

# Belle of the ball: Rwanda's role in great power politics

20 August 2018

## Rwanda's leadership role in Africa

President Paul Kagame has utilised his position as the current chair of the African Union (AU) this year to become a regional trend-setter, with major developments in African integration initiatives. As the first country to ratify the Free Movement of Persons Protocol and the third to ratify the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA), Rwanda has set the example for other states to implement the ambitious agreements that aim to transform the AU into a larger economic union. Positive investments from Volkswagen for a new factory in Kigali last month have also highlighted Rwanda's growing presence as a regional investment hub.

In addition to the economic goals which President Kagame has pursued, Rwanda is a key security ally for the United Nations (UN), being the world's third biggest peacekeeping contributor with deployments in the Central African Republic (CAR), Darfur and South Sudan amongst others. At a time when peacekeeping budgets are decreasing, and missions are being stretched, Rwanda's troop contributions will continue to give President Kagame leverage within the UN.

With predictions of an eruption of violence after the December 2018 elections in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Rwanda's leadership of the AU will likely be integral for creating a unified African response to the issue. This position as a regional power broker has attracted the interest of the USA, China and Russia who have all targeted Rwanda for defence engagement.

## US/EU relationship

There are indications that tensions have developed with western powers as an ongoing trade dispute over used clothing could derail Rwanda's relationship with the USA given that President Donald Trump is threatening to revoke free trade benefits. In contrast to other East African states such as Kenya and Uganda who reneged on used clothing tariffs, Rwanda is playing a trailblazing role in challenging the USA.

A two-week military exercise from the 14<sup>th</sup> August to the 30<sup>th</sup> August, organised by EU and American troops in Gako, Southern Rwanda, will aim to reduce these growing tensions and reinforce security ties. Rwanda's readily available peacekeeping forces provide the USA and the EU an opportunity to support operations without directly contributing their own forces.

Rwanda still receives large investments of aid from the EU and the USA, which provides western powers with a method for preserving its political and security links. If the USA begins to see frictions in its economic ties with Rwanda, it would most likely turn to its close security co-operation as a strategy to maintain influence in the country.

### Expanding Chinese relations

After Xi Jinping's well-received state visit on 23 July, China has capitalised on Rwanda's desire to enlarge its manufacturing, infrastructure and tourism sectors with a series of fifteen new agreements. Perhaps most important is the agreement on the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which will connect Rwanda as part of a global transport network led by China.

Although Chinese influence has tended to focus on economic development, there are signs that China is expanding security ties with Rwanda in line with other African states such as Djibouti. China's rising military presence has been a concern for US policymakers with estimates from the Pentagon suggesting that China's defence spending will increase by over 20% to USD\$280bn in 2028. Moreover, Chinese arms supply to Africa has experienced a 55% increase over the past ten years which is indicative of their growing status within the Continent.

Closer economic and political connections with China have the potential to destabilise the USA's relationship with Rwanda if President Kagame intensifies opposition to the importation of American goods. It is possible that Rwanda will use investments from the Chinese government to outweigh the impacts of a loss in American trade.

### Russian ties

Added to the security environment in Rwanda is the new ally of Russia, who have targeted the sales of arms and training for peacekeeping missions. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov paid an important visit to Kigali in June which outlined plans for the sale of air defence systems and investments in nuclear energy. Despite these talks still being in their early stages, the alignment with Russia on defence issues shows that there are weaknesses in America's relationship with Rwanda.

Russia's security co-operation has been seen across many other African states with discussions to build Russian military bases in Somalia and Sudan. Recently, Russia has supported the ruling government in the CAR to contain rebel groups with arms supply deals, advisors to President Touadéra and peacekeeping training teams. Since Rwanda is the largest police contributor to the CAR, Russia are almost certain to employ its close relations with the country to support its arms trade to the CAR. Alarmed by the growth of Russian arms in the CAR and the challenge to American arms exports (currently the largest to the CAR), the USA has initiated diplomatic efforts and more equipment to gain greater support from the CAR government.

### Small country, big influence

For a small country of 12.5 million people, Rwanda is punching above its weight on the world stage with substantial military involvement in foreign missions and continued support from the international business community. Rwanda may be pursuing a shift in foreign policy considering that a recent meeting held by East African leaders in Kigali saw the denouncement of foreign military bases in Africa and raised concerns that foreign militaries were making the African security situation worse.

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On the one hand, Rwanda is supporting foreign security investment and arms sales to modernise its armed forces and better equip itself for peacekeeping missions but is also promoting greater African independence on the other. Rwanda will most likely balance the security interests of all three major powers to further funding and training for its military. The further deterioration of relations between the USA and China or the USA and Russia could call for security investment in Rwanda to be ramped up as states fight for influence in East Africa. A shift away from Rwanda's historically close ally of the USA is possible given that China and Russia are becoming bigger economic stakeholders in the country.

Rwanda is sending mixed messages on the future of its security, but it appears to be holding the balance of power in a game of great power security interests.

