



## Africa and the World: Navigating Shifting Geopolitics

edited by Francis Kornegay and Philani Mthembu, Johannesburg, Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflection (MISTRA), 2020, 441 pp., \$58 (paperback), ISBN 9780639995564

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Africa and the World: Navigating Shifting Geopolitics**, edited by Francis Kornegay and Philani Mthembu, Johannesburg, Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflection (MISTRA), 2020, 441 pp., \$58 (paperback), ISBN 9780639995564

A publication that uses a wide sweep of history and geography to argue that Africa deserves to be seen as strategically relevant in global terms, is difficult to read with Covid-19 sensory overload. Little did the authors know that soon after the publication of *Africa and the World: Navigating Shifting Geopolitics*, a virulent pandemic would put the foundations of the liberal international world order to the test. The timing is comparable with publishing a book on the status of Western intelligence management days before the 9/11 terror attacks. Or pronouncing on the predictive value of International Relations theory days before the fall of the Berlin Wall. Social science research projects can sometimes fall prey to the rough seas of global politics, and the unpredictability of human endeavour.

Humanity is at a point in global history marked by fundamental change. The deadly coronavirus is sweeping the world and will possibly trigger a global recession. International co-operation is under strain. China is resurgent, the European Union is looking at saving itself, Russia is searching for relevance, Brazil has tragically miscalculated, and the United States under Donald Trump appears to be in a slow-motion meltdown. Nor will Africa be spared. Under these conditions, to argue that 'a continent united in both purpose and action can be an active agent in shaping the evolving global order' (p. x) appears overly optimistic.

Despite this turn of events, whether seen as a 'black swan' event or the price humanity pays for years of unforgiving globalisation, the reality is that Africa remains at the heart of the global political economy – its destiny shaped by its natural wealth, by a bitter contribution to Western development at the cost of its own, and, in recent times, by the restlessness of its young, eager for a better life, whether at home or abroad.

*Africa and the World* is an ambitious intellectual attempt at making sense of the continent's place and role – and future – in an increasingly unpredictable global setting. The project largely succeeds, and is marked by impressive Afrocentric scholarly contributions. The book is also flawed in important respects, demonstrating the difficulties of attempting to portray a continent of more than one billion people and over 50 predominantly weak political units as an 'active actor' in international politics.

The book is not easy to read. The basic assumption is that Africa is situated at the crossroads of geopolitical dynamics. It offers the reader the image of a mega-island located in the South, between East and West. It suggests that this mega-island is a strategic centre in terms of its geographic location, its endowments and its long-term potential. To give substance to the assumption, the book is divided in four sections – and it is here where things become complex: a section intriguingly called 'Africa in the Changing Global Scenario', followed by the vague 'Conceptualising the Global Strategic Landscape' (in reality exploring maritime-based relationships with surrounding regions such as the Mediterranean and South Atlantic), followed by 'Africa and the Indian Ocean Nexus' (featuring an Indian view on the Indian Ocean), and, finally, 'Atlantic-Pacific Equations' (in reality a focus on Latin American regionalism). A concluding chapter rounds it off. It's an overly complex architecture that tends to confuse.

How then to explore the vistas beyond the horizon, as called for in the preface, or examine Africa as the authentic 'Middle Kingdom', as the editors prefer (p. 3)? The book has much to

offer, of course – it paints on a very wide canvas – but I recommend the busy reader (and foreign policymaker, presumably) dives into two chapters for perspective.

A good starting point is Chapter 1, by editors Francis Kornegay and Philani Mthembu. It offers useful vignettes of the 15 chapters. It's a large number indeed, of variable quality, with consequent overlap (most noticeable on the subtheme of Africa and the Indian Ocean region).

Chapter 3, by an ensemble of four academics (Tlhabane Motaung, Themba Moleketi, Duduatsang Mokoele and Nqobile Mangena), puts substance to the assumption. It uses a combination of Anthony Giddens's structuration theory<sup>1</sup> and Fredrik Söderbaum's 'new regionalism'<sup>2</sup> to argue for a historicised reflection on the forces that have shaped the modern geopolitical character of the African continent. It conceives of European global domination, based on economic considerations, as the meta-context within which to understand Africa's structured dependency. Yet, it also uses these theoretical frameworks to explore how Africa has 'galvanised its internal intellectual resources to find its way' (p. 75). At the same time, it recognises the contradictions in the regional experiment (with reference to the Southern African Development Community) 'due to a clash of global economic ideology and the African aspiration of communitarianism associated with Pan-Africanism' (p. 75).

Chapter 4, on the geo-economics of global trade, similarly stands out in terms of its deep analytical contribution. Garth le Pere puts the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) under the spotlight. In his view the AfCFTA is a major achievement in its scope, promise and ambition, yet faces a turbulent international environment. Will it work? Will it be able to effect a structural transition at home in order to face difficult and intractable global externalities? Le Pere concludes on a brave note, suggesting the agreement 'provides the template for a new developmental regionalism and a comprehensive vision for trade and development that can still make globalisation work' (p. 101). This comes at a time when the implementation of the free trade agreement in Africa has been put on hold due to the Covid-19 crisis and as economists calculate the loss of trade and income due to the pandemic.

In the concluding chapter the editors offer the reader a 'futuristic scenario' (p. 403) on the assumption that Africans live up to the promise of being 'united in purpose and action' and the continent becomes 'an active agent in shaping the evolving global order' (p. x). It imagines a new post-Western international system 'overcoming the entropy of the outdated Euro-American imperium' (p. 404) in which a united Africa – a confederated African Union of Regional Integration Communities – plays a critical role. This is Kornegay at his best, suggesting the future will reflect an Afro–South Asian axis in a geopolitical economy that is reconfigured Eastwards, with its own global centre-periphery. However, if the publication ever reaches a second edition, it might be necessary to account for the devastating impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Africa's future.

## Notes

1. See Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984).
2. See Fredrik Söderbaum and Timothy M Shaw, eds., *Theories of New Regionalism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

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