

FINDING THE PHILIPPINES' PLACE IN THE NEW SCRAMBLE FOR AFRICA*

by *Redmond Alejandro B. Lim*

Last August, the United States led by President Obama hosted an unprecedented three-day summit with heads of state from over 40 African states in Washington, D.C. While the European Union (EU), China, and Japan have regularly feted African leaders in the past, it is the first for the US, the world's most powerful nation, in a nod to Africa's growing political and economic influence.

An African century?

Indeed it is difficult not to feel optimistic about a resurgent Africa. Together with the Asia-Pacific, sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is one of the fastest-growing regions in the world today, both economically and demographically.

The regional economy was projected to grow by 5 percent in 2013 and 5.8 percent in 2014. Excluding South Africa, these figures increase to 6.1 percent and 6.8 percent, respectively. The poverty rate across the region also fell significantly in recent years as a result of the steady rise in wages; improvements in infrastructure, energy sector, and education; higher sums of foreign direct investment (FDI), especially from emerging markets; and the gradual recovery of the world economy after the 2008 financial crisis.

In turn, SSA's 2.7 percent annual population growth means that its 926 million people will grow to over two billion people by 2050. This, however, represents a double-edged sword for Africa policymakers seeking to harness the proliferation of young Africans into viable human resources and of an educated middle class while, simultaneously, addressing the problems of overcrowding. The potential for a vast tax base of young productive workers integrated into the formal economy hinges on the ability of African governments to sustain the growth of their respective economies and create jobs while expanding reproductive and maternal health care services.

SSA still faces many challenges such as ethnic violence and political conflict, repression and human rights abuses, corruption, and persistent extreme poverty affecting 400 million people. A third of Africans are malnourished, and 70 percent of HIV cases worldwide are from Africa. The recent Ebola outbreak and the difficulty West African governments experience in containing the disease also challenge the rose-tinted "Africa rising" narrative. Some of the strictest anti-gay laws in the world are enforced in 30 African countries. While the democratization process has sped up in some areas, many states in Africa still have the same, decades-old authoritarian regimes. According to a United Nations (UN) report, SSA nations will not be able to achieve most of their Millennium Development Goals (MDG) by 2015. In addition, the onset of another global recession could mitigate or even negate Africa's recent economic gains.

Philippine-African relations

Compared to its ASEAN counterparts, particularly Indonesia and Malaysia, the Philippines lags behind in terms of influence and exposure in African countries. Relations with several African countries peaked under both the Macapagal and Marcos administrations, but since the restoration of democracy in 1987, there has been no significant Philippine foreign policy vis-à-vis the continent, aside from the protection of OFWs mostly in North Africa. Currently, the country has only five permanent embassies in a continent of 54 states. A Commercial/Trade Office had been established in Johannesburg, South Africa but closed down in 2002; the commercial attaché in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) handles trade relations with the whole continent today.

The Philippines' historically low levels of African engagement can be examined from the lens of its three foreign policy pillars. First, the sheer geographic distance between Africa and the Philippines means that their strategic and core interests rarely intersect. The nine Philippine foreign policy realities, which recognize ASEAN, China, Japan, the United States, and the EU as key actors in the Asia-Pacific regions, underscore the lack of attention to other regions. On the economic front, poorly developed infrastructure and transportation links, as well as lack of economic contacts, suggest that the costs of economic relations outweigh the benefits. Finally, there are far fewer Filipinos living in SSA compared to other regions. According to 2007 estimates, there were only 4,500 and 2,200 Filipinos, respectively, living in Nigeria and South Africa, the two largest African economies.

Current moves: Considerations for the Philippines

To be sure, there have been efforts in the past to forge a coherent Africa policy. The problem was how to transform policy recommendations into reality. Today, there are again overtures by Philippine officials to consider and deepen relations with SSA states. In terms of strategic policy, the Philippines should increase its diplomatic contacts and engage Africa in regional and international fora. Investing in excellent diplomatic relations could provide more support from the African bloc for various Philippine positions and advocacies in the United Nations.

In terms of physical institutions, the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) needs to make administrative changes by reorganizing its Office for Middle Eastern and African Affairs (OMEAA) to reflect a renewed African policy. Some have also pushed for the establishment of more SSA embassies and trade attachés.

For people-to-people exchanges, Filipino workers are generally held in high regard and hold professional and technical positions. For example, many work in Nigeria as engineers and teachers in the oil and education sectors, while many Nigerians pursue higher studies in various Philippine universities.

At the same time, on-the-ground considerations suggest that the Philippine Government temper such enthusiasm with a pragmatic outlook. For example, the operational costs of establishing new posts in remote and often volatile parts of the world may often prevail over any economic gain for the country. The cost of living is high in SSA due to dilapidated infrastructure, questionable food sanitation, and physical security. In fact, the Philippines formerly had other foreign posts in the region such as those in Senegal and Angola. These have closed down due to tightening budget constraints, as well as health and physical risks faced by Philippine embassy staff serving in some of the most dangerous and volatile parts of the world. Instead of establishing multiple embassies, it might be more prudent to open a single embassy in Addis Ababa, the African Union's headquarters, and increase funding for the already existing embassies to act as hubs in their respective Regional Economic Community (REC) groupings.

While loosening visa restrictions to African countries could open new opportunities for greater people-to-people contacts and increased business engagements, there are also health and security risks. The spate of Ebola incidents and the numerous cases of Nigerian drug smugglers already operating in the country are two realities to consider by Philippine policymakers who wish to further such exchanges.

More comprehensive research needs to be done regarding sub-Saharan Africa and the region's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges in relation to Philippine interests. The international community is increasingly preparing for a new scramble for Africa. It may be time for the Philippines to follow suit.

*The Scramble for Africa was the term historians gave to the period of European colonization of Africa in the late 19th century. By 1914, most of the continent was under the rule of the various European powers of the day. Competition among these states, a patronizing sense of duty to "civilize" black Africans, and the search for new markets and raw materials were all factors in this New Imperialism. In focusing on the latter factor, the author's use of the historical term is meant to draw parallels by emphasizing not the brutal enslavement of the old Scramble, but the potential uplifting of millions of Africans through equitable economic and political engagement in the new one.

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