AFRICA IS NOT A DIPLOMATIC TROPHY

The Summit Industry, External Powers, and the Question of African Strategic Autonomy

FWS Ideas & Perspectives

The international diplomatic calendar has acquired a familiar ritual. One after another, major and emerging powers convene African leaders under the banner of partnership, cooperation, development, and shared prosperity. There are Africa–Russia summits, Africa–China forums, Africa–United States gatherings, Africa–Europe meetings, Africa–Japan conferences, and, increasingly, similar initiatives involving other countries seeking to expand their international influence.

The ceremonies are impressive. Heads of state assemble, flags are displayed, declarations are adopted, and photographs circulate across the world. The host government celebrates a diplomatic achievement. African delegations return home with statements of cooperation, promises of investment, and assurances of renewed partnership.

But beyond the diplomatic choreography, a fundamental question deserves to be asked: **What does Africa actually gain from this growing industry of international summits?**

The question is not whether Africa should engage the world. International cooperation is indispensable to economic development, technological progress, peace, and prosperity. Nor is it whether foreign governments have legitimate interests on the continent. They certainly do, just as African countries have legitimate interests in their relationships with them.

The question is whether these encounters constitute genuine partnerships between parties pursuing clearly defined mutual interests, or whether they too frequently become exercises in diplomatic visibility whose practical achievements remain uncertain.

An even more troubling contradiction emerges when one considers the ease with which African leaders assemble in response to invitations from external powers, compared with the difficulties of sustaining collective action around Africa's own urgent priorities.

Why is it sometimes easier to mobilize African diplomacy around another country's invitation than around Africa's own collective agenda?

This question should concern every African government, every continental institution, and every citizen interested in the continent's future.

I. The Diplomacy of Appearances

The multiplication of Africa-focused summits reflects an important transformation in international relations. Africa occupies a significant place in the strategic calculations of established and emerging powers. Its natural resources, expanding population, markets, geographic position, diplomatic representation, and future economic potential attract considerable international attention.

Russia seeks to deepen its African relationships in a changing geopolitical environment. China has developed extensive economic, infrastructure, and commercial ties across the continent. The United States approaches Africa through a combination of economic, security, and diplomatic interests. European governments pursue partnerships shaped by trade, migration, energy, security, historical relationships, and their own economic priorities. Japan and South Korea have established diplomatic frameworks emphasizing development, technology, investment, and cooperation.

These initiatives are not identical. They differ in history, institutional organization, economic substance, and political objectives. Some have produced investments and useful forms of cooperation. Others have generated commitments whose implementation requires closer examination.

The concern is not the existence of these summits. It is the possibility that their frequency and ceremonial importance may obscure the distinction between diplomatic engagement and measurable achievement.

A successful summit cannot be judged simply by the number of African presidents attending, the importance of the host government, or the language of its final declaration.

The real measure lies elsewhere: in projects implemented, investments delivered, technologies transferred, productive employment created, institutions strengthened, and obligations fulfilled by both sides.

A declaration of partnership is not itself a partnership accomplished. A financing announcement is not a completed investment. A memorandum of understanding is not an industrial transformation.

This distinction becomes especially important when diplomatic gatherings are presented as evidence of exceptional commitment to Africa.

Foreign governments do not convene international summits solely out of generosity. They pursue national interests, as governments are expected to do. They seek markets, influence, commercial opportunities, strategic relationships, access to resources, and cooperation on matters affecting their own societies.

There is nothing inherently illegitimate about these objectives.

The difficulty arises when the language of partnership obscures unequal negotiating capacities, when political symbolism substitutes for substantive results, or when African participation is celebrated without adequate examination of what has actually been secured.

Africa should not be reduced to a diplomatic achievement displayed by whichever government succeeds in assembling the largest gathering of its leaders.

Africa is not a diplomatic trophy.

II. The Responsibilities on Both Sides

A mature international partnership begins with an acknowledgment that both parties have interests and responsibilities.

Foreign powers should approach African countries as sovereign partners whose development priorities deserve serious consideration. African governments, in turn, must approach negotiations with coherent strategies, clearly formulated objectives, and the institutional capacity to defend their interests.

This is the substance of mutually beneficial cooperation. It is not a demand that one party sacrifice its interests for the other. It is a recognition that durable partnerships require negotiated benefits, reciprocal commitments, and accountability.

Historical relationships complicate this task.

The Soviet Union played an important role in supporting several African liberation movements during the struggle against colonial domination and apartheid. That contribution forms part of Africa's political history and deserves recognition.

But historical solidarity cannot determine the terms of contemporary African foreign policy. The Russian Federation of today pursues its own geopolitical and economic objectives, including objectives shaped by its competition with Western powers.

African countries have no obligation to make that competition their own.

The same principle applies to Europe.

France's relations with several African countries remain deeply marked by the legacy of colonial domination and the postcolonial system commonly known as *Françafrique*. Despite repeated declarations of renewal and promises of a more balanced partnership, the underlying patterns of political influence, economic interests, strategic dependence, and privileged networks have proved remarkably persistent. *Françafrique* has not necessarily disappeared; in many respects, it has adapted to changing circumstances, adopting new language, new instruments, and new forms of engagement while preserving elements of its historical logic. Like a chameleon, it may change its

appearance without fundamentally changing its nature. The question, therefore, is not simply whether France has announced a new African policy, but whether the substance of its relationships with African countries has genuinely changed.

Yet historical grievances cannot substitute for contemporary policy either. African governments must be capable of negotiating constructive relationships with France and other European countries wherever mutual interests exist, without surrendering the right to disagree or pursue alternatives.

Nor should relations with China, the United States, Japan, South Korea, or any other partner be governed by automatic enthusiasm or ideological rejection.

Every partnership should be examined according to its terms, obligations, opportunities, and consequences.

The fundamental principle is straightforward: **Africa owes neither permanent allegiance to yesterday's liberators nor permanent submission to yesterday's colonial powers.**

Historical memory must inform diplomatic judgment without imprisoning it.

But responsibility does not rest exclusively with external governments.

African leaders cannot attend international gatherings without sufficiently developed national priorities and then expect the host country to formulate development strategies on their behalf.

Effective diplomacy requires preparation. It requires knowledge of national economic needs, industrial capabilities, technological gaps, infrastructure requirements, commercial opportunities, and the long-term consequences of proposed agreements.

It requires competent negotiating teams and institutions capable of evaluating commitments before they are accepted.

Above all, it requires a distinction between the priorities of political officeholders and the enduring priorities of the state.

Where those priorities diverge, international diplomacy risks becoming an exercise in political visibility rather than an instrument of national development.

A government may return from a summit with an impressive declaration. Its citizens are entitled to ask what was negotiated, what obligations were accepted, how implementation will be financed, and when results should become visible.

Diplomatic success must be accountable to the societies in whose name diplomacy is conducted.

III. When Africa Answers the World's Call but Struggles to Answer Its Own

Perhaps the most revealing aspect of contemporary summit diplomacy is not the behavior of foreign governments. It is the contradiction within Africa's own collective political practice.

African leaders regularly participate in international gatherings convened by individual foreign powers. Yet continental initiatives addressing common African priorities frequently encounter difficulties of coordination, implementation, financing, and political commitment.

This is not to suggest that African governments never organize collectively.

The African Union, regional economic communities, the African Continental Free Trade Area, and numerous African-led initiatives demonstrate that the continent possesses institutions and frameworks for collective action.

The challenge is converting those frameworks into sustained political decisions and practical achievements.

Africa has repeatedly identified its development priorities: economic integration, productive employment, industrialization, food security, infrastructure, energy, scientific capability, institutional effectiveness, and peace.

These priorities are not mysterious. They have been articulated in national plans, regional agreements, and continental development frameworks.

What remains difficult is the consistent mobilization of political authority, public resources, and institutional effort required to implement them.

Why should the diplomatic invitation of an external power sometimes command greater political attention than an African initiative whose success could directly improve the lives of millions?

Part of the answer lies in the different incentives involved.

An international summit can offer immediate visibility, bilateral discussions, investment prospects, and diplomatic recognition. Continental integration, by contrast, demands prolonged negotiations, domestic reforms, shared obligations, and compromises among governments with different interests.

Removing barriers to intra-African trade may require difficult administrative changes. Building regional energy markets requires coordination among national authorities and

substantial investment. Developing cross-border infrastructure demands long-term financing, regulatory alignment, and sustained political commitment.

These undertakings are less ceremonial than international summits, but their consequences may be far more important for Africa's transformation.

The responsibility of African leadership is therefore not merely to attend continental meetings. It is to ensure that continental decisions become national priorities and that national policies contribute to shared African objectives.

Africa's international negotiating capacity would be considerably strengthened by a more coherent continental agenda.

A government that knows what it wants can negotiate more effectively. A group of governments capable of agreeing on common priorities can exercise greater collective influence.

But unity should not be confused with uniformity. African countries have different economies, political circumstances, and strategic interests. Collective diplomacy must accommodate those differences while identifying areas where cooperation produces benefits that individual countries cannot achieve alone.

The question is not whether every African government must speak with one voice on every subject.

It is whether African institutions and governments can develop sufficient agreement on essential priorities to make collective action credible.

The continent cannot expect external powers to respect a common African agenda if African governments themselves are unwilling to give that agenda sustained political meaning.

IV. From Resource Wealth to Strategic Power

The contradiction between diplomatic visibility and productive capability becomes particularly evident when Africa's natural resources are considered.

The continent possesses substantial mineral resources, agricultural potential, energy resources, and a growing reservoir of human talent. Yet many African economies remain dependent on the export of unprocessed commodities, imported technologies, external financing, and industrial products manufactured elsewhere.

Natural-resource abundance does not automatically create prosperity or international influence.

Resources become a foundation of national strength when societies possess the knowledge, infrastructure, institutions, investment capacity, and technologies required to transform them into productive economic activity.

A country may possess valuable minerals while lacking the industrial facilities to process them. It may possess significant energy potential while struggling to provide reliable electricity. It may educate talented young people without creating sufficient opportunities for them to apply their capabilities productively.

These contradictions cannot be resolved by diplomatic declarations alone.

They require public policies capable of connecting scientific knowledge, technical education, infrastructure, industrial development, investment, and institutional responsibility.

The case of Mali illustrates the importance of this distinction.

Mali's natural hydrogen discoveries and pioneering electricity-generation experience have attracted international scientific attention. They demonstrate how an unusual geological resource may offer opportunities for energy innovation.

But the existence of a promising resource is not equivalent to an established national energy industry. Its wider development depends on scientific assessment, commercial feasibility, infrastructure, financing, regulatory capacity, and sustained public policy.

The broader lesson extends far beyond hydrogen or Mali.

The strategic importance of a natural resource lies not only in its existence, but in a country's capacity to develop it responsibly and convert its value into lasting benefits for society.

This is where diplomacy should become an instrument of development.

A resource becomes a strategic asset not merely when it attracts international interest, but when the country possessing it has the institutional and productive capacity to determine how its value will be developed, negotiated, and shared.

African governments attending international summits should be able to identify the industrial partnerships, research cooperation, financing arrangements, technical capabilities, and market opportunities necessary to advance clearly established national priorities.

The objective should not simply be to attract foreign investment. It should be to negotiate investment that strengthens domestic capabilities and contributes to sustainable economic transformation.

Nor should African countries approach international cooperation as a request for favors.

A mutually beneficial partnership recognizes what each party contributes and what each expects to gain.

Africa's resources, markets, workforce, geographic position, and economic potential are legitimate foundations for negotiation. Foreign partners may contribute capital, technology, expertise, access to markets, or other capabilities.

The task of diplomacy is to organize these contributions into agreements whose benefits and obligations are transparent, realistic, and measurable.

But no international partner can substitute indefinitely for the responsibilities of African institutions.

Foreign investment cannot replace effective governance. Technology transfer cannot succeed without the development of domestic technical capabilities. Industrial cooperation cannot flourish without dependable infrastructure, sound regulation, and institutions capable of implementation.

The transformation of Africa's international position therefore begins with the transformation of its productive and institutional capacity.

Conclusion — Beyond the Summit Photograph

Africa's growing presence in international diplomacy reflects the continent's importance in a changing world. That importance is real, and African governments should engage confidently with all partners prepared to pursue constructive, mutually beneficial relationships.

But diplomatic attention should not be mistaken for strategic influence.

The multiplication of summits creates opportunities. It does not guarantee their realization.

External governments must be judged by the substance of their commitments and the fairness of the relationships they seek to establish. African governments must be judged by the clarity of their priorities, the preparation of their negotiations, the quality of their decisions, and their capacity to deliver results.

Neither historical friendship nor contemporary rivalry should determine Africa's international choices.

Those choices must arise from a coherent understanding of African interests and from the responsibilities governments owe to the societies they represent.

The continent does not need to reject international summits. It needs to approach them differently.

It needs stronger preparation, more effective collective coordination, greater transparency, and mechanisms capable of measuring the results of agreements long after the ceremonies have ended.

Above all, Africa must demonstrate the same determination in pursuing its own collective priorities that its leaders sometimes display when responding to the diplomatic initiatives of others.

The essential question remains:

Why is it sometimes easier to mobilize African diplomacy around another country's invitation than around Africa's own collective agenda?

Until that contradiction is addressed, the spectacle of international summits will continue to raise difficult questions about the relationship between diplomatic recognition and African political responsibility.

Africa's future will not be secured by the number of foreign capitals in which its leaders are received, the declarations they sign, or the photographs in which they appear.

It will be shaped by the institutions they strengthen, the capabilities they develop, the agreements they implement, and the opportunities they create for their people.

Africa must be a partner in shaping international cooperation—not a diplomatic trophy displayed in the competition for global influence.

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