

THE NEW SITUATION OF AFRICA'S AUTONOMOUS DEVELOPMENT: CAUSES AND PROSPECTS

Yao Guimei

*Director and Researcher of the South Africa Center of the Institute of West Asian and African Studies
of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences*

Since 2020, Africa's turbulence has increased due to the impact of the factors of COVID-19 pandemic, the Ukraine crisis, and major countries' pursuit of interests in Africa. Under the leadership of the African Union (AU) and African subregional organizations, efforts have been made to cope with various types of crises, so we see a new situation of autonomous development in political, economic and diplomatic fields. Observing and understanding this new situation, analyzing its causes and accurately envision its prospects will not only help us to better understand Africa's overall demands for development and the evolution of its relations with major countries, but also help us to build a closer China-Africa community with a shared future.

NEW SITUATION OF AFRICA'S AUTONOMOUS DEVELOPMENT

I. The AU Endeavors to Maintain the Overall Situation of Africa's Peaceful Development in an African Way

First, the AU has responded to the resurgence of military coups. It has intervened decisively in the military coups in countries such as Mali, Niger, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and deterred unconstitutional regimes through sanctions, suspension of AU membership and other tough means. Second, the AU mediated in regional security disputes. It has actively mediated in the internal conflict in Ethiopia and the dispute over the Renaissance Dam among the three Nile countries by calling on the

countries concerned not to jeopardize the process to resolve the conflicts or complicate the negotiations. It has tried to make the parties concerned to reach a peace and reconciliation agreement. The AU, together with the East African Community, the Southern African Development Community and other subregional organizations, has intervened in the peace processes in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the northern part of Mozambique through the African approach, and has achieved positive results, demonstrating its leadership on the continent. Third, the AU has made innovations in its norms and mechanisms. It has actively responded to non-traditional security issues such as terrorism and piracy. For this purpose, it has improved its institutional framework, promoted cooperation between African countries and the United Nations and the European Union, and formulated relevant framework and guiding documents or resolutions.

II. Face Up to the Challenges to Sustainable Socio-Economic Development through Unity by Empowerment

First, the construction of African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) has been accelerated to pave the way for industrialization. Since the launch of the AfCFTA, the Adjustment Fund and the Pan-African Payment and Settlement System have been introduced one after another, and seven countries, including Cameroon, Egypt, Ghana, Kenya and Mauritius, have been selected

as pilot countries for free trade, harnessing the regional resources and the markets and pushing forward economic integration. Second, Africa's control over key minerals has been enhanced. Since 2021, 15 resource-abundant African countries have successively adjusted their mining policies by applying measures such as establishing state-owned mining companies, re-examining mining contracts, increasing localization and environmental protection requirements. They speed up in forming the downstream industrial chains and regional mining value chains, and make more clear-cut demands for value-adding and rebalancing of profits in mining. Third, African countries are vigorously developing digital economies to realize curve overtaking. Not only has the AU called for digital transformation to be placed among the top priorities of the AU Agenda 2063, but more than 40 African countries have formulated digital economy strategies or policies, striving to make the development of the digital economy the new engine for economic growth of the whole Africa. Fourth, Africa has made progress in promoting the major countries to assume the historical responsibility for tackling climate change. The AU has successively launched the Africa Green Recovery Action Plan and the Strategy and Action Plan on Climate Change and Resilient Development (2022-2032), urging the Western developed countries to increase their support

for climate change mitigation and adaptation in Africa so as to enhance Africa's ability to realize climate resilience and climate-smart development. At the 27th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change hosted by Egypt, Africa contributed to the creation of the Loss and Damage Fund. Fifth, a comprehensive assessment of the implementation of the first decade (2014-2023) of planning for Agenda 2063 was conducted to lay a good foundation of planning for the second decade (2024-2033).

III. Expressing Common Position with One Voice on the International Stage

First, Africa has actively participated in multilateral diplomacy to enhance its power of discourse in global governance. The AU has actively promoted UN Security Council reform, aiming to have a veto seat belonging to Africa; it also seeks for the membership of the G20. Second, it has unified its voice in cooperation with the EU, striving for the development of a genuine partnership of equals with Europe. Africa performed strongly in the negotiations of the Post-Cotonou Agreement, and finally realized the expected goal of signing a separate African regional agreement with the EU; in the 6th Europe-Africa Summit and consultations on related issues, African countries made strong and well-grounded argument, and



The 36th Summit of the African Union opened on February 18, 2023 at the AU headquarters in Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia.

(Photo/Xinhua)

had achievements on trade, investment, public health, peace and security, and migration. Third, they have adhered to the spirit of non-alignment by refusing to take sides in the Ukraine crisis, and organized a delegation to visit Russia and Ukraine to advocate negotiation and promote peace, thus demonstrating Africa's influence in the resolution of international hotspot issues.

IV. Taking Balanced Positions Amidst the Game of Major Powers

First, African countries have maintained an unbiased position on the Ukraine crisis. So far, none of the African countries has participated in the sanctions against Russia, nor does the AU use sensitive words as “condemnation” and “aggression” in relevant communiqués. In the two votes related to the Ukraine issue in the United Nations General Assembly, the number of African countries that voted in favor of the resolution and the number of African countries that abstained or did not vote are almost the same. Second, African countries have high expectations for both the U.S.-Africa Summit and the Russia-Africa Summit, and are eager for both countries to increase their commitment. In mid-December 2022, the AU and 49 African countries sent delegations to the second U.S.-Africa Summit, and received a commitment from the U.S. government that it would provide Africa with \$55 billion over the next three years. At the end of July 2023, delegations from 49 African countries, including 17 African heads of state, attended the second Russia-Africa Summit. They made urgent demands to Russia for food security, defense and security. Besides, they reaffirmed fairness of the multilateral forums, as well as ways to interface with AU Agenda 2063 and measures to realize the action plans.

CAUSES FOR THE NEW SITUATION OF AFRICA'S AUTONOMOUS DEVELOPMENT

In recent years, a new situation of autonomous development has appeared in Africa on all fronts. This is not only inseparable from the African countries' unremitting pursuit of their long-cherished aspirations for independence, unity and self-reliance, but also supported by the endogenous impetus brought about by the stable development of the political and economic system. Moreover, it reflects the ambitions and aspirations of African countries to cope with the accelerated evolution of the interna-



(Photo/Xinhua)

This is the Port of Tema, Ghana's largest port, taken on February 14, 2022.

tional landscape.

First, the concepts of Ubuntu Philosophy and Pan-Africanism have laid the spiritual foundation for Africa to unite and strengthen itself to face global challenges. Second, sustainable and stable economic development has provided African countries with more opportunities and resources for autonomous development. Third, as the world returns to the era of power competition, major countries attach more and more importance to Africa and continuously increase their investment, which provides Africa with more opportunities to realize its own aspirations and raise its status in the international arena. At the same time, Africa needs to balance its relations with the major powers through independent development in order to maximize its interests. Fourth, against the backdrop of increasing global challenges, Africa's deep governance predicament and the uncertainty of international anti-terrorism cooperation with Africa, there is an urgent need for Africa to join forces to deal with transnational issues and further safeguard Africa's common interests.

PROSPECTS FOR AFRICA'S AUTONOMOUS DEVELOPMENT

Autonomous development and self-reliance are not only the dream of the African people, but also the trend of the accelerated evolution of the international landscape. While the world is experiencing unprecedented

changes over the past century, Africa's autonomous development enjoys a series of favorable conditions. This will enable it to play a more important role internationally. First, Africa's autonomous development has its unique advantages in resources. Africa is rich in natural resources, including oil and key minerals. At present, resource-abundant African countries are adjusting their energy and mineral policies so that their resources can be properly exploited and utilized. This can help them secure more source of income for their autonomous development. Second, African countries are vigorously promoting economic integration led by the Free Trade Area. The gradual expansion of intra-African trade and mutual investment will effectively stimulate market potential, increase employment opportunities, improve education and release the demographic dividend, thus rapidly increasing Africa's development capacity, innovation and competitiveness. Third, Africa as a big vote bank weighs on the strategic balance of the major countries competition. Africa is an ideal partner which major countries compete to cooperate with and a rising political force. African countries are trying to shape a new paradigm of cooperation with their extraterritorial partners, so there is considerable probability for Africa's strategic autonomy to be enhanced. In dealing with the summits with major countries, African leaders have reached a consensus that the AU should collectively decide on the list of countries to participate in different summits, so as to make Africa a unified participant, in order to shift its regional diplomacy from one extraterritorial power plus African countries to African countries decided by the AU plus one extraterritorial power. The major countries will inevitably adjust their mode of cooperation with Africa accordingly.

Although Africa's autonomous development has favorable conditions, protectionist, unilateralist actions, bloc politics and camp rivalry incited by some major countries have added harshness and complexation to the external environment for Africa's autonomous development. Taking in consideration Africa's inherent and chronic problems, the enhancement of Africa's strategic autonomy faces multiple obstacles.

First, poverty and economic dependence constrain the enhancement of capacity for independence. Africa is weak in capital and debt-ridden. According to the African Development Bank, Africa's annual infrastructure financing gap is 68 billion to 108 billion U.S. dollars. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly widened the financing

gap. It is expected that for the next three years, Africa will need about \$484 billion to revive its economy. In 2022, among the 38 African countries that have conducted debt sustainability analysis, 8 of them are already in debt crisis, 14 are at high risk, and 16 are at medium risk. The Ukraine crisis has pushed up Africa's debt risk. A large number of African countries have to consume their limited funds paying debts and interest, which will inevitably aggravate the dilemma of AU member states' inability to pay the relevant fees to the organization as well as the lack of funds for various AU programs. The discrepancy between the willingness and the ability to solve Africa's problems by Africa will continue to exist for a long time.

Second, the regional and national diversification of development in Africa has made the AU unstable in terms of its cohesion. The 54 countries in Africa have various national conditions, vastly different national strengths and diversified diplomatic priorities. They hold different positions on the authority and role of the AU and African subregional organizations. On issues such as the resurgence of military coups in francophone Africa, there is a wide gap between the AU and African subregional organizations in willingness and effectiveness. For example, in response to the military coup in Niger in July 2023, the AU and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) condemned it and called for the restoration of constitutional order as soon as possible. The ECOWAS, with Nigeria as its core, wanted to intervene militarily. However, Burkina Faso and Mali, where military coups took place before, sided with the soldiers of the coup d'état in Niger and openly stated that any military intervention in Niger would be tantamount to declaration of war against the two countries. The authority and appeal of the ECOWAS has been challenged.

Third, it is difficult for Africa's autonomous development to get rid of the interference and destruction of the United States and the West. Although the U.S. and the West have strengthened cooperation with Africa in order to suppress China and Russia, and have made efforts to cater to Africa, they have never treated Africa as a real equal. Their hegemonic mentality and behavior of interfering in Africa's internal affairs are hard to change. Take the Ethiopian civil war that broke out in 2021 as an example, while the AU was playing a great role in mediating and contributed to the peace agreement between the two warring parties in Ethiopia, the United States also exerted its influence secretly. The U.S. has both ex-

erted pressure on the Ethiopian government through its special envoy for the Horn of Africa region by means of suspension of loans, aid and embargoes, and implanted into the peace agreement between the government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front contents on humanitarian assistance, post-war transition and accountability for war crimes in the Ethiopian Peace and Stability Act (EPSA) passed by the two chambers of the U.S. Congress. This has not only undermined the leading role of the AU for solving African problems with African approach, but also led to occasional tensions in northern Ethiopia. In addition, the United States and the West have ignored the serious impact of the protracted crisis in Ukraine on African countries, and have openly pressured all African countries to prevent their leaders or representatives from attending the second Russia-Africa Summit, thus revealing the true face of the United States and the West, which will not hesitate to drag Africa down for the sake of its own interests. In the future, in the absence of fundamental improvement in Africa's economic diversification and diplomatic dependence, the egoistic intervention by the U.S. and the West will also have a destructive impact on Africa's autonomous development process.

CONCLUSION

Africa is a resource-abundant continent with a concentration of developing countries. In August 2023, President

Xi Jinping pointed out in his keynote address at the China-Africa Leaders' Dialogue that "with steady progress under Agenda 2063, the official launch of the African Continental Free Trade Area, and growing coordination among the subregional groups, Africa is becoming an important pole with global influence". China has always been a staunch companion and supporter of Africa on its path to independent development. Adhering to the concept of "sincerity, real results, amity and good faith" in its policy towards Africa, China has aligned the Belt and Road Initiative with the AU Agenda 2063 by contributing to infrastructure construction in Africa, helping Africa upgrade its industrialization level, and supporting African countries to have a greater say and representation in global governance. At the China-Africa Leaders' Dialogue, President Xi Jinping made three proposals to help Africa bring its integration and modernization into a fast track. They are "the Initiative on Supporting Africa's Industrialization", "the Plan for China Supporting Africa's Agricultural Modernization" and "the Plan for China-Africa Cooperation on Talent Development". China-Africa cooperation has finally become the important driving force for Africa's autonomous development. Africa's autonomous development is not only conducive to enhancing the influence of Africa and developing countries in the international arena, but will also inject new momentum into the building of a community with a shared future for China and Africa. 🇨🇳



On June 29, 2023, the third China-Africa Economic and Trade Expo opened in Changsha, China.