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AFRICA BREAKING OUT

— Camille Grand

When discussing Africa, commentators often tend to focus on the multiple challenges facing the continent, overlooking the fact that Africa also hosts some of the world's fastest growing economies. There are major problems to be sure, but there is plenty of good news, too.

Africa is home to expanding domestic markets attracting foreign investors, and has achieved significant progress in developing a security architecture, giving a new role to African players.

By 2030, Africa will host 1.6 billion inhabitants, close to 20 percent of the world population. This population will be young (55 percent below 25) and urban (48 percent). The African economy is growing faster than ever with an average growth rate of 5.5 percent per year since 2003.

Six of the world's fastest growing economies are African: Angola, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Chad, Mozambique, and Rwanda. That said, the growth is unevenly shared throughout a continent where extreme poverty will coexist with globalized elites and economies.

Africa holds a growing share of the commodities market, for minerals in particular. Private investments already massively surpass public aid in terms of foreign financial input in the African economy. Combined, these trends create a major requirement for investment in infrastructure.

Defense spending will double in Africa by 2030, reaching 75 billion dollars. In Sub-Saharan Africa, major regional players are emerging next to South Africa, with Angola and Nigeria having doubled their military budgets in the last decade.

These mega-trends are shaping a different Africa. Regional or sub-regional actors are becoming security providers. Former colonial powers have lost economic ground to China, which has become Africa's top trading partner (17 percent of market share); India and Brazil are joining the first row. These investor countries have been de facto transformed into African stakeholders in both the economic and security fields.

The African paradox is that, as the continent finally takes off economically, it remains confronted with major systemic challenges that directly threaten its future.

Transnational threats remain the dominant security challenge. These are directly connected to the enduring fragility of states. Increased trade goes hand in hand with increased trafficking of multiple legal and illegal goods and people (drugs, small arms and light weapons, migrants, high value commodities, cigarettes, etc.). Illicit trafficking leads to corruption and continues to have a negative impact on governance, including at the highest levels.

Terrorism coming from radical Islamist groups affects a large number of countries. If the activities of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in the Sahel have been disrupted by the French-led Operation Serval in Mali (now expanded to the whole region under the name Barkhane), and, by enhanced regional and international cooperation, Boko Haram in Nigeria, events in Libya, and other developments in Northern Africa, and unrelenting terrorist activities along the shores of the Indian Ocean from Somalia to Kenya demonstrate that the struggle with terrorism is likely to continue for years, if not decades.

Efforts led by the EU and NATO have currently succeeded in fighting piracy off the horn of Africa, but the significant increase in pirate attacks in the Gulf of Guinea (154 reported in 2013) demonstrate that maritime insecurity off the coasts of Africa remains a serious danger in a context in which maritime trade increases.

The major crisis around the Ebola virus outbreak in West Africa signals again the extreme vulnerability of African societies to global health challenges. AIDS may have gone out of the headlines, but the problem has not gone away. Population growth, urbanization, and deficient infrastructures are additional complicating factors.

Another transnational phenomenon, global warming, hits Africa severely as six of the ten most vulnerable countries to climate change are on the continent – Zimbabwe, Sierra Leone, Madagascar, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, and Guinea-Bissau. This could further increase food insecurity for local populations with the risk of yet more tensions.

Last but not least, interstate rivalries should not be ignored. They have already led to conflicts in the Great Lakes and the Horn of Africa. Tomorrow, competition for resources, combined with increased militarization, could trigger new interstate conflicts.

On the more positive side, the most significant political developments in the field of crisis management and peacekeeping are the efforts led by the African Union (AU) to develop the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA). It has established the AU both as the leader of a network of sub-regional organizations, and as

an interlocutor of the UN. It still lacks a strong operational arm as the development of standby forces has been repeatedly delayed. This is all the more true as the few regional African powers with significant military capabilities preserve their resources for operations in which they have a direct stake.

However, it remains clear that in the foreseeable future external powers will continue to play a role in addressing serious crises. The United States and France remain among the few capable security providers able to build a coalition to respond to the most demanding challenges. They need to develop new ways and means to enable African partners.

Accepting that all of these threats are shared and should lead to a common vision for an appropriate response might be the most demanding requirement for all African and international partners. A deepened dialogue amongst all stakeholders is most needed.

Acting together to combat common threats and crises will be the best way for this remarkable continent to develop its full potential.

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