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The UAE's ever-expanding footprint in Africa

As Africa seeks fairer global partnerships, the United Arab Emirates is stepping in. But is it a friend, a competitor or something in between?

While other BRICS members receive more Western attention for their African presence, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – which became a member of the group in 2024 – has quietly become the continent's largest foreign investor, with $50 billion in 2022. Backed by vast resources and a clear strategy, the UAE's engagement in Africa holds significant implications for both the continent and broader geopolitical dynamics.

UAE engagement with the African continent in the 21st century might be divided into three chapters that have somewhat informed and influenced one another.

Diversification, regional competition & 'economy-first'

First, in the early 2000s, Dubai, recognising its more limited oil reserves compared to those of the capital Abu Dhabi, sought to diversify its economy. In that context, African countries were key partners for investments in sectors such as infrastructure, tourism, agribusiness and mining (especially gold).

Second, after the Arab Spring, in the early-2010s, the UAE heavily emphasised securitisation and regional competition in its foreign policy, aiming to outmanoeuvre rivals Qatar, Iran and Türkiye around the Horn of Africa and Red Sea regions. The establishment of alliances with Ethiopia, the separatist regions of Somaliland and Puntland to counter the Turkish-Somali partnership and its backing of the Sudanese opposition, which it continues to support in the country's bloody civil war, are examples thereof.

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Many of these policies still linger, but UAE foreign policy discourse shifted in the early 2020s. After the pandemic's economic shock, the UAE adopted an 'economy-first' foreign policy, recognising changing global power dynamics and the push to transition from fossil fuels. In Africa, this meant engaging with all regions, diversifying partners and approaches and prioritising business interests to achieve political goals.

Nonetheless, the UAE's engagement in security dynamics in Africa has oftentimes remained much more direct, establishing military outposts and interfering in conflicts in the Horn of Africa, Libya and Sahel regions. Most notable, although officially denied by Abu Dhabi, is the UAE's support for the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in the Sudanese Civil War. Human Rights Watch has accused the RSF of committing war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing. While the UAE continues to provide the RSF with weapons and logistic support, the conflict drags on, impacting livelihoods, displacing millions and creating the world's worst humanitarian catastrophe.

Agendas and interests

The strategic importance of Africa is a given. Be it in terms of energy security, access to resources, strategic trade routes or consumer markets. Currently, European and other Western countries have brought the agenda of decarbonisation and green transition to the forefront of their policy priorities, which has led to frictions with African nations. Many in the Global South fear the green agenda could hinder the development of late-industrialised economies. This is *not* to say that African countries – their leaders and populations – don't care about climate change, as they clearly do. They are already suffering disproportionately from it and stand to face harsh economic consequences in the coming years, too.

The apparent rift between Western and African interests stems from two concepts: reform and development. Central demands of Africa include reforming multilateral institutions, easing debt burdens and ensuring the right to sustainable development — calling on the Global North to honour its climate commitments and finance climate action. These are not only African demands either, as the BRICS+ Summit in Kazan showed. Its final declaration saw the reform of multilateral institutions and economic cooperation for just development as two core points.

The UAE plays a key role here, acting as a mouthpiece for these agendas

and addressing the issue of energy supply, regardless of whether it is green energy or oil-based. Abu Dhabi follows a dual strategy in this: developing green alternatives (with African-mined minerals) while supporting a gradual phase-out by continuing to supply refined oil.

UAE strategy and tactics

The UAE presents its Africa strategy as primarily business-based. The country offers goods and services – refined petroleum, infrastructure, logistics – while buying African products like gold, precious stones and critical minerals for its tech industry. Yet, gold, as the most exported good from Africa to the UAE, presents an interesting insight into some of the ways economics and politics actually intertwine in UAE-African relations. International reports accuse the country of laundering gold for Kremlin and Wagner Group sources in Africa. Additionally, there are claims of imports from rebel-controlled mines in Darfur, as well as other measures to secure the UAE's economic interests, such as access to gold and ports on the Red Sea coast, fuelling Sudan's civil conflict and sourcing Sudanese fighters to join its war in Yemen.

Notwithstanding, the UAE avoids political and ideological discourse, positioning itself as being outside of Great Power competition. This narrative reflects the worldview of UAE policy-makers. They see the world not as a polarised zero-sum game but as an interconnected network of complementary nodes. In it, the UAE aims to be a central node connecting continents. This discourse, however, also serves to mask other facets of its engagement in Africa, such as in Sudan.

Granted, a business approach is key to UAE engagement, especially through state-owned enterprises. Dubai Ports World (DP World) and AD Ports Group (ADP) act as beachheads, operating 13 ports in eight African countries, with six new deals signed in the past four years. They also run a vast network of transport infrastructure, including railways and dry ports. Experts even note that 'the UAE is the only country capable of competing with China in Eastern and Western Africa', even overtaking the latter as Africa's largest backer of new business projects.

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Another newcomer to the BRCIS+ group, Egypt, was the largest beneficiary of Abu Dhabi's investment, hosting 34 UAE-financed projects totalling $27.6 billion. Egypt is an interesting example to illustrate the duality of the UAE's strategy. The UAE invests in port infrastructure, wind farms and solar plants to gain favour with Cairo both to secure strategic

trade routes – Red Sea and Suez Canal – and for regional security disputes — supporting the Haftar-led militia in Libya to oppose Türkiye.

Hence, there is a clear spill-over effect from port/infrastructure projects into defence and security partnerships. This is true for many African countries, where DP World and ADP projects have been followed by arms exports, defence industry deals, or military and police training agreements.

The October 2024 BRICS+ Summit in Kazan was an insight into a changing world. The group is questioning the traditional 'bloc thinking' that still lingers in the West. Its own heterogeneity translates into what the group sets out to be: not an alternative model to the Western-dominated world order, but rather an ever-growing diverse group of countries that are dissatisfied with the current world order, that demand reforms and that refuse to let themselves be grouped into blocs.

The UAE has understood this for a long time. It joined BRICS+ not to close doors to the West, but to gain a seat at the table with rivals and partners. From now on, the UAE government has a guaranteed high-level meeting with China and Russia at least once a year. Given the complexity of their relationships, it is likely to be well explored. When it comes to bilateral relations with African nations, the UAE has also gained a seat at a forum where it can directly reach out to some of its well-established partners, fellow members South Africa, Egypt and Ethiopia, as well as further engage with newly-welcomed partner states Nigeria, Algeria and Uganda.



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