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Beyond Washington: Africa's Emerging Trade Axis with the Gulf, China, and Russia

Michael W. Wilson*

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Beyond Washington: Africa's Emerging Trade Axis with the Gulf, China, and Russia

Under President Donald J. Trump, America's policy toward Africa has shifted from soft-power engagement to a more transactional and disengaged approach. In 2025, the State Department announced plans to close seven of its African embassies in favor of regional offices, signaling a retreat from direct diplomatic presence. More recently, the administration postponed a planned US-Africa Summit to be held on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, citing certain global conflicts as higher priorities. These moves underscore a clear deprioritization of Africa in Washington's foreign policy and diminish America's image and influence on the continent.

America is also undermining its economic relationships in Africa by dismantling foreign development agencies and canceling foreign aid distributions. In August 2025, the United States imposed a 15-30% tariff on 22 African countries. South Africa, Libya, Algeria, and Tunisia faced the steepest penalties. The tariffs have eroded confidence towards the US and portrayed Washington as an unreliable trading partner. For impacted countries, including South Africa, Ghana, Angola, and Cameroon, the trade war had an immediate impact on their economies. There are looming threats of job losses and factory closures in Ghana's cocoa sector and South Africa's automotive industry as demand falls and exporting costs increase.

Before the tariff deadline of August 1, 2025, the White House failed to secure trade deals with African countries, despite efforts by African leaders to do so, as it did in countries like the United Kingdom, underscoring the lack of priority given to Africa. The more significant question, however, lies with the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), which expired in September 2025. Through the AGOA, since 2000, 30 African countries have benefited from duty-free access to American markets for over 6,500 products, particularly in the textile, agricultural, and automotive sectors. America's new stance on trade and tariffs suggests an unwillingness to extend AGOA's mandate, potentially jeopardizing African exporters.

Further withering away economic relations with Africa, US Senators have lobbied the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to halt the distribution of aid packages to countries such as Ghana until US creditors are reimbursed. Additionally, in 2024, the IMF delayed distributing a USD 600 million relief package in Kenya after the country failed to comply with conditions tied to the disbursement.

By sidelining Africa, Washington has created a vacuum for other powers to expand their foothold, including the Gulf states, China, and Russia, as they offer capital without the same stringent conditions. In this regard, the Eastern powers are navigating towards the continent for economic diversification. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar are investing in the continent's energy, agriculture, minerals, and infrastructure sectors. While China expands its control of critical minerals and roads, Russia focuses its investment and trade on the Sahel mining sector. For African governments, the message is clear: if the US deprioritizes the continent, others are ready to offer trade and investment in its place.

Africa's Shift East

Africa has emerged as a top priority for the Gulf states, China, and Russia as they look to boost trade throughout the continent. Responding to President Trump's trade policy towards Africa, China eliminated customs duties on imports from 20 African countries, an expansion of the 33 African states that already benefit from duty-free access to Chinese markets. In 2024, China-Africa trade neared USD 300 billion. Amid the current circumstances, trade volumes will likely increase. Beijing experienced a 26% surge in its exports to African partners in September 2025.

Other partners have moved to position themselves as Africa's preferred trading partners. In May 2025, the Saudi Export-Import Bank signed four strategic agreements aimed at strengthening trade and investment with Africa50, the Ghana Export-Import Bank, Blend International Limited, and Guinea's Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation. In 2023, Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman committed USD 10 billion to finance Saudi exports to Africa, underscoring the Kingdom's quest to grow trade with Africa.

The UAE has made similar advances. In 2021, the Abu Dhabi Exports Office offered a line of credit to the Trade and Development Bank to support African exports. The UAE also signed Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreements (CEPAs) with Kenya and the Republic of Congo in 2025, which will increasingly enable African exports to reach Asian and Middle Eastern markets.

Infrastructure and Regional Integration

Infrastructure investments are crucial for regional integration, which will in turn support trade. The African Development Bank estimates the continent needs 130 to 170 billion USD annually to address its transport logistics challenges; however, average annual investments remain at around USD 80 billion. New investment partners and models that increasingly favor the private sector are needed to close this gap and ultimately contribute to regional integration.

Outside of direct trade, the Gulf states, China, and Russia have each contributed to regional integration throughout the continent. Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative has constructed roads and railways in Kenya and Ghana, amongst others, while the UAE's DP World has developed 12 ports across the continent, including recent investments in Senegal and Congo. Saudi Arabia's Vision Invest invested USD 700 million in ARISE IIP, an integrated industrial zones developer with operations in 14 African countries, including special economic zones, food processing, and storage facilities in Gabon, Chad, and Rwanda.

Qatar Airways is modernizing the Bugesera Airport in Rwanda, aspiring to transform it into the trading hub of East Africa. In August 2025, Qatari Sheikh Mansour bin Jabour Al-Thani pledged to invest USD 102 billion in infrastructure, logistics, and energy across Mozambique, Botswana, Burundi, the DRC, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. These initiatives demonstrate how powers are improving Africa's logistics and transport networks, paving the way for greater trade integration.

The infrastructure and investment strategies of the Gulf states, China, and Russia toward Africa are increasingly complementary, as they have pursued major railway projects that strengthen trade relations. State-owned Russian Railways is expanding its presence in Africa, targeting Burkina Faso, Ghana, South Africa, and Libya to develop regional rail networks to transport goods and people.

The UAE is also growing its role in African logistics infrastructure. In June 2025, Etihad Rail signed MoUs with Chad, Kenya, South Sudan, and Uganda to build long-term strategic partnerships in railway construction, including a USD 3 billion railway network spanning the Horn of Africa, connecting the Berbera Port in Somaliland to Ethiopia, and a railway line connecting Cameroon and Chad.

This builds on earlier Chinese-led efforts, notably China's completion of the first phase of the Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) in Kenya, linking Mombasa to Nairobi and planned extensions toward Uganda. When China completed the first phase of the SGR in 2019, Nairobi turned to Abu Dhabi to complete the second phase, showing how Gulf and Chinese infrastructure efforts can be sequential and complementary rather than competitive.

The Saudi-headquartered Islamic Development Bank further reinforced this integration by approving USD 800 million for Uganda's railway, which will connect the SGR to Kenya's port of Mombasa, effectively consolidating a trade route linking Africa's interior to the Gulf and onward toward the Indian Ocean and East Asian markets. This demonstrates the Gulf states' growing focus on regional integration and creating East-oriented trade corridors, aligning strategically with China's Belt and Road Initiative.

Towards an East-Oriented Trade Corridor

As these projects expand, the trend toward east-oriented trade corridors becomes increasingly visible. The Gulf, China, and Russia are developing complementary infrastructure that, taken together, forms the backbone of a new commercial route linking Africa's interior to Gulf ports, the Indian Ocean, and Asian markets.

Amid mounting Western-backed sanctions, Russia is prioritizing trade relations with African partners, which in 2024 exceeded USD 25 billion. It aims to include Africa in the North-South Transport Corridor (NSTC) to facilitate direct trade links between Russia and African markets and offer African countries new access points to Eurasian and Asian trade networks.

Russia seeks to use Gulf ports to deliver goods across Africa; however, this depends on the success of other regional integration projects. The NSTC links Russian ports to Iran, the Gulf region, and the Indian Ocean, offering another avenue for Gulf-Russia cooperation and underscoring the importance of a coordinated trade route that leverages their shared interests.

Gulf-China collaboration also emerges in the energy sector, underscoring the potential for pragmatic cooperation rather than rivalry. In South Africa, as the country faces an escalating energy crisis, Saudi Arabia's ACWA Power is leading the development of the Redstone Concentrated Solar Power Plant, while the Chinese firm SEPCO III is overseeing its engineering, procurement, and construction. This partnership exemplifies how both regions can pool financial and technical capacities to deliver projects in African markets, leveraging Gulf capital and Chinese engineering at scale.

Critical minerals, particularly uranium and rare earths, provide another nexus for multilateral cooperation. The Gulf states, China, and Russia all share an interest in uranium for nuclear energy purposes. Together, they could envision a resource and trade corridor stretching from Niger and Mali, both rich in uranium, through Chad and the Sahel, towards the Horn of Africa, linking these deposits to Gulf ports and onward to Asian and Eurasian markets.

Russia's presence in the region provides additional leverage: through the Wagner Group's and now Moscow's state-backed entities' involvement in the Central African Republic (CAR) and northern Chad, Russia has secured access to mining concessions, facilitated the export of strategic minerals, and provided logistical and security backing to regimes in exchange for trade and infrastructure access. These dynamics complement Gulf and Chinese investments by stabilizing trade routes and creating potential avenues for trilateral cooperation in logistics, energy, and resource extraction.

Despite these parallel efforts, greater cooperation among the Gulf states, China, and Russia is essential to move beyond the current fragmented approach. Coordinated investments would help transform these overlapping projects into a unified framework for continental continuity and consolidate the eastward trade corridors emerging across Africa.

A case in point is the Lobito Corridor, which traverses a mineral-rich region, attracting several geopolitical parties. Given its proximity to shared waterways with Europe and America, Western powers are eager to secure access to these minerals. Private American and European companies formed a consortium to build and operate the Lobito Atlantic Railway to transport minerals between Congo and Angola. The Lobito Corridor unlocks mineral wealth, creates new agricultural and fuel supply chains, and promotes regional integration. This model demonstrates how Eastern powers could similarly cooperate in the private sector to establish their own integrated trade route, linking Africa's resource corridors to Gulf ports and Asian markets.

Cooperation among these regions is already evidenced through BRICS, where African, Gulf, Chinese, and Russian economies are deepening their ties. Member states have discussed forming a BRICS currency to enhance intra-bloc trade, while establishing bilateral agreements and financial mechanisms to facilitate commerce on both macro and microeconomic levels. A coordinated Gulf-China-Russia approach in Africa could thus become a practical extension of these multilateral ambitions.

Conclusion

Africa's trade and investment landscape is undergoing a profound realignment. As the United States retreats from its engagement through tariffs, aid cuts, and a diminished diplomatic footprint, it is ceding ground to a coalition of Eastern powers eager to fill the void. The Gulf states, China, and Russia have each advanced distinct yet complementary strategies emphasizing infrastructure, logistics, and resource-based partnerships over traditional aid and conditionality.

Accordingly, a web of connectivity is emerging across Africa linking Gulf ports, Chinese-built railways, and Russian-backed mineral corridors. Across the continent, Gulf and Chinese investments are steering regional integration. Consequently, Russia, through its presence in Chad and the CAR, stands to benefit from this integration and expanding access to mineral resources sought after by both the Gulf and China.

The United States' transactional and fragmented approach contrasts sharply with its competitors' long-term, state-driven strategies. If Washington continues to deprioritize Africa, its influence will continue to wane as the Gulf states, China, and Russia deepen their economic and strategic partnerships in its place. Cooperation among these regions, formalized through frameworks such as BRICS and reinforced by joint investments in logistics, energy, and mining, signals the formation of a new trade axis spanning Africa, the Gulf, and Eurasia.

In this shifting order, Africa stands to benefit from diversified partnerships and expanded infrastructure, but it must also navigate the strategic dependencies that accompany them. The continent's ability to negotiate balanced, mutually beneficial arrangements will determine whether this new era of Gulf–China–Russia engagement translates into genuine development or simply redefines existing imbalances in global trade.

Michael W. Wilson is a Researcher at the Gulf Research Center (GRC)

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Gulf Research Center
Jeddah
(Main office)

19 Rayat Alitihad Street
P.O. Box 2134
Jeddah 21451
Saudi Arabia
Tel: +966 12 6511999
Fax: +966 12 6531375
Email: info@grc.net

Gulf Research Center
Riyadh

Unit FN11A
King Faisal Foundation
North Tower
King Fahd Branch Rd
Al Olaya Riyadh 12212
Saudi Arabia
Tel: +966 112112567
Email: info@grc.net

Gulf Research Center
Foundation Geneva

Avenue de France 23
1202 Geneva
Switzerland
Tel: +41227162730
Email: info@grc.net

Gulf Research Centre
Cambridge

University of Cambridge
Sidgwick Avenue,
Cambridge CB3 9DA
United Kingdom
Tel:+44-1223-760758
Fax:+44-1223-335110

Gulf Research Center
Foundation Brussels

Avenue de
Cortenbergh 89
4th floor, 1000
Brussels
Belgium

@Gulf_Research Gulfresearchcenter gulfresearchcenter gulfresearchcenter

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