of interventionism, aid and protectionism. Importantly, it means that France is going to withdraw its troops from combat missions in Africa, particularly from

the restive Sahel region. They are supposed to be replaced by local troops and France instead will focus on contribution to military education in the region. Saying that Macron rejected the idea that France may compete with some countries whose policy is based on mercenaries and armed forces, making a clear allusion to Russian usage of Wagner Group. Macron stressed also that while he is proud of French troops achievements in Africa against terrorists, it was a mistake to assume that France can solve Africa's political problems through military means and that France can't take sole responsibility for that and in effect become a scapegoat. At the same time Macron thanked countries which contributed to fighting terrorism in operations in Mali through Takuba Task Force. Notably Poland was not among them, despite long consideration to join Takuba.

In French president's opinion Africa is not a continent of despair and resignation but an emerging superpower and its role will grow in the future as a world's center of cultural, economic, scientific and political development, making Europe more and more dependent on cooperation with Africa. French future policy on Africa is supposed to be more transparent, based on the sense of mutual interests and obligations, and its aim would be to create a new balanced, mutual and responsible relation. In President Macron's words it will differentiate this approach from the logic of military and economic pillage, which was again a reference to Russian use of Wagner Group to plunder natural resources and commit massacres of civilians as well as Chinese strategy to drive its African partners into debt traps.

Democracy or flexibility

Macron also declared that democracy is a priority among French interests in Africa and suggested that France will work there on civic society building. In principle this is a good approach as history of postcolonial Africa shows that dictatorship based on one ethnic group, neglecting or

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prosecuting other groups, largely contributes to internal strife, civil wars, massacres, crimes against humanity and even genocide and all of that contributes to poverty, high rate of natural increase (as demography in the conditions of tribal and ethnic conflicts is seen as a weapon) and migration (including migration from Africa to Europe). Democratic balance of power is an only long-term solution but the recent history of Africa shows that democracy may be also very fragile if it is not based on strong grounds of common sense of responsibility and citizenship. Moreover, in short term, other conditions must be taken into consideration. Demanding reforms on democracy and human rights from undemocratic leaders in Africa may make key partners turn towards China and Russia, who prefer autocratic rulers over democratic ones as it is easier to corrupt the former and make long term deals with them.

This pattern negates a popular opinion that China and Russia, in contrast to Western countries, do not interfere in internal affairs of countries they are dealing with. This is especially the case with Russia, who helped to carry out coups in Mali and Burkina Faso, at least by spreading misinformation and feeding anti-French and pro-Russian sentiments. In December 2020 Russia helped Central African Republic president Faustin-Archange Touadera in reelection by sending Wagner Group to this country. Once a pro-Russian regime is installed through coup or fraud elections, Wagner Group provides protection against any internal opposition. Assuming that any attempt to carry out a counter-coup would not receive any assistance from the West this tactic does not require much resources (especially big number of troops deployed).

Threat of pro-Russian alliance

Retracting from "cold war" logic of supporting coups by postcolonial countries is generally a good decision and it will help in building better image in long term but it also requires countering Russian and Chinese propaganda. It is also worth to note that public opinion in some countries, including Poland, tends to see this rivalry between France versus Russia and China, as France sole postcolonial problem. This is an erroneous approach and it is worth to pose a question if "pro-Russian" Africa would be better than "pro-French" one. It is not necessary to be an admirer of France and its policy in Africa to find a clear answer.

Meanwhile a pro-Russian alliance has emerged, consisting of 3 countries ruled by juntas (because of that their membership in ECOWAS and African Union has been suspended): Mali, Burkina Faso and Guinea. France, instead of plotting a countercoup, adopted a strategy to wait and let people of these countries realise that trusting Russia that they will solve security problems was a huge mistake. This is a fair approach however it means that Russians will commit many crimes (like Moura massacre in March 2022, where "wagners" helped to kill 300-500 Fulani herders) before they fully discredit themselves and people of these countries would rebel against them. Until then it is necessary to stress the illegal nature of these regimes, necessity to come back to democracy and support opposition. As juntas are based on exclusion of certain ethnic groups, like Touaregs or Fulani in Mali, it is also useful to work with these groups.

Pragmatism in practice

It is also worth to note that in recent interview to France 24, the leader of Al Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (AQMI), Youssef al-Anabi, called Russian presence in Sahel a “colonial force”. This means that there is a chance that jihadists in Africa will now reorient themselves on attacking Russian (and maybe also Chinese) targets, and that would be a very good development. Anabi declared also that they don’t intend to attack targets inside Europe, however it is necessary to be cautious about that and if AQMI and other jihadi groups including those related to “Islamic State” are able to increase their strength too much, it can backfire with a growing terrorist threat to Europe, sooner or later. This is why it is also necessary to support local military capacities in other Sahel countries like Mauritania, Niger and especially Chad and not let them fall into Russian (as well as Chinese or Turkish) sphere of influence. There should be two parallel criteria of assessment regarding sub-Saharan countries in Africa: democratic regime and attitude towards war in Ukraine (expressed through UN voting). While it should be excluded to work against any regime that have legitimacy based on fair elections, on the same time those countries, which have clear stance on Russian aggression should be supported as key partners for Transatlantic community. These are particularly Chad and Ivory Coast. Also Morocco, as a regional power in Western and Northern Africa, should be considered as a key partner in security policy.

Despite emphasis on democracy that Macron made in his statement, his last visit to Africa, which took place shortly afterwards, proved that his approach is much more flexible. Program of this visit included 4 countries, namely Gabon, Angola, Republic of Congo and Democratic Republic of Congo, none of which is considered as fully democratic. But Macron avoided any lecturing his hosts about democracy and human rights. In Gabon, where Ali Bongo succeeded his deceased father in 2009, after the later ruled for 42 years, the main topic was preservation of tropical rainforest in Congo basin, regarded as one of the main lungs of Earth. However Gabonese opposition criticized this visit as in few months presidential elections are expected (not necessarily fair). Next stop was in Angola, where main topic, aside economic cooperation, was the role of Angola in mediation between Rwanda and Democratic Republic of Congo on the armed conflict in eastern provinces in the later. It is important as this is another tool Russia is using to feed anti-French (and also generally anti-Western) sentiments in Democratic Republic of Congo, based of accusations that West is supporting Rwanda in this conflict. Macron praised what he called strong partnership with Angola, making no reference to Angola’s opposition claims that last elections in 2022 were not fair. Visit to Congo-Brazzaville, ruled since 1979 (except period of 1992-1997) with iron hand by dictator Denis Sassou Nguesso, lasted only few hours but there was no mention on persecution of political opponents, despite calls for that from many organisations. There most tough part of visit was Kinshasa, where elections are expected also this year and where pro-Russian groups demonstrated in front of French embassy. It is also worth to add that France very quickly congratulated Bola Tinubu being elected new president of Nigeria after elections being held on 25th of February, despite huge irregularities and protests from his rivals. This also shows that it is rather flexibility and cautiousness then democracy that is now priority in French policy towards Africa.

Why a new approach to Africa matters

Rapid growth of Africa population leaves no doubt that the role of this continent will increase in the near future. While in 1950 Africa with 250 million people had a population constituting not even half of that of Europe (570 m) and China (610 m), now with 1,4 billionn it is more than twice of the number of European population (750 m) and almost equal to Chinese population (1,45 bn). In 2050 it will be already 2,5 bn, while population of Europe and China will be slightly smaller than now. The only question is whether Africa will be able to take advantage of this demographic potential for economic growth and human development or it will be a source of giant problems inside Africa and in its neighborhood, particularly Europe.

Africa, with its demographic potential and natural resources must be also seen as a chance and important partner. However it needs development of infrastructure and structural reforms, including fighting corruption and criminality. Russian and Chinese expansion in Africa should be seen as a threat both to Africa and to European interests in Africa.

Challenges and threats like ethnic conflicts in Africa, jihadist terrorism, wars on water and food, famines, negative consequences of climate change and mass migration to Europe should not be neglected as their negative impact on Europe would be unavoidable. For Russia it is a best scenario to distract the attention of Southern Europe from its imperialist policy and to trigger a division in Europe with countries of Eastern Flank ignoring situation on Southern Flank and countries of Southern Flank ignoring situation on Eastern Flank.

Conclusions

1. Russian attempts to expand its influence in Africa, especially in Sahel region, through means of hybrid warfare, require a concerted counteraction of NATO, EU and broadly understood "western" coalition supporting Ukraine's defense against Russian invasion. It should be based on the concept of 360 degree approach and assumption that the developments on Southern and Eastern flank of NATO are strictly interconnected as well as on understanding that Russian expansion in Africa will increase its ability to continue its aggression on Ukraine and potentially be able to commence other operations on Eastern flank in the future.

2. Pragmatic approach should have priority over idealistic and principal imperative on democracy. This does not mean that democratic values should not be promoted in Africa but other issues, like security and stability, should be taken into account in first place. In this context, there should be broad flexibility in approach. Particularly important is to preserve stability in countries that are key allies in countering Russian hybrid actions and in fighting jihadist terrorism in Sahel, like Ivory Coast, Niger and Chad. Russian hybrid actions against these countries should be subject of particular concern. Especially important is preserving good military cooperation with Chad under the leadership of Mahamat Deby who proved to be a reliable ally.

3. Western countries should put aside their differences and rivalry in Africa and adopt a concerted approach aimed to counter spreading of Russian and Chinese sphere of influence. Emphasis in security cooperation should be put on such problems as terrorist threat originating from Sahel,

irregular migration and its weaponization, smuggling routes. EU should adopt a common strategy regarding these problems and Russian hybrid warfare in Africa.

4. Part of this common strategy should be also addressing root causes of sub-Saharan instability and poverty. Promoting balance of power based on democracy, human rights and civic society is the best way to avoid tribal conflicts which pose a huge threat to stability in Africa. However this policy should be conducted in a cautious way, in order not to enhance leaning of non-democratic leaders towards cooperation with Russia and China. Information offensive, countering Russian and Chinese propaganda, should be strengthened.

5. Polish – French cooperation in Africa would be highly appreciated and would benefit both countries. Especially this concerns security issues, including jihadist threat and migration, as well as countering Russia's hybrid operations. Polish public opinion should be made more aware of interconnection between developments in Africa and security of Polish eastern border, also in context of transferring migrants from Africa to Belarus-Polish border. Poland, as a country without colonial past, can be more reliable in countering Russian propaganda in Africa. Poland should be more active in Africa both in the security issues and in economic cooperation. In this purpose Poland should also develop its diplomatic presence in Africa.

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