

The New Scramble for Africa

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HAKIM ADI, APR 15 2013

In 1884 *The Times* newspaper coined the phrase 'Scramble for Africa' to describe the contention between the major European powers for a share of what the Belgian king Leopold contemptuously referred to as 'this magnificent African cake.'^[1] Britain, France, Belgium, Germany and the other big powers each attempted to carve out their share of the African continent during the infamous Berlin Conference, held over several months in the winter of 1884-1885. They then proceeded to invade and occupy their designated colonies in the period leading up to World War I, without any concern for the fate of the inhabitants of the African continent. That was the era of the so-called 'civilising mission' and 'White man's burden,' that provided openly racist justifications for the conquest and partition of almost the entire African continent. It was undoubtedly one of the great crimes against humanity leading to literally millions of deaths of African men, women and children even in a singly colony, such as King Leopold's ironically named Congo Free State.^[2]

The crimes of colonial conquest and rule, which also created the arbitrary division and externally imposed boundaries that still plague Africa, were perpetrated many years ago. Today, however, commentators speak of a new 'scramble' for Africa when referring to the intense rivalry between today's big powers, such as the US, China, Britain and France, that has already led to military intervention in several African countries, most recently Mali and Libya, the establishment of the US African Command (AFRICOM) with a pan-African remit, in addition to economic and other forms of intervention and external interference throughout the African continent.^[3] Recent events in the Central African Republic, where a coup has taken place that appear to favour the leading members of NATO at the expense of the members of the BRICS grouping, have also been explained in terms of a new 'scramble'.^[4]

The contention between the world's major economic and military powers has been a constant feature of the African continent's recent history. It was certainly a feature of the 1930s, when the fascist powers, Germany and Italy, as well as Japan demanded a 'place in the sun,' a re-partition of Africa in their favour and Italy, with the connivance of Britain and France, invaded and occupied Ethiopia. Competition and contention also existed during the 'Cold War', the period of the bi-polar division of the world between the US and Soviet Union and their respective allies. In this period the big powers sought to subvert the efforts of African countries to rid themselves of the shackles of colonial rule and to establish proxies and clients, new neo-colonial states that provided economic and geo-political advantage throughout the continent. The activities of the Soviet Union in Ethiopia for example and the NATO powers in Angola and South Africa are obvious examples.

The new 'scramble' might be said to have commenced with the contention for the resources of the Democratic Republic of the Congo during the late 1990s. Competition for the uranium, coltan, cobalt and other minerals in the DRC led to a major war involving seven African nations in 1996, and consequently to millions of deaths (estimates vary between 3-10m people). However, as a UN report of 2002 concluded, behind the warring African governments were the big monopolies of the major powers, multinationals such as De Beers, Anglo-American, BAE Systems, Euromet, Oryx and many others.^[5]

The new 'scramble' is also a consequence of the fact that Africa stands poised to break free from the economic dependency that has been one of the most enduring and damaging legacies of colonial rule and its aftermath. In the past decade six of the world's ten fastest growing economies were in Africa. In eight of the last ten years Africa's economic growth has been faster than that of East Asia. Africa's population is growing too and expected to provide

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half of the world's increase in population in the next forty years. It is also expected that Africa will soon have over 100m people with an income of over \$3000 per annum (almost the same as India). As a consequence the World Bank has reported that the continent could be on the brink of the same kind of economic take-off as experienced by China and India in the past, even though it is still heavily reliant on external investment. Africa is becoming increasingly important not only as a supplier of raw materials but also as a location for capital investment (this has increased by 500% over the last ten years), and as a market for goods.[6] The continent is particularly important for its oil and gas supplies in established areas such as Libya, Nigeria, Guinea, Angola, and Algeria but also in new areas such as, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Somalia. The US gets 15% of its oil from Africa, more than from the Middle East, and this is set to rise to around 25%. However, the US and its allies often find themselves in competition with the other big powers. China, for example, now obtains a third of its imported oil from Africa. The major buyers of Sudan's oil are China, Japan, India and Malaysia and China has also become a major purchaser of Nigeria's oil.[7]

At the same time as the increasing contention for economic advantage in the continent, the people of Africa are demanding an end to the consequences of neo-liberal globalisation and unpopular governments that are little more than the proxies of external powers. It cannot be forgotten that the so-called 'Arab Spring' actually began in Africa and that the struggles of the people of Egypt and Tunisia for empowerment and people-centred economies continue. The possibility of revolutionary change as well as economic growth has only intensified the contention between the big powers in Africa and their attempts to maintain their domination over the continent. The old imperialist powers have been joined by Brazil, Russia, India, China, and others, all contending for Africa's mineral resources and growing markets, as well as for strategic advantage in the continent. The BRICS countries used to account for 1% of Africa's trade but now account for 20% and by 2030 possibly 50%.[8] The biggest impact has come from China which is now the major economic power in Africa, has provided interest free loans, buys increasing amounts of Africa's other minerals as well as oil, has tens of thousands of workers in Africa, in addition to many manufacturing and construction companies. Contention between the NATO powers and China is occurring throughout the continent and was evident in Libya, throughout the Sahel region and in other countries such as the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Unable to compete economically, the western countries led by the US have sought other means to preserve their influence. The US established its AFRICOM in 2007 allegedly as part of the 'war against terror' and to safeguard US national interests but with the aim of countering the influence of China and other economic rivals in Africa. AFRICOM with the support of Britain, France and other NATO allies used military might to intervene in Libya, not in the interests of the people of that country, since it was the most economically developed in Africa with its own unique political system, but in order to establish in their own interests the stated policy of 'regime change,' something which is entirely contrary to international law and the Charter of the United Nations. Libya was one of the few African countries not allied to NATO, nor to AFRICOM, and played a vital economic and political role in the African Union. The destruction of the 'Great Jamahiriya' has consequently had a major negative impact not just in North Africa and the Sahel region but also throughout the continent.

AFRICOM, which has established connections and joint training exercises with the military in most African countries, appears to have been modelled on earlier US military initiatives in Africa such as the Pan-Sahel Initiative, and Trans-Saharan Counter-Terrorism Project, that both centred on Mali. It is an extraordinary coincidence that it was precisely in a region identified as important for strategic and economic reasons and targeted by the Pentagon for 'counter-terrorism' for nearly a decade, that 'terrorists' then appeared in the wake of military intervention in Libya, necessitating further military intervention in Mali by France, Britain and other allies of the US in 2013.[9]

It is to be noted that just as during the 'scramble' for Africa in the nineteenth century all kinds of justifications are now advanced for continued external interference: 'humanitarian intervention,' the need to control 'ungoverned spaces' and 'fragile states,' as well as the 'right to protect' civilians. But perhaps these pretexts should be regarded in the same way that we now regard the 'civilising mission' and 'white man's burden'.

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written widely on the history of Pan-Africanism and the African Diaspora, including three history books for children. He is currently working on a film documentary on the West African Students' Union. His forthcoming book Pan-Africanism and Communism: The Communist International, Africa and the Diaspora will be published by Africa World Press in early 2013.

[1] B. Davidson, *The Story of Africa* (Mitchell Beazley, 1984) p.173

[2] A. Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: a story of greed, terror and heroism in colonial Africa* (Pan Macmillan, 1998)

[3] P. Carmody, *The New Scramble for Africa* (Polity Press, 2012)

[4] <http://www.globalresearch.ca/who-is-behind-the-military-coup-in-bangui-central-african-republic-coup-leaders-scrap-chinese-oil-deals/5329311>

[5] See e.g. http://friendsofthecongo.org/pdf/third_panel_report_october2002.pdf

[6] <http://www.economist.com/node/21541015> and <http://www.economist.com/news/special-report/21572377-african-lives-have-already-greatly-improved-over-past-decade-says-oliver-august>

[7] <http://csis.org/story/africa-china-united-states-and-oil>

[8] http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/reports/2011/1/africa%20economy%20agi/01_africa_economy_agi_kimenyi_lewis.pdf

[9] <http://newint.org/features/2012/12/01/us-terrorism-sahara/>

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