

RETHINKING AFRICA IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

A Response to Aziz Pahad and Thabo Mbeki



This readiness to recognise error and to change course – the saving grace of American democracy – is important because it calls into question the idea that there is a singular direction, or fundamental tendency, toward militarisation of U.S. policy, with even sinister motives of creating chaos and instability in other parts of the world.

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In Volume 67 of *The Thinker*, Aziz Pahad and President Thabo Mbeki wrote about the current global situation as it affected Africa [Aziz Pahad, “Current Global Dynamics”; Thabo Mbeki “Order and Disorder? Exploring the Implications for Africa”].

The articles provided a provocative, indeed a harsh critique of the role and policies of the U.S. over the past twenty years. They welcomed the emergence of a more multipolar world where U.S. influence will have receded.

It is a challenge to respond to these

articles. Aziz Pahad and Thabo Mbeki are extraordinarily important and knowledgeable leaders, for whom I have the greatest respect. Second, it is difficult to do so in face of such a long and often accurate list in these articles of some of the worst actions

my country has undertaken in recent years. It is all the more difficult in the midst of the American election season, when politicians are prone to excessive boasting and bombast, and shameless calls to chauvinism. It seems Americans cannot get enough of being reassured that we are great, indeed the “greatest nation on earth.”

But I feel it is necessary to respond because while many of the descriptions in those articles of actions taken by my country may be accurate, the motives attributed to the U.S. and assumptions as to future direction of American policy may not be. Nor is the picture of what has transpired in the period of “unipolarity” complete. Most of all I am concerned that the conclusions that might be drawn from those articles could be wrong for Africa.

This is not an effort to whitewash America’s failings and wrong actions. There are many and I will address several of them below. But the United States is more than its failures. Further, the totality of the world’s development during the “unipolar” era contains some remarkable achievements in which the U.S. played a significant and positive role. As we move into a more multipolar world, the worst option for Africa would be to promote a new Cold War on the continent, even an ideological one, pitting BRICS against the U.S. or something similar. The United States has much in common with Africa’s progressive agenda. Africa would do well to take advantage of that.

Assessing the “Unipolar Period”

Let me first disaggregate a little. It is not useful to lump together, as Aziz Pahad does, Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, and Ukraine – their problems described in all cases as “extremism and terror” – and see these all as the consequences of U.S. policies. They are quite distinct situations. I will discuss Iraq below. But for the others, Afghanistan has been wracked by civil war for decades, with the Soviet Union, Pakistan, Iran, and others having had a significant hand in the chaos. The situation in Yemen derives at least as much if not more from actions and interests of competing powers in the Middle East as by the current U.S.

involvement. Ukraine’s crisis derives in part from sharply different perspectives within the Ukraine population over the direction – east or west – that its foreign policy and economic connections should take. Russia and the U.S. have taken sides in this contest, but it was the people in Kiev that rose up against one direction and those in the east who have supported the other. To attribute the actions in Kiev solely to U.S. manipulation is no more accurate than to assert that those who prefer a close relationship with Russia are purely being manipulated by Russia. Give the people of Ukraine more credit. The Syrian civil war may have roots in the destabilisation of the region after the U.S. invasion of Iraq but it has other roots as well and has invited in several other international

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participants that have aggravated the crisis. The “Arab Spring,” finally, has been a significant driver of change and instability in the Middle East. It was not a product of U.S. policy but a largely spontaneous uprising of people against decades of autocracy, however badly it has turned out in several instances.

The invasion of Iraq, and the destabilisation that proceeded from it, is something different. Let me stipulate at the outset that the U.S. invasion of Iraq was a colossal wrong, with terrible consequences for the region and its people. It unleashed the rise of terrorist organisations in Iraq and later Syria, intensified regional rivalries, and contributed to instability throughout the region that has cost many lives. But what the articles did not reflect is that this is now recognised as such by

nearly all elements in U.S. politics. That of course does not right the wrong, but it does say something to underlying motive and future direction. President Obama was elected in 2008 largely on his repudiation of the Iraq invasion. It is even more striking that the current Republican candidate for president not only has denounced the invasion, but called his own party’s president at the time a “liar.” Polls show that between 65 and 75 per cent of Americans now believe the invasion was a mistake. A majority are now against deployment of American ground troops to any conflict in the Middle East. This readiness to recognise error and to change course – the saving grace of American democracy – is important because it calls into question the idea that there is a singular direction, or fundamental tendency, toward militarisation of U.S. policy, with even sinister motives of creating chaos and instability in other parts of the world. Power may create hubris, and encourage its overuse, but understanding basic motives requires greater analysis. Chaos and instability are not in America’s interest.

I am reminded of Sigmund Freud’s reaction when people were overusing his theories of sexual influences on behavior. “Sometimes,” he commented, “A cigar is just a cigar.” Sometimes the U.S. has made colossal errors and taken advantage of its power to pursue its interests aggressively. But that does not translate into an overall policy framework that always operates in that way or that has no other redeeming values. And to attribute recent changes in U.S. policies – indeed a vigorous debate over just how much the U.S. should be involved at all in international affairs – to the rise of other powers, as the articles suggest, is to sell short the ability of the U.S. to acknowledge error and shift direction. How far the U.S. should go in a new direction of withdrawal I will return to later, with its implications for Africa. But once we get away from a more sinister assessment of the U.S.’s role in the world, we can look at broader considerations of U.S. policy that are important for Africa as for the rest of the world.

One of these other ways we can look at the U.S. role is what transpired

on the economic front during the so-called period of “unipolarity,” that “ogre” Mbeki rues is not yet dead. In Thabo Mbeki’s article, the “Washington Consensus” is seen as fostering rigid ideological policies with mostly negative consequences. But this period, roughly from 1990 onward, witnessed the greatest decline in poverty in history. The number of people in extreme poverty was cut in half, from 1.3 billion to 600 million. The child mortality rate was similarly cut in half. The average number of years of schooling doubled from that in 1970. If the “Washington Consensus” was the driving force in this period, the results were not so bad. Of course, the achievements were not simply the result of that “consensus,” but nor was that policy as rigid as described in Mbeki’s article nor devoid of valuable lessons.

Without question, China’s move toward a more market-oriented economy, with trade liberalisation and greater foreign investment, as well as India’s similar moves, were major contributing factors to the reduction in poverty. The U.S. role was moreover significant in advancing China’s progress. The U.S. championed the entry of both Russia and China (with all China’s continuing state role in its economy) into the WTO. As one analysis noted, “The dominant view on the economic impact of China’s accession to the WTO emphasizes the rise of China’s standing as the world leader on trade, and a preferred destination of foreign direct investments.” Another analyst concluded, “China’s membership yielded China capital, technology, energized reform and competition, and created an opening for new sectors, and importantly helped to depoliticize trade disputes”.

During this period the U.S. maintained an exceptionally open market, running enormous trade deficits which stimulated the export opportunities for not only China but other developing countries like Bangladesh and Vietnam. (Those trade deficits are now under bitter attack in the current U.S. electoral campaign for allegedly harming large segments of American workers). In sum, America’s concept of an international order of

freer trade and open markets, however imperfectly implemented, served not only America’s interests but that of much of the developing world’s population.

What About Africa?

Africa has nevertheless not benefited as much from this era of great poverty reduction. Considerable progress was made in this period in a number of African countries in meeting the Millennial Challenge Goals in health and education. But African economies, while benefitting from the commodity boom of that period, were not sufficiently transformed to survive the subsequent downslide of commodity prices in order to sustain high growth rates. That lack of transformation was documented in the 2014 *African Transformation Report*

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published by the African Center for Economic Transformation based in Accra and headed by K.Y. Amoako. The problems were not rooted in the “Washington Consensus.”

Growth so far has come from macroeconomic reforms, better business environments, and higher commodity prices. But economic transformation requires much more. Countries have to diversify their production and exports. They have to become more competitive in international markets. They have to increase productivity of all resource inputs, especially labor. And they have to upgrade technologies they use in production. Only by doing so can they ensure that growth improves human well-being by providing more productive jobs and

higher incomes and thus everyone have share in the new prosperity.

The report lays out roles both for the state as well as private enterprises and markets.

The state, private firms, workers, the media, and civil society all have mutually reinforcing roles in promoting economic transformation. Private firms – foreign and local, formal and informal – lead in producing and distributing goods and services, in upgrading technologies and production processes, and in expanding opportunities for productive employment. But they can be helped by a state that has strong capabilities in setting an overall economic vision and strategy, efficiently providing supportive infrastructure and services, maintaining a regulatory environment conducive to entrepreneurial activity, and facilitating the acquisition of new technologies and the capabilities to produce new goods and services and to access foreign markets.

None of these recommendations are contrary to the “neoliberal” view cited by Mbeki. And the U.S. has provided support to all aspects of such transformation.

For example, Thabo Mbeki’s article notes the problems encountered with the EU’s trade policies in Africa – “from now on it’s a reciprocal relationship.” By contrast, the U.S. maintains a largely non-reciprocal (save agricultural products) free trade regime throughout sub-Saharan Africa, the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA). Successive Administrations of both parties have resisted Congressional pressure to eliminate this benefit for more advanced African economies, in particular South Africa which has been the main beneficiary but also Kenya. Administrations have argued, so far successfully, that to do so would undermine the growth and effectiveness of Africa’s regional economic communities, such as SADC and the East African Community, stepping stones to the AU’s goal of a Continental Free Trade Zone. By contrast, the EU’s proposed Economic Partnership Agreements would have exactly that negative effect.

This leads to a discussion of U.S. military versus economic policy in Africa. Mbeki points to the growth of U.S. military presence on the African continent in recent years. That is no doubt true. But it does not come from some sinister objective by the U.S., or militarising of U.S. policy in Africa, rather in response to African requests. Much of that growth is in combating terrorism, particularly in Somalia and in the Sahel, with which African countries are wrestling. I recently attended a meeting of African leaders and scholars, where a former African president argued that terrorism was now the number one threat in Africa. In Somalia, it is an African force, AMISOM, which carries on that fight with international support. It is hard to believe that those African forces fighting, and dying, in that conflict are doing it not because they see their vital interests at stake rather than just to serve America's interest. The situation in the Sahel was surely aggravated by the collapse of the Qaddafi regime in Libya, with the subsequent outflow of arms and insurgents. But the growth of terrorism in that region has other, deeper roots. The Boko Haram movement in Nigeria – which is the most deadly terrorist movement in the world – arose totally unrelated to the Libyan situation. There is, more subtly, the significant influx of foreign financed religious practitioners from the Middle East and South Asia, preaching a radical theology, into quite a few African countries to the unease of governments and traditional religious leaders, as documented recently by Dawit Wolde-Giorgis of the African Institute for Strategic and Security Studies in Namibia and by Abisaid M. Ali at the African Center for Strategic Studies in Washington. The security issues are real.

But even this growth of U.S. military presence has to be put in perspective. U.S. economic aid to Africa dwarfs military or other security-related aid. U.S. economic and humanitarian assistance to Africa exceeded \$7 billion in 2015, not counting disbursements from the large five year grants from the Millennium Challenge Account, e.g., the nearly half-billion dollar grant to Ghana in 2014 for power and related

investments. Health and humanitarian assistance are large components of this aid, but significant amounts go to education, economic development, and governance. Power Africa, a recent Obama initiative, is developing public-private partnerships to enhance the critical need for power throughout the continent to help transform African economies.

Africa in a Multi-Polar World

None of the above is designed to paint the U.S. as either without self-interested motives, or free of pursuing its interest often with too much force and not enough diplomacy. The point however is to avoid Africa seeing one side of the international power structure on its side, and the other against it. The U.S. is neither holy nor the devil incarnate. That goes for others as well.

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The U.S. is not alone in misuse of force, nor alone in acting in defiance of international norms and institutions. BRICS members are no exception. Regardless of its historic claims, Russia annexed Crimea largely by force, violating Ukraine's internationally recognised borders, a clear violation of the UN Charter. Russia made no effort to seek UN approval. China has refused to accept the results of an international arbitration panel ruling against its claims in the South China Sea. India refused to join the Non-Proliferation Treaty and instead opted to obtain nuclear weapons. Big powers often do that and sometimes smaller ones as well when they feel their vital interests take precedence over their support of international norms and institutions, or when frankly they think

they can get away with it. In Africa, Ethiopia has not abided by the ruling of the arbitration panel of its border with Eritrea, though having previously promised to do so. Eritrea has refused to allow the UN intermediation force to be stationed on its side of the border despite its UNSC-approved mandate to do so. Far too many government or government-backed forces have fired upon and killed UN peacekeepers. Though it is a war crime, no country has been held accountable. There is much blame to go around.

Given this more complex global reality, Africa would do well to manage its relations with the various world powers in terms of their support for Africa's interests. When it comes to Africa's progressive agenda, Africa can find much resonance and support from the U.S., which it would do no good to rebuff. Indeed Thabo Mbeki comes almost to that same conclusion in his article when he proposes mobilisation of civil society in western countries to support such an agenda “as they have in the past.” But it is not only civil society in the west but the current reality of US policies and programmes that offer such support.

Democratic government and good governance, fundamental principles of NEPAD, will find ready support from the U.S. Protection of human rights, surely a basic principle of progressivism, is also a tenet of US foreign policy. Even if the U.S. has been uneven in support of democracy and human rights, even at times seemingly hypocritical in weighing those principles against other interests, no other big power takes those issues more seriously and is more ready to support them when countries themselves make them a priority. U.S. policy, as pointed out above, supports regional economic integration in Africa, and non-discriminatory trade preferences across the continent, stepping stones toward Pan-Africanism. The U.S. has supported reforms of international economic institutions that Africa's progressivism has sought. The U.S. ratified changes in the IMF to give greater weight to emerging economies. It supports similar reform in the World Bank while some other major powers do not.

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is currently championing in the UN Security Council a new framework for UN-AU partnership which has been initiated by the AU. The new partnership would provide for more reliable and predictable financing of African peace operations by having, for the first time, UN Security Council assessed contributions cover 75% of those costs with Africa assuring it would shoulder the balance. The AU approved the new framework unanimously at the summit in Kigali. The U.S. is looking to welcome this initiative during the UN sessions this fall. This has been a long time goal of South Africa's foreign policy.

From Competition to Partnership

But pragmatically drawing support from each of the powers is not enough. Africa can serve both its own interests and that of world peace by promoting cooperation across the multipolar world when it comes to African development. This opportunity already exists with regard to the U.S. and China. President Obama and President Xi have declared repeatedly that whereas the two countries might face serious differences in various parts of the world, this was not true in Africa. Africa was a venue for cooperation. The U.S. and China might be economic competitors in some sectors in Africa and will compete for African votes in the UN and other international institutions, but these are not vital security issues at stake. Put another way the two countries are thus not "strategic competitors" in Africa. Rather their mutual interests are much more importantly served by Africa's economic growth, peace, and stability. Thus the two presidents pledged to cooperate in Africa in pursuit of those goals. Much cooperation had been taking place in support of peace efforts between Sudan and South Sudan, and regarding South Sudan's current civil war, but the agenda has recently widened. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the People's Republic of China Ministry of Commerce signed a Memorandum of Understanding in 2015 to create a framework to facilitate expanded U.S.-China collaboration, communication and cooperation on development issues.

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To further such cooperation, the Carter Center has created the Africa-China-U.S. Consultation for Peace. I am honored to be the U.S. co-chair, together with Ambassador Mohamed Chambas, the UN Special Representative for West Africa, and Ambassador Zhong Jinhua, formerly China's Special Envoy for Africa. In July of this year, hosted by the Government of Togo, the Consultation held its meeting in Lome to examine areas for potential cooperation on maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea, and for peace and development in the Sahel. Several areas were identified for cooperation on maritime security, in advance of the AU Summit on maritime security to be held in Togo in October. In the Sahel, cooperation was proposed in providing humanitarian aid for the millions displaced by Boko Haram, redevelopment of the Lake Chad Basin, and support for UN and African security forces in the region. In Togo itself, opportunities were discussed

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for cooperation between China's investments in port capacity and related infrastructure and the planned U.S. Millennium Challenge grant in sectors to be determined by the Government of Togo. The U.S. and China's ambassadors, along with Togolese officials, attended the meetings and pledged to follow up.

This is thus not a time for Africa to turn away from the U.S. or to promote a kind of confrontation, or negative forms of competition within Africa. Africa does not need a new Cold War. The timing is also important. In the U.S., in this electoral season, Americans are not only turning away from so many military involvements abroad, but also against trade agreements and to a degree against the international system of freer trade and open economic borders that served to reduce world poverty so greatly during the previous "unipolar" period. How far this trend will go is hard to see. Some correctives will undoubtedly be made. Tensions with Russia and China are also getting greater attention. But so far, the spotlight is not on Africa, not on limiting AGOA or other support for greater economic integration and for increasing trade opportunities for the African continent. So far, there have not been calls for cutting back support for African peace efforts, especially in South Sudan and other troubled countries.

It may be valuable, as Aziz Pahad, suggests, that the U.S. take its role as the "indispensable leader" less seriously. But surely the world will be the loser if the U.S. with the largest economy in the world, and the largest capacity to support international peace and security programmes, withdraws too much from its international responsibilities. It is important for that very reason for Africa to use this moment to build its ties and common agendas with the U.S. more firmly. It is opportune for Africa to demonstrate that it is a continent that is an ideal venue for international cooperation. It is timely for Africa's progressive movement to indeed take hold but act not as a beacon for competition but for international cooperation. The U.S. can be a very supportive partner for such an agenda. ■