

US, China tussle over Africa: governments warned to exercise caution

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As African governments spread their wings to embrace China's no-strings-attached ideological and economic involvement in Africa at the expense of the US, experts urge the continent to guard against a 'simplistic shift' in allegiance from west to east, according to a Standard Bank Economic Strategy report released on Monday, 14 March 2011.

The report, titled "China and US in Africa - Measuring Washington's response to Beijing's commercial advance" and researched by Standard Bank economists Simon Freemantle and Jeremy Stevens, insists that a multipolar globe lies on a more mature and inclusive approach to the world's new reality.

Seperate benefits

"African states must remain acutely aware of the separate benefits to be gained from seeking deeper alliances with the US - still by some margin the globe's largest economy," the report says.

"Africa must channel poles of influence into regional economic objectives, in light of domestic priorities. At times, niche areas of synergy will be national, such as green technology and mineral beneficiation and others, like infrastructure, may reside in the transnational sphere."

Repressive China, the world's second-biggest economy but ranked 97th in the world for GDP per capita, seemed to have systematically run over the African continent, distributing its 'immoral' dollars and ideology and feeding its cheap exports to miserable and hungry Africa, while recklessly sucking its mineral resources.

But the report cautions: "Regardless of the symbolic influence of ascendancy, the important question is not so much whether China will retain its position as Africa's largest trade partner, or conversely if the US will return to the top.

"Rather, what is more significant is the nature of the products that are traded and how they are supporting Africa's broader economic objectives. For a start, analysis purely of the weight of trade belies the complexities which underlie the structural nature of bilateral engagements."

China's engagement with Afica - reshaping global economy

While the reality is that China's soaring engagement with Africa is reshaping the global economy, it has unfortunately in some instances become an automatic weapon for governments that oppose the US's big brother attitude, which include its

tough stance on human rights and good governance.

"It is no secret that some activities in Africa have prompted concern and even hostility, particularly the long-standing support of leaders in countries such as Zimbabwe and Sudan, as well as questions about worker safety, community engagement and environmental degradation," the McKinsey on Africa's June 2010 report points out.

As naive and overexcited African leaders say imperialist US can go to hell and hail China as a new and 'understanding' partner, the Standard Bank report argues that there are merits in engaging with both countries.

The report, which underlines that oil underpins much of the US and China's Africa pursuits, says: "Africa should rather capitalise on the frictions between the two countries, and must ensure reciprocity. The relative (and varied) merits of engaging with both must be measured and capitalised on."

See China as supplement to US

Freemantle and Stevens urge African governments to see China's rise in Africa as supplementing, rather than replacing the role of the continent's traditional trading partners, such as the US.

"An analysis of the importance of China and the US to Africa should not simultaneously overestimate the importance of Africa to these two globally dominant economies.

"It is no coincidence that aid flows tend to increase in tandem with a rise in bilateral commercial activity. To be sure, aid, particularly in Africa, acts as an important beachhead for wider engagement."

The report, which reminds the continent that historically its most profound aid and development partners have originated in the advanced world, urges African states to engineer a new foreign policy based on this understanding, balancing rather than selecting between the US and China.

Guard against outdated models

"Most importantly, African nations must guard against outdated models of engagement that place ideology ahead of commerce.

"African countries still stand to benefit from strengthening their longstanding relationship with the US, still the world's most powerful economy. The US is still a major importer of African goods and private development assistance to African states.

"For Africa, there are clear advantages in maintaining intimate ties with the US. Small successes in AGOA (the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act) show that African nations can secure access to US consumers."

ABOUT ISSA SIKITI DA SILVA

Issa Sikiti da Silva is a winner of the 2010 SADC Media Awards (print category). He freelances for various media outlets, local and foreign, and has travelled extensively across Africa. His work has been published both in French and English. He used to contribute to Bizcommunity.com as a senior news writer.

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