

GEOPOLITICS PRP LAUNCH

Joel Netshitenzhe, MISTRA Executive Director

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SETTING THE SCENE: AFRICA AND THE WORLD – NAVIGATING SHIFTING GEOPOLITICS

Since its founding ten years ago, the Mapungubwe Institute has made the study of the evolution of human civilisation one of the pillars of its research agenda. This has included the rise and decline of the Mapungubwe state, the ebbs and flows in China's global positioning, as well as nation-formation and social cohesion in South Africa's civilisation of national democracy.

In thanking the Department of International Relations and Co-operation (dirco), we wish, especially, to welcome Minister Naledi Pandor and acknowledge her role (including from her days at Science and Technology) in supporting MISTRA's research projects. If she thought she had escaped the Mapungubwe Institute, this is not possible because MISTRA is everywhere.

Today, we celebrate the release of our new book pertaining to human civilisation, focussing on how Africa can and should navigate today's complex geopolitics. In line with MISTRA's endeavour to interrogate issues at a strategic level, this publication is not about the temperament of some global leader facing impeachment, or a version of Kremlinology in the current age. Rather it examines glacial movements in geopolitical balances and the place of Africa in that dynamic.

The book proceeds from the premise that continuities and discontinuities of world history, have shaped Africa's own economics and politics. While many studies emphasise ideological, economic and political factors, in this volume we also seek to inject the subtle issue of psychological states of mind and how these impact on the postures of various nation-states, in relation to one another and to Africa – and, inversely, how Africa positions itself in relation to other continents.

It is not accidental that the cover of the book reflects both standard and inverted maps of the globe: in very simple terms, to challenge the conventional notions of geostrategic centre and periphery. Indeed, in terms of location and contiguities of land masses, it can be argued that Island Africa is in fact at the centre of the globe.

There is no doubt that an understanding of Africa's place in geopolitics has to take into account the weight of history, so the continent is not pulled hither and thither by the unpredictable winds of the self-interest of global powers.

What is that weight of history?

Global powers of the North have, over centuries, waged wars of domination against each other and the rest of the world; with Europe in particular, assuming the dubious honour of progenitor of expansive wars in which soldier and civilian alike died in their millions. Though this is not unique to Europe, the extent to which this is embedded in the psychology of global powers is relevant to how these countries today relate to one another and to Africa.

A critical part of this weight of history is the fact that China had the world's largest economy during much of the 19th century. And so, the notion of the Thucydides trap comes into play. As China rises

once more to occupy a pre-eminent place in the global political economy, we are left wonder whether this will result in 'cold' and even 'hot' wars – as has happened since Athens and Sparta.

Where does Africa feature in all this?

Palaeontologists assert that Africa is the origin of humanity; and objective historians have demonstrated the global eminence of its ancient civilisations. Yet, the continent was also an object of colonial plunder. In the past few decades, it has emerged to assert its self-determination.

The global environment in which this is unfolding is characterised by advances in technology with both positive and negative potential for humanity. It is reflected in primary unipolarity in terms of the global socio-economic system and the absolute dominance of one military hyper-power. But it is also reflected in secondary multipolarity and new global rivalries playing out at various levels of intensity.

This is worsened by the growing rapacity of the security-industrial complex – made up of convergent military, intelligence and industrial interests – sowing tensions across the globe and undermining individual freedoms at domestic level. Right-wing religiosity, aggressive mercantilism and anti-immigrant jingoism are all employed to mask the challenge of social inequality in the political economy and to corral populations against globalisation. In addition, as in the Maghreb and the Sahel, misguided interventions have worsened the threat of terrorism.

The authors in this volume argue that Africa has to stake its global claim, taking into account a variety of factors:

Firstly, African countries need to acknowledge the path determination which transcended movement into independence and ensure that they consciously avoid mimicry of any form in socio-economic policy and praxis.

Secondly, the continent needs to utilise its competitive and comparative advantages in terms of natural endowments, infrastructure projects, geographic location, a youthful population and other attributes that provide a platform to diversify economies and integrate into global value chains. The efforts to pool sovereignties and speed up economic integration are central to this.

Thirdly, Africa needs to exercise its strategic social agency by developing comprehensive strategies in relation to other regions and continents – as distinct from being an object of the interests of others. Indeed, virtually all other continents and many developed countries have Africa strategies; but do African countries collectively and individually have strategies in relation to other continents?

Fourthly, the continent should resist the emergent domineering and confrontational geopolitical approaches, with some global powers openly and boldly asserting that, in the manner of the 19th century Berlin Conference, Africa should again become a theatre of great power rivalry, for spheres of influence.

Lastly, African research institutes and civil society need to conduct strategic studies and campaign for the strengthening of Africa's self-assertion on the global stage. They should work together to ensure greater impact on policy-making processes.

In this way, Africa will, to quote Steve Biko, bestow 'the great gift': that is, 'giving the world a more human face'.

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