



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

Macron's African tour - the most influential representative the West has



During his recent African tour, French President Emmanuel Macron promoted a new, softer approach towards the continent, but also an attitude that does not mean complete French disengagement from the African continent.

“Francafrique is a thing of the past”, said the French leader, presenting part of the strategy, which considers the era of French colonialism and all its post-colonial derivatives finished.

But, at the same time, Macron points out that this does not mean a complete withdrawal from Africa, because France has been present and invested in the continent for too long to leave it to itself.

A new model of the French post-postcolonial approach follows on from Macron's words that France wants to build a "balanced partnership" with African nations.

There is “another path that consists in not reducing Africa to a field of competition or rent and to consider African countries as partners with whom we have shared interests and responsibilities. And, basically, to build a new relationship, balanced, reciprocal and responsible”, said Macron.

Changing the model of military presence

This "balanced partnership" is most evident in the additional reduction of the French military presence in Africa, and particularly in the change of purpose of those missions.

On the eve of his recent tour of four African capitals, Macron announced a plan according to which the remaining French military bases – in the Ivory Coast, Gabon and Senegal – would now be under a mixed administration of France and the countries where these bases are located.

This means that on the entire continent, the base in Djibouti, strategically positioned at the entrance to the Red Sea, will remain the only

one that is exclusively French.

The idea is for France to devote itself to the military training of local partner forces, technical support, and the implementation of specific programmes of importance for the host country.

As with the "end of the Francafrique era", this also means that the era of French military presence on the continent, as it existed until now, has ended.

At the same time, Paris will focus on its "soft" influence in Africa, which concerns cultural ties, support in relation to migrants, and particularly trade, economy and finance.

Special French involvement will be related to ecology, which Macron confirmed by his participation in the conference on the protection of forests in Central Africa, as one of the largest planetary eco-resources.

Africa demands more respect

It will not be easy for Mr. Macron and France to convince Africans that they are determined to change course and to soften their presence, because it has not been a partnership at all.

Macron was greeted by anti-French protests in the four African capitals he visited. Nationally oriented protestors emphasised the long-term colonial presence, the exploitation of resources, and particularly the frequent French tolerance and support for local dictators, such as in Gabon, which was the first stop on the tour.

The President of the DR Congo, Felix Tshisekedi, transferred that street tone to the official level, so at the joint press conference he urged France to look at African countries differently and to consider them “as partners and not with a paternalistic look”.

Macron's last African tour, in addition to being a very important bilateral moment for France, perhaps had an even more important global context, bearing in mind the increasingly

pronounced effort of the West to counter the influence of China and Russia, which has strongly developed in Africa.

The major Western powers can hardly have a better and more influential representative in Africa than France and Macron, regardless of the shadow of anti-colonial sentiment that Paris still has.

This was Macron's 18th visit to Africa since he was first elected president in May 2017, and since then he has visited 25 African countries.

The best advocate of Western interests

No Western or global leader has such a record of visits to Africa, which makes Macron a very competent and influential advocate of Western interests.

Those interests have been strongly shaken, first of all by the long-standing paternalistic attitude of Western governments towards African states and their problems, and also by their complete absence from the continent.

This "hole" is being aggressively filled by China, with enormous investments in infrastructure and African economies, as well as Russia, primarily with its arms exports and security presence, through the private army Wagner in Central Africa.

The United States has been trying to change this imbalance, which is why President Joe Biden recently held a summit with African leaders, and Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen announced a greater American commitment to African economies in Senegal, Zambia and South Africa last January.

In light of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, African countries are of particular importance for the West's pressure on the Kremlin to withdraw, because due to their weak institutional capacities, they are very susceptible to the violation of Western sanctions against Russia.

The head of Russian diplomacy, Sergei Lavrov, visited as many as 12 African countries in just six months, during two tours. Securing the political support of African nations for the Russian invasion was certainly one of the goals of Lavrov's offensive, and even more so their cooperation in evading sanctions.

"Africa looks like promising terrain to recuperate at least some losses by building new logistical chains, creating routes to circumvent sanctions, and expanding cultural and military cooperation. There would also appear to be a more sympathetic audience in Africa for Russia's interpretation of the war", assessed Vadim Zaytsev, an independent researcher in a publication by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

The scope of Macron's latest tour of Africa may not be immediately visible when it comes to new Franco-African relations, but given France's traditional influence on the continent, it seems like the most convincing message of Western interest to devote much more to Africa than before.