

African countries' view of Central Asia

Description

There is still a strong geographical polarisation in African countries, with Western countries - particularly the United States, France, and the United Kingdom - receiving better coverage than other areas from the local media and researchers. However, international political news is also being followed more and more assiduously, and over the last few decades, Africa has been looking more and more toward Asia as political events and crises unfold.

As elsewhere, the focus of attention on African countries varies according to historical events, as was the case, for example, with the collapse of the Communist system in the 1990s⁽¹⁾. Asia is now attracting growing interest, and since 2008, African countries have been doing more business with that continent (China, Japan, and India) than with Europe⁽²⁾. This flow of interest is reflected in studies on Sino-African trade and diplomatic exchanges⁽³⁾. In 2019, it also focused on the Covid-19 pandemic. Since 2022, it has also turned its attention to Russia due to Moscow's large-scale invasion of Ukraine and the various political crises and coups d'état in several African countries. The Middle East and North Africa are also the focus of North African nationals' current production.

As far as Asia is concerned, its follow-up is not exempt from competition with popular narratives and paradigms still prevalent in Africa, particularly concerning political issues. Analysis and commentary on international relations are still partly based on doxas and sophisms. This characteristic is evident on social networks and can be observed in everyday narratives and discourse.

Central Asia-Africa: mutual ignorance

Except for Asian countries with genuine soft power (Korea, Japan, Turkey, UAE, India, and China), Asia remains a relatively unknown territory for Africans in Africa. This is particularly true of the five Central Asian countries, about which documentation and accounts are rare on the continent.

The author's survey conducted in 2024 among 25 people from several African countries was questioned online and face-to-face (at a pan-African workshop held in Côte d'Ivoire), revealing a considerable lack of knowledge about the Central Asian region. When asked simple questions about the location and names of the countries making up this sub-region, 22 people were unable to answer, confusing Central Asia with the Middle East. The three respondents who were best able to answer had been scholarship holders in the Soviet Union and, as a result of their stay in Russia, were familiar with the area. The "countries in -stan" and their former membership of the Soviet Union are well-known stereotypes, but knowledge (even in the form of preconceived ideas) of the five countries is limited to these two pieces of information.

For their part, the Central Asian countries are not developing a policy of influence towards the countries of Africa. Discreet in international relations and rather self-centered - at least until recently - the five countries in the region are now advocating, albeit to varying degrees, a multi-dimensional policy designed to avoid any one-sided dependence on a single neighbor (Russia, China, etc.). The openness of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, in particular, encourages them to turn towards neighboring countries, such as the United States, European countries, and/or distant Asian countries. In this configuration, Africa's place does not, at this stage, appear to be of primary importance.

This lack of mutual understanding results from underdeveloped diplomatic relations, which result from not very visible mutual geopolitical stakes. [For example](#), only Algeria and Egypt have embassies in Tashkent, while Uzbekistan has only



one diplomatic representation on the African continent, in Egypt.

Is a closer relationship possible in the future?

Given current trends in international relations, however, it is highly likely that Central Asia will end up on the mental map of African countries. The progress of the *Belt and Road Initiative* promoted by China, the foreseeable regional crises (linked to the sharing of resources – energy, water, etc.), and the emergence of a new region will all have an impact. The progress of the Belt and Road Initiative promoted by China, the foreseeable regional crises (linked to the sharing of resources – energy, water, etc. -, border disputes or inter-ethnic tensions), the rivalries of the major powers, and the policy of opening up the region promoted by some of the countries in the area should put Central Asia in the media spotlight.

We can already see that news from the Central Asian sub-region is gradually attracting the attention of development players, researchers, and international journalists, highlighting several issues, from cross-border crime to illegal immigration and trafficking, democratization, respect for human rights, and health. Development players are increasingly active there, with Kazakhstan emerging as a market of interest for European trade outlets, Uzbekistan benefiting from its strategic position, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan benefiting from support programs, and Turkmenistan, which is more difficult to access, now seems to be willing to open up to some extent.

As Central Asia becomes a geopolitical and economic zone considered strategic, it gains importance in the eyes of African countries. This rise in the region's visibility comes at a time when several African countries also seek to be included in global governance and emancipate themselves.

What synergies for tomorrow?

As international mobility becomes more fluid and inclusive initiatives multiply (development programs, international conferences, etc.), new South-South partnerships are emerging. Through these practices, distant peoples will inevitably come together and create new synergies.

The low level of interaction between African and Central Asian countries and the resulting feeling of ignorance or neglect is primarily the result of weak, soft power, which fails to account for the mutual interest in exchanges. For one community to take an interest in another when their historical and cultural links are virtually non-existent, a genuine strategy needs to be implemented, supporting and creating pre-existing or future interests. This is not yet the case here, but a more positive future trajectory is likely.

Notes :

(1) Inès Trépant, « Pays émergents et nouvel équilibre des forces », *Courrier hebdomadaire du CRISP*, vol. 1991-1992, n° 6-7, 2008, pp. 6-54.

(2) Jean-Raphaël Chaponnière, « L’empreinte chinoise en Afrique », *Revue d’économie financière*, vol. 116, n° 4, 2014, pp. 195-212.

(3) Mathieu Duchâtel, *Géopolitique de la Chine*, Presses Universitaires de France, 2022.

Thumbnail: Statue of Al-Farghani (scholar and astronomer born in Ferghana and who died in Egypt after 861) offered by Uzbekistan to Egypt (Cairo), © Roland Unger/Wikimedia Commons).

[Link to the French version of the article](#)

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