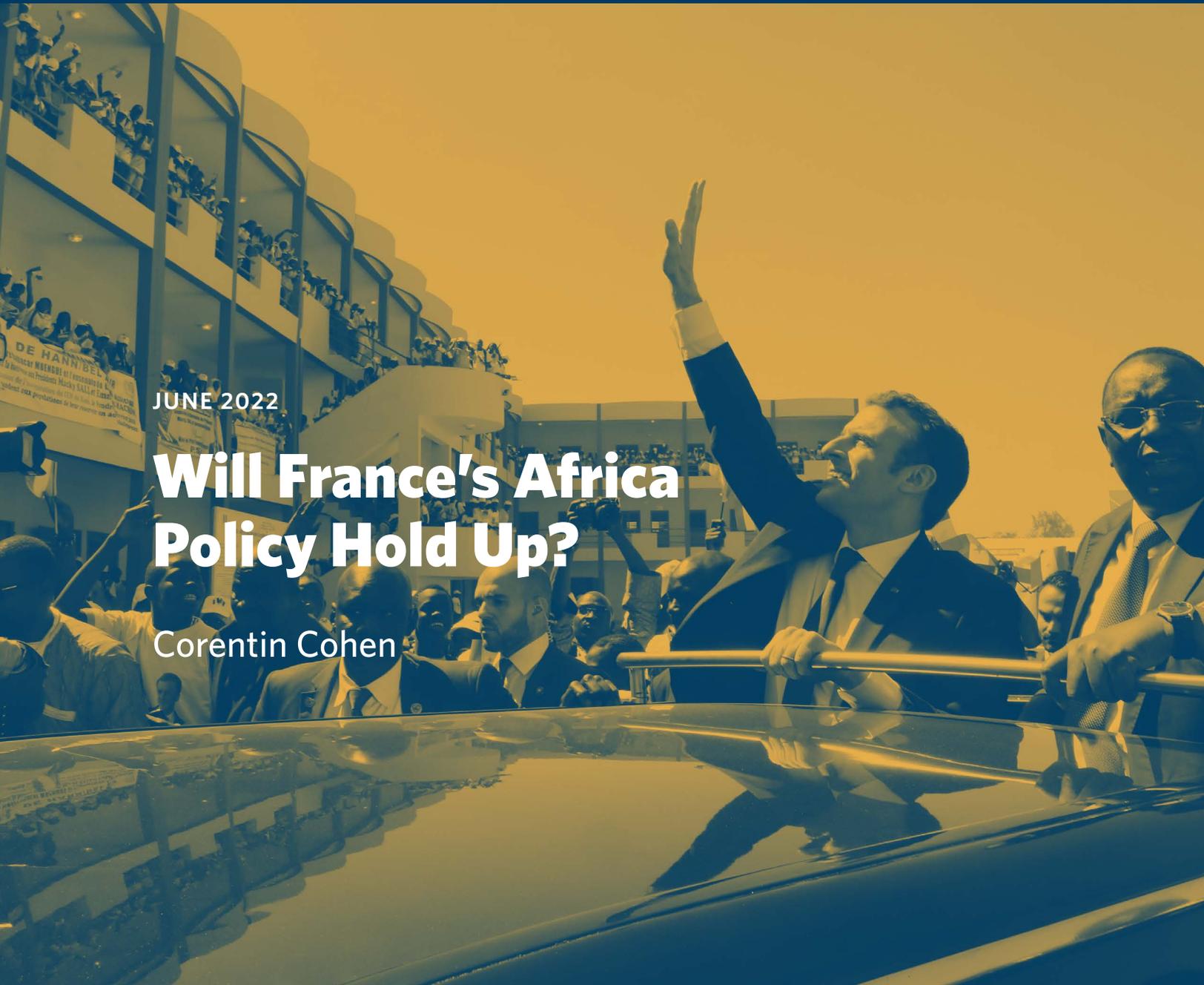


JUNE 2022

Will France's Africa Policy Hold Up?

Corentin Cohen



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Summary

During his first term, French President Emmanuel Macron sought to revitalize his country's diplomatic outreach to countries throughout Africa. Some aspects of this pivot were designed to more directly address the legacy of French colonialism in Francophone countries. He also sensed that the growing stature of non-Western powers like China has given African counterparts greater latitude to pursue ties amid heightened diplomatic competition among a host of other countries both in Europe and elsewhere. In pursuing this strategy, Macron has sought to promote a vision of French diplomacy with Africa through greater foreign aid and more robust people-to-people ties grounded in a spirit of partnerships between equals.

While Macron's efforts have created an opening for renewed relationships, this pivot has not been as seamless as he had hoped. Bureaucratic inertia and stovepiping in French foreign policy circles have at times meant that implementation of these policies has lagged. In certain cases, Macron's own nationalistic appeals during his recent reelection bid have appeared to undercut his attempts to make amends for France's troubling colonial history. Meanwhile the French president's attempts to deepen economic, people-to-people, and security ties in more equitable ways have fallen short of lofty expectations, with past practices proving harder than expected to jettison. For Macron's ambitions for French relations with African countries to keep their momentum, the president and his team must take an earnest look at what has worked well and what can still be improved.

Introduction

On a November 2017 diplomatic tour to Africa early in his first term, French President Emmanuel Macron had a surprising message for university students in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. Instead of claiming he would turn the page on France's Africa policy, as most French presidents before him had, he said there was no page to turn: France did not have a grand strategy for its diplomacy on the continent anymore. As he explained, a new era of France-Africa relations had arrived, and the two sides needed to both reinvent their political relationships and acknowledge their shared histories. He said:

I am from a generation of French people for whom Africa is neither a cumbersome past nor a neighbor among others. France has an unbreakable historical link with Africa, steeped in suffering and heartbreak, but also so often in fraternity and mutual aid. Africa is engraved in French memory, in culture, in history, and in the identity of France, and this is a strength and a pride that I want to cultivate, one that I want to carry as an asset of France, for France and for Africa in our relationship with the world.¹

Since then, Macron has tried to reinvent France's relationships with African partners. While he has addressed the legacy of French colonialism and foreign policy and may have succeeded in creating a diplomatic opening, change has proven harder to achieve than the French president might have anticipated.

Certain political obstacles have kept Macron's efforts from reaching their full potential. First, bureaucratic infighting, inflammatory campaign rhetoric, and controversial policy stances in some cases have blunted the effectiveness of the French president's striking acknowledgment of France's colonial past. Secondly, Macron has sought to enhance France's economic and aid policy with financial tools aimed at strengthening existing relationships and crafting new ones. While this policy has emphasized partnerships with business leaders, entrepreneurs, and civil society, the approach has sometimes been overly transactional and is yet to bear fruit. Third, France's military-driven security policy in the Sahel has failed to develop effective ways to defuse extremism or adapt to the region's social and political transformations. While Macron's pivot has created new political space for France-Africa engagement on more equal footing, the French president's vision of mutual aid and reciprocal partnerships between France and African countries remains unfulfilled.

France's Fraught History With Africa

France's historical legacy in Africa is complicated and checkered. Macron's discourse has contrasted with the approaches of former French presidents, which have attracted growing criticism in light of France's history of colonialism in Africa.² That legacy goes back to the invasion of Algiers in 1830, which marked the beginning of French colonization on the continent. French colonization reshaped African states and societies and French military, political, and economic institutions alike. During and after the colonial period, information and goods circulated between France and Africa, and French and African elites' pursuit of common interests nurtured unique relationships of domination and local responses to those power dynamics.

Despite formal independence for French colonies in West Africa, Central Africa, and Madagascar in the 1960s, France retained a sphere of influence in these regions after decolonization. These enduring formal and informal political, economic, and personal networks among those in France and on the continent with common views of world politics and shared interests in Africa were called *Françafrique*. This dynamic encouraged ruling elites in these newly independent countries to align their policy choices with those of France and the West. The U.S. government supported this arrangement during the Cold War to limit the Soviet Union's geopolitical influence.

This special relationship has often been declared to be over. After former French president François Mitterrand's speech at La Baule in 1990, France claimed it would begin to give preference to democratic partners. In Africa, this policy created expectations in the following decade. But France's inconsistent treatment of some of its allies, including support for authoritarian regimes like those in Central Africa, has at times provoked mockery and fueled popular disappointment regarding Paris's human rights rhetoric.³ Several African heads of state have maintained personal relations with French presidents who in exchange have supported their governments. Party-to-party political links, personal networks, and financing of French political campaigns and parties have been highlighted in various scandals.⁴ Although former French president Nicolas Sarkozy claimed that *Françafrique* was over in 2008 during a visit to South Africa, rumors and allegations of ongoing financing or political connections have persisted.⁵

Indeed, France has remained a privileged partner for many African presidents because of ongoing intelligence and military cooperation, political alliances, the possibility of military intervention, and a public development aid regime that has kept many regimes afloat. French policy stances still have a symbolic role in Francophone African public debates given Paris's rhetoric in favor of democracy and fair elections. Yet there are signs that this status quo cannot last.

The world is changing, and there are growing reasons to think that France's longtime arrangement with African partners has become more threatened and unsustainable over time, as Macron's approach acknowledges. This potential owes partly to the fact that African societies have negative perceptions of France as a former colonial power.⁶ Another reason is that France now faces greater diplomatic competition, as other powerful states such as China, India, Israel, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates have emerged as new development partners for African countries to court, even as the sway of traditional multilateral institutions like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund is lessening. Increasingly, since the end of the Cold War, these evolutions have challenged France's global stature and its ability to act as a political broker for African states.

Macron's attempt to reshape French diplomacy toward African countries can only be judged over the long term. Like any foreign policy, it has a multitude of internal and external implications and is marked by contradictions stemming from inherited policy tools and practices of the past. Consequently, there are still many obstacles standing in the way of enduring success in the years to come.

A Symbolic Bid for Diplomatic Space

Through a series of weighty, historically significant gestures, Macron has given France a stronger voice on the African continent. But these efforts have been bogged down in part by various foreign and domestic policy considerations, including the politics of France's 2022 presidential race. Part of Macron's shift has been rhetorical. He has aimed to turn the page on France's political relationships with various African partners in historically and symbolically significant ways designed to produce new diplomatic space. He also has backed up this rhetoric with policy shifts meant to address historical grievances with French colonization and postcolonial Africa policy. Nevertheless, in his second term, Macron will still need to engage with talk of tangible reparations.

A Rhetorical Break With the Past

Before he was first elected in 2017, Macron acknowledged that colonization was a crime against humanity, and he restated this view during his visit to Burkina Faso in November 2017.⁷ Macron seems to grasp the symbolic stakes of France's changing relationships with African countries, including former French colonies. Many observers have attributed this notable shift to the president's age. But it was only possible because his *En Marche* movement was emancipated from the links that both right-wing and left-wing mainstream French political parties had maintained with African counterparts in former French colonies.

Macron has sought to acknowledge and at times be more transparent about the past mistakes of French policy in Africa. In some cases, the topics have been mostly cultural. For instance, he nominated Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy to draft a landmark 2018 report on what to do about African cultural artifacts that were taken to French museums during the colonial era, a decision unpopular with major French museums.⁸

In other cases, the stakes have involved human lives in even more tangible ways through efforts to memorialize particularly harrowing historical realities. France has officially acknowledged multiple dark incidents that occurred the waning days of the French empire, such as the death of anticolonial activist Maurice Audin in Algeria at the hands of the French government and the massacre of as many as a few hundred Algerian protesters in Paris in October 1961.⁹ There has been unprecedented transparency about classified archives related to momentous and painful events including the investigation into the 1987 assassination of Burkina Faso's former president Thomas Sankara, an inquiry on the genocide of Tutsis in Rwanda in 1994 through the Duclert Commission in 2018, and revelations about many atrocities that occurred during Algeria's war for independence from French colonialism.¹⁰

These efforts built on gestures and laws, dating back to 2001, designed to memorialize the past including by recognizing slavery as a crime against humanity.¹¹ France still needs to acknowledge key moments in its history, such as Cameroon's war for independence and Madagascar's decolonization period. But as the 2022 French presidential election has demonstrated, the memories of these events are still contentious, including in France.¹² These attempts to reckon with France's colonial past contrast sharply with proposals of controversial education laws encouraging French schools to discuss the supposedly "positive aspects" of colonization.¹³ Troublingly, figures like Sarkozy at times have endorsed such apologist and racist discourse, as he did in 2008 when he said, "The tragedy of Africa is that the African has not fully entered into history . . . They have never really launched themselves into the future."¹⁴

Although Macron's initiatives have not completely addressed the question of reparations for past wrongs, they have opened a new political space, as the French president has shown that he is committed to the truth. These efforts will help allow historians to write accurate historical accounts and judge past events in light of newly available information. This accountability is the only way for French and African societies to acknowledge their shared histories without ignoring the grimmest chapters. That said, as the president made these historic moves, he also passed interministry instructions limiting researchers' access to some classified archives, making it virtually impossible to research some of these issues. Even so, Macron's pivot has blunted some criticisms from African governments who rely on anticolonial rhetoric to feed their nationalist stances, while also pressuring them to allow similar levels of transparency at home and open their own archives.

Macron's bid for a diplomatic reset also has economic dimensions related to the political baggage associated with the Communauté Financière Africaine (African Financial Community) franc, known by the shorthand CFA franc. This regional currency dates back to the French colonial era. It is still used in the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU) and in the Economic and Monetary Community of Central African States.¹⁵ The currency has consistently attracted economic and political criticism. Some countries such as Mauritania and Madagascar have given up the CFA franc to adopt their own currencies.¹⁶ Other states and their co-opted elites have claimed that the arrangement provides monetary stability as France historically guaranteed the CFA franc's fixed exchange rate with the French franc and then the euro. Until Macron initiated reforms in December 2019, French public servants administered the currency along with representatives from African states in what was clearly a relationship of political domination.¹⁷ Consequently, in May 2021, France freed assets that had been held at the Bank of France to the Central Bank of West African States, in an apparent attempt to right the economic imbalance posed by the CFA franc issue.¹⁸

Bureaucratic Infighting and Mixed Political Messaging

But political considerations have somewhat hamstrung Macron's bid for a diplomatic reset with Africa. For one thing, in the early days of his first term, the new government he led initially did not effectively marshal the state's bureaucratic ranks and seemed to pay little attention to the way its policies were implemented.

This was the case with the Duclert Commission investigating French classified archives related to the 1994 Rwandan genocide. The founding of the commission under Macron in 2019 offended the French political and military establishments' sensibilities. The commission questioned France's political alliance with Rwanda before and during the genocide. It also shed light on ways in which the French military operation under the United Nations' mandate had contributed to helping "the masterminds of the genocide, who the French political authorities refused to arrest."¹⁹ It finally concluded that France had "overwhelming

responsibilities,” that the French government “demonstrated a continual blindness in [its] support for a racist, corrupt and violent regime,” and that “French perception continued to be dominated by an ethno-nationalist obsession.”²⁰

In another instance, officials from the French Ministry of Culture, prominent museum directors, and legislators were reluctant to pass a law facilitating the return of select historically significant artifacts to their rightful African homes; these items have been held in French state collections since the colonial era. More than 66,000 such objects have been identified, but very few have been returned so far.²¹ These tensions with French diplomats and other government officials even led Macron to criticize the “deep state” within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and this friction probably nurtured his ambitions to reform the training regimens of high-ranking civil servants and diplomats.²²

Similarly, despite growing pressure from activists who oppose the CFA franc and whose discontent was soon amplified by pro-Russian media, the French Treasury, the Bank of France, and the presidents of some WAEMU countries remained reluctant to change their attitudes toward the CFA franc. This state of affairs nearly led to a stalemate that would have blocked the reforms on the adoption of the eco, the new name of the CFA franc. African stakeholders with disparate views on the stability provided by the currency, to say nothing of their countries’ differing export capacities and access to development aid and IMF loans, found it difficult to agree on the value of the eco. Some of them wanted the eco to stay pegged to the euro, while others wanted the eco’s exchange rate to be bound to a basket of currencies. As it stands, the eco will be backed by the euro. The question of unpegging the CFA franc and the euro lingers, though, as some economists believe that the CFA franc’s fixed exchange rate is too high to foster investment on the continent, that it has dampened local demand, and (as in other non-CFA countries in the continent) that it is supported by very high interest rates that mostly benefit local banks.²³

Finally, the rhetoric of Macron’s own government amid his reelection bid has partly eroded the potential of his diplomatic reset with Africa as he has courted conservative votes with sometimes controversial policy stances and inflammatory language on issues involving law enforcement, religion, and national identity.

A series of contradictory messages has shown the French government’s limited appreciation of the interconnectedness of French and African audiences. In the wake of the killing of George Floyd in the United States, some French government ministers took ambiguous positions on protests organized in France after cases of police violence and discrimination against Black French citizens emerged.²⁴ This included an attempt to pass a law that would potentially criminalize the publication of images of on-duty police officers, at a time when most civil society organizations were rallying to end impunity for these crimes, change people’s views on racism, and organize a movement to end ethnic profiling.²⁵

Meanwhile the interior minister attended a protest organized by police forces, and others endorsed remarks claiming to protect French secularism (*laïcité*) from Islam in ways that fed domestic prejudices and eventually sparked protests in the Sahel, the Middle East, and Asia, forcing the president to quiet down the debates.²⁶ In another display, the prime minister glorified colonization on a national news program.²⁷ These instances undercut the rhetorical appeals Macron has made for a fresh start in France's relations with African partners.

The Limits of Macron's Transactionalism With Africa

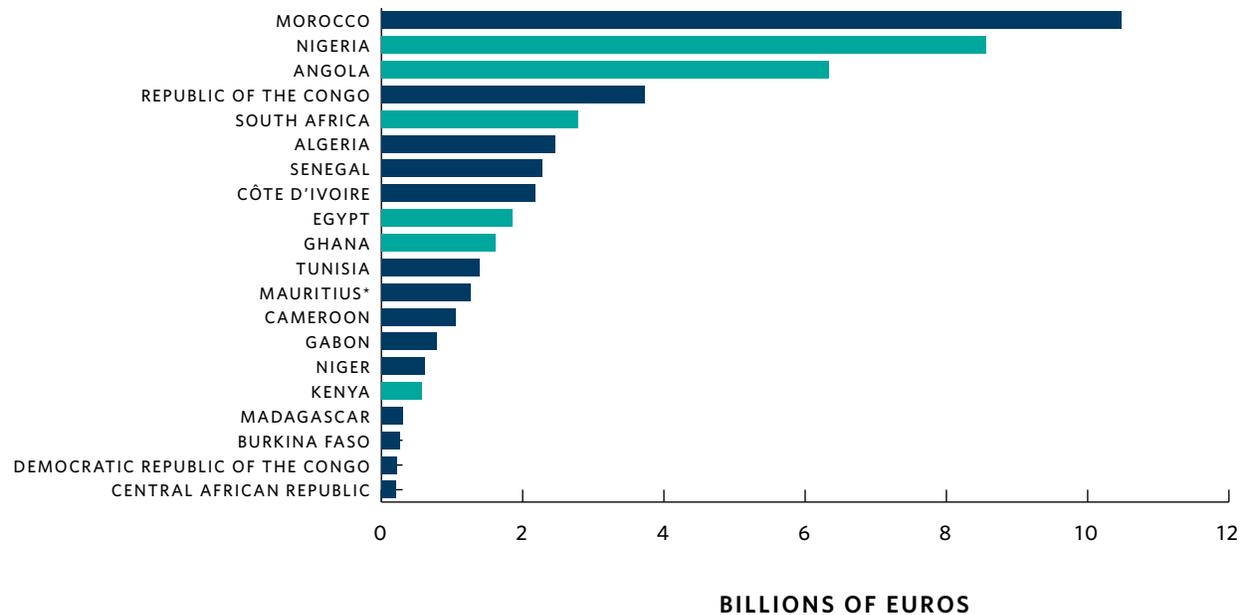
Macron's new approach in practice has turned away from human rights–centered rhetoric about the defense of democratic values beyond Europe. Instead, Macron has favored more transactional engagement. This stance was embodied in the deepening of French relationships with key arms buyers such as Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, Emirati Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman after a recent attempt to rehabilitate his image after the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi.²⁸ The French government sees Africa as an emerging region in need of financial support and a source of key partners for France amid the tumult of the coronavirus pandemic. As Macron's visit to a concert hall called the New Afrika Shrine and his meeting with alumni of the Tony Elumelu Foundation in Lagos, Nigeria, in 2018 illustrated, his approach has focused on engaging in macroeconomic diplomacy and on cultivating ties with new political intermediaries, business groups, and entrepreneurs in Africa to advance shared interests.²⁹

Economic Diplomacy

Macron's focus on economic diplomacy is broadly similar to the approach of former president François Hollande and former prime minister Laurent Fabius, though in some ways Macron has underscored development aid and other financial tools even more than his predecessors did. During various diplomatic tours, the president has emphasized the expansion of bilateral economic cooperation with Angola as well as English-speaking countries such as Nigeria, South Africa, and Kenya, which are all important recipients of French FDI in Africa (see figure 1).³⁰

Over the last five years, France's international development aid budget has increased significantly, from 0.38 percent of France's gross national income in 2016 to 0.53 percent in 2020, a figure that is projected to reach 0.7 percent in 2025.³¹ A total of 39 percent of France's 2020 bilateral aid flows (3.6 billion euros) went to Africa.³² In total, eighteen of the nineteen countries prioritized to receive French public development aid were in Africa.³³

Figure 1. French Direct Investment in Africa (2017-2020)



FRENCH SPEAKING COUNTRIES

SOURCE: Authors calculations based on Bank of France data. See Bank of France, “Foreign Direct Investment Flows - Geographical and Industrial Breakdown - Annual Data (2000-2020) (2020 Annual Report), Bank of France, July 29, 2021, <https://www.banque-france.fr/en/statistics/balance-payments/foreign-direct-investment/statistics/foreign-direct-investment-annual-series>.

NOTE: This figure depicts the average annual net foreign direct investment that is invested in each of the respective countries. Mauritius is listed as blue, but French and English are both widely spoken there.

These partnerships and this bilateral aid have been used to foster new relationships in recipient countries. The largest share of French bilateral aid went to infrastructure and social services, including education, public health initiatives, water distribution, and sanitation.³⁴ Most of the funds are issued through grants, but over the last few years a growing part of French development aid has consisted of loans and credit lines that lessen the risk of private investment and emphasize public-private partnerships. This could contribute to the continent’s development objectives, but there is a risk that these efforts could over the long term weigh down African states’ private debt levels. Ultimately, these programs could face eroding public support in Africa and increase inequalities as their costs are borne by Africans themselves.

Amid the pandemic and because of concerns about the public health emergency’s impact on African economies, Macron articulated a new doctrine that emphasized reworking capitalism to cope with growing inequalities and climate change.³⁵ France started to develop a more

structural approach to its ambitions to reform the Washington Consensus with a May 2021 conference in Paris on African countries' debt burdens.³⁶ This joint initiative with African presidents brought together heads of state and some G20 leaders, who agreed on a temporary moratorium on African states' debt servicing payments and a currency allocation—denominated in a reserve asset created by the IMF called special drawing rights (SDRs)—to bolster African countries' reserve holdings.

The conference also marks a breakthrough as most African heads of state publicly reached a consensus on the need to improve transparency rules on debt. The conference could provide a moral and a rhetorical tool to cancel or renegotiate secret debts with private and public lenders, but its effects remain to be seen. The reallocation of some SDR holdings by European states is also lagging as only a few states, like France, Italy, and Spain, have promised to reallocate 20 percent of the SDR holdings they received from the IMF during the pandemic to African countries.³⁷

An Expansion of Public Diplomacy

Macron's economic approach has a public diplomacy component too. Similar to the 2007 *Afrique Avenir* forum by former French president Jacques Chirac and other French initiatives that brought together “the African successes . . . of creators, entrepreneurs, leaders, [and] artists,” Macron is looking for ways to form new partnerships with African nonstate actors.³⁸ This task has become more pressing since France's failure to anticipate the Arab Spring in 2010 or to support civil society movements in places like Egypt, Syria, Tunisia, and Gulf countries. Macron has been keen to embrace African business and artistic elites that could help to shape governance in Africa beyond political parties and governments that the French government and African citizens alike all too often see as unreliable. This idea was at the core of the New France-Africa Summit in the French city of Montpellier in October 2021, an event that brought together young leaders such as civil society and environmental activists, business leaders, and athletes.³⁹ A key highlight of this forum was a report that Macron commissioned by intellectual Achille Mbembe on the renewal of French-African relations.⁴⁰

But the political benefits of this approach to public diplomacy have been limited so far. In some ways, this approach remains stuck in transactionalism. These actors do not necessarily have the same agenda as France does. This approach might be limited to short-lived financial pacts with business leaders and philanthropists who are not in a position to challenge the status quo with their countries' military leaders. An example of this was France's partnership with Sudanese-British businessman Mo Ibrahim, who supported the political transition in Sudan until the country's October 2021 military coup. In this instance, French diplomats and security agencies had less leverage than their Egyptian, Emirati, or Saudi counterparts. France has looked to Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates as key markets and allies, but these countries worked against French interests and France's attempts to foster

democracy in Sudan. Revealingly, French ambassadors and diplomats lack tools to support such political transitions because many governance-related programs are mostly in the hands of the French Development Agency.

Finally, Macron also has sought to use African diaspora communities, particularly through education exchanges, to strengthen ties with France, but this reliance on young African talent to counterbalance France's loss of soft power has not produced many results either. The short-lived Presidential Council for Africa and the French-African Foundation were expected to help identify future diplomatic intermediaries in African partner countries. These forums' overwhelming focus on start-ups, businesspeople, and lawyers has undermined this ambition.⁴¹ The creation of special golden visas for young talent and business owners who have invested at least 300,000 euros in France seems elitist.⁴²

Moreover, this will likely be insufficient to compensate for the French educational system's decreasing appeal to foreign students, owing to the French government's decision to increase university fees for all non-EU students, with costs rising from 170–380 euros per year to 2,770–3,770 euros depending on the degree program.⁴³ This short-sighted policy hurts France over the long term because France's influence on the African continent still relies on the formation of elites, the middle class, and civil servants in French universities. After all, approximately 50 percent of foreign students in higher education institutions in France come from the African continent.⁴⁴ But the increase in university fees for non-EU students has accelerated the growing interest of African Francophone students in higher degrees in other countries like the United States and Canada, or more recently in China, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. In fact, China has overtaken France as the leading destination for African students: nearly 82,000 African students were studying in China in 2018, compared with approximately 42,000 in France (in 2015).⁴⁵ These countries are also trying to train African elites by developing fellowship programs and grants.

Trapped in a Pattern of Military Interventionism

The limits of Macron's attempt at a diplomatic reset with African partners became evident from the difficulties he has faced in recalibrating the security and military aspects of France-Africa partnerships. Over the last five years, France's approach has remained stuck in a pattern heavy on military action in countries like Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic, Chad, and Mali, with little recourse for new foreign policy tools. France's security-driven approach has ignored ongoing political and social dynamics in the Sahel. It has also kept France from doing enough to discourage the militaries of countries like Chad and Mali

from overthrowing their leaders in coups. These setbacks have drawn attention to the shortcomings of French policy, but it is unclear if they have been enough to spur meaningful change.

The first reason why France has remained trapped in the position of security provider to African partners comes from the intellectual inheritances of past French security policies and rhetorical appeals to combat terrorism after the September 11, 2001, attacks. Under U.S. pressure and a shared interest in addressing counterterrorism concerns in Mali, Hollande initiated a military engagement called Operation Serval in 2013. The French expeditionary force, which was then renamed Operation Barkhane in 2014, was tasked with rooting out terrorist fighters across the Sahel and is ongoing.

Macron went along with this past policy. His foreign affairs minister, Jean-Yves le Drian, previously served as Hollande's defense minister. A political heavyweight with an electoral fiefdom in Bretagne, le Drian's support was key to Macron's election success. Along with the French military chief of staff, le Drian argued that the intervention in Mali against Tuareg rebel movements that favor secession and some of their al-Qaeda-affiliated allies would protect Europe from terrorist attacks. The November 2015 attacks in Paris demonstrated that this claim was dubious because the threat came from the self-proclaimed Islamic State in Syria and not from the Sahel. Belligerents in Mali were focused on fighting national armies, and al-Qaeda-related groups in the Sahel focused on Western targets within their reach and the French army. But Macron adopted his foreign minister's hawkish position, along with the far-right thesis that Africa's growing population and the prospect of immigration to Europe threaten the stability of countries like France.⁴⁶

Despite the questionable effectiveness of this approach, Operation Barkhane and the French Development Agency's efforts to spur security and stability through military operations and state-building programs were seen as an answer to the rise of jihadi groups such as Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin, the self-proclaimed Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, and the Islamic State's West Africa Province. Both the French Ministry of Defense and the French Development Agency claimed they could keep Sahelian states from tottering and maintain stability, a claim that the French government seemed to take for granted.

Despite Operation Barkhane's tactical successes and operations, French officials may have miscalculated the effect of the killings of jihadi group leaders in the Sahel. The killings may indirectly have contributed to the accelerated emergence of new jihadi figures beyond the northern regions of Mali where they had been based since the 2000s.⁴⁷ The elimination of jihadi leaders with Algerian and Western Saharan roots seems to have benefited local figures more connected to rural areas and local grievances in areas along the borders between Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. One example is the role of Amadou Koufa, who became famous for his sermons in the Fulani language and the founding in 2015 of the Macina Liberation Front. Another example is the ascension of lieutenants with local ties within the hierarchy of these jihadi groups.⁴⁸

But none of these French foreign policy tools helped produce a political solution for Mali after the signing in Algiers of a 2015 peace agreement between the Malian government and an umbrella organization for different Tuareg movements called the Coordination of Azawad Movements. Despite the agreement, devolution and decentralization reforms that had been agreed on since 2015 were kept on standby and still have not been implemented. Instead, violence has continued, and jihadi groups spread in new regions and rural areas.

France's military-driven approach misjudged political transformations underway in the Sahel. First, it ignored Sahelian states' clientelistic governing structures. It did not anticipate that Mali's then president Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta would for a time manage to use the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and international aid to maintain his grip on power without engaging in credible local elections and devolution reforms. Then Keïta himself was overthrown in an August 2020 coup, which was followed by another coup in May 2021. In other countries, various international military cooperation programs, notably French and U.S. ones, contributed to the rapid political ascent of special forces and military officers. Although large shares of these budgets were embezzled by ruling elites and top officers, those responsible became powerful public figures.⁴⁹

Second, this concentration of power in the hands of the government and military along with the absence of devolution reforms accelerated the loss of relevance of all local intermediaries working between the state and individuals, such as elders, traditional rulers, and mayors. They were helpless in the face of jihadi groups, and most had to take sides so as to receive protection, leading to cycles of retaliation and violence.

Third, French policy ignored how the political deadlock and faltering security situation fueled local demand for religiously inspired moral and social regulations and accelerated the formation of these new moral authorities. In Mali's capital of Bamako, the government fueled a growing surge of Bambara nationalism. It blamed these security woes on the international community, MINUSMA, and Operation Barkhane. These analytical flaws remained and were nurtured by the proliferation of think tanks and mediators of all kinds, claiming to have a solution to the conflict. This contributed to a growing debate on the best strategies to curb the violence or to negotiate with jihadi groups who had no reason to do so as the Malian government was losing ground. But these ideas mostly ignored the social and political dynamic that local researchers understand all too well.

In response to the situation and its impact on the region, the Africa and Indian Ocean Directorate of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs tried to revive the G5 Sahel joint force—which includes Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger—and to secure funds to support it.⁵⁰ The improved coordination of regional armies was believed to be a solution to what was in fact a political deadlock. This happened amid massacres, executions of civilians, and allegations of war crimes carried out by local armies and jihadi groups.⁵¹ France's efforts could not hinder the proliferation of state-supported militias, which fueled the dynamics of the civil war.⁵²

This state of affairs did not translate into any policy changes. The French aerial bombing of Chadian rebels threatening president Idriss Déby's regime in February 2019 and the French military surge in Mali in February 2020 eroded French leverage by proving to all Sahelian heads of state that France would keep acting as an unconditional protector because of its military-driven policy. Mali's two coups and the constitutional coup in Chad in the aftermath of Déby's death were historic opportunities to change course and reinforce the rule of law. But this security-driven approach prevailed. This has indirectly contributed to a permissive climate that combined with nationalist rhetoric and the growing role of special forces in the region to lead to these recent coups.

These issues have rarely been at the center of presidential races in France's Fifth Republic. Foreign policy remains an exclusive domain of the president, with weak parliamentary control. The legacy of the Gaullist compromise, the idea that France should remain independent in the context of the Cold War world, still holds sway over policymakers and voters. But as jihadi threats continue to loom and after the coups in Chad and Mali, pressure has been building across France's political spectrum to change course. Although the withdrawal of Operation Barkhane has been on the table for a long time, these internal dynamics and the outcomes of French policy forced the president to endorse a strategic shift and redeploy troops from Mali into neighboring countries. The Malian military coup, the junta's appeal for Russian mercenaries likely to act as a praetorian guard, and the recent expulsion of the French ambassador to Mali have offered an unexpected opportunity for French policymakers to withdraw definitively from Mali rather than doubling down on the costs of years of mistaken policies.

France's Diplomatic Posture After 2022

Any attempt to open a new chapter in France's relationships with African countries will fail if it is unable to acknowledge these mistaken policies and to exploit the political space it creates and foster deeper relations with African societies and new partners. As he embarks on a second term, Macron should focus on a few key factors: accountability and the cultivation of new partnerships.

Increasing Accountability for French Africa Policy

One major issue is that France's highly vertical decisionmaking and policymaking processes lack transparency and accountability and are in need of democratic reform. This is a product of the tendency for French foreign policy to be largely driven by the president and his staff.

Major French foreign policy institutions like the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defense, the intelligence services, and the French Development Agency tend to work in silos. Decisionmaking is concentrated around top political figures with limited space for democratic oversight and a dearth of checks and balances. For example, in November 2021, thanks to a whistleblower and a leak of military intelligence documents, an investigative report by a media outlet known as Disclose revealed that the French government had approved a secret and illegal intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance flight program run by the French military intelligence and private actors to support the Egyptian government (a major client of the French weapons industry). Although the program was labeled a cooperative counterterrorism initiative, it mostly provided the Egyptian government with information that led to extrajudicial assassinations of smugglers and individuals trying to cross the border between Libya and Egypt, with potential French complicity with these crimes.⁵³ As the officers of the program described it, “practically no element [of the program] has addressed the terrorist problem.”⁵⁴

The same report also revealed that the French government supported the exporting of spyware used against opponents of the autocratic regime in Egypt. Yet attempts to open a commission to investigate these deeds in the parliament and keep the government accountable were nipped in the bud, and these revelations had no impact at all. In a striking similarity, the Duclert Commission’s report on the genocide of the Tutsi ethnic group in Rwanda showed that this concentration of power around Mitterrand contributed to France’s uncritical support of the Rwandan government that oversaw the genocide, despite warnings from certain departments of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the foreign intelligence agency.⁵⁵ This lack of accountability is still a major issue and the lessons of the commission need to be acknowledged.

Sharing of information and openness to constructive criticism and outside perspectives will be vital if France wants to develop political relationships with new partners, whether they be states or coalitions of civil society actors and business leaders. For instance, Macron tried to deepen French relations with Ethiopia, but he sometimes appeared to downplay tensions within the country and put too much faith in Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed when mass violence and the insurgency in the region of Tigray had already worsened. Changing this culture will entail a more balanced understanding of the relative strengths and weaknesses of key players like the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defense, the French Development Agency, and the intelligence services, and it will also be important to make power less concentrated and inject more transparency and responsibility into these institutions.

Creating and Deepening Partnerships

The second issue is forming relationships with new partners. Under Macron, France has started to change its ties with old authoritarian partners in Central Africa and in the Great Lakes region of Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Rwanda. Forthcoming transitions will soon put this new posture to the test.

Traditionally, France resorted to secret diplomacy and a role as a mediator of last resort in its dealings with these countries. In exchange for French support, heads of state such as President Denis Sassou-Nguesso of the Republic of the Congo and Déby in Chad acted as local brokers for French policy on the continent. Since the 1990s, this approach has preserved France's relations with allied heads of state, whom France has shielded from marginalization or exclusion by the rest of the international community. The French government has also given a stamp of approval to sham elections in these countries for the sake of maintaining diplomatic ties with autocrats, as it did, for instance, in Chad in 2006.⁵⁶

Macron has somewhat distanced himself from historical authoritarian French partners in Central African countries like Cameroon, Gabon, and the Republic of the Congo, which have become more reliant on their relationships with China over the last twenty years. Now France needs to use its symbolic power to support the aspirations of African citizens and anticipate the transitions to come. Cameroon's President Paul Biya is eighty-nine years old, while President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo of Equatorial Guinea and Sassou-Nguesso of the Republic of the Congo will be eighty before long. As leaders in these former partner countries manipulate anti-French rhetoric for their own political ends, French diplomats will need to engage skillfully to help facilitate and navigate transitions that are already being negotiated among local actors—working with civil society and nongovernmental organizations where possible to promote the rule of law and adherence to human rights. This shift implies that France should rethink its public diplomacy and public or tacit endorsements in favor of positions that might challenge these authoritarian regimes. This would help to secure limited wins, such as the liberation of imprisoned opposition figure Maurice Kamto and Anglophone leaders in Cameroon.⁵⁷

Meanwhile, France has successfully pivoted to develop key relationships with other countries like Angola and the Democratic Republic of the Congo while also patching up ties with partners like Rwanda. Yet it is unclear if France will develop cooperation capable of weathering potential turmoil in the Great Lakes region or how it will deal with the authoritarian streak of Rwandan President Paul Kagame's regime amid growing criticism.⁵⁸ Another aspect of this diplomatic reset will involve cultivating closer ties between France and East African countries, in part to complement France's diplomatic outreach in the strategically important Indo-Pacific region. This diplomatic bid has key implications for French oversea territories and for the French oil giant Total's massive investments in the region.⁵⁹

The Feasibility of a New Partnership Between Europe and Africa

As Macron's second term begins, he will need to strive to learn from the past limitations of French policy in Africa. France's stewardship of the presidency of the Council of the EU in 2022 and a new domestic presidential mandate can set the tone for long-term political partnerships between France and other major European powers on the one hand and African states and societies on the other. France could help develop policies that favor the provision of public goods and infrastructure, wealth redistribution, and accountability. These are key issues for the EU and its relations with the African Union as new political models hinder African citizens' aspirations for democracy and the rule of law. Five priorities would be a helpful starting point.

First, with its European partners, France could fulfill its promise to reshape capitalism. France could help African states try to enhance their fiscal capabilities and limit the impact of offshore banking on the continent as it erodes states' sovereign capacities.⁶⁰ Beyond its expansion of investment and aid, Paris could support an honest dialogue on the role of corruption and tax evasion, which deprive African states of between \$50 billion and \$80 billion in revenue per year.⁶¹ A key measure for that goal would be to develop legislation in France and the EU, modeled after the United States' Foreign Corrupt Practices Act or Foreign Account Tax Compliance Act, to hold foreign companies, banks and other financial services providers, and lawyers accountable for operations they enable involving Europe or euros. Another related effort would be to support the establishment of beneficial ownership registries in Africa and make the use of such registries a condition for access to bilateral or EU aid.

Second, Macron promised that COVID-19 vaccines would be a symbol of a new partnership between Europe and Africa. This has not turned out to be the case, as Europe did not support a temporary lift on patent restrictions for the vaccines.⁶² Yet access to public goods, increased public health assistance, and more openness on patents and research capacities could be key areas for cooperation going forward. As for people-to-people ties and education exchanges, in light of France's colonial past and as a form of forward-looking reparations, France should give young Africans and citizens of former colonies access to its higher education system on similar financial terms to those that French and European citizens enjoy.⁶³ France could encourage other former colonial powers in the EU to do the same, ultimately aiming to develop partnerships across the continent to send European students to study and work in Africa. The Erasmus+ bilateral partnerships between European institutions and African universities could also be expanded. Finally, instead of duplicating existing efforts, France could support and invest in its unique network of research centers around the continent including the Pasteur Network, International Mixed Units of French Research Institutes Abroad, and the French National Research Institute for Sustainable Development to build thriving hubs for the circulation of researchers and intellectual elites between Africa and Europe.

Third, the EU harbors ambitions to become a pivotal leader in the green transition to enhance energy efficiency, but Europe should not overlook potential avenues to energy cooperation with African partners and the issue of justice. As France and the EU focus on developing legislation on imported carbon emissions, they could give African states specific credits and carbon quotas that will support new investments in public projects. The EU also needs to rethink current legislation that treats African countries as substandard markets where European companies can export chemicals, drugs, secondhand cars, and other products not allowed in Europe. European stakeholders could support proposals on the continent involving decarbonized energy capacity and industrial investments for recycling infrastructure.

Fourth, France and the EU are now confronted with a dual dilemma regarding the security situation and growing traction of authoritarian models in Africa. Key figures of the democratic transitions of the 1990s now openly question the appeal of democracy and consider China to be a model of development and benevolent authoritarianism. In response, France could consider recalibrating its partnerships to focus more on good governance, impartial justice, the rule of law, and transparency. If France wants to remain a security partner for the region, the French government should conduct a thorough and transparent policy review of its military cooperation programs and policies. While some military engagements may indeed contribute to development, many French and African citizens fail to see the benefits of the French training of African militaries over the last sixty years. This policy review would also help regain the trust of EU allies who have supported France's actions in the Sahel but now feel that they were misled.

Fifth, there is no doubt that European and African societies are both reliant on leading U.S. technology companies like Amazon, Apple, Meta, and Google, making them vulnerable to growing U.S.-China geopolitical polarization. Both European and African governments need to establish norms to account for their limited technological capacities; protect their sovereignty; and uphold the rights, freedoms, and privacy of their citizens. In any case, digital competition will have direct consequences for the political regimes and conceptions of citizenship that emerge in African and European societies in the years to come.

As Macron's second term begins, now is an opportune time to reimagine France's diplomatic outreach to African countries. While Macron has demonstrated a clear desire to redress the mistakes of the past, other aspects of his policy ambitions remain mired in transactional and outmoded approaches to engagement. A hard look at what has worked and what has not is an essential step toward ensuring that France wields its considerable influence to pursue equal partnerships and mutual benefit for African countries.

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Acknowledgments

The author thanks Juliette Ovadia for excellent research assistance on this publication.

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