French Foreign Policy in East Africa: Not Without Challenges, but Promising Signs Exist

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Key Points

- One of the main components of France’s overall foreign policy is development assistance and sustainability is at the heart of that policy.

- French development assistance is guided by the desire to fight climate change and boost economic growth, while providing support for gender equality, human rights and peace.

- France is concerned about the increasing influence of China in the East African region. Its renewed interest there is partly due to a desire to offset China’s gains.

- While renewing ties with traditional colonial partners, France is also branching out by expanding relations with non-francophone countries.

Summary

In March 2019, President Emmanuel Macron visited Ethiopia, Kenya and Djibouti as part of a diplomatic outreach to the region, aimed at deepening economic and political ties. On the surface, the visit was important to the policy of enhancing the economic health of France and the East African countries, but there were also underlying motivations, such as wanting to counter China’s growing influence in the region. This analysis looks at the principal motivations behind France’s foreign policy objectives in the region, as well as incentives that lie beneath the surface.
Analysis

One of the main areas of French foreign policy is development assistance. This refers to public spending intended to aid developing countries, by promoting economic development and improving living conditions in the countries concerned. Primarily, sustainability is at the heart of France’s development policy and, in accord with this, the French Government has divided its assistance into four main components:

- Fighting climate change and protecting the environment;
- Human development and gender equality;
- Economic development for social progress;
- Boosting human rights, stability and peace.

Aside from Djibouti, relations between France and East African countries have traditionally been quite limited; but, more recently, Paris has displayed renewed and expanded interest in the region. This paper analyses the motivations behind French foreign policy on the East African region. The four main areas of French assistance have been used to guide the analysis of French relations with certain countries within the region. The United Nations Statistics Division lists twenty countries that are deemed to be part of East Africa.
This paper, however, focuses mainly on two prominent countries in the Horn of Africa (Djibouti and Ethiopia), and also looks at Kenya, not a traditional regional partner of France, but one of the most significant states in the region. By narrowing the scope to only those countries, a more focused view of French intentions in the region can be gained.

In March 2019, French President Emmanuel Macron visited Ethiopia, Kenya and Djibouti. The visit was aimed at deepening economic and political ties, boosting the opportunities for French businesses in the region and, perhaps most strategically, countering the growing presence of China. The visit especially focused on Kenya and Ethiopia, in the hope that developing warmer cultural and personal connections with them would lead to increased levels of business, trade and investment with France.

While in Nairobi, President Macron made a passionate plea, at the United Nations One Planet Summit, to speed up the fight against climate change and said that the best way to move forward is with actions, not words. He spoke of Kenya as a leader in that field, noting that 75 per cent of its power sources are now renewable, and called upon other countries to follow in its lead. He also pointed out that, while Africa contributes the least to the problem of climate change, it is among the areas that are likely to suffer most from its effects.

While at the summit, Macron also pledged 500 million euros towards green projects, including renewable energy projects, the protection of African ecosystems and the development of infrastructure. While the pledge was not specific to East Africa, its implications are important. Djibouti, for instance, is a resource-scarce country and is very prone to natural disasters, including flash floods and extended periods of drought. That vulnerability is exacerbated by poor management of water resources, below par land use and planning, and a lack of building code enforcement. Being a coastal country also means that rising sea levels pose a significant threat to its populated areas. For these reasons, Djibouti is among the countries that are most vulnerable to the effects of climate change. Macron’s pledge will hopefully aid it in formulating a successful approach to climate change adaption strategies and measures.

To encourage human development, France is taking a leading role in advancing women’s rights around the world, with major priorities being the fight against gender-based violence and the promotion of gender equality. In Ethiopia, that is extremely important. According to USAID, one in three women in Ethiopia experiences physical, emotional or sexual violence; 65 per cent of women have suffered genital mutilation. Only half of the young girls who enrol in primary school make it to grade five, due to distance, personal security and economic challenges. Currently, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development chairs a “Gender and Development” platform, which provides a forum for discussion of French international policies in the fight against gender equality.

The third component of French foreign policy – economic development – is particularly relevant because East Africa’s economic importance to France is growing immensely. Ethiopia became France’s third-largest market in 2017, with the value of French exports soaring to a record high of 832.1 million euros. While in Addis Ababa, Macron co-signed a defence cooperation agreement, which included a deal to help Ethiopia construct a navy (reportedly to be based in Eritrea) and to provide aid for air co-operation, joint operations
and opportunities for training and equipment purchases. Economic links are also growing in Kenya, with the number of French companies active in Kenya tripling over the last six years. While in Kenya, Macron signed contracts worth around three billion euros, with French Construction Company Vinci signing a 1.6 million euro contract to operate a highway stretching across Kenya, while renewables firm Voltalia sealed a 70 million euro contract for the development of a solar power plant.

The four-day visit to East Africa also revealed a significant threat to France’s foreign policy objectives in the region: the growing influence of China. All over Africa, Macron attempted to woo African counterparts other than traditional allies, to offset that influence. There are challenges facing France in attempting to influence the region economically, but Macron is using soft power effectively to enhance the effects of French influence.

Since the 2000s, there has been a tentative shift away from France among African countries, with the diversification of partnerships. French companies that have become prominent in Africa are being criticised by local nongovernmental organisations for a variety of reasons, ranging from social responsibility issues to corruption scandals. French companies are still winning new infrastructure bids, but, for some countries, China has become an easier business partner to deal with. A 2015 McKinsey report estimates that China’s trade with Africa stood at US$188 billion, dwarfing that of France at $57 billion. In the last 20 years, China has gone from an almost non-existent engagement with Africa, to being the continent’s largest economic partner. The much-vaunted Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), for instance, offers many incentives to East African countries. Kenya, Ethiopia and Djibouti have all made investments that reflect their leading role as partners in that initiative.

In Djibouti, Macron was on a mission to reassert France’s influence in its strategically-located former colony. This reflects fears that Djibouti is rapidly becoming a key node in China’s expansion of its economic and military presence across the continent. As part of the BRI, China opened its first overseas naval base in Djibouti. France still has the largest naval base in Djibouti, but the access that China has been given is one example of a roadblock to Macron’s desire to reassert French influence there.

Djibouti and France have been closely linked since 1894, but, since the 2000s, China has been at the forefront of international investment in Djibouti. China has provided economic aid, developed industrial production and invested massively in high-profile public infrastructure projects. While Djibouti is, in relative terms, a tiny country, its strategic location is of vital importance. Almost one-third of world shipping passes it en-route to and from the Suez Canal, the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean; it is a location that makes the otherwise impoverished country a perfect BRI partner. China has caught France (among others) napping.

During Macron’s visit, he chided Djibouti for its over-reliance on China, saying: ‘What can look good in the short-term … can often end up being bad over the medium- to long-term’ and that Paris ‘wouldn’t want a new generation of international investments to encroach on our historical partners’ sovereignty or weaken their economies.’ It remains to be seen whether France has come to the party too late. Djibouti’s need for more infrastructure projects is further increasing its national debt, the lion’s share of which is owed to China. The
external public debt-to-GDP ratio had, and preliminary findings by the IMF at the end of 2018 found it. Preliminary findings from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) indicated the external public debt-to-GDP ratio had risen to 104 per cent at the end of 2018, up from the 85 per cent recorded in 2016. Under such conditions, it is very difficult to refuse a creditor.

According to the World Food Programme, 79 per cent of Djiboutians live in poverty. When support from traditional partners (such as France) is lacking and another country offers to help by lending a vast amount of money, it would, naturally, be difficult to refuse. Djibouti should not be demeaned for wanting to look after itself. A Djiboutian government official said: ‘Business is business. The Chinese invest here, while the French aren’t competitive ... The French are late, very late.’

Djiboutian President Ismail Omar Guelleh has called upon French companies to invest in the new international Free Zone of Djibouti, four years after criticising France for abandoning its former colony and investing very little since it gained independence in 1977. The Free Zone is part of the BRI project and has been established to create a unified customs system between Djibouti and China. The aim is to leverage Djibouti’s advantageous location by launching a transit trade centre. It remains to be seen whether France will invest here given China’s role, but it may have to if it wants to continue to have a major trading presence in Djibouti.

While on the surface it may look like Beijing will walk over Paris, due to its deeper pockets and economic heft, Macron has been using soft power effectively to push his agenda. On arrival in Djibouti, Macron stated: ‘French companies can offer a respectful partnership ... one which will not bring on excessive, unsustainable debts and favours the development of local jobs.’ The subtle dig at China is not lost on African countries, with Kenya also heavily indebted to China and showing a willingness to rebalance its foreign relations to reduce the overt dependency on China. Similar actions are being taken in Ethiopia, where the gradual return to democracy is creating a sense of distance from Communist China and aiding a realigning of interests with France. Macron has done much to endear himself to Ethiopia under the rubric of soft power, with pledges to support developments of its cultural heritage and several higher education partnerships.

In France’s favour, there is some disquiet among the Ethiopian public at China’s growing influence there, with some apparently longing for the days when French influence was more widely felt. A railway worker in Addis Ababa said: ‘France must come back’. A 30-year old taxi driver echoed those sentiments, saying: ‘China is bad for us. They ... leave nothing for the Ethiopians.’

This is a perfect opportunity for France to step in and bring the influence that the people want. It does seem that France wants to take that opportunity, with reports that Paris will share its expertise in rebuilding the Ethiopian navy and developing the nascent tourism industry. Some doubts arise however, as the small delegation accompanying Macron on the trip did not inspire confidence that it was a priority item. It will be important for France that it does not back away from its undertakings, particularly those relating to helping Ethiopia to build a larger, more sustainable tourism industry. This is especially so because Beijing
continues to offer value to Ethiopia, with the announcement on 24 April 2019 of the cancellation of interest payments on loans provided to Ethiopia up to the end of 2018.

On a positive note for France, however, its defence co-operation agreement with Ethiopia fulfils a number of French strategic objectives, including cementing its strategic foothold in the region. If Ethiopia manages to succeed in its reform and integration efforts – at the same time as Paris makes significant inroads in the area – France may well be in a prime position to reap the rewards of future geopolitical changes in the Horn of Africa sub-region, ahead of such rivals as China and the United Arab Emirates.

China is posing a significant challenge to French influence in the East Africa region and the economic might of China may be too powerful to overcome in the short term. There are, however, promising developments within these three key countries that suggest that Paris can still be an important partner, with considerable influence in the three capitals.

The gradual return to democracy in Ethiopia under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed should enhance the relationship, as should the willingness of Kenya to rebalance its relationships and reduce the sense of overdependence on China. Perhaps the most uncertain relationship will be that of France and Djibouti, with China’s economic stranglehold on Djibouti posing a strong threat to French influence. France’s overarching foreign policy priority of development assistance should be successful and, if France can strongly support these countries, perhaps it can effectively offset China’s influence in the region as well.

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