

Emerging Powers and Africa – recognition, remembrance and Africa’s place in a New International Order

This essay examines how emerging powers use the past to foster, mobilise and explain their contemporary engagement with Africa. There is a profound past, one in which the contours of contemporary globalisation were framed, layered over engagement stretching back to antiquity and up to the onset of the harsh realities of colonialism. China, India, Brazil, Turkey and South Korea project upon Africa a moral purpose to explain their role which, in many ways, echoes the European discourses on Africa that accompanied their engagement in the age of imperialism.



Africa

First it needs to be recognised that the importance of Africa for emerging powers is commonly held to be its material wealth in resources and, more recently, as a growing market for goods and services. Certainly oil, strategic minerals and timber have featured as drivers for state-led and private firms' engagement in these sectors and, as such, can exercise a determining influence over aspects of relations. How can we make sense of, for instance, China's relations with Angola without any analysis of the overwhelming commercial ties based around the energy sector? Or, equally, Malaysian involvement in the joint Sudanese oil production with Chinese, Indian and Sudanese national petroleum companies? The battery of annual trade data, detailing how emerging powers have balance sheets with African economies that are heavily weighted towards commodities, is a stark reminder of the fundamental content of bilateral relationships.

However, this purely commercial reading of the central motivations for sectoral involvement in Africa misconstrues the significance of the continent for emerging powers in telling ways. For instance, the numerical assemblage of Africa's fifty-five states within the UN General Assembly and their capacity to deliver bloc votes which can sway the proceedings one way or the other is an important political resource that Africa deploys on the international stage. On security questions involving Africa, which occupy up to seventy percent of the UN Security Council's agenda in a given year, the voices of non-permanent African representatives are meaningful arbitrators of multilateral responses and questions regarding the deployment of peacekeeping missions in the affected areas. In other parts of the UN system such as the Human Rights Council or international institutions like the World Trade Organisation, African votes can be critical to securing support for a given policy position.

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Emerging Powers

More generally, the great power status sought by emerging powers is something that is conferred through recognition by the society of states in the international system.¹ Established great powers play a crucial part in this process and, during the bipolar Cold War system, provided recognition or withdrew such support in line with ideological and material imperatives (as apartheid South Africa knew well). In the aftermath of the Cold War, the United States came to occupy a position as a 'hyper-power' in the liberal international order, actively situating regional powers in a 'hub and spoke' arrangement within the unipolar international system.¹ George Bush's comment at G8 summit in 2003, that South African President Thabo Mbeki was 'the point man' on the Zimbabwe crisis, summarised this relationship in a colloquial fashion.² The inclusion of China, India, Brazil, Mexico and South Africa at G8 summits from 2007, as part of the Heiligendamm Process under the auspices of the 'Outreach 5', signalled that these regional powers were in line for integration into the mechanisms of global governance.³

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Following the global financial crisis of 2008, China's own standing as a global power assumed greater visibility amongst African states as they launched a plethora of 'Look East' policies. These sought to capture new financial resources and accompanying opportunities available through bilateral and multilateral (Forum on China-Africa Cooperation or FOCAC) engagements. The hasty creation of the G20 in 2009 to address the global financial crisis became the most representative gathering of leading countries outside of the UN and, as such, put into sharp focus how emerging powers had

become a key component to global governance. South Africa's privileged status as the only African country offered a seat on both the G20 and BRICs (following Beijing's invitation to join Brazil, Russia, India and China in 2010), again underscored how significant recognition of emerging power standing is to acquiring the trappings of formal power.

For all of these reasons, any emerging power aspirant to global power status necessarily has to be able to articulate and even deliver on an 'Africa policy' to declare credibly to have an international stature. What are operationally speaking regional powers (with the exception of China) with global aspirations consistently put forward African agendas. Indeed, since 2000, the AU's Global Partnerships Office has been inundated with requests by emerging powers to establish regional summits such as the Turkey-Africa Forum and the Africa-South America Summit, so much so that they have had to put a moratorium on new partnerships after 2008. Emerging powers have not been deterred and approached other continental institutions or sub-regional bodies: For instance, the African Development Bank co-sponsors the Korea-Africa Economic Cooperation Ministerial Conference while the Brazil-Africa Forum is co-hosted with the East Africa Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Agriculture.

Examining the content of emerging powers' economic agenda for Africa demonstrates that the differences in their stated over-arching aims are limited: All adhere to a policy of supporting the developmental aspirations of Africa and doing so within the context of the rubric of 'South-South Cooperation'.⁴ Admittedly the specifics of policies do vary: For instance, in some cases, there is a greater emphasis on the substance of programmes (technical cooperation in a given sector) or the modality of delivery (grant aid versus loans or project-based initiatives).

What is most striking, however, is the discourses that underpin engagement, that is to say, how an emerging power explains its relationship to the African continent and in so doing represents 'Africa' as well as where the continent is situated in their visionary depiction of international system. This narrative on Africa articulates, in effect, an insight into the

moral purpose of power in the international system as projected by these countries. In this respect, emerging power tropes on Africa can be clustered around a number of themes, namely framing, historical narratives, and visualisations.

Framing

Emerging powers frame their engagement with Africa along two axes, either restorative or transformative. The restorative discourse generally aligns itself with the pan-Africanist litanies on a renaissance in the making, bringing the continent back to a position of dignity rooted in its historical past. The transformative discourse emphasises the supine position of Africa in relation to ex-colonial powers and the United States (sometimes conflating the two through use of the term 'the West' or 'North'). In both cases ideas of 'Africa rising' feature prominently and the role of emerging powers is defined as one of being an ardent supporter of this process precisely through their economic engagement with Africa. In this context, the international system is portrayed as being dominated by Western powers through its institutions, financial structures and productive capabilities – all legacies of the colonial era. Emerging powers distinguish themselves from the West through their shared standing – or point of origin at least – in the international system, as developing countries and through their colonial or imperialist experiences. Common points of reference are the Bandung Conference in 1955 and foreign policy principles such as non-interference in state sovereignty, which give policy expression to notions of solidarity.

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Historical Narratives

How emerging powers represent their own historical links with Africa differs considerably and is especially telling. For instance, the Chinese use of the 15th century Admiral Zheng He and his voyages to the Horn and Eastern Africa's coastal littoral are celebrated to communicate something about contemporary Chinese ties: first, that China arrived in Africa before the Western powers; second, that the nature of the engagement was trade-based; and finally, that they did not go on to colonise the continent. Beijing's role as a supporter of anti-colonialism and liberation movements – although sometimes on the 'wrong side'



as was the case in Angola – features prominently in diplomatic utterances. For Brazil, the story of the past is one which the architect, Lula Da Silva, characterised as a debt that Brazil owes Africa. This emanates from the slave trade that brought so many Afro-Brazilians to the country and produced the vibrant Brazilian culture with its proximity to the continent. Turkey's handling of its Ottoman past, which ruled over North Africa and much of the Horn, focuses not on imperialism and slavery but rather on the common heritage of Islam from that period and goes so far as to characterise its contemporary role in Africa as that of a 'humanitarian power'. Indonesia, when constructing its recent Indo-Pacific 'maritime fulcrum power' policy, gives emphasis to the arrival of Javanese peoples in Madagascar in the 9th century to justify its reach across the Indian Ocean.

Visualisation

Africa is visualised in ways which, surprisingly, reflect many of the conventional tropes of the West towards Africa. Imagery accompanying bilateral summits portrays the continent through pictures of wild animals, tribes and untrammelled landscapes. Similarly, advertising for tourism groups from emerging powers, not unlike its Western counterparts, focuses on the fecundity of the continent, its wildlife, (generally East African) peoples and the open savannah. At its most absurd, posters of tribesmen from Papua New Guinea (mistakenly used by the organisers), along with various pictures of wildlife, were featured as part of the decorative displays of FOCAC III in Beijing in 2006. Chinese films, such as the contemporary blockbuster *Wolf Warrior II* (filmed in South Africa) shows us an Africa as a kind of frontier of warlords in cahoots with racist Western

mercenaries that threaten the lives of ordinary Africans, Chinese traders and humanitarian workers. Indian films like *Dhoom 2* locate scenes in Namibia's undulating desert landscapes as a backdrop to thwarting an international criminal network trading in stolen national treasures. Here, African individuals are virtually absent.

Interestingly, the fact that it has been the openness of the West's liberal international economic order that provided the context by which export-oriented economies like China, Turkey and South Korea industrialised and

ultimately developed is not acknowledged in emerging power discourses on Africa. A tacit admission, however, of this core economic condition can be found in the global uproar that has accompanied the rise of protectionism in the United States and, concurrently, President Xi Jinping's forthright declaration at Davos in 2017, that China would step in to preserve and lead the same liberal international economic order.

Some (tentative) conclusions

What all of this tells us is, first, that emerging powers approach Africa through the lens of shared experience and common heritage. The centrality of the colonial era, economic dominance and Western intervention are the ties that bind them together. Africa's importance as a region is underscored in language that echoes African sensibilities – the renaissance and rising discourses – but also carries some specifics that reflect particular historical trajectories of emerging powers. The slave trade, whether originating in the historical conduct of Brazil or the Ottoman empire, is reframed or 'forgotten', while revolutionary and development solidarity is foregrounded. At the same time, despite the patent desire to demonstrate their distinctiveness from the West, emerging powers see Africa in ways that surprisingly cohere with the imagery of exoticism or even 'primitivism' found in traditional Western portrayals of the 'dark continent'.

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solidarity. The uses of power by emerging powers are therefore ethical and encouraged as they contribute to the furthering of this wider emancipatory agenda pursued by the Global South. It is for this reason that the contemporary criticism levelled at Chinese loans practices and growing levels of debt amongst African countries has, unlike other putative warnings from Western circles, struck a chord across the continent. More than any other act conducted by an emerging power, it runs against the grain of fundamental precepts of solidarity, development and righting the wrongs derived from the colonial period. In this respect, more than any other fact or exercise of power, the Chinese management of creditor-debtor relations has the potential to transform emerging power-Africa relations in ways that are perceived by Africans to resemble traditional Western ties.

Emerging powers standing in relation to Africa is one derived from a shared critique of the inequalities and structural impediments to development, reflective of a moral universe where colonialism and its crimes are fixed in time as is the accompanying necessity of South solidarity. The uses of power by emerging powers are in effect ethical and encouraged as they contribute to the furthering of this wider emancipatory agenda pursued by the Global South.

Finally, what insights can be gained by examining how so-called traditional powers of the West portray emerging powers in Africa? There are a number of academic studies which analyse, for instance, media reportage on China in Africa and conclusively demonstrate that these sources systematically portray the Chinese in a negative light. At the same time, emerging power discourses on partnership and equality with Africa have brought about a shift in at least the rhetorical declarations of Western countries. At events like the EU-Africa summit, governments reframe their own narratives away from patronising language of the past. And, if emerging powers too often portray Africa in recognisably 'Western' ways, how does the West visualise emerging powers in Africa? One of the most compelling examples is Henning Mankell's crime novel *The Man from Beijing*, set in contemporary Mozambique, which describes how a shadowy Chinese agent colludes with Frelimo contacts to bring tens of thousands of Chinese farmers to the countryside. Fear of China's long-term intentions in Africa percolates below the surface of many Western perspectives but the place of other emerging powers in Africa doesn't seem to resonate in the same way.

Emerging powers in Africa are reshaping the continent and contributing to a new appreciation of its significance in the international system. Reconciling the facts of engagement and the exercise of power on the continent has encouraged the formation of narratives shaped by history, Africa's development aspirations and the complementarity of emerging country engagement. Nevertheless, however powerful discourses based on remembrance and forgetting are, the contemporary conduct of emerging powers in relation to the continent is bound to require a reset of narratives to provide new more critical reading of this evolving relationship.

NOTES

- 1 See Laura Neack, 'Middle Powers Once Removed: the diminished global role of middle powers and American grand strategy', paper presented at the *International Studies Association Conference* (14-18 March 2000), Los Angeles. Also see Chris Alden and Marco Antonio Vieira 'The New Diplomacy of the South: South Africa, Brazil and India and Trilateralism', *Third World Quarterly* (September 2005), 26(7), pp. 1077-1095.
- 2 Carroll, R. 'Bush backs Mbeki on Zimbabwe', *The Guardian* (10 July 2003)
- 3 Leninger, J. 'The Heiligendamm Process and Emerging Powers: more of the same or a genuine global governance innovation?' (January 2010)
- 4 See FOCAC VI Declaration; India-Africa Summit Declaration; Brazil-Africa Forum Declaration.