

Poland: a renewed interest in Africa

Description

Despite a long shared history and after a modest but real commitment to the African continent during the Cold War, democratic Poland abruptly turned its back on it. Strengthened by its successful transition and its image as a non-colonial country, it has been making a comeback over the last ten years, all the more so because it now sees this as a strategic necessity.

It would be an understatement to say that, *a priori*, Poland has no African tropism. Only three prime ministers and two presidents have set foot on the continent's soil in the last 25 years. Revitalized relations between Poland and Morocco did allow high-level visits in the 1990s and 2000s. On the other hand, the visit to Libya by the head of government, Marek Belka, in 2005 was intended to settle the legacy, in the form of a mutual debt, of overly cordial relations in the 1980s. It was not until 2013 that Donald Tusk, who had already been Prime Minister for five years, became the first Polish leader since 1989 to visit sub-Saharan Africa. Reactions ranged from indifference to mockery. Before his second trip, in the autumn of the same year, Tusk said, [‘I know we’ll laugh about this.’](#)



A long and rich history

Yet the Poles share a rich and ancient history with the African continent, from the Couronian attempts at colonization in the 17th century in what is now Banjul (Gambia), Potocki's voyages to North Africa, Beniowski's adventure in Madagascar, participation in German and French colonialism (particularly in Algeria), Szolc-Rogoziński's explorations of Cameroon, and the books of literary giants such as Ossendowski and Sienkiewicz. Friendly relations were also maintained between the few independent African countries during the wars (Egypt in 1927, Ethiopia and Liberia in 1930).

But it is, of course, the memory of the Polish People's Republic (PRL, 1952-1989) that remains the freshest: Warsaw forged close links with friendly, socialist, or at least third-world countries, following in the footsteps of other Central and Eastern European countries (first and foremost East Germany). Doctors, engineers, scientists, and other specialists were sent to Morocco, Algeria, and Libya (and some students from these countries came to train in Poland). Relations with Ethiopia, Ghana, Equatorial Guinea, and Mozambique were fruitful in the 1970s and 1980s. In Angola and Namibia, where the civil wars only recently came to an end, and the memory is all the fresher, Poland supplied war material to the MPLA (People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola), as well as medical assistance and training for SWAPO (South-West African People's Organisation) guerrillas.

The transition to democracy in the 1990s led to a renewal of Polish-Moroccan relations but sounded the death knell for the previously excellent relations with certain sub-Saharan nations. The transition indeed became an 'export item' to Algeria and Tanzania, and it was the occasion for opening an embassy in South Africa (1990), which made the transition from apartheid to reconciliation and democracy. However, the results were still very negative due to economic constraints and 'shock therapy' (the Balcerowicz plan). Disputes between the PRL and Mali (1969), Cameroon and Guinea (1981), Somalia (1985), or force majeure in Liberia (1990) and Côte d'Ivoire (2003) led to embassies being closed and never reopened. To these must be added the closures caused by the austerity policy: between 1990 and 2008, eight embassies closed their doors. Of the twenty embassies opened in 1981, only eleven remained operational in 2008, and two were suspended for several years.

A return to trade and investment (2013-2018)

The Arab Spring is undoubtedly helping to reawaken Warsaw's interest in Africa. Now an integral part of the EU and NATO and benefiting from rapid economic development, this more self-assured Poland is being approached by Libya and Tunisia (2011), who want to benefit from its experience in transition.

The Go Africa program (2013) was a significant step towards establishing Polish companies on the continent. This initiative, coupled with D. Tusk's visits to Nigeria, South Africa, and Zambia, led to the acquisition of small but essential contracts on a Polish scale: oil and gas extraction in Nigeria and Tunisia, mining in Congo-Brazzaville, Mozambique, and Namibia, and modernization of the mining industry in South Africa, among others.

The emphasis is on agricultural modernization (Ethiopia and Tanzania) and the defense industry. The Strategic Dialogue with Nigeria was a relatively successful first attempt, leading to the sale and subsequent transfer of technology and local production of Beryl rifles. This success has led to broader cooperation in drones and naval supplies.

The flourishing cooperation with Angola in the fisheries sector dates back further (to 2006). A promising start in Libya, where PGNiG is exploiting hydrocarbons in the Murzuq basin (2013), was brought to a screeching halt by the deteriorating security situation, which also led to the suspension of the activities of the Polish embassy in Tripoli (2014).

This new interest on the part of Poland is sometimes in line with Africa's desire to diversify its economic and defense partnerships. This is the case with Senegal, which opened an embassy in Warsaw in 2014-2015 and whose President Macky Sall visited Poland in 2016. The Polish embassy in Dakar reopened that same year.

2017 President Andrzej Duda traveled to Addis Ababa to speak at the African Union (AU) headquarters to support Poland's candidacy for the UN Security Council. Ethiopian President Mulatu Teshome Wirtu visited Warsaw the following year. Bilateral trade and investment remained the main focus. However, Poland was beginning to realize Africa's strategic potential and develop a rhetoric of victim—or hero—solidarity in the face of colonialism.

Africa and Poland's new geopolitical and strategic ambitions (2022-2024)

Despite this, we have to admit that Africa is losing its importance in the visions of Ewa Kopacz (Prime Minister in 2014-2015) and then in the speeches of Beata Szydło and Mateusz Morawiecki (2015-2023). The migration crisis in 2015 and the tug-of-war between Warsaw and Budapest on the one hand and Berlin and Brussels on the other, regardless of the color of the Polish government, momentarily reduced the African question to that of 'African and Asian' migrants. The line taken by the coalition government that emerged from the last elections is unlikely to be very different from this point of view.

However, France's difficulties in Mali and then in the Sahel (since 2020) provide an additional reason for interest for the Polish government, which, like Hungary and Italy, focuses on slowing migratory flows. Visits by the Polish defense and foreign affairs ministers to Cape Verde and Chad (2018), as well as overtures towards a defense partnership with Niger and participation in the European Union's EUCAP Sahel civilian mission (2023, before the coup d'état in the latter country), are examples of this.

In 2017, B. Szydło stated at the EU-AU summit [that peace and security in Europe and Africa were inseparable and interdependent](#). The reopening of the Polish embassy in Dakar in 2016 was followed by others in Tanzania (2018), Sudan (2023, before the civil war that continues to rage), and Rwanda (2022, following the opening of an embassy in Warsaw a year earlier).

Another decisive factor is, of course, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The same year, President Andrzej Duda made two trips to Egypt (May) and West Africa (September). The Ukrainian question dominated the exchanges, with A. Duda even acted as a messenger in Cairo. Poland, Kyiv's ally, was discovering geopolitical and strategic ambitions, as well as the need for diplomacy on a global scale, like Ukraine. It developed its rhetoric of solidarity, selectively reactivating the memory of shared history, particularly the PRL's support for decolonization, and insisting on 'common values.'

President Duda's actions were twofold: on the one hand, he helped Poland obtain supplies of liquefied natural gas and other raw materials; on the other, he provided assistance to Africa, which was suffering a food crisis as a result of the Russian blockade of the Black Sea, and insisted on Polish-Ukrainian solidarity about cereal exports. This was still the tone for A. Duda's last trip to East Africa in February 2024, despite a marked return to economic concerns (agriculture, tourism, defense).

Over and above its significant involvement in assisting Ukraine and its concern about migration, Poland is discovering itself as a [‘great country’ capable of playing ‘an important role’ in African policy](#). But it will still have to avoid the traps into which European powers, whether their interest in Africa is recent or long-standing, still regularly fall between non-interference and indifference, partnership with authoritarian regimes, or consistency with pre-set values, for example. President Duda's recent trip to Rwanda, an opportunity to intensify relations with Kigali – particularly in the defense field – is a good example. As A. Duda puts it, it is not just a question of ensuring Rwanda's security ‘thanks to young people ready to protect their country in the event of an attack.’ Rwanda is regularly singled out, including by the UN, for its support for the rebels of the March 23 Movement (M23) in the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Kinshasa has denounced the [‘hypocrisy’](#) of Warsaw, which supports the DRC at the UN on this issue.

Thumbnail: President Duda with his Kenyan counterpart William Ruto, Nairobi, February 2024 (president.pl, photo Marek Borawski/KPRP).

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[Back to the top of the page](#)

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