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Africa and the World: Navigating Shifting Geopolitics

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Global Insight aims to provide members of the policy community with concise but trenchant analyses of topical issues. Comments and suggestions are invited

1. Africa's shifting geopolitics in a changing strategic landscape: Towards greater agency

Geographically situated in the 'Global South' as the geological extension of the Afro-Eurasian land mass, Africa is centrally situated at the very intersection of global strategic dynamics. This raises a number of questions. Chiefly: How does Africa and its future, interlinked with the continent's encircling geopolitical, economic and security dynamics impinging on continental-maritime perimeters in proximity to Europe, the Middle East, Asia and the America's relate to the broader west-to-east shifting of the global political economy's center of gravity in a still evolving multipolar strategic landscape? This policy brief attempts to address this predicament from a uniquely Africa-centered vantage-point, highlighting key recommendations for enhancing African agency and strategic autonomy. It is a perspective informed by the continent's globally centered positioning relative to all other continents and continental-maritime interregional zones of political, security and geoeconomic intercourse. As such, the continent is configured in such a manner as to be suggestive of a mega-island or, if you will, 'Island Africa.'

Given its historical and contemporary circumstances, an African 'geostrategy' such as might be imagined would, of necessity, be preoccupied with an aspirational 'continental sovereignty.' This would require, on the one hand, carving out strategic autonomy at the level of the African Union (AU) in conjunction with its regional economic communities (RECs) and, on the other hand, continental and regional integrationist de-fragmenting. This constitutes a pan-African challenge toward achieving an 'Afro-continentalism' of enormous proportions and complexity as Africa does not occupy a universe on its own, all by itself.

In its interregional connectivity to non-African regions, Africa's fate cannot be de-linked from geopolitical-economic, environmental and strategic contradictions unfolding in other landscapes, nor from external influences intruding into a fragmented terrain emanating from major powers occupying these – in many cases – highly conflicted neighbourhoods. The geopolitics of the Maghreb, with Libya's internationalized civil war, the Western Sahara stalemate and G5 dynamics involving France with embattled Sahelian states are emblematic of Africa's conflicted interregionalism with non-African regions as are Persian Gulf-Red Sea contradictions affecting the Horn of Africa.

What these complex dynamics reflect from an African vantage-point is how the continent must be an active agent in shaping the evolving global order. This is an urgently important endeavour given how prevalent academic scholarship on geopolitics tends to knowingly and without knowing imagine Africa as a passive passenger in a changing geopolitical order. As such, this policy brief makes a strong case for a different perspective and contributes to what should be an ongoing effort at analysing geopolitics with Africa at the centre. This will surely remain important for a continent being courted by various external actors while experiencing demographic and technological transformations that will only enhance Africa's relevance in the changing global landscape.

The aim of enhancing the role and effectiveness of the African Union and Regional Economic Communities must thus be closer aligned with bilateral engagements of individual African countries, especially the large economies on the continent that must take on greater responsibility in organising Africa's relations at global level. Leading African economies will need to play a proactive role in creating and safeguarding the strategic autonomy of the African continental and maritime space. The imperative of greater regional and continental integration must thus not only be seen as important from an ideological and historical point of view, but from a dispassionate and strategic calculation of Africa's aspirational role in the world. Indeed a more integrated continent is of paramount importance to the strategic interests of the continent in a changing international environment. The key priority therefore remains greater integration in terms of how Africa can leverage its external relations and partnerships to advance this overriding goal.

2. Recommendations

2.1 A Pathway towards Strategic Autonomy

Recent years have seen greater efforts by Africans to exercise agency and ownership in pursuing their development efforts. These aspirations are captured in the African Union's *Agenda 2063*, and in the Kagame Report on AU institutional reform. These initiatives share a quest to identify and act on African priorities, and thus spearhead an endogenous development effort on the continent. The real test for achieving *Agenda 2063* is whether African stakeholders are themselves committed to its implementation in mustering necessary political will. It is thus important to understand the extent to which African stakeholders align their engagement with external powers towards achieving key regional and continental priorities while expanding the policy space and strategic autonomy of the continent. Continental integration is thus integral to achieving greater strategic leverage and influence for Africans in global affairs.

The *Island Africa* concept and quest, in this regard, should in no way, however, be misconstrued as delinking the continent from the inexorable processes of globalisation. It emphasises how Africa's encircling interconnectivities are both the continent's weakness in terms of external vulnerability and potentially its strength through enhancing its integration in the global economy. As such, the quest for strategic autonomy aims to ensure that Africa's engagement with the world is based incrementally on the interests of Africans. Hence, the exchange regarding a proposed interrogating of an Africa-centered global zone of peace and cooperation system encompassing the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean as well as that already existing in the Atlantic.

While South Africa sits on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) as a non-permanent member for the third time between 2019-2020, it simultaneously Chairs the AU in 2020. This convergence makes it an opportune time for Tshwane to take forward its longstanding agenda of strengthening the UN-AU relationship in resolving conflicts – integral to Africa's integrated development. It will be important to conceptualise a 'roadmap scenario', factoring in a stronger AU-UN partnership in transforming the African geopolitical landscape toward deepened regional-continental integration *interacting with* continued efforts towards UN reform. While efforts towards UN reform continue, AU members also have to sustain their own internal reform measures.

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

2.2 The continental economic pathway

Perhaps the African Continental Free Trade Area (CFTA), one of the key outlined priorities of *Agenda 2063*, could act as catalyst in giving impetus to greater integration. Now that the CFTA has arrived, it will be important to ensure that an active AU structure focused on business, trade and investment is empowered with driving the role of the African and non-African private and public sector, something like an *AU Business Council for Trade and Investment*. However, this council-like structure would need to ensure the factoring in of the African diaspora as critical stakeholders in mobilising resources for mutually beneficial trade and investment opportunities, and also as important advocates for African interests in the policies of their own countries. Major African and diaspora business magnates and financiers such as Mo Ibrahim, Aliko Dangote, Patrice Motsepe and African-American Robert Smith are indicative of the investors in need of cultivating for such a council in driving the 2063 agenda.

An integral part of AU reform will have to focus on the funding of pan-African institutions and the imperative of reducing the extraordinarily high percentages of donor funds required to operationalize AU programmes. If Africans can fund their own institutions, then they can propose to redirect some of that traditional donor funding towards longer term investments in infrastructure, manufacturing, agriculture, and the development of new technologies on the continent. This closely ties in with the agenda on domestic resource mobilisation and stemming illicit financial flows, which have been identified as integral matters for African countries to resolve.

If Africa is to overcome continental fragmentation into the many and sundry weak-to-failing 'sovereign' states, one area that might be considered a new model in approach to official development assistance (ODA) is one that shifts focus from bilateral aid to Africa from donor countries toward a more multilateral framework that channels the bulk of ODA through the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) and the AU's NEPAD development agency which, in turn, would disburse it into the RECs where they then collectively decide on

financing agreed upon country-level and inter-state priorities. Hence, something along the lines of an AU-ECA-RECs triangle to focus development cooperation interventions into a more pan-African integrationist road to *Agenda 2063*. This alternative model of international cooperation would aim to allocate resources more efficiently. Whilst not completely removing bilateral development cooperation, the aim would be to reduce it in favour of the regional and continental form of engagement. This would also be in line with the aim of channelling the continent's international relations in ways that enhance continental integration and *Agenda 2063*.

2.3 Strengthening Multiple Track Diplomacy

In all the recommendations laid out on the path towards greater continental autonomy in a changing geopolitical landscape, it is important to recognise the importance not only of *track one* diplomacy that involves state-to-state actors, but also *tracks two and three*. Indeed the only way to meaningfully drive the required interventions and reforms is the strengthening of the continent's own agency along multiple diplomatic tracks. It will thus be important to *strengthen tracks two and three*, encouraging think tanks, universities, civil society, the private sector, and trade unions to participate in available fora and to create spaces where none had existed previously. This might also require revisiting platforms like Mwalimu Julius Nyerere's Pan-African Freedom Movement for East, Central and Southern Africa (PAFMECSA) with a similar movement in West Africa generating bottom-up integration impetus. This is necessary for offsetting the ever unreliable Heads-of-State and Government Club and complementing CFTA-linked business, trade and investment elite. However, the corollary to African integration has to also be far-reaching UN reform.

2.4 Reforming the United Nations: Towards a Regionalisation of Global Governance?

It is important to acknowledge that whereas UN Security Council (UNSC) reform is long overdue and remains an uphill battle, in some ways, it is also a distraction from the broader UN reform picture and needs to be contextualised within the regionalising scenario of the reform conundrum. What might this entail? It would mean nothing less than considering transforming the UN system along decentralised lines of continental and regional economic-security governance. Indeed the institutional focal point of such a reform process would be the UN's *regional economic commissions* (UN-RECs) under the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) interacting in mutual reforming partnerships with continental and regional economic/security communities like the AU, EU, ASEAN and other such formations. And given the accelerating global warming threat, this matrix will have to include a major role for the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.

2.5 Interrogating, monitoring and evaluating implementation of Agenda 2063

Agenda 2063 will have to be followed by a systematic monitoring and evaluation process based on the agreed-upon ten year plans. Given the large size of the continent, the RECs will have to be empowered to ensure greater internal cohesion that contributes to greater AU integrity. While regions will not necessarily move at the same pace, it is important that their efforts be guided by a common aim of enhancing the strategic autonomy of the continent in an interconnected global order. The aim: to ensure that on particular matters Africa enhances its voice by speaking in a more coherent, coordinated, and thus more commanding voice in the international geopolitical and geo-economic environment. This will enhance a more straightforward pathway to greater continental autonomy in a changing global order.

These pathways point to the need for more empirical research amongst African research institutes in order to make meaningful inputs to the various policy processes on the continent. Countries with greater capacity will have to contribute more towards implementing the agreed-upon frameworks. Comparative studies on the degree of regional integration amongst the various regional economic communities will have to be undertaken, and various African fora consisting of multiple stakeholders will need to take place in order to evaluate the implementation of *Agenda 2063* and its Ten Year Implementation Plans, all with the overall target of ensuring greater continental autonomy in navigating Africa's place in a changing geopolitical and geo-economic landscape.

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