



## Part 2: Canada's Africa Strategy is out! An initial assessment (10 March 2025)

By Chris W. J. Roberts

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

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On 4 March 2025, the USA – or, more properly, the cabal of misguided Trump 2.0 tariff fetishists – finally pulled the trigger in its economic assault on Canada and Mexico (and ordinary Americans) with broad-based 25% tariffs as well as 10% on energy imports. Two days later, some tariffs were hastily walked back until the next deadline, April 2<sup>nd</sup>, or March 12<sup>th</sup>, or whenever Trump, Navarro, and Lutnick decide to play havoc again with millions of companies and families as well as the global equity markets.



Amidst this chaos, on March 6<sup>th</sup>, Canada stealthily released its long-awaited Africa Strategy in Toronto and online. (The date was perhaps selected as it is Ghana's Independence Day, and Canada solidified a special relationship with Ghana in 1957 by sending its Minister of Mines and Technical Surveys to the celebrations and opening its first High Commission in post-colonial Africa there. Or, the point was to release the document in the last week of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's government to put down a marker for any future PM. Or both.)

Much of what is in the new document was telegraphed in November 2024, but at least we now have a complete policy document that actually retained the word "strategy" in the title. Better late than never, and better a full "strategy" than a framework or a guideline.

Given a prorogued Parliament, a federal Liberal Party leadership transition (from Justin Trudeau to Mark Carney), and the sword of Trump-acles hanging over continental free trade, it is hardly ideal timing for a new policy announcement that is intended to shape Canada's relations with an entire region for years to come. A new Prime Minister or two within the next few months will have their own priorities, so, as in February 2007 (see a future article in this series), it is entirely possible this document becomes just another discursive artifact rather than a substantive policy driver or foundation. Buried behind an earlier-that-Thursday Canadian government announcement about establishing three northern operational support hubs in the Arctic (again, better late than never) and the minute-by-minute tariff watch, only the relatively small constituency of Canadians

who see the continent of Africa as the weak link in Canadian global and business affairs are talking about the new strategy, and there is already a range of opinions and healthy debates. But Africa is the future and Canada needed a reset, so a quick assessment is in order (a human evaluation, not a soulless AI recapitulation). Future articles in this series will outline various opportunities and challenges in more detail, leveraging what's already in the document and what still needs to be done, keeping in mind that one should keep their analysis limited to their areas of competence. But let the initial dissection begin.

### **Evaluative Criteria for *Canada's Africa Strategy (or CAS)***

Realism is necessary here. Not everyone will be happy with any policy announcement. Policy-making always encompasses trade-offs, both financial and political. Compared to the threats from Trump on tariffs and annexation, Trump's changing sides in the War on Ukraine, or even the challenge of Arctic security, reassessing Canada's engagement with Africa is not, on its face, a comparable priority. But, from another perspective, if commercial diversification, a crumbling international order, vulnerable supply chains, and a loss of trust in once reliable allies are the themes of 2025, Africa beckons even more than when the policy review began over two years ago (see Part 1 for the African structural influences that Canada is responding to).

To provide as honest and quick assessment as possible, I'm going to lay out two sets of evaluative criteria and focus these initial remarks on alignment and misalignment with them. The first set of evaluative criteria is taken from my September 2024 submission to the final round of public consultations by GAC. Happy to share the full document if you are interested (email or DM me). But my five priority themes were as follows:

- (1) Put people first.**
- (2) Change the narrative.**
- (3) Fund knowledge and assessment.**
- (4) Build on Canada's comparative advantages in Africa.**
- (5) Build better partnerships in extractive industries (including energy and critical minerals).**

The second evaluative standard is more generic: are there clear policy objectives for the contemplated activities and initiatives, and how is progress going to be measured (metrics, key performance indicators, expected outcomes and impacts, etc.)? In other words, why bother: how does Canada benefit, how do we get there, and when might we know what success looks like? That's a crass statement to some, but we live in a world where "Canada First" attitudes and transactional considerations need to be addressed. Without firm geopolitical and commercial calculations entering the equation, or if cost-benefit and means-ends analysis are ignored, a future government (Carney, Poilievre) of whatever political stripe will expediently drop kick CAS into the deficit fighting abyss. And African governments and other stakeholders won't take the effort seriously either, seeing it as yet another value signalling exercise without deep roots in Canadian interests and without the political will to innovate and maintain momentum.

## CAS Summary

The following five strategic areas are taken directly from the “Summary” page of CAS (p.2) and are described as “aligned with the African Union’s *Agenda 2063*.” While not covering every detail, the summary provides the main themes and initiatives (emphasis in original). You can access the full CAS here (in English):

<https://www.international.gc.ca/gac-amc/assets/pdfs/publications/africa-strategy-en.pdf>

- (1) **Strengthening our diplomatic engagement and people-to-people ties**, including through new special envoys and embassies, expanded collaboration with the regional economic communities and parliaments, and a new diaspora engagement mechanism
- (2) **Enhancing economic cooperation**, including through a high-level trade mission to Africa, the creation of an Africa Trade Hub, additional support for the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area, negotiation of foreign investment promotion and protection agreements, and research partnerships
- (3) **Reducing poverty, supporting economic development, empowering youth, assisting in humanitarian crises and climate adaptation**, including through a new Africa Trade and Development Program, a new office of FinDev Canada, Canada’s bilateral development finance institution, in South Africa, investing in renewable energy and infrastructure, investing in youth and skills training, prioritizing the mobilization of finance, supporting adaptation and addressing biodiversity loss through Canada’s \$5.3-billion climate finance envelope, and building on decades of cooperation in global health and nutrition
- (4) **Bolstering partnerships for peace, security and human rights**, including by supporting African-led peace operations and conflict prevention initiatives, promoting the role of women and youth in peace and security, strengthening democracy and human rights, a revised Canadian approach to the Sahel, and the provision of technical assistance and support against numerous threats
- (5) **Advancing shared priorities through increased engagement on the global stage**, including by continuing to support increased African participation and influence in multilateral spaces and by working closely with African partners to address global challenges and opportunities

Also on the “Summary” page is the following important paragraph, as it provides some context for related initiatives announced in November 2024, Canadian bilateral assistance to Africa trends, as well as the growth in two-way merchandise trade:

Over the past 5 years, Canada has significantly stepped up its political engagement with Africa. This has included leader level high-level dialogues with the African Union Commission, the naming of new special envoys, a new embassy and 2 new high commissions. Canada has invested approximately \$4.5 billion in bilateral international assistance programming in Africa over the past 5 years to build African economies, support health and education and respond to humanitarian needs. International assistance for Africa has increased by 52% over the past 8 years. In 2024, the value of Canada’s merchandise trade with African countries totalled \$15.1 billion, an increase of nearly 30% in 5 years.

As neither CAS itself nor the accompanying press release provides any guidance as to financial commitments backing the Strategy – compared to the \$2.3 billion over five years for the Indo-Pacific Strategy announced in November 2022 – the paragraph highlights new resource commitments (i.e., three new full diplomatic missions don't come free) and the scale of bilateral assistance over the last five years. But whether there is any new money or just some reallocation or repurposing of existing budgets envisioned, the jury is still out.

### Hopeful signs ... with details mostly to be announced later

Much of what is in CAS was telegraphed back in November 2024. See <https://tinyurl.com/y4z5s3ak>. There were further details or hints about some of those initiatives in CAS, and only a few surprises. The following notes some of the hopeful signs, with inevitable caveats and questions.

- Overall, **there is a noticeable shift in narrative vis a vis Africa**, recognizing that “global economic and geo-political volatility” requires that “Canada must seize opportunities to strengthen its economic and national security,” including by diversifying investments, improving supply chain resiliency, maintaining transport routes for critical goods, all “while promoting local benefits in Africa.”
  - For example, the term “economic development” is used ten times in the document, compared to just four times for “development assistance.” Similarly, “prosperity” is mentioned twenty times, while “poverty” is used just six times.
  - Compared to decades of Canadian policy thinking and programming towards the Africa, CAS 2025 represents a substantive shift in the meta-narrative, where development assistance does not lead or dominate the relationship. There is, however, room for both more urgency and more humility.
  - First, Canada needs to recognize it is running from behind: it needs to work harder to regain influence, trust, and attractiveness as a partner on the continent when African governments, companies, and peoples have more options. That urgency should have been kicked into a higher gear given the tariff and annexation rhetoric coming from our once closest ally, and the “crisis in foreign aid” debates raging everywhere, including across Africa, that are less about maintaining traditional Official Development Assistance flows than rethinking the entire OECD aid regime in Africa. Good overviews by Bright Simons: <https://tinyurl.com/2kj544b6> and Ken Opalo: <https://tinyurl.com/ntkufzjs>
  - Second, there needs to be more articulation around strengthening Canada's comparative advantages while acknowledging the two-way nature of relationships: where is the openness to not just *share with* but *learn from*? This is as true in commercial spaces such as fintech as it is in the security domain, where many African militaries have much more warfighting, counter-terrorism, peacekeeping, or other operational experience compared to the Canadian Armed Forces today.
- CAS reiterated the **Africa Trade Hub**, a promising concept designed “to coordinate economic diplomacy and engagement across the Government of

- Canada as well as provincial and territorial governments.” This sounds similar to, but not quite as encompassing as, the “Africa Office” recommended by the Senate report in February 2007 to coordinate all African-oriented activities across the federal government, not just economic engagement.
- Will the Africa Trade Hub staff up or otherwise leverage researchers and practitioners from outside the civil service, or will it just be a new unit within GAC? Can the Africa Trade Hub be the mechanism that builds on Canadian comparative advantages and establishes ambitious trade and investment objectives which are not yet delineated?
  - A much-needed commitment to “**expand our analytical capability and understanding** of economic developments in Africa and their implications for Canada” hopefully means increasing cooperation with and resources for universities, think tanks, NGOs, and business associations in Canada and Africa, not just within GAC. It isn’t clear if this is related to the Africa Trade Hub (above) or a new **Africa Trade and Development Program** “which will support development initiatives that foster stronger trade and investment environments.”
  - Reconfirmed the importance of **Diaspora engagement**, though no details yet about the “new mechanism that involves youth and businesses.”
  - Announcement that **FinDev Canada**, our development finance institution created in 2018 in Montreal, **will open an office in Cape Town**, South Africa.
    - Very mixed feelings about this: the overhead to establish an overseas presence is considerable, while FinDev Canada’s investible assets for Africa are comparatively limited. There are minimal insights into FinDev’s impact or investment returns to date either, or a rationale for how an expensive Cape Town office enhances deal flow (Export Development Canada has its South African office in Johannesburg, the commercial and banking centre of the country). Many Canadians and others I’ve spoken to already find FinDev in Montreal impenetrable except for large, already well-resourced funds and companies. That said, if FinDev Canada was going to get extra resources to work on energy infrastructure or critical minerals priorities, Abidjan, Accra, or Lusaka would make far more sense (more on that in Part 3).
  - There is recognition and prioritization in different segments of CAS that **Canada should “promote mutually beneficial resilient supply chains and the responsible, inclusive and sustainable production of critical minerals in Africa** in line with the Canadian Critical Minerals Strategy,” though without any specifics. (This will be a focus in Part 3 of this series.) Throughout there is an assumption that critical minerals are mostly important for the global energy transition, but that misses the broader importance of critical minerals including copper – and extractive industries more broadly – to drive expanded energy/electricity and industrial development *in Africa*.
    - Electricity generation and access, the biggest deficit and obstacle to growth facing most countries on the continent today, is not expressly addressed in CAS: “electricity” is never mentioned, and more than half of the eleven mentions of the word “energy” is limited to green, renewable, or solar forms (climate was mentioned 23 times). As I mentioned in my September 2024 submission to GAC, Western (including Canadian)

hypocrisy that imposes limits to energy production in Africa while we ramp up oil and natural gas output and exports is hardly conducive to being taken seriously.

- Despite the chaos initiated by the Trump administration in American foreign assistance around the world, the recent invocation by US Energy Secretary Christopher Wright that “I don’t care where energy comes from. The only goal of energy is to expand human opportunity,” is exciting many across Africa. “This government,” he said, “has no desire to come and tell you what you should do with your energy system,” as doing so is “so nonsensical, paternalistic, and postcolonial.” Canadians must take note.

In summary then, in relation to my recommended five priority areas, I have to admit that there was progress made in all five:

(1) **Put people first:** With full resident missions in Rwanda, Benin, and Zambia, Canada increases its diplomatic footprint and on ground presence. The announcements about “a high-level trade mission” (Team Canada-style?), Special Envoys, and the expanded outreach to the African Union (including as a G20 member), Regional Economic Communities, and continuing support for the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) can all build more high-level connections over time. Increasing the number of Air Transport Agreements, which could drive more direct flights to the continent for business or pleasure, would also improve people-to-people ties.

(2) **Change the narrative.** The movement away from prioritizing development assistance, humanitarian issues, and poverty alleviation towards partnership, investment, and prosperity is commendable. The Africa Trade Hub and African Trade and Development Program could cement this approach into the future, as well as a continuing focus on “innovative financing instruments.”

(3) **Fund knowledge and assessment.** At least on paper, the commitment is there.

(4) **Build on Canada’s comparative advantages in Africa.** This is the least developed, but reading between the lines various strands can be pulled together if the proposed mechanisms (Africa Trade Hub, Diaspora mechanism, Africa Trade and Development Program, and the ambiguous references to critical minerals) leverage better knowledge and assessment to strengthen and promote Canadian comparative advantages. Both the Commonwealth and Francophonie get mentioned, briefly, and it might be time for Canada to reinvigorate bilateral and multilateral relationships via these existing networks.

(5) **Build better partnerships in extractive industries (including energy and critical minerals).** Language around this was more prevalent than expected, with some of the limitations pointed out above. But, again, this will be a focus of Part 3 of this series.

### **But what’s missing or problematic in CAS?**

I’ve identified seven lost opportunities or missing pieces that currently limits the impact of CAS. Some of these lapses, however, can still be fixed.

- 1) For those of us closely watching this file for over two years, **the often delayed and then stealthy launch on March 6<sup>th</sup> reduced the overall impact.** A handful of stakeholders were invited, but few in the media were alerted in advance and the

event took place in Toronto rather than in Ottawa where, for instance, the African diplomatic corps and Parliament Hill media could have been invited. The impression was a hasty release without much fanfare so as to not draw too much attention. Expectations management since the fall had already signalled a more modest strategy than hoped, and political turmoil certainly didn't help. But Canada lost an opportunity to use the launch of its first ever comprehensive strategy to convince Africans (and many Canadians) of its seriousness. In addition to some substantive gaps, the release process itself will require political leadership and senior policy-makers to repair some of the damage.

- 2) A bigger issue, however, was **no mention of associated funding in the press release or CAS document**. While this isn't a huge surprise given a prorogued Parliament and other pressing priorities, there are few signals of what might be intended. Even repurposing existing funds from different departments could have been part of more specific announcements about how some of the November 2024 initiatives are going to be operationalized. Hopefully, if CAS survives the next few weeks or months, new or reallocated resources surpass the \$50,000 (yes, total) external funding that was part of the *Africa Trade Strategy* release in May 2000. The Canada Fund for Africa announced around the (then) G8 Summit in Kananaskis in 2002 mobilized \$500 million for a wide range of initiatives (which would be equivalent to over \$800 million today) including \$100 million for the Canadian Investment Fund for Africa. For comparison, "Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy secured \$2.3 billion over 5 years, seeking to advance 5 interconnected strategic objectives and deliver on 24 initiatives across 17 federal departments and agencies." No one was expecting anything comparable for CAS, but there should have been some indications about resource commitments. No means, no ends.
- 3) **But the biggest missing element? There isn't one specific mention of the long-standing visa problem facing Africans travelling to Canada**, whether for business, professional events, conferences, or education. People-to-people ties are stressed in CAS, but without acknowledging the visa crisis, which the Canadian Council on Africa and the Canadian Association of African Studies (among other organizations) have been pointing out for more than two decades, it's not clear how Canadians can work with African partners to close deals, buy or sell goods and services, train technicians, share knowledge, and otherwise be taken seriously in terms of the first strategic area, "Strengthening our diplomatic engagement and people-to-people ties."
- 4) While trade and investment is prioritized throughout CAS, three issues could be handled better.



- a. First, efforts to improve commercial relations emphasizes a need to increase the number of Foreign Investment Promotion and Protection Agreements (FIPAs, or Bilateral Investment Treaties). However, my discussions with those wanting to do business in Africa, including investors, have focused instead **on the importance of Dual Taxation Agreements (DTAs)**. FIPAs can be useful, especially to attract very large investors, but they are rarely invoked, can signal distrust more than mutual respect, and may not be tailored enough to specific circumstances to do the risk reduction heavy lifting they are assumed to do. This is not to say that FIPAs should be abandoned, but given limited bandwidth within GAC for international negotiations, perhaps DTAs and Air Transport Agreements could be prioritized, depending on the country.
  - b. Second, the range of unilateral trade preferences that Canada has available for many African exports was not included or mentioned in CAS. While Canada does not yet have any FTAs with African partners, both the **General Preferential Tariff (GPT) and the Least Developed Country Tariff (LDCT) provide avenues to increase African exports to Canada**. Recent changes to the LDCT regulations, for instance, should make exporting eligible goods to Canada easier, and right now Canada needs to find new sources for all sorts of products which were once imported, tariff free, from the USA. See <https://www.canada.ca/en/departement-finance/programmes/international-trade-finance-policy/canadas-unilateral-tariff-preference-programs-for-imports-from-developing-countries.html#a14>
  - c. Third, **there are creative ways to improve the business climate for individuals and companies** that might include personal tax changes and incentivizing and/or derisking private, pension (e.g., Maple 8), and other institutional investors to look more seriously at investment funds, mining projects, or energy infrastructure in Africa. Hopefully, again, some of the mechanisms and research proposed will cast a wide net for innovative ideas.
- 5) The November 2024 announcement that Canada would appoint **Special Envoys for Africa and for the Sahel** sounded promising. But what has since happened is that two Canadian Ambassadors already serving on the continent have been double-hatted. The potential for a high profile, Canadian-based Special Envoy for Africa with staff and direct connections to the PMO, PCO, GAC, Africa Trade Hub, African diplomatic corps, provinces, Diaspora groups, business, etc., who could act as the international face or point of contact on CAS, is a missed opportunity. Once upon a time the cabinet had a strong junior minister for Africa (Secretary of State for Africa and Latin America David Kilgour, 1997-2002). Canada needs to find a way to recreate something similar to ensure there is political leadership invested in CAS implementation and success.



- 6) **Canada’s commitment to peace, security, and democracy in Africa has been woefully deficient** for over two decades, so that isn’t a partisan statement. Not sure how seriously Canada is taken on peace and security issues in Africa today, and not sure Section 4 “Bolstering partnerships for peace, security and human rights” provides the foundation to change that equation. There is considerable emphasis on “supporting African-led peace operations and conflict prevention initiatives,” but little in terms of concrete commitments. Canada made three modest peacekeeping commitments to the United Nations in 2017, and one still remains unfulfilled and mostly forgotten in 2025. The history of Canadian peacekeeping in Africa (p. 8) unfortunately muddies the waters of what Canada has really done in the 21st Century, which has been to let African (and Asian) soldiers take on the most dangerous peacekeeping and counter-terrorism missions on the continent. While I completely support Canadian efforts to engage in conflict prevention, electoral strengthening processes, and human rights promotion, I’d like to see a clearer vision articulated, one that provides more consistency and predictability in Canadian responses rather than what seems to be selective amnesia applied to some governments and hyper-sensitivity applied to others. A policy should articulate some guideposts for both domestic policy-makers and the international community in the domain of democracy and human rights.
- 7) **Lastly, and ultimately the most important consideration for what is Canada’s first comprehensive “Africa Strategy”: there is a complete absence of ambitious goals or even modest objectives to provide evaluative criteria, timelines, or guidance to deploy limited resources.** For instance, while two-way merchandise trade with Africa has increased to \$15.1 billion in 2024 (up 30% in 5 years, see p. 2), why not set an ambitious target to double or triple that by 2030 as part of Canada’s diversification imperative? Other countries have done it. What would it take? What about setting a goal of catalyzing Canadian private investment to produce 1000+ MW of new electricity in energy deficit countries by 2030, or a million new tonnes of copper, or making the Lobito Corridor a Canadian priority (alongside DR Congo, Zambia, Angola, the USA, and EU) and establish key performance indicators for Canada’s contributions around themes of enhancing local value added, jobs, business creation, infrastructure, and sustainability? Each of the five CAS “strategic areas” need this kind of goal setting to provide impetus and direction to the proposed activities. This is where, I assume, the Africa Trade Hub, Africa Trade and Development Program, the Diaspora mechanism, plus the new research partnerships will have an important role to provide input into goal setting, resource allocation, implementation roadmaps, and evaluation. If not, CAS will be relegated to obscurity faster than *AfriCan Access Magazine*, Canada’s first English-language business, travel, and politics about Africa I launched in 1998. And that wouldn’t be good for anyone.

## **Canada's Africa Strategy 2025: Interventions from the Trenches**

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