



## **Part 1: Why Africa Matters in Four Dimensions (4 March 2025)**

**By Chris W. J. Roberts**

**@cwjroberts or [www.cwjroberts.com](http://www.cwjroberts.com)**

**Find the series on *Linked In*, *Bluesky*, or *X* using [#CanadaAfricaStrategy](https://twitter.com/CanadaAfricaStrategy)**

After more than two years of study, consultations, shifts in emphasis, reining in expectations, and partial announcements, it seems Canada’s long-awaited “Africa Engagement Strategy” (which is just a guess at its final title) is finally nearing release. The timing is both propitious and precarious. Propitious in the sense that diversifying Canadian commercial and diplomatic relationships has taken on an existential dimension unfathomable just weeks ago. Precarious in terms of a lame-duck government releasing a new policy or strategy amidst a prorogued Parliament, an internal leadership battle, a trade war with the USA, and a potential future prime minister promising to curtail spending on foreign affairs to invest in Arctic security and “Canada First”.

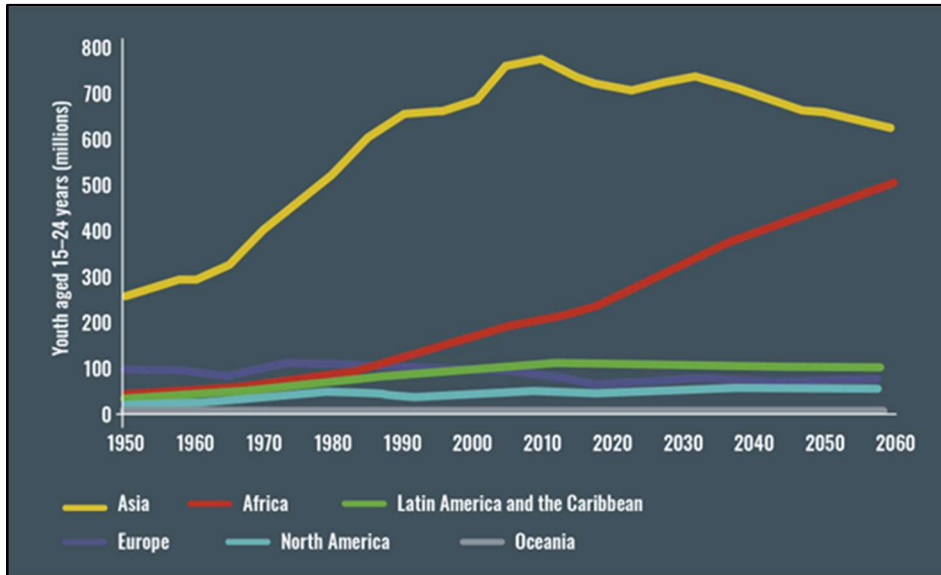
That said, this series of interventions on Canada’s approach to Africa will focus on why rethinking Canada’s relationship with African countries, organizations, peoples, and markets is more imperative in 2025 than ever before, and provide some recommendations about what a new strategy might entail (and then turn to reviewing the Strategy once it is released). As one of a handful of Canadians who can truly say they’ve operated in these trenches for thirty years – a long experience which remains underleveraged by policy-makers in Ottawa and elsewhere during a critical period in Canada-Africa relations, with an impending G7 Summit returning to Kananaskis where Canada once kept the “African Renaissance” on the agenda in 2002 despite the immediate aftermath of 9/11 – I’ve never seen this level of attention, momentum, and external forces generated for rethinking Canada’s approach to Africa.

There are now more MPs and Senators genuinely interested, maintaining friendly pressure on cabinet and senior bureaucrats to produce something substantive and avoid a value-signalling exercise. Provincial governments and universities increasingly include Africa in their international business development and student recruitment efforts. There are more direct flights to Africa from Canada than ever before, with hints of more coming. The African Diaspora(s) across the country is/are mobilized, building bridges across communities and looking for ways to contribute their knowledge, expertise, networks, and capital as they seek to shift narratives from charity and poverty to partnership and prosperity. A Canadian-educated Diaspora across the continent provides a natural reservoir of sympathetic partners who understand Canada’s value propositions. Businesses across a range of sectors are more open to African opportunities, though often constrained in pursuing them by limited support mechanisms from the Canadian government and financial sector compared to almost all competitors on the continent. Still, some individual Canadians are already using creative investing directly in African businesses and investment funds, attuned to investment returns *and* transformational

impacts (more on this in a future article). The two objectives can certainly align. But much more can be done to energize these trends and position Canada and Canadians as a preferred partner. It is, to reiterate, an urgent component of Canadian diversification.

### Influence of the Four D's: Demographics, Demand, Democracy, and Diasporas

Before future parts of this series delve into specific aspects and recommendations within the various domains of Canada-Africa relations, it is necessary to articulate why

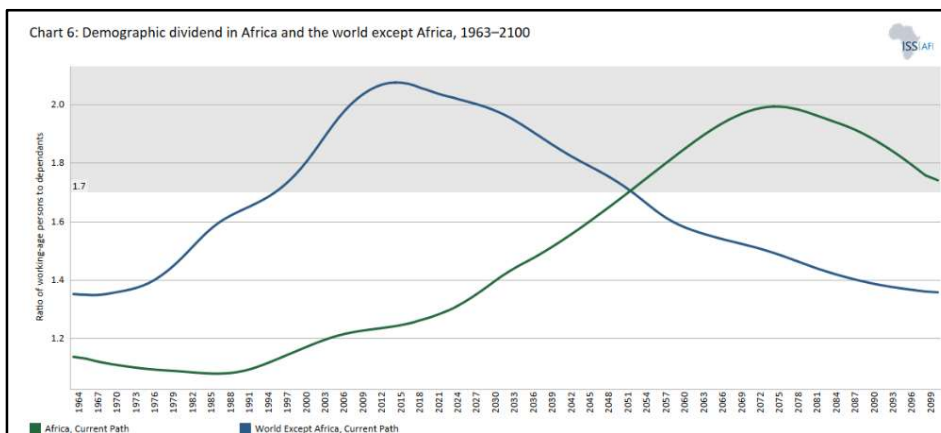


Canada needed to go through this (often tortuous) policy exercise. Canada needs to respond to Africa's changing weight in global economic and diplomatic affairs. As I



said during the recent, energizing [Age of Africa Symposium](#) in Toronto (7-8 February 2025), it is useful to conceive of the global structural influence of Africa in four dimensions, what I call the **4D's: demographics, demand, democracy, and Diasporas**.

First, and most widely understood, **demographic** trends in Africa are unlike the rest of world. Africa is both the youngest continent, with the median population around twenty-years old, and has the highest fertility rates. That means Africa's 1.3 billion population today could double by 2050, and potentially reach 3 billion by 2063. Even if, under different scenarios, most countries see a more rapid decline in population growth than

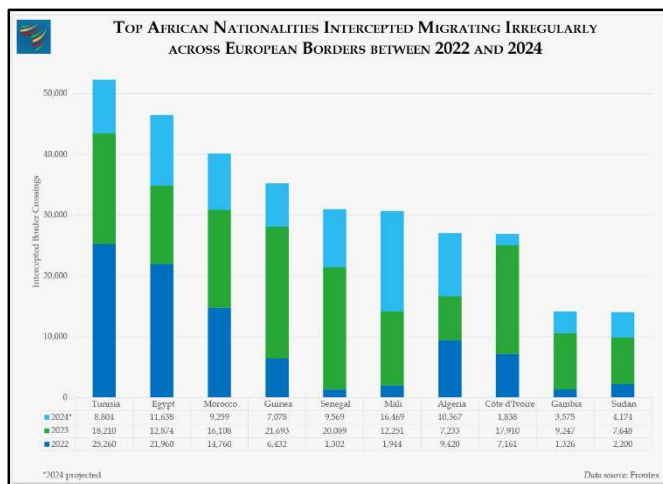


currently forecast, Africans will comprise the largest ratio of working-age population as every other region sees their population

get older. A national demographic dividend only kicks in as the ratio of working age population grows in relation to dependents (children and elderly). A ratio above 1.7 is ideal (see graph above): most African countries are still up to three decades away from achieving that ratio. But some African countries will hit that sweet spot sooner than others, and with good governance and economic policy, those countries could see decades-long high growth rates mirroring China (1980s-2000s) or Botswana (late 1960s-late 1990s).

What then are the immediate demographic influences? First, the large and growing cohort of African youth will be the future workers, consumers, and innovators that drive both continental and global growth. Africa will shortly replace China and India as the global growth pole through the rest of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Second, that young population will continue to shape cultural production and consumption too, with those influences already global. Tech-savvy generations can produce, promote, and distribute digital and non-digital cultural products more easily than ever before. Third, Africa is the fastest urbanizing continent, with the level of urbanization lagging every other region. That creates all sorts of pressures for infrastructure and governance, but it can also make it easier to improve access to education, electricity, and employment opportunities. Concurrently, rural development opportunities in terms of improving agricultural productivity and employment income, local food security, more direct linkages to export markets (e.g., increasing income for farmers rather than multinational corporations) and the potentials of remote work, tourism, and alternative approaches to delivering infrastructure provide a potentially helpful break on overly rapid urbanization.

Lastly, beyond rural to urban migration, international migration by choice or by forced circumstance across borders and oceans will only grow if more economic opportunities are not created quickly enough, or if conflict and repression are not

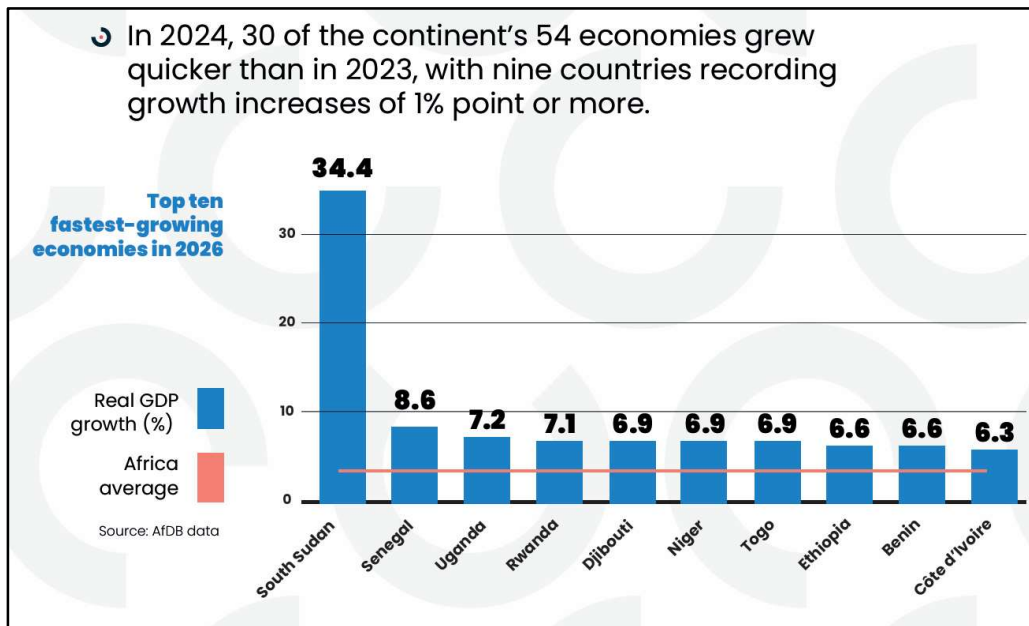


reduced. For example, Guinea in 2023 and Mali in 2024 were the respective largest sources of “nationalities intercepted migrating irregularly across European borders.” Each country is still under military-led governments that have restricted political activity and curtailed economic freedom. Senegal had high levels of European-focused migration during its political crisis in 2023, but much reduced since the election of President Faye in early 2024. Both

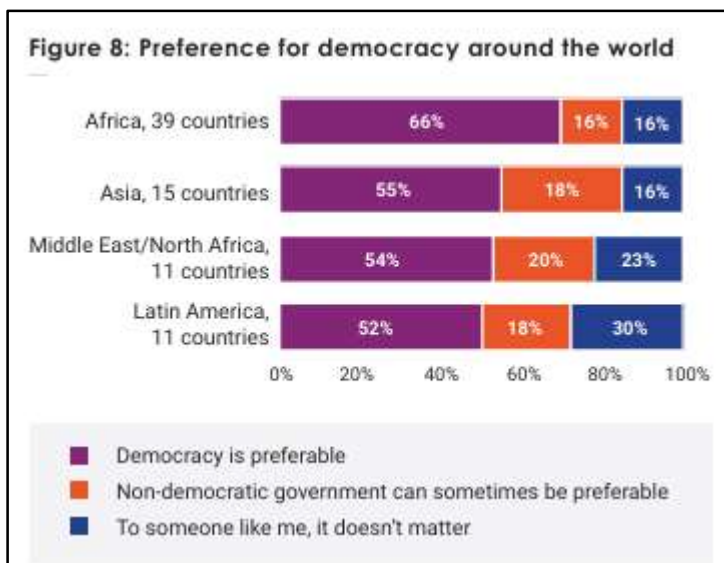
politics and economics matter to African youth who want better opportunities and more input into their futures. A realistic appraisal thus needs to assess both the challenges as much as the opportunities inherent in Africa’s youth bubble, but no one can ignore the basic reality of a working-age population shift from China (yesterday), to India (today), to Africa (tomorrow). (For a detailed look at Africa’s demographic trends, visit <https://futures.issafrica.org/thematic/03-demographic-dividend>.)

Given those demographic trends discussed above, the second D to consider is **demand**: for jobs, opportunities, prosperity; for electricity and energy of all types; for education; for healthcare; for infrastructure, innovation, and technology; for capital; for

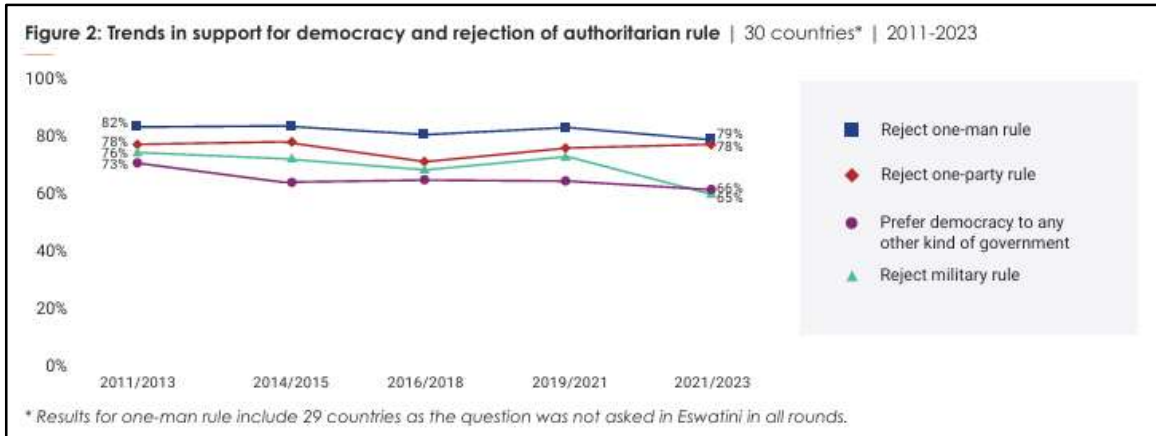
autonomous development, respect, security, and freedom; for relevant cultural products; and for inclusive politics and partnerships (nationally and internationally). With nominal continental GDP per capita still by far the lowest among any region, Africa has the most potential for high growth rates given unmet demands across all these sectors and themes. As the Concerto chart illustrates below (using African Development Bank data), most African countries are showing momentum towards greater growth, and forecasting out to 2026 – with the usual caveats about underlying assumptions – many countries will surpass the 6% growth rate that, if sustained, is required to move the needle on poverty alleviation and prosperity especially if population growth is 2% or higher. (Note that the South Sudan forecast assumes political stability and revived oil income, and that is built on a very low base plus volatile and incomplete economic statistics.) Meeting the real demands of people needs to be at the heart of both African governmental policy-making and external actors’ calculations around how to engage as partners not patrons.



Third, in a world where **democracy** is under threat on every continent, the

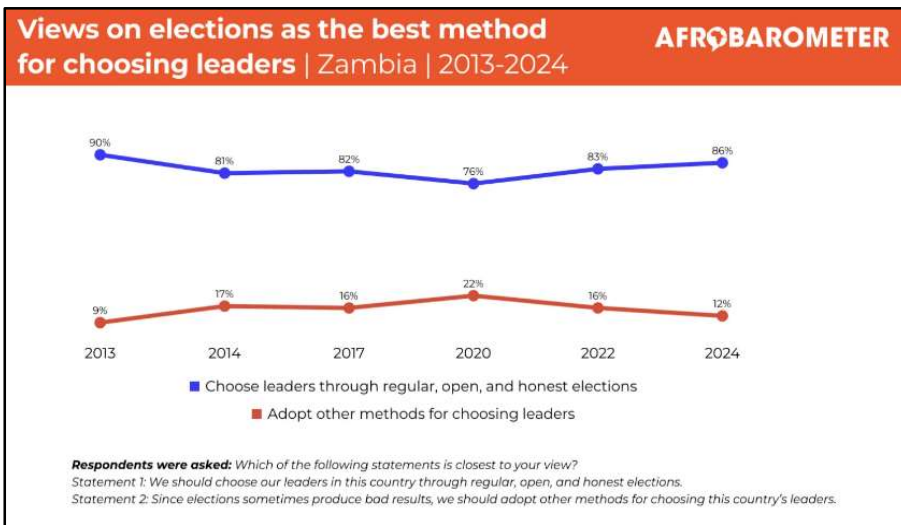


demand for accountable and effective governance in Africa remains strong. Despite popular coups in some places and autocratic rulers who rule for decades, Africans are generally more convinced than others that “democracy is preferable” to non-democratic government (with reference to some Afrobarometer charts from the *African Insights 2024: Democracy at risk – the people’s perspective report*). There has been less overall resistance to the idea of



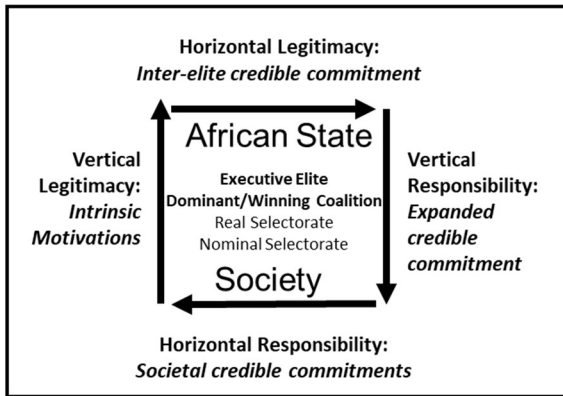
military rule (dropping from 76% a decade ago to 65% by 2023), but fewer Africans today remember what military rule looked like in the 1960s-1980s (and even 1990s Nigeria). It will be interesting to revisit those numbers at the end of the 2020s after military rulers have been in power for longer periods: did they produce economic growth and security unlike the earlier generations of military rulers, or did lack of accountability and the concentration of power end up souring public support and delaying developmental progress? (There are few examples, globally, of military regimes improving security and prosperity over time.) The Afrobarometer Figure 2 above shows that most Africans still reject “one-man” or “one-party” rule, and two-thirds still prefer democracy to any other kind of government. Many are not convinced that their democratic institutions are fully working (i.e., elections, effective institutions, independent judiciary, etc.), but they understand the difference between strategically rigged elections and those (as in Botswana and Senegal, for instance) that are free and fair.

In fact, relatively small Botswana, Namibia, and Senegal wield more influence both continentally and internationally today because of their recent elections and transfers of executive power: in two cases, a change in political party against strong incumbents, and in Namibia, a term-limit-induced leadership change in the ruling party, SWAPO, and an election victory produced the country’s first women president (Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah) who will be inaugurated on March 21<sup>st</sup>. In Zambia, a one-party state from



1972-1991, citizens are still committed to “regular, open, and honest elections” rather than other methods of choosing leaders despite significant economic and political challenges including an

international debt restructuring that took three years, a major drought, and a significant power deficit where many experience more load-shedding than electricity access.

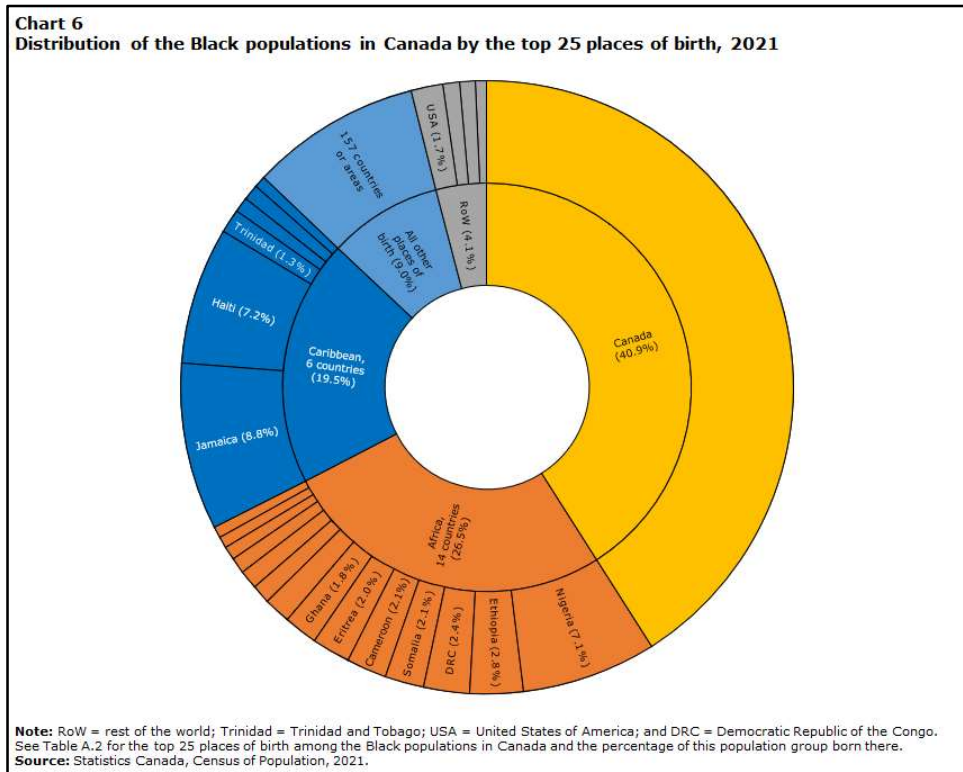


Democracy, it should be noted, is not simply a call for a specific Western constellation of political institutions, but instead for a configuration of political institutions that provide accountability-responsibility and legitimacy mechanisms and constraints between citizens and governments, citizens and other citizens, and political elites among themselves. Ultimately, how does society create mechanisms that underpin credible commitments so that individuals, families,

communities, companies, and governments can make long-term plans and will do what they say they will? (My political sciency graphic above would need another 1000 words to explain properly, so that's not going to happen here.) There are multiple pathways to a polity that creates the conditions for inclusive politics and broad-based prosperity, that is, a foundation for credible commitments, but as we've seen in Trump 2.0 USA, there is no guarantee those foundations are permanent. Democracy is always a work in progress, but one that is worth supporting at home and abroad.

Lastly, the fourth D is for **Diaspora**, meaning here the 1.5 million (as of 2021, so higher now) Black Canadians who trace their heritage back multiple generations, or more recently, to the African continent . This includes those of Caribbean or American descent

too. It should be added that "African Diasporas" in Canada must also include those from North Africa, non-Blacks from South Africa, Ismailis from East Africa, Lebanese from West Africa, etc., or members of any



community who have made a home in Canada but still maintain links to the continent. Those growing Diasporas create larger constituencies interested in Canada-Africa

relations, but more importantly are epistemic communities of experts, networks, and capital that can cement those relations in mutually beneficial ways. In its announcements of various initiatives in November 2024, Global Affairs Canada committed to “the establishment of a new diaspora engagement mechanism,” something many of us suggested in various consultation processes and which was included in Recommendation 23 of the House of Commons FAAE Standing Committee report, *A New Era of Partnerships: Canada’s Engagement with Africa* (Nov 2024).

Much work still needs to be done to understand the power of the Diasporas (which includes information gathering processes about numbers, interests, organizations, activities, etc., still in early stages), and to establish an effective “diaspora engagement mechanism.” Canada will hopefully learn lessons from the ill-fated “President’s Advisory Council on African Diaspora Engagement in the United States” created by the Biden Administration in late 2022 but dismantled by the incoming Trump Administration barely two years later. But it is clear that growing and increasingly active African Diaspora communities across Canada represent a considerable asset in any effort for Canada to re-engage on the continent in any kind of substantive way.

In summary, then, Africa’s structural significance for global affairs is driven by its **demographics**, how that converts into economic **demands** and demand for responsive and inclusive **democracy**, and how African **Diasporas** in Canada create people and market-based linkages that naturally draw Canada closer to most countries on the continent. None of that means that Canada-Africa relations will automatically capitalize on these opportunities, but ignoring these structural forces and Canada’s comparative advantages to contribute to African peace and prosperity is no longer an option in a disrupted and unpredictable geopolitical environment.

.....

**By Chris W. J. Roberts**

@cwjroberts or [www.cwjroberts.com](http://www.cwjroberts.com)

Find the series on *Linked In, Bluesky, or X* using #CanadaAfricaStrategy

