

Africa's natural resources and geopolitical realities

By Abdelhak Bassou

Summary

For its 6th edition, the Tana High-Level Forum on Security in Africa, held in Bahir Dar on Lake Tana in Ethiopia from April 22 to 23, 2017, focused on the theme of Natural Resource Governance in Africa. One of the forum session's key discussion points sought to "understand and explain why the exploitation of these resources is increasingly a source of tension and violence, which have dramatic repercussions on the continent's peace and stability."

During the various events throughout the course of the forum, it was necessary to keep in mind that the abundant and available African resources have not enabled the continent to truly develop, and that these resources are a serious source of crises and tension.

With this perspective, this paper examines Africa's natural resources in terms of African geopolitical realities and the cause and effect relationships that resources and geopolitical facts can foster within the continent.

Introduction

This paper discusses natural resources in Africa in relation to the continent's geopolitical realities by, on the one hand, examining the role of natural resources in Africa's geography and economy and, on the other hand, reflecting on the main issues concerning Africa's geopolitics before seeking the links or correlations between natural resources and geopolitics.

1. Natural resources

Natural resources are generally studied in the context of geography and economics, where they are an important factor in all studies and analyses. However, despite its

importance, the availability of wealth, in the form of natural resources, unfortunately does not automatically generate development, nor is it a sufficient development indicator. For example, Niger belongs to the top ten of the poorest countries, while it also has a significant number and variety of natural resources (e.g. gold, iron, uranium, coal and oil).

This country is only one example that illustrates the case of several other African countries, if not the majority among them. The African continent is well endowed in terms of natural resources and significant reserves in comparison to world reserves, and sometimes even in large percentages, which indicates that some materials, such as coltan, are only found in Africa. (See table and map below.)

Natural resources mined	% of African reserves in relation to world reserves
Copper	97 %
Coltan	80 %
Cobalt	50 %
Gold	57 %
Iron	20 %
Uranium and Phosphates	23 %
Manganese	32 %
Vanadium	41 %
Platinum	49 %
Diamonds	60 %
Oil	14



This high availability of wealth is a challenge for researchers because it has not led to the continent's emergence, at least as an economic power, in absence of being a great power. On the contrary, some states with limited natural resources are able to perform well among middle-income countries and sometimes even reach the level of emerging countries.

2. Geopolitics

Geopolitics is the study of political relations between state, intra-state and supra-national entities using geographical data, which includes physical elements, human elements and natural resources. Non-geographical elements such as governance or military power are also taken into consideration.

Depending on the region or entity being studied, geographical features in general and natural resources in particular are more or less important in terms of the effects they have on political relations.

Four main aspects characterize Africa's geopolitics:

- Fragmentation and disparities between sub-regions as well as between countries, and between zones within the same country;
- Inter-state conflicts on the continent (79 of the 345 armed conflicts that shook the world in 2008 were in Africa);
- Foreign covetousness;
- Continuous research on integration and cooperation among the continent's states.

The essential question would then be to ask what correlations exist between the abundance of natural resources in Africa and the fragmentation, increased conflict, and covetousness on the continent and most importantly, the endless pursuit of cooperation and integration, which characterizes the continent in geopolitical terms.

I. Natural resources as a conflict factor in Africa's geopolitics

The link between conflicts and natural resources cannot automatically be interpreted as a causal relationship. Any existence of these resources does not imply that they will automatically give rise to conflict, just as any conflict is not necessarily the result of a dispute over natural resources. In an article entitled Natural Resources and Conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa, in 2012 Roland Pourtier wrote that:

« The world history of conflicts teaches us that they are always multidimensional; although there is no unambiguous determination, the question of the links between resources and conflicts nevertheless remains. A 2009 report by the United Nations Environment Program suggests that at least 60% of intra-state conflicts over the last sixty years have been linked to natural resources. Africa accounts for one third of the world's documented conflicts and the majority of them have a direct link to mining and oil production (Nigeria, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Angola, DRC and Sudan). "Oil curse," "blood diamonds, these expressions used by NGOs, strongly express this causal link, which should nevertheless be relativized ».

This is the case in Africa where, even though a majority of conflicts have their roots in the rivalry surrounding natural resources, other causes have been identified apart from economic and wealth factors. The economic and material causes are even generally hidden behind motives deemed nobler such as freedom, dignity or sovereignty.

Moreover, most economies in Africa are based on the export of raw materials, hence the importance given to natural resources. For most countries, these resources are their only source of economic survival. Thus, they cannot avoid a conflict when it revolves around natural resources.

In terms of conflict, several forms of tension linked to natural resources can be identified (Philippe Hugon, 2009):

- Natural resources can catalyze border, land or sea disputes.
- They can encourage separatist movements.
- Natural resources can, because of their abundance, incite foreign covetousness.
- The scarcity of natural resources can exacerbate regional and international conflicts.

The African case demonstrates all of these forms of conflict that are linked to natural resources. Some forms have been more preponderant in history than others. However, they have never been absent. As such, some analysts have spoken of the curse of natural resources in Africa; a phenomenon where the natural resources sector, oriented toward exports, generates public revenues but paradoxically leads to economic stagnation and political instability.

1. Border conflicts

a. In the aftermath of their independence, African states experienced border disputes. In fact, during the period between the 1960s and the 1990s, several countries were involved in border conflicts, usually with declared pretexts. However, most of them were rooted in the search for wealth in the coveted zones. This is particularly true of:

- The Aozou strip (see attached map), located between Chad and Libya, which was invaded in 1973 by Colonel Gaddafi who decided to annex it in 1976. It was only after his military defeat that Libya accepted a peaceful settlement of the dispute. The real object of interest between France and Italy during the colonial period, and between Libya and Chad after

independence, are the oil and uranium resources as well as the manganese that the area was deemed to contain.

- Burkina Faso and Mali engaged in armed clashes in two conflicts in 1974 and 1985. The declared cause had a territorial dimension linked to the claim of the Agacher border area, a semi-desert strip of land 160 kilometers long and 30 kilometers wide between northern Burkina Faso and eastern Mali. This does not obscure the economic reason; the strip of land in question is said to contain natural gas and mineral resources, each of which is seen as a lever for its economic development.

b. The signing of the Montego Bay Convention on the Law of the Sea in 1982 and the uninterrupted series of hydrocarbon discoveries in the Gulf of Guinea from the mid-nineties onwards also accentuate the importance of economic zones and push the States in the region to take a more insistent interest in their maritime borders, all the more so as the seas contain both hydrocarbon and fishery stocks. This will result either in the emergence of new conflicts around maritime borders or the aggravation or resurgence of old conflicts. Dr. Charles Ukeje and Professor Wullson Mvomo Ela express this in a study entitled "African Approach to Maritime Safety: Case of the Gulf of Guinea" as follows:

« While the decision made at the time of independence by African states to keep colonial borders has reduced the risk of conflict, violent border clashes have been identified in recent decades. With technological advances facilitating the discovery of hydrocarbons and gas along the coast of the Gulf of Guinea and in the deep sea of the region, the risks of litigation around maritime borders have increased. If such disputes persist, they are likely to trigger new conflicts and contribute to the worsening of existing conflicts and the erosion of meek efforts to promote an effective regional response to maritime insecurity in the region ».

Some examples illustrate these conflicts well:

- The Conflict of the Bakassi Peninsula, a bilateral border dispute that dates back to 1981, was resumed in 1994 and again in 1996. This dispute between Nigeria with Cameroon concerns the delimitation of the borders on both sides of the peninsula. After some limited armed conflicts, the two countries brought the dispute

before the International Court of Justice. In October 2002, the court recognized Cameroon's sovereignty over the peninsula. Formerly administered by Nigeria, this territory is rich in hydrocarbon deposits and fishery resources that were at the root of the conflict. Cameroon's recovery of the peninsula prompted it to request the United Nations to reconsider its maritime borders with Equatorial Guinea in the area between the reclaimed peninsula and northwest of the island of Bioko, which is part of Equatorial Guinea.

- In Central Africa, Equatorial Guinea and Gabon have been involved in a border dispute over the sovereignty of the islands of Conga, Cocotier and Mbanié. The conflict dates back to the early 1970s, but the recent discovery of hydrocarbon deposits exacerbated tensions and the states steadfastness in their positions. Even in the case of negotiated solutions, each State has hardened its position to obtain the maximum concession from the other. Again natural resources affect geopolitical realities and impact political relations and neighborhood concerns.

2. Separatism and internal strife

Tensions around natural resources are not limited to relations between African states. Even within a single state, regions where natural resources are concentrated are inclined to appropriate the best share and to deprive other regions. Internal tensions arise mainly from the poor regions, which, in the name of national solidarity, demand their share of these resources deemed to belong to the whole country and not only to the region that contains them.

This aspect is often illustrated in African countries through tensions between the South/North or East/West regions, which often lead to separatist tendencies.

On this aspect of geopolitics, in its recent history, Africa is experiencing and has experienced several examples that support this tendency towards separatism which undermines the efforts of integration, cooperation and development:

- In 1967, **Biafra**, an eastern region of Nigeria, seceded as an independent state calling itself the Republic of Biafra. A bloody civil war followed until 1970. Again and despite arguments that the secession had ethnic roots, the facts are that Biafra contains two thirds of Nigeria's oil reserves, that Nigeria is the top African

producer – although recently outranked by Angola – and that the control of natural resource wealth has been linked to separatist movements.

- Since 1982, **Senegal** has been confronted with a secessionist rebellion in Casamance where the armed independence group Diola set up the Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance (M.F.D.C.). In the late 1990s, thousands of people were killed and over 20,000 Senegalese fled the region. The Senegalese army was deployed and the fighting continued until a ceasefire was signed in 1993. A number of pretexts can be advanced, but it must be noted that the agro-ecological zone of the Lower and Middle Casamance has abundant natural resource potential with significant water, wildlife, forest resources (the country's largest forest formations) and fishery resources. The availability and abundance of local wealth can be linked to separatist tendencies.
- Between 1946 and 1998, the **Democratic Republic of Congo**, former Zaire, was destabilized by several secessionist conflicts (Katanga, Upper Congo, Kwilu, Kasai, Kivu, etc.). Today it has become clear that these conflicts revolve around natural resources. The United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) has confirmed this. The illegal exploitation of these resources (gold, wood, ivory and minerals) is valued at \$1.3 billion per year. However, all of this money is not funneled to the armed groups. Transnational criminal gangs, mainly based in Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi, largely capture these funds. Separatist ambitions have given way to transnational crime, with their networks that feed and equip armed groups under different pretexts to create disorder, conflict and powerlessness useful for their criminal activities.
- The birth of **South Sudan** is an illustrative example of natural resources impacts on geopolitics. Southern Sudan, rich in oil, had very early sought to separate from the North. Having achieved its independence in 2011, this same wealth became the driving force of a civil war between Southern factions, which not only threatens to ruin the new entity but also constitutes a risk of destabilization throughout the region.

3. African natural resources are the object of foreign covetousness

After having been an issue between the colonial powers until the end of the World War II, Africa became a place of economic interest for both sides during the Cold War. Today, alongside the classical powers, African resources are also coveted by emerging countries.

This covetousness of African wealth between the global powers and between the emerging countries is also one of the salient aspects of African geopolitics. Relationships around natural resources also determine the pattern of political relations between African countries and the rest of the world.

In this area, the difference between politics and economics is very difficult to make. The relationship between China and Africa, which is primarily based on African natural resources, was first based on political and ideological convergences. Moreover, in order to approach the African countries, China has always defined itself as a developing country. This rapprochement of anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist ideology and status has opened opportunities on Africa's resources for China.

Despite the progress made by China, India and, to a lesser extent, Japan, the traditional western powers have maintained their share of access to Africa's wealth. In fact, access is facilitated by the intermittent need for security by both certain countries and regimes in Africa.

Western powers and emerging countries are competing to take over the natural wealth of African states. This competition exceeds the wealth of the subsoil and even targets arable land, because of Africa's powerlessness to develop this land itself.

II. Fragmentation and research and cooperation

1. 1. Fragmentation and disparities in natural resources and their management

The impacts of African natural resources on continental geopolitics differ depending on two major elements:

- Natural distribution, which makes some countries more affluent than others;
- Economic governance, which means that some countries better exploit natural resources than others.

There is a disparity between rich and developed African countries and others that still suffer from poverty. This disparity influences the positioning of African countries in the world. Indeed, if certain African States find their place in the international community and in some way are involved in international relations, other countries are marginalized and are brought to the attention of global authorities only through the aid they receive and the crises which they face and that the international community must resolve.

a. Governance of natural resources

More than the availability of resources, governance determines the positioning of African countries among their peers in the world. Revenue Watch Institute's 2013 ranking of 21 African countries (out of 58 globally) based on their governance of natural resources, demonstrates that:

« Ghana, the highest ranked African country, is ranked 15th. It is in the category of countries that partially meets the transparency and accountability standards in governing the wealth of their subsoil, alongside Liberia (16th overall), Zambia (17th), South Africa (21st) and Morocco (25th).

The 16 other African countries involved in the ranking are all in the category of countries with poor or catastrophic governance of natural resources: Nigeria (40th), Angola (41st), DR Congo (44th), Algeria (45th), Mozambique (46th), Cameroon (47th), South Sudan (50th), Zimbabwe (51st), Libya (55th), and Equatorial Guinea (56th) ».

It should be noted that some countries in this ranking that are well-endowed in terms of natural resources, notably oil, are at the bottom of the ranking when it comes to rules of transparency and accountability in the governance of these resources. The differences in these management systems results in fragmentation, which hampers cooperation between African countries and divides these countries into separate categories depending on the resource management regime.

Management of arable land resources is another example of management disparities in Africa. While some countries rich in fertile land import their food, others such as South Africa are among the 11 agricultural powers in the world. Moreover, Africa accounts for 24% of the world's agricultural land and one-third of the world's river basins, but only 9% of agricultural production. This illustrates another instance where Africa is leading in terms of natural endowments, but without a corresponding top ranking when it comes to combining both natural resources and good governance.

Africa is at the center of the difference between geography, which accounts for physical, demographic and natural aspects, and geopolitics, which can go beyond geographical data to issues such as governance and management of international relationships.

b. Disparities in terms of natural resource endowments

Africa's natural resources are not naturally distributed across the continent. Several resources, where the continent is a major producer or holder of the largest reserves, are in fact concentrated in certain countries. Sometimes the same country is ranked first place for several resources:

- For hydrocarbons, five African countries share the largest share of reserves and production. The others remain either at the level of very average or insignificant production or lack hydrocarbon resources altogether. For both oil and gas, the majority is distributed among five countries (see attached tables).

Pétrole (en milliers de Baril/J)				
Classement africain	Classement mondial	Pays	2013	2014
1	12	Nigéria	2 302	2 361
2	16	Angola	1 799	1 712
3	18	Algérie	1 485	1 525
4	21	Lybie	918	810
5	27	Egypte	539	527

Gaz naturel (en milliards de mètres cubes)				
Classement africain	Classement mondial	Pays	2013	2014
1	9	Algérie	82	83
2	18	Egypte	56	49
3	22	Nigeria	36	39
4	30	Lybie	12	12

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- Africa is well ranked in terms of world production of gold. It is clear that this production is concentrated in a few countries (South Africa, Tanzania, Ghana).

If a geopolitical lesson can be drawn from these two examples, it concerns the difference in language that should be used in geopolitical analyses and studies. Talking about natural resources in Africa does not and should not have the same meaning as the natural resources of African countries. Indeed, when Africa's natural wealth is taken into account, the entire continent appears to have enough resources to secure a good global positioning and to emerge from dependence towards interdependence. However, while some of the continent's states are, if not emerging, at least middle-income countries, many are still developing, if not merely poor. In this case it is better to talk about resources of African countries and not about African resources.

Taken as a whole, Africa seems rich and the wealth of its countries appears complementary. Nevertheless, the absence of effective cooperation tools and complementarity mechanisms gives Africa the image of a continent that seeks to go beyond its dispersed order towards a quest for better methods of cooperation and integration.

This desire to go beyond the fragmentation and infighting, which (as displayed by the actions of certain African leaders supporting inter-African solidarity and cooperation) is the glimmer of hope for an Africa that will occupy a place in the world bestowed to it through its wealth in natural resources.

2. Natural resources as levers for cooperation and integration

Countries generally perceive natural resources as strategic national capital linked to sovereignty and that must remain at the exclusive disposal of national interests. Any free access by partners to these resources is seen as a direct attack on sovereignty. From this perspective, natural resources are linked more with conflict than with cooperation.

The principle is certainly confirmed by international law; in particular by resolution 1803 dated December 14, 1962 that provides that:

« The right of peoples and nations to permanent sovereignty over their natural wealth and resources must be exercised in the interest of their national development and of the well-being of the people of the State concerned ».

Several countries cannot divest themselves of the idea that integration would imply that the most resource-rich countries bear the greatest burden of integration.

However, several attempts have been made in Africa to improve natural resource management with a bilateral or multilateral framework, which allows production and exploitation to be optimized, and creates a better avenue for integration ambitions.

On many occasions, this search for cooperation has helped to avoid the prolongation of certain conflicts and resolve certain crises by assuring procedures for the co-management of resources. Some cases should be mentioned in this area:

- In 2001, Nigeria negotiated a treaty on a joint development zone with São Tomé and Príncipe. The zone is located in the maritime areas between the two countries, a zone rich in oil where the reserves are estimated at close to 1 billion barrels. Under this treaty, Sao Tome obtains 40% and Nigeria 60%. This process of joint exploitation of marine resources in general, and of oil in particular, in joint development zones makes it possible to make resources a leading factor in cooperation and marks a step towards genuine integration, as well as helping both countries avert the consequences of an unresolved border dispute.
- The Democratic Republic of the Congo and Angola amicably settled a maritime border dispute between them. It is seen as a good example of cooperation around oil resources to mitigate counterproductive tension. The Democratic Republic of Congo had filed a request to the United Nations to extend its continental shelf. However, it appears that the area in question covers the oil area from which Angola draws its resources. The two countries have brought the difference before the legal authorities. However, pending the verdict and to avoid gaps during the waiting period, the two countries have identified a Zone of Influence and Cooperation (ZIC), under an agreement, which provides for the equal sharing of the operations and revenues, signed and ratified in 2008.
- The Nigeria-Morocco Gas Pipeline is another facet of cooperation: On December 3, 2016, Morocco and Nigeria entered into a partnership between their respective sovereign wealth funds to finance a gas pipeline project that would transport Nigerian gas along across the entire coast of West Africa to Morocco. It could become an extension of the West African Gas Pipeline (WAGP), which already serves Benin, Togo and Ghana, neighboring Nigeria. This project expresses the will to transform a natural resource conflict factor to a leverage of cooperation. At its completion, the pipeline will cross fifteen countries where it will facilitate electrification.

Natural resources have also repeatedly led to a common vision and rapprochement among African countries. The following are indicative examples:

- Aware that the contradiction between an identified availability of natural resources and a continent's non-emergence or even poverty situation is due to a lack of strategic vision in the governance of these resources, African countries have developed the Africa Mining Vision (AMV) initiative. This initiative brings together the producing countries and replaces belligerent geopolitics with a collaborative and mutual assistance approach.
- The African Minerals Development Centre (AMDC): This center presents itself as having the mission "to work with member States and their national and regional organizations to promote the transformative role of mineral resources in developing the continent through increased economic and social linkages." One of its primary objectives would be to "ensure that Africa's interests and concerns in this lucrative sector are properly articulated and internalized throughout the continent, for the benefit and prosperity of all."

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper demonstrates that Africa's geopolitical realities impact, and are impacted by, the continent's natural resources. These resources are at the origin of many of the conflicts, tensions and manifestations of instability experienced by the continent. However, a realization is emerging that the dysfunctions in the natural resources management, which are responsible for the continent's precariousness, can only be overcome through joint efforts, continental solidarity, cooperation between states, and in particular South/South cooperation. Through joint initiatives, Africans are therefore attempting to turn their natural resources into a boost for development beyond the limits of sovereignty-based views.

In this sense, natural resources are one of the tools used by African geopolitical players to achieve either power goals in a conflictual and competitive environment, or to achieve cooperation, solidarity, and collaboration for the good of the continent. While the tool used is the same, the distinction is in the usage or framework in which the tool is used that ultimately changes the function of the tool.

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