

# ATLANTIC AFRICA: UNITED STATES, EUROPE, CHINA, RUSSIA

Influences with Variable Geometry - A View from the South

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## ABSTRACT

The Atlantic area and its Afro-Atlantic seaboard are suffering the consequences of the global situation. We are witnessing a complex geopolitical game involving different strategies that have various processes, tactics, and objectives. The current situation reveals a paradoxical dynamic, which involves the Euro-Atlantic powers, extra-regional powers (China and Russia), and all the Afro-Atlantic countries. How is the power game organized in the Atlantic area? How does Africa's Atlantic seaboard experience it? What are the scenarios for the evolution of this power game in light of African challenges?

This article aims to draw up the dynamics of the power game in the Atlantic area and to analyze its relevant variables, its actual dimensions, and the challenges that lie ahead.

**Keywords:** Afro-Atlantic – Powers –Euro-Atlantic – China – Russia- United States, Europe

*"We must be part of solutions and not just a subject, a topic of discussion"*. This statement by the Chairman of the African Union (AU), Macky Sall, reflects the African vision for a new international order<sup>97</sup>. This is the lens through which Northern and Southern Africans look at their relationship with the world today. The academic and political history at both national and continental levels highlights this strong desire for diplomatic self-assertion.

Africa is more present than ever in an evolutionary global context driven by the continuous reconfiguration of geostrategic balances, and resulting reshuffling of power dynamics. African states grapple with a series of major issues. Firstly, the geo-economic pressure to keep pace with globalization. Secondly, factors of insecurity that continue to challenge the prospects of development for African populations. The war in Ukraine and the Chinese-American tension leave Africa exposed to a struggle for influence, the results of which remain uncertain.

Africa's Atlantic seaboard is one of the key pieces of this complex geopolitical game, both in terms of the nature and number of actors, and the ambiguity of their preferences. Each actor has many possible strategies, and thus the costs and benefits of the different scenarios are uncertain. The current situation reveals a paradoxical dynamic, which brings into interaction the Euro-Atlantic powers, extra-regional powers (China and Russia), and all the Afro-Atlantic countries.

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<sup>97</sup>Interview with *The New York Times*, December 13, 2022.

How is this great power game being experienced by Africa's Atlantic countries? What are the scenarios for the evolution of the power game, in the context of African issues?

Far from claiming to be able to answer these questions exhaustively, this study reconstructs the processes that shape this power game. These processes are independent from one another and interact to create the current geopolitical situation: an eclectic power game against a backdrop of strategic competition (section 1), which coincides with the emergence of a new African stance (section 2), making it necessary to review the Atlanticist approach (section 3).

## **1. AN ECLECTIC POWER GAME AGAINST A BACKDROP OF STRATEGIC COMPETITION**

The current geopolitical situation raises significant concerns about the future of the European and Euro-Atlantic security landscape. The West and the Russians no longer trust each other, while China is perceived as a systemic threat.

In Africa, the geopolitical *status quo* that favored the Europeans and the United States has evolved in favour of a new emerging dynamic in which China and Russia challenge the strategic pre-eminence of both Europeans and Americans. Meanwhile, the Atlantic African coast suffers from this conflict at both the military-security and diplomatic levels. For the time being, the balance remains tipped in favour of Western superiority, but the West is ironically on the defensive, facing especially the rising power of China.

### **a. The Great Powers of the Atlantic on the Defensive**

The strategy of the great Western powers is defensive because the accommodation effort is based on the consolidation of transatlantic solidarity facing the 'strategic threat, which is Russia', on one hand, and the 'systemic threat, China' on the other. The measures taken in the Afro-Atlantic area should be seen in this context of competition for dominance.

## **REFOCUSING TRANSATLANTIC SOLIDARITY**

Understanding the emergent security order remains a challenge. However, evidence arising from facts and debates<sup>98</sup> confirms the significance of the territorial collective defense of the Euro-Atlantic area, which structures and organizes the other strategic and security components.

The first key to refocusing transatlantic solidarity is the restoration of naval power as a central element of strategic thinking. Revealing facts illustrate this strong tendency. We can cite the presence in the Euro-Atlantic area of five Western aircraft carriers<sup>99</sup> in the first weeks following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. The other revealing example is the transit, during January 2023, of the Russian frigate Admiral Gorshkov, loaded with hypersonic missiles, through the North Sea to the South Atlantic. Shortly after, the arrival of this frigate in Cape

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<sup>98</sup> With reference NATO's new Strategic Concept (June 2022) and the Strategic Compass (March 2022).

<sup>99</sup> From the United States, United Kingdom, Italy, and France.

Town, South Africa, on February 13, 2023, to participate in tripartite maneuvers (South Africa, China, Russia), leads us to confirm that the Atlantic Ocean could become a battleground for great powers. However, it is unlikely in practice that the number of combat fleets in the Afro-Atlantic zone will ever match those present in the western Mediterranean. Either way, NATO members seem to be committed to strengthening their interoperable system in favor of more joint naval maneuvers against their potential competitors.

Subsequently, we noticed the expansion of the maritime factor to non-military issues to encompass other power aspects, such as the protection of energy supplies (exploitation and transportation), the protection of maritime infrastructures, the establishment of a competitive maritime economy, and the security of trade routes. These geo-economic issues are on the agenda of all the world's great powers, which are mobilizing the necessary means to control maritime spaces and to take advantage of them.

Finally, there is the consolidation of the Euro-Atlantic area as a powerful area in relation to the Latin American and Afro-Atlantic subgroups, due to its strategic influence (NATO) and its role as an economic supporter. This influence is exercised by the United States, European countries, and the European Union (EU), within the framework of their foreign and defense policies, with agendas that are both cooperative and competitive.

#### **DEFENSIVE STANCE ON THE AFRO-ATLANTIC FRONT**

The defensive stance of the West is demonstrated by the maintenance of a sustained and reinforced presence in the region, to prevent China and Russia from threatening the West's vital interests and/or affecting their capacity to act.

We are somehow entering a phase of security realism in which security issues, with all their hard and soft elements, are simultaneously areas of cooperation and solidarity, while becoming areas of rivalry and competition. In view of the Chinese and Russian offensive in the region, Europe and the United States seem to be on the defensive, alternating between technical cooperation and geopolitical influence. The war in Ukraine could also prevent them from strengthening their positions in different African regions. Will they take action to prioritize countries and regions, including the Atlantic coast of Africa?

A profound analysis of the actions of Western partners along the Afro-Atlantic coast reveals a kind of mutualization of the United States' and Europe's efforts when it comes to pursuing common interests, such as the fight against terrorism and organized crime. However, they pursue distinct strategic and operational approaches in the Gulf of Guinea and the Western Maghreb (Morocco, Mauritania). The European Union has its strategy for the Gulf of Guinea, adopted in 2014, and several programs and projects<sup>100</sup>. The United States, on the other hand, relies on several programs<sup>101</sup>, instruments<sup>102</sup>, and exercises<sup>103</sup>. A comparison of the two strategies reveals a clear advantage for the United States in terms of qualitative presence and direct influence. Its integrated approach, carried out by U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), African Lion, and SOCFWD<sup>104</sup>-West Africa, makes it possible

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<sup>100</sup>Coordinated Maritime Presences (2020-22/2022-24); CMR Monitoring, Support and Evaluation Mechanism (CRIMSON 2011-23); Gulf of Guinea Inter-regional Network (GoGIN 2023); Support to West Africa Integrated Maritime Security (SWAIMS). As for Morocco and Mauritania, they are subject to the Euro-Mediterranean mechanisms and regional cooperation (5+5 Dialogue).

<sup>101</sup>Africa Partnership Station (APS), African Maritime Law Enforcement Partnership (AMLEP), Tactical Law Enforcement Team (TACLET); Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP).

<sup>102</sup>United States Africa Command (AFRICOM); SOCFWD-West Africa.

<sup>103</sup>African Lion (North and sub-Saharan Africa), Flintlock, Exercise Obangame Express, Phoenix Express (Maghreb and Europe).

<sup>104</sup>Special Operations Command Forward- North and West Africa.

to define a large area of interest including North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa: AFRICOM's largest annual exercise, African Lion, involved more than 7,500 troops from several African and European countries in June 2022. On the other side, the European commitment is quantitatively larger, more technical, and diversified (EU + European powers), yet geopolitically segmented. Separating North Africa, notably Morocco and Mauritania, from West Africa and the Gulf of Guinea, ignores three factors that unify the Afro-Atlantic coast: 1. the transnational nature of insecurity; 2. the same requirements in terms of capacity building; 3. the existence of regional cooperation mechanisms and instruments. Moreover, the inconsistency between the strategies of certain European powers and the EU's strategy makes it difficult to understand the political intentions behind the actions carried out in the region.

Americans and Europeans are concerned about the growing influence of China and Russia in the Afro-Atlantic region. The scenario of a Chinese naval base in Equatorial Guinea<sup>105</sup> fuels these fears and has the potential to increase tensions further. General Stephen J. Townsend, the head of AFRICOM, during his speech to the Armed Services Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives, on March 15, 2022, stressed that a permanent Chinese naval presence in the region “*would almost certainly require the Department to consider shifts to U.S. naval force posture and pose an increased risk to freedom of navigation and U.S. ability to act*”<sup>106</sup>. The United States is aware that any decline of its influence in the region will be exploited by its major competitor, China. In this battle for influence, the Chinese presence is not the only problem for the West. Russia is considered a “strategic rival” on the sidelines of the war in Ukraine, according to General Stephen J. Townsend<sup>107</sup>, while White House spokeswoman Karine Jean-Pierre had expressed in January the “United States’ concern”<sup>108</sup> about the joint naval exercise (Mosi II) expected to be conducted off the coast of Durban by South Africa, China, and Russia on February 22, 2023. The door is thus open for the maritimization of power relationships in the region. This remains in favor of the United States and the Europeans, who have the means and strategic resources to cover a large part of Africa's Atlantic coastline.

#### **b. China and Russia: Towards a Useful Stance**

During the Cold War, China and Russia maintained strong influential relationships with Africa. Today, their African policies are based on a few achievements, such as the symbolic heritage of their relationship during the Cold War, or their membership of the BRICS group. There is also the desire to break the Western monopoly by proposing themselves as an economic, political, and security alternative. However, their respective actions in Africa, and particularly in the Afro-Atlantic region, have different dynamics in terms of both intensity and strength. While China continues on its upward trajectory in the long term, Russia grapples with its own paradoxes: diplomatic agility while facing limitations in terms of economic and conventional military capabilities, particularly in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine.

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<sup>105</sup>Beijing and Malabo appear to have exchanged views on a potential naval base.

<sup>106</sup>See <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/AFRICOM.pdf>

<sup>107</sup> Idem

<sup>108</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2023/01/23/press-briefing-by-press-secretary-karine-jean-pierre-and-secretary-of-energy-jennifer-granholm-2/>

## CHINA'S RISE TO POWER IS A LONG-TERM PROCESS

China's presence in West Africa is entering the engagement period; it is the third level of Chinese policy, which began its rise in Africa after the independence of the countries in question before the establishment of actual relationships throughout the 2000s<sup>109</sup>.

In a short period of time, China has been able to strengthen its diplomatic influence by organizing the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in Dakar, from November 28 to 30, 2021, and by securing the membership of all the countries along the Atlantic coast in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). These countries need infrastructure and the funds necessary for economic modernization<sup>110</sup>, presenting a good opportunity for the BRI to capitalize on. China also shares some African agendas for integration, including Agenda 2063 and the Program for Infrastructure Development in Africa (PIDA). "*The coherence of the Belt and Road and the PIDA lay the foundation for a great adventure of Sino-African development*"<sup>111</sup>, said the Chairman of the African Union Commission.

Trade between China and Africa reached a record amount of \$282 billion in 2022, 11% more than in 2021<sup>112</sup>, led by South Africa as China's first African trade partner, with a bilateral trade of \$56.74 billion in 2022, followed by Nigeria (\$26 billion in 2022), which is considered the main destination of Chinese investment in Africa. China has, for instance, financed with \$1.5 billion the deep-water port of Lekki, which opened on January 23, 2023. China's other main trading partners on the continent are Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). In the north of the Atlantic coast, China seems well placed to invest in the industrial sector in Morocco - for example, the Dakhla Atlantic port and high-speed rail expansion projects. It is thus clear that China is different from other international partners in Africa due to the diversity of its commercial and financial offers and its financing of major socio-economic projects, including road infrastructure, hospitals, schools, and bridges.

In the security market, regarded as a competitive field, China has also made numerous notable achievements. It maintains the image of a country that has never made any military attempts in the Afro-Atlantic area and stands out for its contribution to peacekeeping in Africa. Secondly, Afro-Atlantic countries are open to diverse strategic partnerships in terms of military cooperation agreements. Thirdly, China provides the targeted countries with significant funds for reforms in the security sector. The DRC, for example, received \$27 million in January 2023<sup>113</sup>. Meanwhile, African armies are increasingly acquiring Chinese weapons, raising significantly China's market share in this regard. And, finally, the new Global Security Initiative (GSI) is anticipating plans to include security agreements within the framework of the peace-security-development nexus<sup>114</sup>.

In addition to its economic, security, and diplomatic involvement, China has yet to establish a strategic foothold in Atlantic Africa, despite its close relationships with the coastal states. Equatorial Guinea is said to have quietly expressed its interest, but this was done without taking into account the strong opposition from the United States. It is therefore certain that any naval base project in Equatorial Guinea could encourage other powers to

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<sup>109</sup> Eleonora Ardemagni, Rachid el houaigui and others, China's engagement in Africa and the Middle East, NSD-S HUB, June 2021. <https://thesouthernhub.org/topics/socio-economic/china-engagement-africa-middle-east>.

<sup>110</sup>The annual infrastructure deficit exceeds \$170 billion per year by 2025, according to the African Development Bank. See <https://www.jeuneafrique.com>, February 18, 2022.

<sup>111</sup>Statement by the Chairperson of the African Union Commission, Moussa Faki Mahamat, at the joint press conference with Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang on January 11, 2023.

<sup>112</sup>Data published by the General Administration of Chinese Customs, <https://www.chine-magazine.com/les-echanges-commerciaux-chine-afrique-ont-atteint-un-montant-record-en-2022>

<sup>113</sup> <https://www.chine-magazine.com/la-chine-met-27-millions-de-dollars-pour-assurer-la-securite-en-rdc/>

<sup>114</sup>Proposed at the annual conference of the Bo'ao Forum for Asia on April 21, 2022.

follow suit, hastening the transformation of Atlantic Africa into a battleground for external competition. To avert this risk, the African Union is taking a firm stance against foreign bases, as evidenced by the decisions of the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council in 2016 and 2019, warning countries about foreign military presences and advising them to be cautious when authorizing new bases<sup>115</sup>.

### **RUSSIA'S PRESENCE**

Russia is developing a comeback policy for the African continent, having started an accelerated phase after the “Russia-Africa” summit in Sochi, in October 2019. Is this an actual long-term commitment or just ambitious rhetoric without any significant substance? What are the impacts of Russia’s presence in the Afro-Atlantic region? In fact, Russia’s relationship with Africa is based on the principle of non-interference. Like China, Russia does not hinge its partnerships on specific political conditions; it has the ability to match its diplomatic and military apparatus with other informal means such as digital lobbying (social networks) and private security companies. Furthermore, its influence strategy is strengthened by diplomatic visibility, achieved through visits of high officials. In other words, Russia uses all the available means and plays its best cards to defend its interests on the continent just as other powers do. In addition, African countries cannot afford to lose their economic, technical, or diplomatic relations with any country.

However, Russia’s presence as a structuring power in Africa is correlated with the complex reality of the Russian position on the international and African stages. The country, which has a GDP equivalent to that of Brazil or Spain, is not a big provider of development aid, and its trade with Africa is relatively little, around \$14 billion<sup>116</sup>, far behind the EU (\$295 billion)<sup>117</sup>, China (\$282 billion)<sup>118</sup>, and the United States (\$83 billion)<sup>119</sup>. It has nevertheless managed to be the main supplier of arms to Africa<sup>120</sup>. On the other hand, international sanctions reduce its resources and limit its financial room for manoeuvre, essential to any ambitions on the continent. This dilemma raises the question of the future of the Russian presence in Africa. It is within this context that relations between Russia and the Atlantic coast of Africa should be placed.

For the time being, Russia’s strategic visibility in the region is materialized by agreements on civil nuclear cooperation (Morocco, Nigeria, Congo), military cooperation (Senegal, Gambia, Ghana, Cameroon, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Congo, Angola, Namibia, DRC), and participation in the MOSI II joint naval exercise in partnership with South Africa and China. More than being effective and/or having substance, these agreements and operations are a matter of strategic communication. The fact that this Russian normative push started more or less at the same time as the first Ukrainian crisis in 2014, before taking an institutional form in 2019 during the Sochi summit, suggests the hypothesis that Russia is trying to break free from its isolation, showing the West that it still has partners.

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<sup>115</sup>PSC/PR/ COMM Communiqué (DCI), 601<sup>st</sup> meeting, May 30, 2016; PSC/PR/ COMM Communiqué (DCI), 868<sup>th</sup> meeting, August 14, 2019. See <https://www.peaceau.org/fr>.

<sup>116</sup> <https://africacenter.org/fr/spotlight/decoder-les-engagements-economiques-de-la-russie-en-afrique/>

<sup>117</sup> Idem.

<sup>118</sup> <https://www.agencecofin.com/actualites/2701-104908-chine-afrique-les-echanges-commerciaux-ont-atteint-un-montant-record-en-2022-a-282-de-milliards>

<sup>119</sup> <https://www.state.gov/translations/french/parteneriat-entre-les-etats-unis-et-lafrique-pour-la-promotion-du-commerce-et-des-investissements-bilateraux-en-afrique/>

<sup>120</sup><https://www.sipri.org/publications/2022/sipri-fact-sheets/trends-international-arms-transfers-2021>.

## 2. A NEW AFRICAN STANCE

How do African countries on the Atlantic coast engage with the power game prevailing in their territories? What room for manoeuvre do they have?

Presently, we can observe that the stance of these countries is guided by three processes, distinct in some ways, but which intersect and mutually reinforce one another according to national, regional, and international political and geopolitical developments. The three processes are: the quest for collective autonomy; the pragmatism of foreign policies; and the need to establish an Atlanticist partnership. The desire of collective entities (AU, Regional Economic Communities, and Regional Mechanisms) to produce a common discourse regarding the choice of international partners coexists with the paramount importance of national interests, followed by regional interests.

### c. A Commitment to Collective Autonomy

Scientific and political debates on Africa's actions and its international role are increasingly addressing its autonomy in a changing world. Since 2000, the entire continent has embarked on an attempt to take control of its economic, political, and strategic fate. This appropriation process is based on three building blocks: 1) strategic resilience by strengthening the institutionalization of the African space, through the AU and subregional organizations, on the one hand, and the establishment of a continental free trade area, on the other hand; 2) the priority given to South-South and triangular cooperation; 3) the institutionalization of partnerships with great international powers, in the sense that partnership and dialogue with these powers<sup>121</sup> are gradually becoming part of the AU's common diplomatic agenda. This institutional dynamic is important because it draws its strength from the weight of the number of states, which are 54. It is the world's largest regional voting bloc, which carries a lot of weight in multilateral decision-making (e.g., resolutions condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine). It is also active in the global debate on climate change, maritime security, digitization, and the reform of multilateral institutions.

In parallel to this institutionalization effort, Africa (AU and African countries) is developing, not without some difficulty, a new storyline that has been consolidated by international events, including the 2008 financial crisis, the 2011 Arab Spring, COVID-19, the Chinese-American rivalry, and the war in Ukraine. This acceleration of history has fundamentally altered the manner in which Africa interacts with the rest of the world.

- On the strategic level, African leaders consider that the global strategic competition is very favourable, since the involvement of foreign powers allows them to multiply and diversify international partnerships<sup>122</sup>. They insist on autonomous decision-making in clear terms such as, Africa *"cannot be the*

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<sup>121</sup>AU–EU Partnership; Africa–South America Cooperation Forum (ASACOF); African Union Commission–United States of America High-Level Dialogue; China–Africa Cooperation Forum (FOCAC); Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD); Africa–India Partnership; Africa–Turkey Partnership; Africa–Korea.

<sup>122</sup>Fonteh Akum and Denis M. Tull, Strategic Competition and Cooperation in Africa: Perceptions, Implications, and Ways Forward, Policy Brief 13 FEB 2023, Institute for Security Studies (ISS).

*preserve of one against the other*<sup>123</sup>, or *“we must put Africa’s interests first, regardless of the country with which we cooperate”*<sup>124</sup>. Africa has thus entered an era of alternatives. A significant number of emerging or consolidated actors, including China, India, Brazil, the Gulf States, and Turkey, are offering new opportunities. Simultaneously, although Western are still important, they are no longer Africa’s primary economic partners. The main evidence of this is a relative decrease in the EU’s share of Africa’s foreign trade<sup>125</sup>. Similarly, aid funds are likely to decline further, since Europe has begun to redirect its efforts to Ukraine.

- On the economic level, we are witnessing a new discourse on economic sovereignty. Reducing reliance on traditional partners and seeking alternative avenues for development are at the heart of national agendas. Donor interference under the guise of conditional policies is no longer well-received by concerned countries. In response to the pressing financial needs of African states, China offers unparalleled investment opportunities<sup>126</sup>, regardless of the risks of debt.
- On the diplomatic level, the pressure of the war in Ukraine on both the political and economic levels is prompting Africa to adopt a neo-non-alignment strategy: in March and October 2022, nearly half of the continent’s countries chose abstention or empty chair votes in the UN vote denouncing the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The vote on a resolution calling for the withdrawal of Russian troops on February 23, 2023, showed a similar pattern.
- On the military level, the AU has expressed strong reservations about foreign bases, saying they undermine Africa’s sovereignty and the AU’s Non-Aggression and Common Defense Pact. This stance has been framed by two decisions issued by the Peace and Security Council in 2016 and 2019.

However, the path toward collective autonomy faces endogenous and exogenous blocking factors, which have specific dimensions in the current context. Indeed, an analysis of the current situation shows that the desire for collective autonomy is not necessarily translated into common positions on all issues.

#### **d. Pragmatic foreign policies**

Due to the political diversity among the 54 states, pragmatism and national, and to some extent regional, interests continue to guide the decisions regarding international partners. The challenges faced by these states, regardless of their weight, are related to their status and rank within the international system: what position should they hold in the global geostrategic and geoeconomic landscape? How can they maintain a comfortable position

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<sup>123</sup> Speech by Macky Sall, current Chairperson of the Union, at the 35th Ordinary Session of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the AU, February 5, 2022.

<sup>124</sup> Statement by the Chairperson of the African Union Commission, Moussa Faki Mahamat, at the joint press conference with Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang on January 11, 2023.

<sup>125</sup> <https://fr.statista.com/infographie/26663/partenaire-commercial-premier-pays-source-des-importations-des-pays-africains-chine-france-afrique/>

<sup>126</sup> It was \$130.4 billion in 2010, \$346.9 billion in 2015 and \$473.5 billion in 2020, Young Africa, February 27, 2022.

or how can they conquer or reconquer it? These questions are very important because the volatility of the geostrategic situation cannot fail to affect African foreign policies.

Furthermore, the path towards a diversified positioning should be based on a national logic, because the fundamental issue is how to find the best balance between a practical management of the interference with the West inherited from the colonial era, on the one hand, and the adhesion to a community of geoeconomic interests, which is the Global South, in the other. African countries have no choice but to build and/or consolidate their own connections and alignments within the North-South scheme and the Latin America-Africa cooperation axis.

To illustrate this complexity, we can cite Morocco, South Africa, and Equatorial Guinea as examples:

- Morocco's geopolitical stance in the context of the war in Ukraine and the Chinese-American rivalry follows three lines of conduct: its self-assertion and the assertion of its sovereignty, strategic affiliation with the United States, and the relevance of its economic partnerships with China and the EU.
- South Africa's neutrality regarding the war in Ukraine and the South African navy's participation in the joint military exercise with China and Russia (February 22, 2023) draw a fine line between the hope of establishing a new world order and maintaining strong economic relations with the EU and the U.S.
- The informal proposal of a potential Chinese naval base in Equatorial Guinea has reshaped the country's position in the geopolitical landscape of the Gulf of Guinea region. Equatorial Guinea is exploring opportunities amid the diplomatic competition between China and the United States, aiming to leverage it to its advantage.

All things considered, the prevailing value system in the decision-making processes of states hinges on the pursuit of the optimal solution. From Rabat to Pretoria, from Dakar to Addis Ababa, from Cairo to Nairobi, as everywhere else in Africa, the logic adopted is that of choosing the option that offers the least costs and the greatest benefits in terms of national interest. Dualistic stances (South Africa), so-called strategic signalling activities (Equatorial Guinea), and the pursuit of influence (Morocco) are the direct outcomes of this tendency, which is likely to be reinforced by the current dynamic in global affairs.

### **3. TOWARDS AN INFORMAL 2+2 DIALOGUE: EUROPE-U.S./AFRICA-LATIN AMERICA**

The concept of multilateral Atlanticist cooperation should be based on a geopolitical and technical way of thinking, rather than a functional approach. It is time to break free from the essentialist functionalist mindset. This regards each country, or the whole of the Southern shore, especially in the current context, as an instrument, failing to consider that these countries have their own histories, geographies, political systems, and social norms. The most important effort of accommodation is to adopt a new vision that takes into account the structural limits of the Atlantic area and the alternative opportunities that cooperation can offer. The conditions are favourable for opening a new geopolitical perspective, that of an informal 2+2 dialogue: Europe-U.S./Africa-Latin America

This should be based on two processes:

#### e. Need for a Strategic Consensus

The stability and prosperity of the Euro-Atlantic area are certainly linked to the balance of power with Russia and systemic competition with China. However, they have also become dependent on the stability and prosperity of the Afro-Atlantic area. In general, any modification or reversal of alliances in this area could have a direct impact on the configuration of the power dynamics at play. This is what emerges from the American analysis of the scenario of a Chinese naval base in the Gulf of Guinea, for instance. General Stephen Townsend, the head of AFRICOM, said that, in nautical miles, “*a base on the North Atlantic coast of Africa could be much closer to the United States than the military installation in China are to the West Coast of America*”<sup>127</sup>. The possibility of a growing threat from China that could come not only from the Pacific but also from the Atlantic seems to be gaining momentum in Washington.

Western countries should therefore, from a strategic perspective, understand the significance of the Afro-Atlantic coast, from the Strait of Gibraltar to the Cape of Good Hope, which embodies the primary strength of the African continent. The 23 countries on the Atlantic coast represent 46% of the African population, 55% of African GDP, carry out 57% of the continental trade, and harbour enormous natural resources (including 24 billion barrels of oil<sup>128</sup>). However, these countries face common challenges: the crisis of the human development model; the resolution of territorial and maritime conflicts; the rise of asymmetric threats (piracy, terrorism, banditry); the appropriation of the maritime space through a structuring maritime policy.

The combination of these issues with the actions of the region’s states seems to lay the foundations for an ‘Afro-Atlantic’ strategic identity, which is yet to be established: a common vision of the issues and the institutionalization of the area through informal structures. In this context, there is a gradual shift towards individual states taking ownership of maritime issues, as opposed to relying solely on the AU and the Regional Economic Communities, integrating and considering all the socioeconomic, geopolitical, and environmental parameters. The first category of issues that emerges is the exploration of marine mineral resources (hydrocarbons, highly concentrated metallic ores, and rare earth elements), fishery resources, and natural energy resources (wind power, ocean thermal energy). The second category is that of free movement on the African seas, which must be defended and protected in the same way as resources. The third and final category of issues is related to the implementation of the blue economy and the protection of the marine environment.

#### f. An Extended Cooperation Framework

The Afro-Atlantic coast has all the assets and potential to cooperate with Western partners. The question is how to align this potential with the sectoral requirements of national economies, and above all to identify the framework within which future integrated cooperation with the EU and the United States should be developed. One of the institutional solutions would be to support regional initiatives such as the African Atlantic Initiative (AII), which was launched in Rabat in October 2012 by the member countries of the Ministerial Conference of African Atlantic States. Similarly, it is necessary to interact with the three major maritime initiatives adopted by the

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<sup>127</sup> <https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-africa-china-business-government-and-politics-24f774a952eaabcb38d2b25380b61a62>

<sup>128</sup> Rachid EL Houdaigui, *La Façade atlantique de l’Afrique : un espace géopolitique en construction*, Policy Center For the New South edition, Rabat, 2016, 183p. The cited data are the result of the author’s combined research and calculations

AU: the African Integrated Strategy for the Seas and Oceans Horizon-2050 (AIM Strategy); the blue economy within the framework of the AU Agenda 2063; and the African Charter on Maritime Safety, Security and Development. On the other hand, the Morocco-Nigeria gas pipeline project, which would traverse 14 countries to connect Nigeria to Morocco, could contribute to both economic and political integration. It would transport Nigerian gas resources to West African countries and eventually extend to Morocco, with the possibility of serving Europe in the future.

However, this dynamic cooperation should not ignore the advantages of South-South relations. The links with the Latin American-Atlantic region constitute an important way in which the Afro-Atlantic countries can accelerate their integration into global value chains. Countries including Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina have been able to successfully stand out and become part of the competitive niches of the global economy. Their economic models differ from those of traditional and emerging major powers, making them potential intermediaries for African foreign policies in two key ways: 1) strengthening the established community of interest; 2) contributing to the processes of cooperation and integration between Africa and South America, which have yet to achieve the levels of integration and increased intra-regional trade. Regarding the latter point, tripartite cooperation involving the EU can propose and advance the project of exploring new interactions in light of the changes introduced by the African Continental Free Trade Area (ACFTA).

## **CONCLUSION**

This article has outlined the dynamics of the power game in the Atlantic space, and analysed the relevant parameters, established dimensions, and the challenges that lie ahead.

The current geopolitical configurations open up new perspectives full of uncertainties and opportunities for the Atlantic area. It is therefore imperative to reformulate agendas, redefine priorities, and establish new geopolitical and geoeconomic paradigms. There are two issues that should be at the forefront of the regional diplomatic agenda: strengthening resilience in view of the repercussions of the Russia-Ukraine war, and seizing the opportunities provided by the 2+2 trajectory involving the United States, Europe, Africa, and Latin America.

The Atlantic coastline in Africa poses both a security challenge and an inescapable strategic perspective for Atlanticist nations. The future of multilateral cooperation hinges on the alignment of actual intentions between the EU and the United States, the levels of commitment and responsibility demonstrated by African countries, and the actions of extra-Atlantic powers. Today, we must reflect collectively on the convergences and complementarities necessary for the Atlantic region to overcome the obstacles that have often divided it.

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