From Empire and Cold War to the Emerging Markets Century: what can we learn from Africa's persistently peripheral role in International Relations?

STEFAN ANDREASSON

School of Politics, International Studies and Philosophy
Queen’s University Belfast
21 University Square
Belfast BT7 1NN
United Kingdom
s.andreasson@qub.ac.uk

DRAFT PAPER – PLEASE DO NOT CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION

Abstract
This paper examines ‘African agency’ in an emerging markets century characterised by an increasingly influential role of non-Western state actors in the global political economy, and in international relations more generally. Twenty-first century international relations are characterised by a transition from a bi-polar to a multi-polar world, via a moment of American unipolarity in the wake of the Cold War. Whereas this transition has received much scholarly attention and has been well-documented in terms of relative shifts in power and influence between Western states and their main competitors among the emerging markets, most notably China, less attention has been paid to ways in which transformation of the international order is affecting states in marginalised regions. Drawing on Realist assumption about the centrality of the sovereign state in international relations, this paper focuses on implications of this international power shift for an African continent which remains peripheral and relatively powerless in the Realpolitik of international affairs despite receiving increasing attention due to growing natural resource demands and due to improved prospects of economic and market growth. Despite a ‘new scramble for Africa’, Africa's role remains decidedly peripheral and a conspicuous lack of empirical statehood remains crucial for understanding its role in the shifting dynamics of international relations, the drivers of which remain largely exogenous to Africa. This remains the case even for a regional power like South Africa beset by serious challenges to internal order. We can draw important lessons from Africa’s and South Africa’s roles in the emerging markets century regarding continuity of North-South relations and the persistent relevance of state-centric perspectives for understanding international relations, even in an era of great transformation. The Thucydidean perspective on power relations remains highly relevant and, pace the Book of Ecclesiastes, there is for those on the margins of the international system nothing new under the sun.

Introduction

Why, following decolonisation and the rise of the East and South, does Africa remain marginalised in international affairs? Across the entire range of conventional measures of development (and the attendant location in the hierarchy, or division of labour, of nations and regions that such measures indicate), whether measuring technological and military capabilities of states or the economic, educational and health indicators comprising the United Nations Development Programme’s Human Development Index, African states are clustered towards the bottom, and therefore on the margins of the international state system. While it is important to note that all African states are obviously not alike – indeed there is spectacular heterogeneity across the continent – this paper will nevertheless speak, where and to the degree it is possible, of Africa in general terms. After all, African experiences with marginalisation and lack of development as conventionally measured are relatively uniform when compared to other regions. This marginalisation, in turn, explains the persistent appeal in scholarly literature of attempting to understand Africa’s persistent developmental difficulties, and its impediments to pursuing regional and national interests in the international arena (e.g., Kornegay and Landsberg 2009; Qobo 2010).

Explanations for Africa’s marginalisation vary substantially, according to time, place and ideological inclination of those attempting to provide answers. According to a prolific neo-Marxist tradition, Africa’s underdevelopment is fundamentally the result of external factors, in particular European colonialism and the intentional underdevelopment of Africa for the benefit of imperial enrichment that this era produced (Rodney 1982), followed by the rapacious nature of neo-colonial relations perpetuating the practice of ‘looting’ Africa’s human and natural resources by means of ever more intricate and sophisticated means (Bond 2006). In a variation on this theme, Africa’s problems become a more indirect consequence of the continent’s historical developments as compared to that of the West, resulting in Africa’s misfortune and subordinate location in the international division of labour à la Wallerstein’s (1974) Modern World System – simply the inevitable, if not consciously intended, consequence of the ‘Janus face’ of development, whereby enrichment in one region necessarily produces underdevelopment in another by means of unequal exchange and related international interactions (Baran 1957; Frank 1966).

Alternatively, African underdevelopment has been understood as primarily a consequence of domestic developments, in particular social, political and economic factors internal to African countries themselves. For example, the rational pursuit of individual and communal group enrichment in an environment where African economies attempt to compete and industrialise within the confines of the global economy have produced sub-optimal outcomes when certain domestic interest are systematically favoured over others, generally the urban over the rural (Bates 1981). Internal weaknesses result in an inability of African states to approximate the Weberian ideal-type of state sovereignty across the entirety of their territories (Herbst 2000; cf. Weber 1964). Mistry (2005) notes that Africa’s ‘development failure’ has occurred despite substantial international aid flows to the continent which cannot resolve enduring problems resulting from ‘binding constraint[s]’ posed by domestic factors such as a lack of human, social and institutional capital, as opposed to a lack of financial capital. Echoing Mistry’s argument about international aid reinforcing negative aspects of domestic politics, Moyo (2009) argues that aid has had a near-uniformly negative impact on African countries by

---

1 Africa will throughout refer to sub-Saharan Africa unless otherwise specified.
fuelling various internal dysfunctions – most importantly corruption and a lack of accountability – which then results in the enabling of weak states with a continuously poor capacity for endogenously generated development. While these arguments are not exclusively focussed on endogenous factors, as they show how internal dysfunctions exist in a negatively reinforcing relationship with external factors, and also how actions of international actors have contributed to present difficulties (by providing aid under misguided pretexts), they nevertheless place primary causal effect for Africa’s poor record of development on internal developments.

In some cases, Africa’s problems are deemed to have causes more troubling still, suggesting something deeply amiss with African societies and perhaps with Africans themselves. Whereas early encounters between Europeans and Africans entailed some positive assessments by European explorers of Africans and their societies (Grinker et al. 2010: 22-3), the dominant theme has been one whereby Europeans, who by an intricate combination of geography, socio-political developments and good fortune were able to shape the modern world in which states compete and pursue development-as-national-interest, held the abilities and potentialities of Africans and other colonised peoples in little regard. From Hegel’s (1975) typical dismissal of Africa and Africans as being ‘no historical part of the world’ and contributing nothing to the development of civilisation, to popularised theories of cultural and then also racial inferiority that emerge with colonisation to reach prominence in the ‘scientific racism’ of the late nineteenth century and culmination in Holocaust by mid-twentieth century, it is the deficiencies of African societies and peoples as compared to the achievements of Western civilisation and a select few others, notably the civilisations of the Far East (i.e., Japan and China), which explain the persistence of African underdevelopment and has therefore justified domineering attitudes and policies towards the continent since the early days of colonialism (cf. Andreasson 2005: 974-5). While different explanations go in and out of fashion, these are major points around which explanations for Africa’s underdevelopment historically have revolved and, alas, there is no consensus on which explanation, or set of explanations, is correct.

The weak African state

This paper declines to choose between specific external and internal explanations, never mind cultural ones, and takes as its point of departure the African state to better understand Africa’s marginalisation and its persistently peripheral role in the international system of states. Following the influential argument by Jackson and Rosberg (1982; 1986) regarding post-independence African states’ lack of the ‘essentials of statehood’ – the fact that in Africa, statehood is often ‘juridical’ (i.e., de jure recognised by international actors) rather than ‘empirical’ (a de facto ability to exercise sovereignty) – it is evident that, in a system where strong states are able to more effectively pursue their national interests and thereby shape an international order (which is of course never entirely stable) according to their needs we can understand why Africa remains peripheral by looking at why African states are weak and therefore less able to exercise effective agency in pursuit of their own national interests.

Jackson and Rosberg’s description of the weakness of African states might today appear harsh, even condescending. But from Somalia to the Congo and Liberia, similar problems persist across the continent a quarter-century later:
In Tropical Africa, many so-called states are seriously lacking in the essentials of statehood. They are ramshackle régimes of highly personal rule that are severely deficient in institutional authority and organisational capability. The writ of government often does not extend to all parts of the country, and where it does is observed irregularly and without obligation or fear in many quarters – including even state agencies themselves. The language of the state may be little more than a façade for the promotion of personal, familial, communal and other private interests by people who are only nominally soldiers, policemen, judges, bureaucrats, or members of some other official category. Many African states are not only internally deficient; they are also externally weak. […] Most African states are also, of course, highly dependent on the external world for the material aid needed for their development. Millions of Africans in more than a few countries are dependent on food aid for survival. In short, many states in Tropical Africa are as yet far from credible realities (Jackson and Rosberg 1986: 1-2).

These remain characteristics observable throughout Africa today and they are generally more evident in African countries than among their international competitors. The writ of government throughout the state’s territory, a core attribute of a sovereign state, often remains elusive as comprehensively documented by Herbst (2000). In this environment, a propensity for destructive factional competition for the spoils of government generally occurs along communal lines and irrespective of whether governments are democratically elected or not (Lindberg 2003; cf. De Sardan 1999). Aid dependence continues to characterise relations with external actors. From Zimbabwe to Somalia and Ethiopia, states are today unable to properly feed their populations without external assistance (which, as the current famine shows, is also inadequate).

Determinants and implications of African state weakness

As noted by Fessler (1949:1; cited in Herbst 2000:3):

Distribution of governmental authority is one of the oldest and most abiding problems of society. By our solution of this distributive problem we determine what sort of government we will have, or whether we will have government at all.

Herbst’s (2000) account of the enduring problem with African state-building has the advantage of applying across historical epochs, from the pre- to post-colonial eras, but comes also with serious implications for those who seek to improve Africa’s role in international affairs as it is an account determined partly by geographic, ecological and demographic factors less amenable to reform than are political and economic ones. Herbst’s argument is that Africa’s very low population densities, as measured over the last five hundred years in comparison to other regions of the world, and in particular those regions in which strong state systems developed (most notably Europe), means that African states, before, during and after European colonisation, have found it exceptionally difficult to extend authority from central administrative cities or regions throughout the entirety of their territories. It is only in a few

---

2 It is only by 1975 that Africa reaches the population density of Europe in 1500, and population densities in sub-Saharan Africa remain lower than in any other world region with the exception of the former USSR (Herbst 2000: 15-6), where an imperial Russian state was able to exert a colonial type of control over the vast reaches of the Soviet territory.
regions like the Great Lakes and Ethiopian Highlands, which have by African standards historically high levels of population density, that Africa’s ‘longest traditions of relatively centralized state structures [have existed, and where states] have been periodically able to exercise direct control over their peripheries’ (Herbst 2000: 11). These are territories which have since been explicitly demarcated by the borders created by European colonial powers at the 1884-5 Berlin Conference and thereafter accepted by post-independence African governments. Thus Herbst’s argument suggests a very fundamental weakness at heart of the African state, the origins of which antedate politics and socio-economic organisation.

With African states facing fundamental constraints in terms of its ability to build and maintain what are the key constitutive units of the modern system of international relations (states) – constraints which are rooted in geography (a vast continent made up of territorially large states), ecology (soil, rainfall and other factors generally working against sustaining large populations) and demography (the resulting low population densities across much of Africa) – the predicament is a serious one indeed as these factors combine into a potent constraint on the ability of African states to effectively pursue national interests. We should thus be careful not to overestimate the degree to which political and economic reforms alone can improve state capabilities and, as a consequence, African agency in the international system.

However, Herbst is also critical of the (Western) historical emphasis placed on the sovereign state as the necessarily fundamental unit of socio-political organisation in the international system (2000: 257). In particular he is sceptical of employing ‘realist assumptions’ (by which he seems to mean neo-Realist theory à la Waltz) to account for the historical development of the state in Africa, and therefore also Africa’s particular problems with state-building in the modern era. For instance, he notes that the general weakness of the African sub-system of states means that cooperation rather than conflict has characterised inter-state relations, resulting in relatively few inter-state conflicts (although intra-state conflicts have often been severe) as compared to the prevalence of such conflicts during the emergence of the European state system. The relative lack of external threats of force from neighbouring states generated less impetus in Africa for the development of strong states. This fact ‘directly challenges traditional realist assumptions about the anarchical nature of international society and the importance of the threat of force’ (Herbst 2000: 16).

But the African situation actually reinforces Realist claims, as focussing on the troubled history and nature of African states is a powerful predictor of Africa’s persistent marginalisation and lack of effective state agency. It may well be true, as Herbst implies, that a system in which non-state entities were the primary agents would benefit Africa and the developmental needs of its peoples, but that is a normative claim which disregards reasons why the state remains the primary unit of the international system and whether it is at all likely that any other unit of socio-political organisation could eclipse it and indeed produce a more stable, equitable or somehow mutually beneficial system of international relations better suited to addressing needs of marginalised and relatively powerless regions. What we have instead is a situation where African leaders and governments have consciously ‘abandoned’ their pre-colonial past which indeed contains alternative forms of socio-political organisation: ‘The attachment by Africans and others to the current state system is extraordinary, given that even the parties to the 1885 Berlin Conference noted explicitly that they reserved the right to change principles “as experience may show to be expedient”’ (Herbst 2000: 258).

Africans statesmen realise that they have emerged independent into a state-centric system in which strong states reap the rewards. No states occupying dominant or ascending positions in
the present international order, whether the USA, or China, India, Russia or Brazil (the BRICs), are likely to cede state sovereignty to any significant degree where vital national interests are concerned, irrespective of their recognition of, and participation in, regional and global organisations which coordinate some affairs at the supra-national level. In terms of normative and ideological commitments, nationalism is a notable force in these countries (if perhaps less so in Brazil which arguably retains more of an internationalist, or Third Worldist, commitment). Strong, and therefore successful, states in a state-centric system are the ones with a significant capacity to determine the shape and nature of such a system. But their status as regional or global powers means that they have no major incentives to change the system in ways that erode the significance of the state strength on which their influence is primarily based. And if the EU is the world’s prime example of a transition to supra-national governance, then in this case too we are in the current economic crisis environment, with its increasingly evident manifestations of problems inherent in economic and political integration, likely to witness a greater reluctance to cede state sovereignty. In some cases there may also be moves by the EU’s powerful member states, e.g., the UK, France and even Germany (let alone several smaller members who are increasingly sceptical of deepening union), to reconsider and perhaps repatriate sovereignty already ceded. With respect to Africa, there has been little interest on part of dominant actors in the international system to consider and promote alternatives to the state system and ‘[t]here is little evidence to suggest that the rules of this sovereignty game will not continue to be generally observed in the future as they have in the past’ (Jackson 1993: 154; cited in Herbst 2000: 260).

While Spruyt’s (1996) seminal analysis of the emergence and eventual dominance of the sovereign state in Europe recognises that ‘change in the nature of the constitutive units of the international system’ is not always slow and incremental, but can indeed occur suddenly, in a chaotic and revolutionary manner (Herbst 2000: 260-1), recent examples of experiments with supra-nationalism do not suggest that we are nearing any kind of tipping point where transformational upheaval somehow results in units other than the sovereign state dominating the international system. If anything, we are likely to see an increasingly pronounced retreat to reliance on, and safeguarding of, state sovereignty – a tendency which, it has to be granted, is fuelled not only by rational considerations conditioned by the dynamics and incentives of a state-centric system but also by the re-emergence of isolationist and otherwise defensive tendencies in an environment of global economic crisis where increased uncertainty and aversion to risk make appeals to the state, rather than to abstract international organisations, more appealing to leaders and peoples alike. While Herbst is correct in identifying fundamental impediments to African state-building and the effective exercise of African state agency, he overstates degree to which alternatives to the state system are apt to emerge, even at the level of the African sub-system. There may be new states generated by internal conflict, such as the birth in July 2011 of South Sudan, but not proliferation of non-state entities resulting in the eclipsing of sovereign states themselves. Contra Wendt (2003), the ‘World State’ or any other world government is certainly not inevitable.

So despite Africa’s historical difficulties with state-building, and indeed the existence of a range of contextual factors working against the emergence of strong states in Africa, African states and their leaders have since independence remained committed to the state as inherited from the colonial era rather than to look for alternatives to the state identified by Herbst (2000: 262-72).

So much of what is written about globalization is wrong when applied to Africa, precisely because leaders have actually constructed more institutions to mediate the
pressures from international markets and cross-national flows of people compared to any time in the past, especially the precolonial period when African countries were much more closely integrated into the world economy and when migration was much easier. Far from the nation-state melting away in the face of pressures for globalization, national boundaries, broadly defined, are, in a number of ways, more relevant than ever before. Indeed, despite the enormous emphasis on global political and economic forces in the literature... the geographic and demographic facts on the ground are still crucial to understanding political processes in Africa (Herbst 2000: 252-3, emphasis added).

Thus Africa remains locked into a situation where weak states, which are difficult to strengthen, remain the African norm in an international context where state strength also remains a crucial determinant of the ability to effectively exercise state agency and to pursue development and other basic needs.

A state-centric explanation

Following Realist theorising about international relations, and accepting in particular neo-Realist assumptions about the centrality of the sovereign state and national interest, the importance of the distribution of capabilities across states in an anarchical international system, and so on (e.g., Waltz 1979) – a system which remains defined by the pursuit of interest by states with the economic, technological, military and cultural capabilities to shape international affairs in their own interests – it is evident that we live in a world where state weakness engenders marginalisation, subordination, underdevelopment and ultimately suffering. This remains the case despite an increasing, if reversible, interconnectedness of the global economy and importance of international and regional organisations like the UN, WTO, NATO, EU and AU.

Whether or not one agrees with Davidson’s (1992: 290) lamentation that the nation-state is a ‘curse’ and constitutes ‘a shackle on progress’ for postcolonial societies (in Africa), states, like the poor, remain with us and shall perhaps always do so – as per Waltz’s (1979: 95) famous wager on the more likely durability of the state than the multinational corporation (even, in Waltz’s particular example, Uganda following the horrors of Idi Amin). It is therefore futile to suggest that a theory of international relations (or, in Waltz’s case, international politics) which posits state capabilities and strength as crucial for understanding why, echoing Thucydides (1972), the strong benefit by doing as they can and the weak suffer as they must is misconstrued, because it shows that states which are manifestly deficient in those capabilities and strengths which the theory posits as crucial are in fact doing so poorly relative to stronger states, just as the theory predicts! And it is certainly not difficult to read Africa’s historical experience of international relations through the Thucydidean analytical lens. Indeed, the underlying assumption herein is that, time and time again, throughout the course of history, stronger parties dominate weaker ones to thereby shape their contemporary international environments according to their interests (which may of course, in some instances, be mutually beneficial to stronger and weaker parties). This understanding of international history as series of recurring relational patterns can be traced from Thucydides to Huntington (1996) and stands in contrast to teleological accounts of history in Hegel, Marx and Fukuyama (1992).³

³ I am indebted to Aviezer Tucker for making this point.
In the modern era, these strong and weak parties are first and foremost sovereign states, irrespective of their geographical location or cultural context. Even if this did not have to be the case, as the eventual triumph of the sovereign state in Europe over rival forms of socio-political organisation was never pre-ordained (Spruyt 1996), it is the reality of the world in which we exist. States and their interests define the international system and its politics. Quite contrary to Chabal and Daloz’s (1999) claim that ‘Africa works’, albeit not along the lines presumed by state-centric ‘Western’ theories of politics and international relations, most African countries do in fact not work well at all in terms of stacking up to international competition and maintaining the internal order necessary for effectively pursuing any long-term national interest including development. This is an all too common problem across the continent, directly linked to lack of empirical statehood.

This argument rejects critiques by Dunn (2000), Malaquias (2001) and others who have accused Realists (and ‘Western theories of international relations’ generally) of simply analysing Africa through a Western historical and cultural prism which takes for granted the Westphalian system of sovereign states, thereby failing to understand that African history and socio-political organisation is different from that of the West, that nation-states are not compatible with African realities and that therefore ‘Western’ theories of international relations are of little use to understand Africa’s role in international affairs (cf. Brown 2006). The opposite is in fact the case. Because we live in a system in which state capabilities and strength remains central to the pursuit of national interest, however defined and irrespective of the degree such interests are sometimes mediated through international institutions, it is Africa’s relative, and in some cases near-complete, lack of empirical statehood (stemming from external as well as internal factors) which explains its persistently peripheral role which has consequently led to colonial domination, post-independence subordination and a general inability to influence current shifts in the international system to better meets Africa’s interests and needs.

Whether stronger regional co-operation, or even consolidation of a continent-wide organisation like the AU, would in the long run be desirable for promoting Africa’s role internationally and its developmental needs domestically, the relative inefficiency of regional and continent-wide bodies is not the cause of internal weaknesses in African countries but instead one additional symptom of such state weakness. Whereas China is able to exercise a sufficient degree of sovereignty over a very large geographical territory and almost one fifth of the earth’s population (regional difficulties in Xinjiang and Tibet aside), and whereas the USA can do the same over a continental-sized territory comprising hundreds of millions of inhabitants and even the EU can do the same where specific ‘competences’ have been

---

4 Although international organisations do mediate states’ interests, they can be ineffectual and counterproductive and it is usually powerful states who shape their actions in the first place – most obviously in instances where some states exercise a de jure or de facto veto on crucial matters. According to Waltz (2000: 26), ‘[i]nternational institutions are created by the more powerful states, and the institutions survive in their original form as long as they serve the major interests of their creators, or are thought to do so’. And for Ikenberry et al. (2009: 20), ‘dominant states find a variety of reasons to use international institutions. Institutions may be helpful in coalition building. They facilitate the exercise of power by creating patterns of behavior that reflect the interests and values of the dominant state. Institutions can conceal or soften the exercise of power, and they can lock in a hegemonic order and enable it to persist’. 
delegated to it by its sovereign member states, most African states can generally do nothing of the sort, or at least very seldom to a comparable degree (cf. Kornegay and Landsberg 2009).

Sub-continental India, a country with a population slightly larger than that of all Africa, displays many similar weaknesses to those of African states. In India, too, there are areas of insurgency where the writ of the state does not reach, as well as vast regions of deep deprivation and rampant corruption. But these significant shortcomings aside, India is nevertheless able to effectively assert itself as one of the world’s major emerging markets with significant and increasing economic and political influence in international forums and affairs. It can do so because India is a single state of considerable size with sufficient nodes of rapid economic and technological growth and expansion (from technology in Bangalore to finance in Bombay). Africa, on the other hand, remains a collection of many relatively weak states operating within an African framework (the AU) which is a relatively weak actor in terms of both African and international affairs. The most productive way to think about improving Africa’s role and strengthening African agency in the international arena is to place first in the order of priorities a bottom-up strengthening of state capabilities and sovereignty, however difficult in the present situation given Africa’s unfortunate marginal role in the international system. In this sense, a comparative analysis of state and capacity building will tell us as much about Africa’s role in the international order as can theories of international relations (cf. Herbst 2000).

**Africa in the emerging markets century**

If lack of empirical statehood is a deeply rooted predicament in Africa (Jackson and Rosberg 1986), how will it impact African agency and therefore African prospects in the unfolding emerging markets century? Whether originating in Africa’s colonial experience and then reinforced during the Cold War, or whether due to other factors besides, Africa’s continued marginalisation prompts important questions about African agency, and whether African agency – agency defined here as an effective pursuit of national interest by states that results in some discernible impact on the evolving international order in terms of reflecting that national interest – can provide a distinct means of understanding the dynamics defining international relations today. To what degree does Africa matter in international relations? After all, high hopes have been pinned on Africa being able to prove its effective agency in a new era characterised by a shift in economic and political power producing a new multi-polar order in which the major emerging markets – notably China and India – will increasingly shape the international system. But African state weakness, the persistence of a state-centric system and continued relevance of state-centric analysis, the hypothesis to be evaluated by examining the nature of Africa’s present international relations, and those of its strongest states (especially South Africa), should be as follows: because key actors in the international system are states, and because African agency is weak, we should expect that African states remain decidedly peripheral international affairs, and that this is the case even for regional powers like in comparison to major emerging powers like the BRICs.

That Africa should remain peripheral, with the footprint of African agency on the emerging order hardly discernible, is not the case because Africa is somehow uninteresting or irrelevant to established and emerging powers in an international system where Africa’s shares of global GDP and trade remain very small. On the contrary, this is the case despite a greatly renewed interest in Africa’s natural resources which is driven by economic growth in emerging markets, and by an interest in African markets by Western and emerging market corporations
looking for growth potential in an ever more saturated global marketplace (cf. Andreasson 2011). It is also the case despite a greatly renewed interest in Africa as a potential breeding ground for terrorism in the wake of ‘9/11’ and commencement of the US-led ‘war on terror’ (Barnes 2005; Whitaker 2010). In terms of global resource demands and security concerns, Africa remains firmly ‘on the map’. But in the context of a shifting economic and political gravity away from the West, Africa’s continued marginalisation stands out.

To understand why Africa seems left behind we must examine how decidedly asymmetric relations are perpetuated and how they disadvantage the exercise of African agency internationally. While Africa’s neo-colonial ties with its former European colonial masters and the USA are well documented, it is increasingly important to examine evolving forms of ‘South-South’ cooperation between African states and organisations and corresponding actors elsewhere in the developing world, and in particular Africa’s rapidly expanding relations with China as the major new entrant on the African scene (Alden 2005). Africa-India relations are less developed but are also rapidly evolving and increasing in importance given India’s role only second to China in transforming the global economy (Mawdsley and McCann 2010). Furthermore, we cannot understand Africa’s external relations without understanding why individual African states find it difficult, or are unwilling, to articulate ‘common positions’ when interacting with external actors at the international level (Kornegay and Landsberg 2009).

The current power shift in the international system finds African states ‘confronting the geopolitical and geo-economic trade winds’ of this shift from West to East and South (Kornegay and Landsberg 2009: 171):

   The substantive cut-and-thrust of developed-developing world interactions are between the larger developing world ‘emerging power’ economies and the developed world, with Africa’s ‘least developed’ economies sidelined even as the emerging powers seek to gain a foothold on the continent (Kornegay and Landsberg 2009: 186-7).

Similarly, Martin (2008: 352) notes that Africa lacks ‘middle powers’ or ‘semi-peripheral’ states, perhaps with the exception of South Africa. But even in the case of South Africa, ‘the evidence is not … encouraging’ and, ironically, the more advanced nature of South Africa’s economy as compared to others economies in Africa means that South Africa is more likely to be disproportionately hit by competitive exports from the world’s major manufacturing competitors, notably the BRICs (Martin 2008: 353).

This is the context in which African agency must be understood and analysed. However, Kornegay and Landsberg (2009) also pose what they understand to be a puzzle but which refers in fact to expected developments. Why, they ask, should an African continent containing ‘Lesser Developed Countries’ (LDCs) rather than emerging markets or powers of significant stature yet again – referring here to the new ‘scramble for Africa’ – become the focus of political and economic competition by major international powers (Kornegay and Landsberg 2009: 172)? The answer is that powerful states will act where and as they can. The weakness of African states means that asymmetrical power relations will favour external actors whose demand for natural resources and interest in potential new markets ensures a continued attention to Africa. Because African states are weak on their own and cannot effectively act as a bloc to confront major powers outside Africa that are larger and more powerful than any single African state, they are less likely to extract more beneficial deals in
negotiations on trade, development and related issues. For Kornegay and Landsberg (2009: 173), the crucial problem here is that Africa lacks ‘continental sovereignty’, i.e., the ability to act as a bloc – a function they argue that the AU ought to fulfil. But what they fail to consider is that other major actors do not possess ‘continental sovereignty’ either, but strong state capabilities. It is true that the EU can at times act effectively as an economic bloc (in security related matters, the capacity for effective agency is compromised), but that depends on the sovereign strength of its constituent parts. The problem, yet again, is Africa’s weak state sovereignty, not a lack of ‘continental sovereignty’. Perhaps it could be argued that because African states are weak, they have no choice but to pursue strategies aiming at supra-national agglomeration of power – something resembling ‘continental sovereignty’.

But at the moment this seems merely a desideratum, the likelihood of which actually transpiring is unlikely given the very fact of a state-centric system rewarding strong states and certainly not regional bodies constructed on weak states.

The AU’s lack of effectiveness should not be surprising given the weak foundations on which the organisation rests. In addition, Kornegay and Landsberg (2009: 184) are troubled by individual African states pursuing their interests within the AU and in intercontinental forums like the New Asian African Strategic Partnership (NAASP). But such efforts by individual states are to be expected. If the EU, based on states with quantitatively and qualitatively different sets of capabilities, often finds it difficult to coordinate and act as a ‘sovereign’ entity, why would this not continue to be a significant problem for the AU? Kornegay and Landsberg’s argument seems to implicitly support a kind of ‘top-down’ regionalisation in Africa in order to make the AU a more effective actor on the global stage and to counteract advantages of ‘the one’ (i.e., China) bargaining with ‘the many’ (African states) (cf. Shaw et al. 2009: 35-8). But such an aspiration might be tantamount to betting on a losing horse given difficulties with supra-national experiments elsewhere and considering also Africa’s general lack of state strength.

For Cornelissen (2009: 24) it remains unclear whether Africa’s increasing ‘self-awareness and assertion’ in the international system – in international organisations, multilateral networks and the like – will or can result in a ‘tangible repositioning’ of Africa’s role and status in the international order. Indeed, a ‘profusion of Southern-based multilateral bodies has in fact weakened rather than bolstered Southern solidarity … [and] does not seem to have resulted in an autonomous voice for the African continent’. Cornelissen’s scepticism dovetails with the contention in this paper, that Africa remains peripheral in international relations despite its at times vigorous involvement in networks intended to boost South-South cooperation and the role of developing regions generally. While North-South relations have undoubtedly shifted compared to the early years of decolonisation, most obviously on account of the end of the Cold War and the emergence of major emerging markets, little has changed in terms of Africa’s experience with having to negotiate its interests in an international arena characterised by an asymmetrical distribution of capabilities and power stacked in favour of Africa’s external competitors. There is, in terms of the overall location of African states in the international order, nothing new under the sun – even in the emerging markets century.

There is no consensus in the recent literature on how to best facilitate African agency internationally and development domestically, but the need to promote further African integration and cooperation, to build further on embryonic forms of South-South cooperation and to actively engage with major international powers and in international forums for better recognition and accommodation of African interests remain prominent features of recommendations and aspirations. Undoubtedly, these recommendations and aspirations have
some merit. African countries would be amiss if they did not investigate every avenue for improvement at a time when so many aspects of the international system seem to be in flux – its economics, politics, cultural relations, if not its fundamental units. But we are nevertheless left wondering how realistic it is that African countries, even the most powerful ones, can have the kind of impact in the international system that those who see a new era of international relations dawning would prefer. Does it make sense to expect that African agency will have a significant impact on shaping whatever reconfigured international order emerges in this emerging markets century? Or will the reconfiguration of global power merely see Africa trade old masters for new ones? Mohan and Power (2008) predict that even with the much-heralded entry of China into African markets and politics, little changes in terms of Africa’s role in the international order:

... China’s involvement will not fundamentally alter Africa’s place in the global division of labour. It simply adds a new and significant market without challenging the continent’s extraversion. History suggests that in some states this will entrench rentier states, concentrate ownership in a few hands, and deliver limited multipliers to marginalised Africans (Mohan and Power 2008: 36).

Given the West’s increasingly precarious role as a driving and dominant force in the international system following economic turmoil, debt crises, fizzling growth and fears of a bleak future, international relations may revert back to great power rivalries when vestiges of US-centred dominance, even residual unipolarity, recede (cf. Ikenberry et al. 2009). Multilateralism in the context of international organisations – irrespective of whether such multilateralism ever was beneficial or desirable to begin with – might become less important than bilateral bargaining between major powers, and between major powers and those states in marginalized regions providing natural resources, cheap labour and, in some cases, expanding markets for goods.

**Can South Africa lead in Africa and with the BRICs?**

As Africa’s dominant economy and most technologically and socially developed nation, South Africa has long been considered pivotal in terms of driving African development and increasing Africa’s profile and voice in the international arena. During much of the twentieth century, South Africa was considered a developed Western outpost in Africa. With the end of apartheid and the incoming ANC’s cachet worldwide, South Africa has been able to ‘punch above its weight’ diplomatically, thus enjoying a prominent, if not necessarily deserved, role in international politics (Alden and Le Pere 2009). Following intense lobbying by the South African government of the BRIC nations, the country was in 2011 rather surprisingly admitted into this informal grouping of major emerging market powers – henceforth known as BRICS (Andreasson 2011: 1173). If one must identify a strong state in Africa, it is South Africa. Thus, if any African country should be able to effectively exercise its agency in international forums or in negotiations with powerful states, it should be South Africa. In this sense, South Africa constitutes a hard test case: if not even Africa’s stronger states, of which South Africa is undeniably one and arguably the foremost, contain a sufficient degree of the capabilities and strengths which (Realists claim) make for de facto sovereign states, then the hypothesis that African state weakness explains the continent’s continued marginalisation and, ipso facto, the weakness of African agency in international relations seems vindicated.
Flemes’s (2007) detailed study of South Africa as a regional power argues that such powers are supportive of international organisations as a way to enhance their influence vis-à-vis great powers:

South Africa’s success in influencing the processes and structures of the international system will depend largely on its ability to build a coalition with its peers, Brazil and India for instance. As the realist approach emphasises: a multipolar system can only be achieved by the emergence of cooperating regional unipolarities that balance the superpower (Flemes 2007: 52).

The recognition of one’s peers is an important factor in determining any particular state’s regional power status, and South Africa has indeed been recognised as a regional power in the international arena:

Peers like Brazil and India accept South Africa’s leadership role as Pretoria accepts theirs implicitly when these countries cooperate in multilateral institutions like IBSA, WTO (as G-3), NAM or the UN. When the US and European and Asian great powers negotiated trade issues with South Africa, e.g. at the WTO-conference in Cancun, they accepted it as an advocate of the developing world (especially of Africa). And the invitations to President Mbeki together with his Indian and Brazilian colleagues to the recent G-8 summits or to the World Economic Forum meetings in Davos, Switzerland, reflect substantial acceptance of South Africa’s leadership role by the most powerful players of the international system (Flemes 2007: 40).

Flemes (2009) indicates similar success for South Africa in enhancing its regional and international status by being able to somewhat effectively pursue its interests via the India-Brazil-South Africa Dialogue Forum (IBSA). Here Flemes’s rather upbeat analysis of South African agency stands out when compared to the generally more cautious assessments of South Africa’s potential. For Taylor (2009), the very creation of IBSA in 2003, to enhance South-South cooperation, in particular economic cooperation between major emerging markets is in fact a manifestation of ‘inherent frustration with the results of WTO negotiations for key exporting states from the Global South…’ (Taylor 2009: 45). It is significant that Taylor’s (2009: 51-2) discussion of the increasing global presence of IBSA primarily concerns India and Brazil, while it is unclear where South Africa fits into these developments. And, in any case, ‘bilateralism and agreements with the North seem paramount and trump so-called South-South cooperation strategies’ (Taylor 2009: 53). Because the IBSA member states are competitors for export shares to developed markets, rather than ‘natural collaborators for cooperation’, one can only surmise that in this game African states will, yet again, be the ones least able to reap whatever benefits may materialise.

In the final analysis, Taylor (2009: 55) argues that IBSA, as developing states in general, displays a rather naive view that the WTO somehow represents a ‘fair and rules-based global trading regime’ in which developing states on the margins of the international system can confront and challenge world’s dominant powers and their interests. Even though Taylor is critical of state-centric perspectives on development and global economic affairs, his argument about IBSA fits with the argument put forth in this paper about the ultimate importance of state strength and location in the international system for the effective exercise of agency and for the developmental prospects of any state. While South Africa may see some benefits of participation in IBSA, and granted Flemes’s (2009) argument that this is indeed the case, it is in particular India and Brazil, on account of their many advantages over South
Africa in terms of economic and other material capabilities, that stand to benefit from this forum.

South Africa’s regional power status may in any case be difficult to sustain as suggested by the criticisms of both its socio-economic foundations at home and hitherto lauded diplomatic influence and moral standing internationally, including in Africa (Alden and Le Pere 2009, cf. Andreasson 2011). Indeed, ‘while many extra-regional actors have welcomed Pretoria’s self-assigned role as Africa’s pre-eminent advocate, some fellow African states are not so sure about its true intentions (Flemes 2007: 40), and Blumenfeld (2010: 16–17) argues that despite South Africa’s ‘near-obsession with [exercising leadership in] Africa … the evidence that actual practice in the post-apartheid years has matched the rhetoric is sparse, at best’. In addition, Alden and Le Pere (2009: 149) suggest there is a tendency among Western powers to ‘misread the empirical basis of South African power in Africa’. They cast doubt on South Africa’s ability to maintain leadership in Africa, and certainly its ability to project a successful international profile comparable to those of the BRICs. And the most serious challenge to Africa’s strongest state in this regard is the increasing threat to its domestic order, i.e., the Weberian ideal-type sovereignty on which relies any state able aspiring to effectively pursue its interests internationally (Alden and Le Pere 2009: 161–4; cf. Andreasson 2001: 1175–8). This threat to South Africa’s empirical statehood is what they refer to as the country’s ‘own horsemen of the apocalypse in the form of endemic poverty, crime and inequality’ (Alden and Le Pere 2009: 167).

Like Flemes (2007), de Kadt (2010: 29–30) outlines the basis on which South Africa can claim status as a regional power. However, in terms of all essential priorities for meeting the challenges of this century, South Africa risks failure. In terms of ensuring that economic growth is ‘not complicated by political factors’, the costs of Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) are becoming increasingly controversial (Southall 2008). South Africa’s need to invest more in human capital (cf. Mistry 2005) is complicated by a net out-migration of skilled professionals which creates an ill-affordable ‘brain drain’ and which has not been tackled properly by government policies (Wa Kabwe-Segatti and Landau 2008). In terms of ensuring that education promotes scientific and technological innovation, South Africa lags behind international competitors in educational provision and outcomes (cf. Kruss et al. 2010). Improving state performance and delivery capabilities has encountered continual difficulties and setbacks, as manifested by increasingly violent and potentially destabilising ‘service delivery protests’ (Booysen 2007). And ensuring that elites hold to the ‘normative principles of the constitutional order’ – i.e., that they safeguard democratic consolidation – is undermined by increasing corruption in government (Southall 2008). Even Africa’s strongest state faces very serious problems, combining to pose a more important threat to its internal stability and empirical statehood than do similar challenges in other emerging markets.

South Africa’s manifest difficulties and distinctly lesser ability to exercise effective agency internationally when compared to the BRICs, in particular when comparing South Africa’s influence with that of the BRICs in terms of economic performance and size combined, illustrates the general rule, which is that African states remain weak by international comparison. Indeed it is partly the notable weakness of other African states which makes South Africa stand out as a regional power and as the one state in Africa which could possibly be included in the category of major emerging markets. And if South Africa’s increasingly serious internal challenges are damaging the country’s future standing and capability to exercise regional power, the South African case suggests further confirmation of the previously stated hypothesis: even South Africa, Africa’s undeniably strongest state, faces
severe pressures hampering it significantly, especially as compared to the BRICs, in international affairs. These difficulties are perhaps most obviously manifested in recent relations with the BRICs to which South Africa has now officially been joined. If this is the case, might we, to paraphrase Jackson and Rosberg (1986), eventually come to view South Africa’s designation as a major emerging market in the same category as the BRICs as a case of ‘juridical’ rather than ‘empirical’ BRICS status?

**Conclusion**

In the end, we might look beyond present flux in the international system to instead perceive a degree of overall continuity. This is perhaps a counterintuitive suggestion at a time of global economic turmoil and acute crisis of the Eurozone, Arab uprisings, growing concerns (at least in the West) about declining US hegemony, and the economic and possibly military rise of China. But just as Wallerstein’s Modern World System suggested relatively little scope for movement up and down the system, with most of this movement reserved for those hard to categorise ‘semi peripheral’ states (today’s emerging markets?), it is not difficult to forecast a scenario in which the majority of states located on the periphery, home to the vast majority of those to whom Collier (2007) refer as the ‘bottom billion’, will remain peripheral. The great global economic convergence, which largely eluded the efforts of would-be-developers throughout the twentieth century (cf. Scott 2001), such as it is under way today, will likely be a phenomenon primarily affecting the relative positions of the developed West vis-à-vis major emerging markets where levels of overall economic and technological development, as well as military capabilities, will converge throughout the century. Such convergence will hardly change the relative situation of the weakest states in the system, a majority of which are located in Africa.

A future international system developing along these lines does not preclude absolute gains for its weakest states. But there are few indications of substantial relative gains that could result in a more equal international order. It is hard to escape a sense that the window of opportunity for convergence between the most and least developed regions of the world which opened up with decolonisation in the latter half of the twentieth century is now being closed. Instead, a gulf too wide to bridge by processes of convergence along lines generally presumed by orthodox theories of economic development in the context of an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world might prevent any serious catch-up by the most marginalised regions that are lagging behind even Gerschenkron’s (1962) ‘late late developers’. If this is the case, countries in Africa and elsewhere who on account of weak state capabilities are ill equipped to compete and effectively promote their national interests might have to set their sights first on gradual improvements aiming to shore up empirical statehood to then examine possibilities for building bilateral and multilateral alliances, anchored first and foremost in sovereign state interests rather than the ephemeral power of regional and international organisations unlikely to provide weak states with few tangible benefits. Building an international order in which marginalised states and peoples can become better represented begins at home. As long as the state remains the key actor in international affairs, this will be the case.
References


