A MISTRA Policy Brief

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Africa and the World: Navigating Shifting Geopolitics

MISTRA’s new book, *Africa and the World: Navigating Shifting Geopolitics*, addresses key questions about what the shifts in the global political economy mean for Africa. Geographically, Africa is situated at the very intersection of many geopolitical dynamics. Yet prevalent scholarship and debate largely imagine Africa as a passive passenger in a changing global order. *Africa and the World*, and this policy brief arising from it, make a strong case for a different perspective and contribute to what should be ongoing analysis of geopolitics with Africa at the centre.

Authors offer key recommendations for enhancing African agency and strategic autonomy. Central to these recommendations is the notion of the continent as a mega-island or ‘Island Africa’, with resources extending into the oceans that surround it. The Island Africa concept emphasises how Africa’s encircling interconnectivities are both the continent’s weakness – rendering it externally vulnerable – and potentially its strength, by enhancing its possibilities for integration into the global economy. The following recommendations are aimed at ensuring greater continental autonomy in order for Africa to establish its place in a changing geopolitical and geo-economic landscape.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Strategic autonomy

- It is imperative for larger African economies to realise that an inability to create a more autonomous continent and maritime space will diminish their own influence. This is because external powers might step in to fill voids created by a lack of meaningful African cohesion. This situation is already reflected in the plethora of external powers that have established, or are in the process of establishing, footholds in Africa in their own national interests. A fragmented continent of mostly landlocked countries will not be able to exercise continental social agency and engage the world on a more equal footing, hence the imperative of greater regional integration and pooled sovereignty on selected matters.

- African stakeholders should align their engagement with external powers towards achieving key regional and continental priorities. This will be important for realisation of the aspirations captured in the African Union’s (AU) Agenda 2063, and in the Kagame Report on AU institutional reform. Agenda 2063 should form the basis of Africa’s own strategies for engagement with other parts of the world – rather than acting as an object of other countries’ and regions’ designs. However, Agenda 2063 can only be realised if African stakeholders are themselves committed to mustering the political will necessary for implementation. Continental integration is essential for Africans to achieve greater strategic leverage and influence in global affairs.

- The possibilities for an Africa-centred global zone of peace and cooperation, encompassing the Mediterranean and Indian oceans, should be explored. This zone would be in addition to that already existing in the Atlantic. The zone would help to ensure that Africa’s engagement with the world is based on the interests of Africans, rather than of external powers.

- South Africa should take forward its longstanding agenda of strengthening the UN-AU relationship to help resolve conflicts, and so promote development. Tshwane sits on the United Nations Security Council as a non-permanent member for the third time from 2019–2020; it simultaneously chairs the AU in 2020. This convergence makes it an opportune time for South Africa to conceptualise a ‘roadmap scenario’, which factors in a stronger AU-UN partnership to deepen continental integration, in interaction with continued efforts towards UN reform. While UN reform measures continue, AU members also have to sustain their own internal reform.

Economic pathways

- African countries need to take full advantage of the continent’s comparative and competitive advantages to grow economies in a manner that benefits the majority of citizens. The combination of natural endowments, extant and planned infrastructure projects, geographic location, a youthful population and other attributes provide the continent with a platform to diversify its economies and integrate into global value chains. Economic growth imperatives should be pursued in a manner that improves people’s quality of life.

- Now that the African Continental Free Trade Area (ACFTA) has been launched, it will be important...
to ensure that an AU structure focused on business, trade and investment is empowered to drive the role of African and non-African private and public sectors. This structure would be akin to an AU Business Council for Trade and Investment. Such a council-like structure would need to ensure that members of the African diaspora are critical stakeholders who would help to mobilise resources for mutually beneficial trade and investment opportunities. Diaspora members could also be important advocates for African interests in the policies of their own countries.

- **AU reform should focus on the funding of pan-African institutions and on reducing the high percentage of donor funds required to implement AU programmes.** If Africans can fund their own institutions, they can then propose redirecting some traditional donor funding towards longer term investments in infrastructure, manufacturing, agriculture and development on the continent.

- **A new model of official development assistance (ODA) could be considered in order to enhance continental integration and cohesion.** This model would shift focus from bilateral aid to Africa, between donor and individual countries, towards a more multilateral framework. Such a framework could then channel the bulk of ODA through the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) and the AU’s NEPAD development agency. NEPAD would, in turn, disburse the aid into Regional Economic Communities (RECs), which would then collectively make decisions about funding agreed-upon priorities, at both country and inter-state level. Something along the lines of an AU-ECA-RECs triangle is being envisaged. This would channel development interventions onto a more pan-African, integrationist road to *Agenda 2063*. This alternative model of international cooperation would aim to allocate resources more efficiently, while not completely removing bilateral development cooperation. It would be in line with the aim of channelling Africa’s international relations in ways that enhance continental integration and *Agenda 2063*.

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**Multi-track diplomacy**

- **Multi-track diplomacy is required to drive the interventions and reforms necessary to strengthen the continent’s agency.** It is important to recognise the significance not only of track one diplomacy, which involves state-to-state actors, but also tracks two and three. This will entail encouraging think tanks, universities, civil society, the private sector and trade unions to participate in available forums, and to create new ones. This might also require revisiting platforms like Mwalimu Julius Nyerere’s Pan-African Freedom Movement for East, Central and Southern Africa (PAMFECsA), generating impetus for bottom-up integration. **Multi-track diplomacy is required to drive the interventions and reforms necessary to strengthen the continent’s agency.**

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**Monitoring of Agenda 2063**

- **Regional Economic Communities (RECs) should be an essential part of the monitoring and evaluation of the Agenda 2063 process.** Given African’s large size, RECs will have to be empowered to ensure greater internal cohesion, which will facilitate AU integration. Regions may move at different paces but it is important that their efforts be guided by a common aim of enhancing the strategic autonomy...
of the continent. The intention will be to ensure that Africa enhances its capacity to speak in a more coherent, coordinated and thus more commanding voice in the international environment.

- **African research institutes need to produce more empirical research aimed at making meaningful inputs into the various policy processes on the continent.** Research institutes on the continent should constitute forums – at regional and continental levels – to identify areas for investigation and ensure greater impact on policy-making processes. Comparative studies on the degree of regional integration among the various regional economic communities will have to be undertaken. Various African forums, consisting of multiple stakeholders, will need to be held to evaluate the implementation of *Agenda 2063* and its Ten Year Implementation Plans.

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**Reforming the United Nations: Towards a regionalisation of global governance?**

It is important to acknowledge that whereas UN Security Council reform is long overdue and remains an uphill battle, it is also a distraction from the broader need for UN reform. It needs to be contextualised within a possible regionalising scenario for the reform drive. This would entail consideration of transforming the UN system along decentralised lines of continental and regional governance. The institutional focal point of such a process would be the UN’s regional economic commissions, under the Economic and Social Council. These commissions would interact, in mutually reforming partnerships, with continental and regional economic and security communities like the AU, EU and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Given the accelerating threat of global warning, this matrix should include a major role for the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.