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Raw Materials and Geopolitics: understanding the conflict issue in Sub-Saharan Africa

Raw materials are natural substances extracted from water, air or soil. At the crossroads of economic, technological and environmental issues, access to natural resources is one of the major geopolitical problems of the past, the present and the future. Their unequal distribution escalates the struggle between powers for their control as well as for that of supply routes. Beyond its strategic marginalisation, post-Cold War Africa remains a field of struggle between great powers due to its enormous potential, which makes it an indispensable global stake and a privileged area of covetousness.

Since colonisation, the driving force behind the foreign geostrategic project has been the unbridled pursuit of interest coupled with the search for a balance of power. Indeed, with its 30,330,000 km² or 22% of the earth's surface, the African continent is abundant in raw materials. These resources are at the heart of geopolitical realities. However, in contrast to what could have been expected, natural resources are more of an inhibiting factor, a source of conflict and an obstacle to the progress of Nations. The question is: what is the place of these resources in the geopolitics of Africa and how do they generate conflicts? Based on the Dutch disease hypothesis, this paper attempts to demonstrate the relationship between raw materials, competition for their possession, crises and conflicts, and the

underdevelopment of the continent, while proposing a number of avenues that States could take to ensure a more optimal governance of natural resources with a view to achieving lasting peace.

I/ Post-Cold War Africa, a "geological scandal" at the heart of many international issues and challenges: geostrategic reclassification, geopolitical object

The post-Cold War strategic environment is one of renewed interest in raw materials, following globalisation, multipolarity and the rise of emerging powers. With the emergence of new economic poles outside the Triad, fossil fuels, water, arable land and raw materials (mining, agriculture and forestry) have acquired considerable importance in international relations. However, although this phenomenon has increased since 1991, it is not really new. Natural resources have been at the forefront for ages, and their exploitation by man has contributed to making their control strategic.

Among the reasons put forward to explain wars of conquest in history, authors highlight the control and search for raw materials to meet the needs of the population. Since 2013, the "New Silk Roads", a geostrategic ambition reflecting Beijing's desire to invest massively in infrastructure, in particular maritime links and

railways on a global scale¹, have been part of this trend.

Today, more than thirty years after the end of the Cold War, world geopolitics is undergoing profound upheavals which do not spare the African continent, a land that has always been courted², Africa is the object of a new great game, of a new "great powers' geostrategy" according to Gérard Chaliand³. New competition for the control of strategic resources and the strengthening of military bases are taking place. The great East-West quarrel has been succeeded by an upheaval involving Africa⁴.

As it continues to attract the attention of the major powers⁵ for its influence, despite its economic backwardness and international marginalisation, Africa constitutes one of the most important natural reserves of raw materials for humanity. As a subject of a major and indispensable challenge⁶, Africa is the focus of a new geopolitical reclassification⁷. While European interest tended to focus on the East after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Africa continued to be the target of a Cold War-style bidding war⁸. The post-1991 era did not end the diplomatic rivalries and factional struggles supported by foreign powers. Oil and environmental issues have gained in intensity. The clash of interests and the diplomacy of war are now the order of the day.

A deliberate attempt is made to convey the stereotypical image of an Africa that is now 'devalued', 'adrift', 'abandoned', 'forgotten', 'blind spot'. Theories of a useless Africa and Afro-pessimism, developed in the West, are part of this trend. However, with more than 30,330,000 km² including islands (622,000 km² for islands), i.e. 22% of the world's surface area and a population

estimated at 1.5 billion inhabitants, i.e. 15.35% of the world's population, of which 41% are under 15 years old, Africa alone accounts for almost all of the world's chromium reserves (in Zimbabwe and South Africa), 90% of platinum (in South Africa), 66% of cobalt (in DRC and Zambia), 90% of diamonds, 69% of gold and 22% of copper. A huge reservoir of hydrocarbons and minerals (white gold), the continent also has significant world reserves of manganese (39%), iron, zinc, uranium, coltan, nickel, titanium, bauxite, precious stones and coal, as well as gas and oil in the north of the continent, in Sudan, South Sudan and in the Gulf of Guinea.

Thus Africa, especially the sub-Sahara region, has become a target of covetousness through intense diplomatic activity by the industrial consumer powers. It would be a fallacy to speak of a strategically devalued Africa on the pretext that it is no longer necessary for the great powers to control the deposits, or that they find the quantities they need on the world market. One third of the world's mineral resources is found in Africa!

From the above, post-Cold War Africa is a cluster of actual or proven and probable deposits of prized raw materials in the centres of global-liberal globalisation. Far from being strategically downgraded and abandoned, the continent is being courted and subjected to new competitions, a situation that significantly hampers its development. The historical-strategic context thus outlined leads us to the fundamental question of this second part, namely: how do resources generate crises and conflicts?

¹ Known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) or One Belt, One Road (OBOR), the "new silk roads", first expressed by Chinese President Xi Jinping in Kazakhstan in 2013, link China to Europe by rail and sea via Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus, Poland, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, South-East Asia and the Indian subcontinent, and Africa. It is an emancipatory economic process, a strategic vision of China's total power. Strategically, this project was designed to supply and transport raw materials to supply Chinese industry and propel the economic power of the Asian dragon in the context of its hegemonic rivalry with the United States.

² E. M'Bokolo, *Le continent convoité*, Paris/Montréal, Editions vivantes, 1980.

³ G. Chaliand, *L'Enjeu africain. Géostratégies des puissances*, Paris, Seuil, 1980, p. 7.

⁴ M. Touraine, *Le bouleversement du monde. Géopolitique du XXI^e siècle*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1995.

⁵ See P. Péan, *Carnages. Les guerres secrètes des grandes puissances en Afrique*, Paris, Fayard, 2010.

⁶ J.-P. Benoît, *Indispensable Afrique*, Nancy, Berger-Levrault, 2^e édition, 2006, 179p

⁷ P. Hugon, *Géopolitique de l'Afrique*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2007, p. 230.

⁸ A. Fontaine, "La guerre froide à l'heure africaine", in *Le Monde diplomatique*, Avril 1957, pp. 1-11.

II/ Raw materials and conflicts in Africa: what geopolitical relationship?

Raw materials remain today a classic lever of industrial development and a vector of power. How then can we understand the condition of African countries, especially those of the sub-Saharan region, most of which are major reservoirs of raw materials? Indeed, of the 54 countries with raw materials, many are among the poorest in the world, often crippled by conflict.

One of the methods of understanding this phenomenon is geopolitics, understood as the method of studying international relations and diplomacy, the analysis of an historical development in geography, which takes place in temporal and scalar variations, according to François Thual's definition. For Yves Lacoste, this method makes it possible to understand the rivalries of power and influence over territories, and for Pierre Marie Gallois, to examine the relations that exist between the conduct of a power policy carried out at the international level and the geographical framework in which it is exercised⁹.

Sub-Saharan African countries' raw materials undeniably have a strategic value. A resource is deemed strategic when regarded by mankind and taken by State as a decisive advantage not only in its relations with other States, but also in the process of its development. The strategic dimension depends on three elements: the characteristics of demand (industries, needs, and environment); the conditions of supply (scarcity, geographical location, needs) and the political dimension (mobilisation of states, cost, geopolitical role).

As a mining Eden, Africa is a victim of its geography and natural endowment. The rush of industrialised countries for oil and other resources has led to instability in the Middle East, the Gulf of Guinea and the Sahel, reinforcing the idea that where raw materials flourish, there are conflicts. The crises in Libya (2011), Mali (2014) and the Central African Republic (2014) are a good

example of this. Realistically, each power is trying to get the best of the game.

The various conflicts in Africa have led to the massacre of populations and the destruction of infrastructure and environment, as well as the illegal exploitation of natural resources¹⁰. In the early days of imperialism, natural resources were at the heart of rivalry between colonial powers (e.g. Franco-British rivalry in Niger and Franco-Belgian rivalry in Congo). Throughout the colonial period, and even today, Africa attracts the world's attention because of its rich diversity and becomes the main focus of competition between the major powers. The major powers involved in this bulimic struggle include France, Great Britain, Portugal, Belgium, Spain and Germany. With regard to Africa, the quarrels intensify and bear witness to the frenzy, transforming the continent over time into a hell for its inhabitants. Like the United States, which is trying to replace oil wells in the Persian Gulf with those in the Gulf of Guinea, China is intervening in the development of African countries by building infrastructures, in exchange for which it obtains rights to exploit or extract the resource rent.

The game is much more open and these nations no longer hesitate to break out of the usual diplomatic conformism and openly inveigh against each other. Recently, in the wake of this, Italy attacked France on its African policy and accused it of impoverishing Africa. France itself challenged China on the debt issue, the United States denounced Chinese predatory practices, while Russia criticised the deterioration of the terms of trade resulting from the colonial pact. It castigated American unilateralism and the unsuccessful interference of the West which, though wrongly according to the latter, makes the rain and the sun shine in Africa, validating or invalidating governments whenever it suits its interests, transforming the process of continental development into a Myth of Sisyphus. However, it is obvious that such criticism is not motivated by ethics, justice or altruism.

⁹ P. M. Gallois, *Géopolitique. Les voies de la puissance*, Paris, L'Âge d'homme, 2000.

¹⁰ F. Kourra Owona Mfegue, *Les ressources naturelles dans les conflits armés en République démocratique du Congo*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2012.

Beyond the mirror¹¹, Africa is a global issue, a precious field for expressing the concerns and satisfying the interests of the major powers¹². In such a global environment shaped by a growing demand for energy, migratory flows, global warming and new threats, Africa is at the heart of several major international hopes and issues¹³. More generally, it seems to be taking on a central role, even if it remains marginal in economic terms. The resources in raw materials make the African states, within the international bodies, the main targets¹⁴ or indispensable partners¹⁵. Anne-Cécile Robert evokes a continent in the grip of influence peddling and open to the great game of powers with Riyadh, Beijing, Berlin, Ankara, Moscow, etc.¹⁶ While the abundance of resources makes Africa a priority for China, India, Turkey, Brazil and the United States, for example, they also place it at the heart of their rivalry by contributing to the impoverishment and fragility of this continent. Africa is now one of the major priorities of opportunistic emerging powers' diplomacy¹⁷. Struggles over interests, bad governance, poverty and unemployment, especially in the eastern DRC and the Sahel, generate crises and conflicts, transforming the poles of mineral deposits into powder kegs, grey zones and geopolitical black holes. In reality though, the Sahara, for example, is not so deserted as such!

The geostrategic utility of Africa after the Cold War was questioned on the grounds that the continent was no longer of interest neither diplomatically nor strategically. This cliché was immediately overtaken by the upholding of Western military bases on the continent even after the closure of the few Soviet military bases and the withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola, and by

the renewed geostrategic interest of Africa for the West. The strategy of global counter-terrorism, especially in the Sahara, the economic competition to counter the rise of China on the continent and the need to secure its energy supplies led the US Department of Defence to create a special military command for Africa in 2007, called US-AFRICOM, which could not find a home on the continent¹⁸.

For the Kremlin, relations with Africa have seen a revival since 2009 to the benefit of Russian diplomacy and business. What is true for Moscow is also true for Ankara, Rio de Janeiro, New Delhi and Beijing. Seen from this angle, the security stakes prove to be secondary, with military interventions serving more as a front for positioning in order to arrogate spheres of geostrategic influence. Paradoxically, the natural endowment that is so precious becomes just as much a curse to the development of nations.

In fact, since the stakes are high, rather than contributing to the continent's industrial take-off as a boon, an asset and a lever, the presence of raw materials carries geopolitical stakes, a numbing factor of division, rivalry and destabilisation. The revenues from their illicit trafficking finance the black market, which is conducive to the acquisition of arms and drugs that fuel the continent's militias and rebellions. An example is the exploitation of Coltan in the North Kivu region of the DRC, which is controlled by armed militias and whose revenues fuel the conflicts in the Great Lakes region. But how can the exploitation of Africa's subsoil resources be capitalised?

In order to achieve rapid economic emergence and lasting peace in naturally endowed African states, notably the DRC, CAR, Niger, Mali and Cameroon, there is an urgent need for

¹¹ B. Boubacar Diop, *L'Afrique au-delà du miroir*, Paris, Philippe Rey, 2007, 212p.

¹² A. Traoré, *L'Afrique humiliée*, Paris, Fayard, 2008, 294p.

¹³ On this point, see Y.-A. Chouala, "L'Afrique dans le nouveau partenariat international : enjeux de civilisation et de puissance", in *Etudes internationales*, Vol. 34, N°1, March 2003, pp. 53-78.

¹⁴ "Guerre et paix en Afrique", in *Diplomatie. Affaires stratégiques et relations internationales*, Hors-série, N°15, février 2015, p. 4.

¹⁵ See A.-C. Robert, *L'Afrique au secours de l'Occident*, Paris, Les éditions de l'Atelier, 2006; "Indispensable

Afrique", in *Manière de voir. Le Monde diplomatique*, N°108, December 2009 - January 2010.

¹⁶ A.-C. Robert, "Traffics d'influence en Afrique", in *Le Monde diplomatique*, N°754, janvier 2017, pp. 10-11.

¹⁷ J.-F. Lafargue, "L'Afrique au cœur d'une rivalité internationale", in *Questions internationales*, N°33, septembre-octobre 2008, pp. 21-30.

¹⁸ US-AFRICOM, or AFRICOM, became operational on 1 October 2008 and coordinates all US military and security activities in Africa.

industrialisation, which is an antidote to the deterioration of the terms of trade and its corollaries. This sine qua non condition for breaking out of the lethargy is accompanied by a host of prior measures to be taken, notably in terms of reforming and adapting the education system; matching training to employment; updating customs policy and reducing taxation; reinforcing the regulatory role of the State; and encouraging national investors; reducing burdens and bottlenecks, notably corruption, stimulating foreign investment for a flourishing domestic market, limiting imports and promoting the joint-venture strategy; developing strategic support cooperation aimed at breaking with paternalistic or neo-colonial policies; opening up in all directions and diversifying international partnerships.

Conclusion

A researcher, far from being a judge, seeks to understand, and it has become essential to understand in order not to suffer and, above all, to foresee. At a time when the effects of climate change, a demographic boom and unprecedented urbanisation are all converging, natural resources are becoming a planetary issue. Although highly valued, African raw materials are still far from being a guarantee of wealth for its people. As in the past, they continue to arouse envy and fuel conflicts because of their economic and geostrategic importance. Through the revenues they generate and the way in which they are disposed of by the warring parties, they contribute to maintaining rivalries for power and influence over the control of territories. While it is important to note that Africa is a major potential power that was unable to express itself during the colonial era because of colonial wars and rivalries, it is also important to stress and deplore the fact that today it is bending under the weight of geopolitical situations despite the end of the Cold War. While Africa needs the great industrial powers to emerge in the context of economic globalisation, the latter also necessarily need Africa to sustain their power, increase their influence and impose their hegemony. Hence the need for strategic and geopolitical awareness on the part of African leaders. /-

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