Shifting Geopolitics in Africa

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Introduction

This special issue of *Nokoko* engages the issue of relationships between neoliberalism, militarisation and shifting geopolitics in Africa. These are big questions and much ink has been spilt on what exactly neoliberalism is (See (Robinson, 2022; Sheppard, 2016). There is also a voluminous literature on African (in)security. I want to focus here on what the changing nature of global geopolitics portends for the continent.

External states have a variety of interests in Africa. These include resources, markets and the associated security of supply and demand. The vast majority of what the continent exports are primary materials, with fossil fuels accounting for about half of total exports, depending on prices. Africa is also a substantial market for manufactures, with a population of 1.4 billion people, and a site for so-called Contracted Overseas Projects (COPs). These are particularly significant for China; and a source of demand for loans, oftentimes associated with these projects. During the period of the so-called "Africa Rising" phenomenon many countries also gained access to private international capital markets again and several issued Eurobonds, or government bonds denominated in foreign currencies. While these have the advantage of lower interest rates than bonds issued in local currencies, the danger is that if local currencies weaken relative to the euro, for example, their repayment becomes much more expensive (i.e. there is substantial currency risk).48 These concerns can be considered geo-economic.

External actors also have more explicitly geopolitical interests on the continent, such as support in international institutions and fora, for example, and the prevention of conflict "spillovers" and piracy. They also have geocultural interests, such as the reinforcement of geopolitical identities and self-understandings as well as the desire for respect (Moisi, 2009; Nel, 2010). They also view the continent through different geopolitical codes (Kraxberger, 2005), with the United States emphasising charity and more latterly security and infrastructure development in competition with China, whereas China has demonstrated a more explicitly geoeconomic focus, at least until recently (Benabdallah, 2019; Carmody, Zajontz, & Reboredo, 2022; Schindler & DiCarlo, 2022).

Meta-Trends in African Geopolitics

A few major trends in African geopolitics stand out. Climate change is perhaps the biggest challenge facing the continent in the future (Toulmin, 2009). The destructive power of cyclone Idai in Southern Africa in 2019 speaks for itself, as does other potential catastrophes such as "day zero" in Cape Town, when municipal water taps were due to run dry (narrowly avoided as a result of rain), although some argue this was as much a financial crisis as a potential "natural disaster" (Millington & Scheba, 2021). The shrinkage of Lake Chad in recent decades by as much as 90% and associated increases in poverty have likewise provided fertile ground for conflict witnessed in the emergence of Boko Haram, although police brutality and repression, amongst other factors have also played a role in their emergence (Comolli, 2015; Perry, 2014; Smith, 2015). The

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48 According to the President of the African Development Bank countries on the continent could have saved US $30bn by borrowing from his institution instead of issuing Eurobonds (African Business, 2022).

Anthropocence as a geologic era defined by human impact on the environment is socially constructed and environmental impacts are socially mediated, meaning we should perhaps talk about "socio-nature" as an actor, rather than "nature", which is in any event socially constructed.

For some, we are entering "Geopolitics for the End Time" (Macaes, 2021) or the era of an "uninhabitable earth" (Wallace-Wells, 2019). Africa has and will be the continent hardest hit by climate restructuring or departure both as a result of its physical geography and because much of the population depends on rainfed agriculture for subsistence (Toulmin, Crick, & Binyam, 2023). The meta-geopolitical implications of climate change are presently unknowable but it is clear that securitisation is accelerating (Buxton & Hayes, 2016), potentially leading to a new, "negative" (security) Scramble for Africa. However, there are also political imperatives for disengagement, with France pulling its troops out of Mali for example, as relations with the military junta soured. France has sent troops there in 2014 under the so-called "Operation Barkhane" to forestall an Islamist takeover of the country.

The overall development of the continent remains structured by neoliberalism, which is reinforced by rising debts in the context of the COVID pandemic, with many countries, such as Zambia, turning to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for loan packages (Scarfe, 2022). Oxfam has found that the vast majority of IMF programmes in Africa entail austerity measures, deepening poverty. In Zambia, the structural power of Western dominated international financial institutions is demonstrated by the recent loan agreement with the IMF, which included the condition that Zambia will "totally cancel 12 planned projects, half of which were due to be financed by China EXIM Bank, alongside one by ICBC [Industrial and Commercial Bank of China] for a university and another by Jiangxi Corporation for a dual highway for the capital" (Scarfe, 2022). At the same time, World Bank projects, mostly focussed on social sectors, such as health and education, are continuing.

According to Acharya (2018), we now live in a multiplex world order, rather than a multipolar one, where the power of different actors intermix and mingle rather than stand off against each other. One of the secular trends of the twenty first century has been the heightened importance of China in Africa. While this may appear set to continue, there has been a dramatic contraction of loan funding for China's signature foreign policy, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) since 2016. Likewise, many of China's highest profile projects have been mired in controversy, such as the multi-billion dollar Standard Gauge Railway in Kenya (Taylor, 2020). Chinese foreign direct investment to the continent also fell almost 50% from 2018-19, prior to the pandemic, perhaps in response to investor concern and the new "dual circulation strategy" in China which places a greater emphasis on domestic market expansion. This economic retrenchment is however offset by great so called "soft power" engagements, such as the offering of more scholarships for African students to study in China. This represents an attempt to construct Chinese hegemony, which has, or is, also being attempted in other regions (Zou & Jones, 2020).

China operates a different type of power than other "great" powers. Whereas some write of China being characterised by "fragmented authoritarianism" (Lieberthal, 1992), in reality it is the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rather than the state, which is controlled by the Party, where real power lies and this is tightly coordinated through a "red phone network" (Martin, 2021). There are about 3,000 red phones in a network run by the military for senior CCP officials in the country, which can only dial each other. The operators who run the network are expected to recognise people calling by their voice.

Whereas Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) or corporations often compete aggressively overseas for business, they operate under conditions of "bounded autonomy" (Breslin, 2021), as evidenced by the dramatic overseas loan contraction from 2016 onwards for example. This represents a distinctive structure of power which can be thought of as "webpower", where the centre directs or sets the incentives for the improvisation in commercial strategies by the nodes (such as SOEs). In this structure power is simultaneously both concentrated and diffuse. For example, Huawei, the Chinese telecommunications giant has been controversial globally and in Africa. Notionally, it is a private company, but in reality the vast majority of voting rights are held by a CCP-affiliated trade union (Wen, 2020). It has been implicated in hacking scandals in the

African Union and in spying on opposition politicians in Zambia and Uganda, for example (Abegunrin & Manyeruke, 2019).

Webpower is in evident elsewhere. For example, "In Zambia, a 'pyramid of power' exists within Chinese associations from the Chinese embassy at the top, to associations and individual Chinese and companies; some associations 'may even take orders directly from homeland governments (provincial and municipal) and promote subnational and party policies within the Chinese community in Zambia' (Li & Shi, 2019) quoted in Large, 2021, 162. However, this power is not undisputed and has been subject to substantial pushback in recent years (Patey, 2020) and the BRI has suffered from a number of contradictions (See Carmody & Wainwright, 2022). This raises the question of how much power Africa-based actors have in these relations or networks.

African Agency

What can Africa-based actors do in such a rapidly changing context? In much of the academic literature on Africa there has been a tendency to present domestic actors, including political elites as powerless in the face of overweening external powers. For example, this has been one of the criticisms levelled against discussions of the "New Scramble for Africa". The emergence of new powers, particularly China and India, but also others such as Turkey and the Gulf States in Africa (Mason & Mabon, 2022) has given African political elites more "balancing" options with Western powers and the ability to strategically play one side against the other, depending on the issue, stage of the economic cycle and the nature of different states extraversion portfolios (Peiffer & Englebert, 2012). Jean-François Bayart (2000) argues that African political elites often pursue a "strategy of extraversion" to create or bolster their own power by being able to draw on the resources of external actors. Thus extraversion, in this instance, is not something which is externally imposed but rather stems, and is driven by domestically-based actors. That is not to say dependence does not exist but that it is co-constituted through alliances of domestic elites and "external" actors. Where it is felt there might be an over-dependence on a particular external state, this may be revised, as has recently been the case in Angola in relation to China (de Carvalho, Kopinsky, & Taylor, 2021).

"African Agency" has a positive valence in much of the literature (See Brown & Harman, 2013 for example). However, there is also a debate about whether or not it exists (Carmody & Kragelund, 2016), depending, of course, on definition. A somewhat minimalist definition appears to have gained traction in recent years where agency is considered the intention to do something and its implementation (Anwar & Graham, 2022), rather than, for instance, bespeaking the power to make alternative choices. However, this positive valence is not always justified as there are many "negative" forms of agency, such as corruption, crime, and illegitimate regime maintenance (Taylor, 2015).

In return for various inducements, including market access, China is able to leverage support from many African countries. For example, at the special Sino-African summit on COVID-19 a declaration was issued supporting Chinese positions on Hong Kong and Taiwan and the claims of the zoonotic origin of the virus, rather than the alternative theory of its leaking from a virus lab in Wuhan. African political elites are often powerful, in relation to their own populations in particular, but also in relation to external actors, depending on the particular conjuncture, stage of the commodity cycle and other factors. However, their power waxes and wanes along different axes as they seek to balance internal legitimation, accumulation, and external resource access concerns (Carmody & Taylor, 2003). This political opportunity structure does not generally encourage policies towards economic diversification, unless there are "systemic vulnerabilities" which may encourage the emergence of developmental states as in Rwanda, and Ethiopia (Doner, Ritchie, & Slater, 2005). However, such developmental states are fragile given the omni-present danger of a conflict relapse, as has recently happened in Ethiopia. The Botswana democratic developmental state (Samatar, 1999) is being heavily affected by climate change and domestic resource consumption, engaging in what Livingston (2019) calls "self-devouring growth". For instance, the relative abundance of food is contributing to a shortage of water. This is the case even though most African economies have made a minimal contribution to the climate crisis, except those which use substantial fossil fuel

energy, such as South Africa, or engage in gas flaring and oil export on a substantial scale, such as Nigeria.

The Future of Global Order and Africa

Africa's future will in part depend on the nature of the emergent global (dis)order. The continent has been heavily affected by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and consequent food price increase and shortages. China is becoming more involved in the continent's security (Alden, Alao, Chun, & Barber, 2017; Barton, 2018; Large, 2021) through increased military cooperation and the opening of its first overseas military base in Djibouti in 2017.

The liberal global order is in a period of flux and challenge. Murphy (2022) argues that China is constructing an alternative set of institutions in case the liberal order fails, even as it has been a major beneficiary of it (I. Taylor, 2017; Ian Taylor & Cheng, 2022). However viewing China as a "risen" power may put a different complexion on the current international conjuncture as China seeks to both insulate itself from economic backlash (Inkster, 2020) and at the same time increase its influence and power to remould the global order towards its continued ascent in the international system.

We are currently in an era of great power competition and conflict through both old (war and proxy war) and new (cyber and artificial intelligence) and hybrid means (Ratto & al., nd). The United States already has a web of tented camps and drone bases across much of Africa, forming a "lily pad" structure (Turse, 2015), with about 6,000 troops on the continent (Cohen, 2020). As Chinese and Russian military engagements increase this may bring these different powers into more direct competition, if not confrontation and conflict. At the same time Djibouti, given its strategic location, hosts multiple bases from many different countries, including Japan, Spain and others without substantial problems49 (Cobbett & Mason, 2021) as all such countries have an interest in maritime security, open sea lanes, and the free flow of natural resources from the continent to power their own economies.

The terminology of the "militarisation of Africa"50 is problematic because it tends to reproduce an imaginary "traditional" continent ruled by force alone rather than liberal governmentality (Baaz & Verweijen, 2018). The rise of populist politics in (parts of) the West may suggest a selective delinking from African security issues (Owusu, Riberedo, & Carmody, 2019). This is particularly the case given widespread disillusionment with the "everywhere" and "forever" wars of the United States through its "war on terror" (Gregory, 2004). It remains to be seen, however, whether climate disruption will lead to existential state-society formation crises on the continent. If so, the imperative or desire for the containment of people may reassert itself even more forcefully and brutally than is currently the case in the Mediterranean (Hayden, 2022) and where European governments pay some Sahelian and North African states for migrant detention camps through, or as part of, the Valetta process (Parshotam, 2017; Urbina, 2021). This represents a securitisation of mobility rather than space and is the antithesis of human security.

In a sense this strategy mirrors neoliberalism, which attempts to create insecurity in livelihoods and the labour market to encourage labour force participation, effort and entrepreneurialism, including of the self (Padraig Carmody, 2007). A largely sedentarist global order has so far outsourced insecurity to less powerful parts of the world. Some envisage a new era of mass migration (Khanna, 2021), however this seems extremely unlikely, particularly as populism appears to continue its uneven rise globally. The current global order faces an existential challenge, not from migrants, but from the omni-crises engulfing it, from global power shifts to climate change, pandemics, and inequality. Africa is the one of crucibles where the current global orders' contradictions and challenges play out. This will undoubtedly be met with new strategies to contain dissent and outsource poverty and conflict to expanded sacrifice zones or blasted landscapes of capitalism (Tsing, 2015). A Pan-African vision of geopolitics which emphasises equality, solidarity, and common humanity may be one way of blunting the current conjuncture's impacts, if not over-coming it.

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49 Although US pilots have been targeted by lasers coming from the Chinese base nearby (Kube & Siemaszko, 2018).

50 Used in the Call for Papers for this volume

Acknowledgements

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