

CONCLUSION

Setting the Agenda for New Franco–Africa Relations in the Twenty-first Century

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There is no gainsaying that the French political elites, across the political divide, are in favour of a new form of relationship between France and all its former colonies on the African continent. This view is anchored in the assumption that Francophone Africa is on the verge of complete ‘Somalisation’¹ if proper measures are not put in place to prevent the collapse of state structures in these countries. Events in Mali, Chad, the CAR, Cameroon, the DRC, Burundi and, more importantly, in Côte d’Ivoire point in this disturbing direction. The reduction of Francophone Africa to a heap of failed states does not augur well for France, which has over the years committed itself to aiding Francophone Africa in the pursuit of the triple goals of promoting *la francophonie*, economic development and democratisation.² These goals were questioned soon after the Rwandan genocide, in response to indications that France had contributed to arming and attempting to prop up the regime of Juvénal Habyarimana. Though several arms shipments to Rwanda from France before the 1994 genocide were recorded, France has vehemently denied any involvement in facilitating the genocide. However, France–Africa relations seem to take a new direction soon after the La Baule 1990 France–Africa summit.

During the 1990 summit the former French President, Francois Mitterrand, indicated that France intended, in the future, to reward those regimes on the continent that undertook political reform.³ This signalled a significant break with past French practice on the continent, when it had tactfully supported dictatorial regimes in countries such as Gabon, Cameroon, Chad and the CAR. This apparent show of concern about the plight of Africans by Francois Mitterrand, or lack thereof, signals a gradual creeping Afro-pessimism among French political elites. This gradual shift in French policy on Africa occurred at a time when Africa represented a low proportion of France’s international trade, and there was growing concern among French political elites around the articulation of the country’s policy on the continent, following the democratic winds of change that swept across the continent at the time. In contrast, Jacques Chirac’s (French President 1995–2007) Africa policy was criticised in France, in Africa and in many EU member states. It has been argued that French policy on Africa at that time was strongly aligned with the interests of powerful lobbies and that France’s political influence on its former colonies was disproportionately influential and considered too militarised and politically retrograde.⁴ Under Jacques Chirac, *Françafrique* was realigned to accommodate the interests of leading French companies such as Accor, Air France Bolloré, Bouygues and Total.⁵ Such an approach in France’s Africa policy indicated that little had changed since the glory days of Charles de Gaulle.

Despite the above, a fundamental shift in French–Africa policy was experienced under the tutelage of Sarkozy and more recently under that of Hollande. Sarkozy had in the main promised a break on every possible African policy issue and he made it clear that the old corrupt ties with former African colonies had to be dropped.⁶ Though heavily criticised by some proponents of the *Françafrique* concept, Sarkozy called for and encouraged a healthier relationship with Africa, based on a partnership between equal nations. In reality, however, Sarkozy’s rhetoric had little impact in countries where such policy options matter most. His attitudes to Ali Bongo and Denis Sassou-Nguesso and the conduct of the French military in Côte d’Ivoire, Mali and the CAR point to the fact that there is a high degree of continuity, with little change, in Franco–African relations. Sarkozy’s visit to Libya and the announcement of secret arms deals negotiations with Muammar Ghaddafi and his cosy relations with Ali Bongo of Gabon and Idriss Derby of Chad reminded sceptics of the bad old days.⁷ For many, Sarkozy’s rhetoric smacked of bravado, as he failed to announce corruption and abuses committed by some of the African leaders close to him.

ITUATING CURRENT FRANCE–AFRICA POLICY IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

French interest in Africa grew proportionally with the French commercial empire. By 1848 slavery had been abolished, and all men, without distinction of colour, domiciled in French colonies, were declared French citizens and enjoyed all the rights assured by the French Revolution and the subsequent French Constitution. The principle of liberty, equality and fraternity that was the cornerstone of the successful French Revolution of 1789 was practised, though with very limited success. It should, however, be noted that the principle of liberty, equality and fraternity became an important guiding policy orientation of colonial French–Africa policy.

Despite the major humane policy orientation inherited from the French Revolution, France’s policy on the African continent was anchored in two principal theoretical precepts, assimilation and association. The assimilation policy was an assimilative drive aimed at ‘converting’ the colonised into French. The justification for this policy direction was the assumption that African cultures and civilisations were primitive and could not operate within the wider scope of French presence on the continent. The idea was therefore to destroy African cultures and civilisation and replace them with French culture. In essence, the assimilative policy aimed to assert the superiority of European culture over ‘primitive’ African cultural values.

Crowder⁸ argued that the French revolutionary doctrine of the equality of man and the superiority of European culture, particularly French culture and civilisation, informed this assimilative policy on the continent. The ideological underpinning of the assimilation policy, unlike the British indirect rule system, centred on teaching colonial subjects that, by adopting the French language and culture, they could eventually become French citizens. As Belmessous⁹ argued, the aim of the policy, particularly in French West Africa, was to mix colonial and native peoples in order to strengthen the political grip of the metropole on colonial subjects. She further argued that the assimilation policy was based on a paternalistic vision of cultural differences translated to mean Africans were ‘backward’ and socially, economically and culturally inferior to the French. It was therefore

necessary, according to the French, to educate and bring 'these savage Africans to civility'. The primary exponents of this form of penetration of Western ideals into the traditional African cultural fold were the missionaries and the civil colonial administrators.

Assimilation was built on the premise that there were no racial or cultural differences that education could not eliminate. Education of the African population became the quintessential factor in the success of French administration in colonial Africa. The fundamental aim of French colonial policy was not generally formulated because they accepted African cultural values, but rather because they regarded Africans as 'a people without history, without any civilization worthy of the name, constantly at war with one another and fortunate to have been put in touch with the fruits of French civilization'.¹⁰ Men of letters, particularly in Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire, were accorded French citizenship and enjoyed all the rights and privileges that came with it. French involvement in Africa was therefore not generally considered an expansion of the French empire, but rather a moral obligation towards another human race, the African race. That explains why the French scramble for Africa was regarded as a civilising mission (*l'oeuvre civilisatrice*) rather than empire building.¹¹

French colonial administrators experienced difficulties in the application of the assimilative policy. It has been argued that Africans were generally not ready to abandon their culture to pursue the French civilising bandwagon. They proposed a policy of association with the African population. Exponents of the policy argued that Africans were culturally separate from the French and that it was therefore impossible to assimilate them into French culture. Association therefore implied the acceptance of African culture as a tool for the administration of the colonies. The line between the French policy of association and Lugard's¹² indirect rule became increasingly blurred in the final years of colonial rule. There were therefore no empirical differences between association and indirect rule. In the midst of all this, pragmatism became an important policy application formula. Despite all the difficulties associated with association, it became the dominant French colonial policy from 1910 to 1945.

Undoubtedly, the association policy also failed to achieve the desired results of providing metropolitan France with the necessary economic resources for the sustenance of France and its overseas territories. Because of the difficulties experienced in formulating an ideal African policy, Lord Hailey argued that 'the underlying assumption remained that, on a long view, the future of the overseas territories must be one of eventual integration with France in a larger political unit'.¹³ The integration of African people and their economies into the larger French society became another schematic and theoretical undertaking that characterised French policy on Africa prior to 1960. Thus, it could largely be assumed that France did not have an ideal African policy prior to 1960. Its policy formulation and application were characterised by inconsistencies and pragmatism, unlike the indirect-rule colonial system designed and implemented by the British, much to the admiration of their peers in India and Nigeria.

However, it is important to note that France emerged from the World War II in 1945 economically weakened and with its international standing and image battered as a result of its collaboration with Nazi Germany. The war also saw France dispossessed of its imperial status. General de Gaulle's main task after the war was to repair and restore France's grandeur by forging a special relationship with its African possessions. This French policy

in Africa has been derogatively called *Françafrique*. Jacques Foccart,¹⁴ the greatest proponent of *Françafrique*, reasoned that France's super power status lay in the maintenance of an inherently neo-colonial policy towards Africa, which owns raw materials important for the survival of French industries. *Françafrique* was patriarchal, defensive of French interests and caricatured as presidents and aimed at preserving the French *pré carré* (backyard) on the continent. Neo-imperialism became an important area of manifestation of this policy and, in many ways, an extension of French colonial rule on the continent.

MITIGATING FACTORS FOR A NEW FRANCE–AFRICA POLICY

French involvement on the continent has largely been limited to its former colonial possessions. Little effort has been made to venture, economically at least, into countries that lie well outside the French–African *pré carré* (backyard or area of influence), save for Nigeria and South Africa. Thus, French involvement on the continent is informed by centuries-old interests, which France has refused to relinquish despite pressure from certain former French colonies on the continent. The recent stance adopted by Alpha Condé, the former African Union (AU) Commission Chairperson and the President of Guinea, Conakry, regarding the possible role France should play on the continent is telling. Insisting that France should abandon its parochial and perhaps paternalistic *Françafrique* policy towards Africa, President Condé notes that times and circumstances have changed, and thus France should look at possible ways of reshaping its African policy. The new look *Françafrique* policy should be a win-win, a practical approach aimed at alleviating the plight of Africans on the continent.

However, it should be noted that the *Françafrique* policy, which was initiated by General Charles de Gaulle and perfected by Michel Foucart, has for the most part played a determinant role in France's foreign policy and by extension its African policy. The involvement of France on the continent has made many on the continent look up to France for its African policy formulation rather than to the AU, where important decisions on the future of the continent are debated.

In the political realm, the residues of French colonial policies of assimilation, association and integration still linger along the political corridors of former French colonies on the continent. The fact that almost all political parties in former French colonies on the continent look to France for approval of their political manifestos points to this fact. The policy of *Françafrique* suggests that France will provide political mentorship to French-African political elites. This has been the norm in many Francophone African countries since independence.

This notwithstanding, the political, security and economic conditions that necessitated the adoption of the *Françafrique* policy have changed drastically. New and emerging trends in international politics have greatly diminished the power of the Western bloc in international politics. China is playing an important role in the way in which development on the continent is now defined.

The Economic and Monetary Union of West African States (UEMOA) and Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa (CEMAC) in the central African sub-region have been the driving forces of French economic and monetary policy in Africa. The

UEMOA and CEMAC are French colonial creations, which have survived the decolonisation period. Through this important economic and monetary instrument, France formulates and implements all economic and monetary policies in former French colonies on the continent. These parallel structures have made the envisaged African central bank initiative obsolete in the eyes of West African political elites. In the education and cultural domain, the French system of education still dominates the education system on the continent more than 57 years after independence. An African education system that would respond to the continent's internal home-grown societal needs is yet to be developed.

Overall, the former French colonies on the continent are more attached to France, economically and politically, than to other African countries. For Africa to succeed in its drive for a united Africa and for the aspirations of the AU's Agenda 2063 to be realised, a thorough and critical perspective on African countries' relations with France needs to be addressed. As such, any relationship with France should be based on mutual benefit to the citizens of France and former French colonies on the continent. It is of the essence therefore that a concerted effort should be made to make the unity of the continent attractive to its inhabitants. Africa is yet to benefit from the economies of scale arising from breaking down political boundaries, and the principal architects of obstructing such a move are the Western countries. Until such time as the West views, and trades with, the continent as a partner, the vestiges of division will continue to plague the continent, and African economists will continue to burn the midnight oil in developing concepts to take the continent out of its present *déjà vu* and predicament.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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- 8 Crowder, M., 1962. *Senegal: A study in French Assimilation Policy*. Oxford University Press, London, p.24.
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- 4 He was the Chief of Staff for African and Madagascan Affairs under the presidencies of Charles de Gaulle and Georges Pompidou.