

Beyond the Indo-Pacific: resetting our engagement with the countries of Africa

Lisa Sharland

The Australian and African continents border the Indian Ocean. Australia is a member of the Indian Ocean Rim Association along with several African countries, including Kenya, South Africa, Mauritius and Tanzania. Yet, the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper excludes the African continent from its definition of the 'Indo-Pacific', which starts at the 'Eastern Indian Ocean'. In fairness, the line had to be drawn somewhere. Australia's resources aren't infinite and we have to prioritise. But that doesn't mean we should ignore the diverse interests that we have on the African continent, particularly when they're directly engaged.

The challenge

'Africa literacy' within the Australian Government remains low. This was one of the findings of last year's Senate inquiry into Australia's trade and investment relationships with the countries of Africa.¹ Unfortunately, media coverage and fearmongering about crime and the African-Australian community in Melbourne over this past year have reflected the worst in Australia's understanding of the continent, the South Sudanese community, and the experiences of those who have emigrated to our shores.

Africa is a continent of opportunities in terms of both people and resources. The continent's population of 1.2 billion people is expected to double by 2050, and it's expected that the continent will have the largest number of young people. Reconciliation between Ethiopia and Eritrea after more than two decades of border disputes, and the drawdown of UN peacekeeping missions from the Mano River Basin after 25 years, are promising developments. Yet the challenges across parts of the continent remain immense, with civil wars, humanitarian crises, insecurity, a lack of effective governance and extreme poverty still prevalent.² It's therefore critical that African countries and their partners and investors engage in providing education and employment opportunities and supporting sustainable development in order to avoid youth falling into the cycle of poverty, instability and conflict.

Agriculture, infrastructure, extractives and security are among the sectors offering opportunities on the continent—and many countries are seizing them. Russia, China, India and the Gulf states are among countries that are vying for influence.³ Russia has increased its trade with sub-Saharan Africa and is finalising military cooperation and mineral deals with various countries.⁴ China is engaged through its military base in Djibouti, UN peacekeeping deployments across the continent, and loans and infrastructure as part of its Belt and Road Initiative. US National Security Advisor John Bolton has characterised China as an opportunistic and mercenary competitor in Trump's US Africa strategy,⁵ yet offered much less by way of US leadership in working with countries on the continent.

At the same time, terrorist activity has started to shift away from the Middle East and into Africa's Sahel and Maghreb regions.⁶ Threats against Western targets remain an ongoing concern. Last month alone, more than 20 people were killed and many more injured during an attack by al-Shabaab on the Dusit Hotel complex in Nairobi—a hotel several hundred metres from the Australian High Commission and regularly frequented by Westerners. For the more cynical and the sceptics about Australia's engagement in Africa, this is one area where our interests directly converge. More than 170 ASX-listed companies are operating across the continent. Many of them are operating in West Africa and the Horn of Africa, where Al-Qaeda in

the Islamic Maghreb, Boko Haram and al-Shabaab remain active. Mining companies and their personnel continue to come under attack. Most recently, a Canadian miner was kidnapped and murdered in Burkina Faso.⁷

The challenge for the incoming government is this: how should Australia invest in diplomatic and security cooperation with African countries, given the escalating security concerns in our immediate region (defined as

the Indo-Pacific)?

Quick wins

To begin with, Australia needs to demonstrate that it's listening and willing to engage, even if the resources available to do so are limited. Government ministers and parliamentarians should seek to visit Africa when the opportunity arises (and host their counterparts in Australia). Visits to the continent by our ministers have dropped off considerably since we concluded our election to the UN Security Council in 2012. African Union summits provide a valuable opportunity to step up this engagement again. Similarly, the government should support a trade and investment delegation visit to the continent in order to expose Australian business to the opportunities available there.⁸ Such visits would contribute to Africa literacy across government and demonstrate our willingness to engage.

Given the limited resources available, we should also seek to leverage off our roaming ambassadors—including those on women and girls, counterterrorism, and cyber affairs—to engage with the continent. Many countries in Africa are keen to learn from Australia's approach to counterterrorism, and there's capacity to do more in this space with Kenya, Nigeria and other West African countries, in cooperation with partners such as the UK and France. It's also to Australia's benefit to assist in shaping the development of cyber resilience on the continent, given the operation of Australian companies.⁹ As the hacking of the African Union headquarters has shown, vulnerabilities can be exploited, putting at risk not only African countries but also regional and global interests.¹⁰

The hard yards

Attacks against the extractive sector and Western interests are a cause of significant concern, presenting a risk to Australian nationals, businesses and foreign investment on the continent. As a starting point, the government could engage with the mining sector to collect more data on companies operating in Africa (a recommendation from the Senate inquiry).¹¹ Similarly, ASPI research has shown that the private sector—particularly the mining sector—can engage more substantively in preventing and countering violent extremism.¹² As the latest Global Terrorism Index notes, domestic interests extend beyond national borders; countering terrorism in Africa is also in Australia's national security interests.¹³

The government could lead the way, working with the Australian mining sector to strengthen its engagement in this area.

Australia's cuts to its aid program over the last five years have been significant. Despite humanitarian need in parts of the continent, our share of overseas development aid to sub-Saharan Africa has continued to decline and is currently hovering around 3% of our total overseas aid.¹⁴ And while engaging in trade and supporting the private sector are important, more aid funding will expand the limited toolbox of resources available to our diplomatic posts overseas, supporting communities, investing in development, and contributing to security while leveraging our soft-power influence.

Breaking the rules

Australia's diplomatic footprint on the continent remains comparatively small, with only nine diplomatic missions. One of the recommendations made by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade during the Senate inquiry into Australia's trade and investment in Africa related to the use of more novel and innovative diplomatic engagement, such as pop-up posts open only for short periods. This should be considered by the next government. It would allow us to leverage our limited diplomatic resources in a creative way, but also demonstrate to certain countries in Africa that we're interested in engaging more substantively. Co-locating with countries such as the UK and Canada, which have a more substantial presence on the continent, would be another option to explore.

Africa is in the orbit of the Indo-Pacific. Australians and Australian interests are affected by developments on the continent—and our interests are likely to expand in the decades ahead. There are good reasons for the next

government to reset our engagement.

Notes

- 1 Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade (SSCFADT), *Australia's trade and investment relationships with the countries of Africa*, Australian Parliament, 21 June 2018, [online](#).
- 2 Mariana Sow, 'Figures of the week: Africa's growing youth population and human capital investments', *Brookings*, 20 September 2018, [online](#).
- 3 Alex Vines, 'Global engagement with Africa continued to surge in 2018', *Chatham House*, 8 January 2019, [online](#).
- 4 Aaron Ross, 'How Russia moved into Central Asia', *Reuters*, 17 October 2018, [online](#).
- 5 Mark Landler, Edward Wong, 'Bolton outlines a strategy for Africa that's really about countering China', *New York Times*, 13 December 2018, [online](#).
- 6 *Global Terrorism Index 2018: measuring the impact of terrorism*, Institute for Economics and Peace, Sydney, November 2018, 52, [online](#).
- 7 Janice Dickson, 'Security expert warns Canadian man's death is "shot fired" to mining companies in West Africa', *Globe and Mail*, 17 January 2019, [online](#).
- 8 See, for example, Advisory Group on Australia-Africa Relations (AGAAR), *A strategy for Australia's engagement with Africa*, Australian Government, 14 July 2017, [online](#).
- 9 AGAAR, *A strategy for Australia's engagement with Africa*.
- 10 Danielle Cave, 'The African Union hack and Australia's 5G network', *The Strategist*, 13 July 2018, [online](#).
- 11 SSCFADT, *Australia's trade and investment relationships with the countries of Africa*.
- 12 Lisa Sharland, Tim Grice, Sara Zeiger, *Preventing and countering violent extremism in Africa: the role of the mining sector*, ASPI, 23 November 2017, [online](#).
- 13 See Khalid Koser, Lilla Schumicky-Logan, 'Preventing violent extremism: global investments for national security', in *Global Terrorism Index 2018: measuring the impact of terrorism*.
- 14 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 'Sub-Saharan Africa', fact sheet, Australian Government, October 2018, [online](#).