

➤ African Agency and the New Multi-polarity

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As this report highlights, the dramatic changes underway in Africa today are reshaping the continent and its position within the international system. New economic opportunities are breeding new opportunities for Africans and, for some, the possibilities of a profoundly different relationship with external powers. Several years ago, this author speculated that the rise of emerging powers in Africa was setting in motion 'an Africa without Europeans'; that is, a world where the content and meaning of Africa no longer subject to its ties to the West but in fact defined and produced in conjunction with partners from the developing world.¹ Indeed, every day this seems closer to becoming a reality and it becomes possible to speak of an Africa where genuine multi-polarity is a given condition of the continent's relations with the outside world.

In facing these changing circumstances, however, in many respects Africans seem set on replaying old patterns of engagement with the outside world. To date, the African response to this developing reality has taken the form of two time-worn reactions.

The first approach is adaptive, aimed at learning the lessons of emerging power development success and grafting these onto African policies. The pursuit of a 'Chinese model' or 'Brazilian model' by African leaders, reflecting a genuine admiration of their development achievements and a desire to use emerging power resources and experiences to further African development, underpins this whole-hearted embrace of all things 'South'. This takes specific form in the efforts to emulate China's state-managed development, spearheaded by large state-owned enterprises, or the role of Brazil's *bolsa familia* in transforming the lives of millions of impoverished citizens. This is further enhanced by the possibility of forging longstanding ties with other developing countries which are free of the mantle of paternalism, promises to generate the requisite measure of self-respect and mutual interest to sustain the relationship into the future.

The second approach is that of critical distance to emerging powers. As welcome as these new actors' involvement is for African governments, questions about the nature of particular resource contracts, the conduct of some firms, the impact of their investments are all beginning to dampen the unbridled enthusiasm of the last few years. For instance, the actions of Brazilian firms like mining giant Vale displacing communities in central Mozambique or the suspicions aroused amongst SADC² leaders by Chinese arms sales to Zimbabwe have produced sharp reactions within the continent's elite and from civil society alike. Individual governments, from Nigeria to South Africa have pressed China to move beyond trade and investment in minerals and into value-added industrial production.³ As noted earlier,

1 Chris Alden, 'Africa without Europeans', in Chris Alden, Dan Large and Ricardo Soares de Oliveira, eds., *China Returns to Africa – an emerging power and a continent embrace* (London: Hurst 2008).

2 The Southern African Development Community (SADC) consists of 15 member countries from the region.

3 *Financial Times*, 'South Africa to China: let's make it more than about minerals', 24 August 2010.

the conduct of some Korean and Indian investors in acquiring agricultural land has produced local fallout and even contributed to the toppling of a government. Some African elites, like the Sudanese multimillionaire businessman Mo Ibrahim, have gone so far as to urge traditional powers like the US to stem their 'retreat from Africa'.⁴

These sentiments are not mutually exclusive, vary from country to country and are influenced by specific circumstances. Moreover, it would be a mistake to see in either of these approaches a resounding commendation of an 'African pivot to the South', a sharp critique of emerging power conduct on the continent or plaintive endorsement of deepening ties with traditional partners: rather it is an expression of a preference for a diversity of external partners. This time-honoured African strategy of extracting resources from the international community in the service of particularist domestic needs remains a constant of its foreign engagements in the modern era.⁵ Aligning this impulse to a set of discourses based on declarations of political parity but underpinned by profound economic asymmetries suggests African agency must go beyond these conventions if it is to put in place genuinely sustainable partnerships. Time will tell whether this classic response is pro-active enough, strategic in form and likely to reproduce the development successes of emerging power while at the same time carving out a sphere of African autonomy.

Navigating the untested waters of this new relationship with emerging powers and armed with the crude maps of the past, Africans are only just beginning to fully recognise the opportunities and challenges inherent in emerging power engagement. Crafting a sustainable development partnership from this new beginning promises to be the key task of Africans in the twenty first century. ■

4 Mo Ibrahim, 'United States Disengaging from Africa', South African Foreign Policy Initiative, Open Society Foundation for South Africa, 30 April 2013.

5 Jean-Francois Bayart, 'Africa and the World – a history of extraversion', *African Affairs* 99/395, 2000.