



CONCEPT NOTE

Africa in the Changing World Order: Becoming a Joint Rule Maker

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A CoDA High-Level Dialogue



Background

There is now no doubt that the world is in the throes of tremendous change. The minute details of the reconfiguration that is taking shape - depth, contours, speed, and overall systemic import - are, of course, still the subject of ongoing academic debates. These debates, however, do not detract from the fact that at different levels and in various arenas, change and realignment are taking place simultaneously on multiple - even if ultimately inter-connected - fronts. From the continuing revolution in digital technologies, information, communication, and artificial intelligence to the massive recomposition and redistribution of political, economic, military, and soft power among nations which we are witnessing, the world is being redesigned in complex ways with implications for global governance.

Markers of the on-going transition in global order are all around us and growing. As they pertain specifically to the post-1945 multilateral system and the Pax Americana that underpinned it, the re-emergence of China and India, the expansion of the ranks of significant Middle Powers, the ongoing overall shift in the locus of global economic power from the West to the East, and the gradual supplanting of the post-Cold War unipolar order with a decisively multi-polar system are a few of the signs that, to paraphrase Antonio Gramsci in a modified form, an old order is slowly but surely dying and a new one, though not yet born, is gradually but inexorably emerging. It is a process that is producing a new balance of power in the international system.

The new multi-polar world that is in the process of establishing itself is also being accompanied by a redrawing of the global geopolitical map. Among African countries, against a backdrop of longstanding discontent with the workings of the post-1945 multilateral system, the perceptible erosion of the West's long-running and historically unchallenged hegemony in global affairs, and the emergence of various alternative centres of power and influence, have been welcomed and embraced by various political leaders as an opportunity to win space and exercise new found choice in international affairs, doing so if need be by playing one power against another to get what they want for immediate national purposes.

There has been no shortage of justifications for the openness - in some cases, even outright eagerness - of some African leaders to try to shake off, or at least dilute, perceived Western political, economic, security, and cultural imposition, double standards, and conditional support, and “Look East” to China, India, Russia, Turkey, and other (re)emerging powers, big and medium, for partnership. Zimbabwe was the first to officially espouse a Look East Policy (LEP) which it adopted in 2003 in the face of Western sanctions. However, Harare is far from being alone in the resolve to consciously and deliberately diversify relations away from the West by cultivating the countries of the East, especially China, for expanded cooperation.

From the assumption that partnership with the East will be more equal, less paternalistic, and decisively more respectful of the principles of non-interference and the sovereign independence of states to the expectation that support offered by the East, including development and security assistance, will be free of conditionality, more equal, and imbued with a developmental logic, African countries have moved rapidly to expand their relations with the new centres of power and influence around the world. In doing so, there is also the expectation that the diversification of cooperation with the East will reduce the vulnerabilities that are associated with a one-sided dependence on the West.

As part of the greater quest for the exercise of choice and agency by African countries, there has been a multiplication of the periodic summit-level meetings that they attend with new centres of power such as China, India, Russia, Turkey, etc. They have done so, of course, while still continuing to participate in summits with the EU, the United States, France, and Japan. Alongside the expansion of trade with the East, development assistance and commercial loans obtained have also ballooned, fuelled in part by the celebration of the support from the new powers for Africa’s major domestic infrastructure development agenda.

Multi-polarity, by definition, ordinarily offers greater room for the countries of the continent to exercise more agency in determining their own affairs. However, it will be a fatal error to assume that any of the new or re-emerging big and medium powers in the international system are driven by altruism in the structuring and conduct of their external relations. Whether old or new, re-emerging or re-scaling, growing in influence or declining in overall reach, all states have clearly defined interests which they seek to maximise. In a competitive multipolar world, it can be expected that messaging that is deliberately crafted in the quest for the maximisation of interests will be an important part of the game.

For new or (re)emerging powers seeking strategic inroads into a richly endowed continent like Africa with many valuable assets of global interest, it should not be surprising that they have chosen to present themselves as either representing a new approach to international affairs and partnership or offering a much better package of “friendship” and “solidarity” than what older partnerships provided. This is exactly what underpins much of the no-questions-asked and no-interference-in-internal-affairs offers of friendship and solidarity African countries have been getting. It might be expedient for African countries to accept such messages on their face value in the short-term but it is not good enough as strategy for positioning the continent to be a co-rule maker in an emerging new world order. The continent clearly needs to adopt a more nuanced approach in order not to simply become a pawn in a multipolar world in which rules are being re-negotiated.

Let there be no doubt: There is much in the history and contemporary experiences of African partnership with the West that the countries of the continent are right to be uncomfortable and even outraged about. However, in seeking to exit unhappy elements of an existing partnership, care must be taken not to end up entering into another unhappy partnership that is lop-sided and even outrightly exploitative. Unless the countries of the continent are clear-sighted in organising their international relations around their well thought out and carefully articulated interests, the real danger they face is to be reduced to a pawn among competing powers in a multipolar world. The question of the huge debts which various African countries have built up with China, for example, is a significant enough issue to alert leaders and citizens to the fact that there is no free lunch being served anywhere. China, like any other creditor country, is in business for the advancement of its core national interests.

Some commentators will argue that as things stand, the dangers for Africa associated with engaging a more competitive multi-polar world without a fulsome clarity of vision and purpose appear already to be playing themselves out speedily. The continent is presently the object of a new scramble among various powers, old and now, big and medium. It is a scramble that is fragmenting the countries of the region and undermining their capacity for coordinated collective action. The major underwriters of the new multi-polar world are each seeking avenues to plug African countries into their global geo-political schemes, wrapping these endeavors in comprehensive global power and influence projects that integrate Africa into the competing hubs they have created in Beijing, Brussels, Washington DC, Ankara, New Delhi, Moscow, and Abu Dhabi, to cite the most prominent.

However, despite the slow pace of an African positioning to respond to the changing world order, it is still not too late for the continent to take full advantage of the opportunities that are available for playing a robust and autonomous role in defining the rules of a new world order. To do so, there has to be a resolve by the continental leadership not to become beholden to any power centre but rather to pursue an enlightened non-alignment that foregrounds the sovereignty of continent and the security, welfare, and freedom of its peoples. That resolve should be accompanied by a determination by African to partake fully for its own account and as an equal partner in the making of the rules for the new world order that is in the making.

The import of this is that African countries must immediately begin to define proposals for the principles, values, and rules that work for them in the context of a new world order. For this to happen, several conditions will need to be fulfilled. These include a much greater exercise of leadership vision for a national and continental rebirth, a rupture with the extraverted development and governance paradigms inherited from the colonial past, an increased investment in coordinated continental action under the auspices of a properly revamped African Union, and a willingness to take much bolder collective action in order to claim a rightful place for Africa in global governance systems and processes.

At the time of the making of the post-1945 world order, Africa was a vast colonial territory under the domination of various European powers. At independence, the countries of the continent joined the global multilateral system that had been established as rule takers. Today, with 54 member states of the UN, vast natural resource endowments, an overwhelming youthful population, and strong prospects of becoming the next economic growth pole of the world, Africa is well-placed to be a joint rule maker. The continent can and should confidently strike out and table bold proposals about the rules and norms on the basis of a new global order should be built.

In taking on a proactive role in the process of the making of a new world order, there is room and justification for African diplomacy to assume the lead in blunting the dangerous rivalries that are threatening the world with a nuclear war and driving cooperative international action to address common problems such as climate change, inequality, and pandemics that are no less threatening to human civilisation - and even the continued viability of life on earth. What Africa must not do is carry over a syndrome of dependency into a new global order. Like Achebe remarked about the proverb of the dancing masquerade, Africa “must be ready to... try something new”. And different. It is time for the continent to stand up for itself.

Objective

The high level dialogue convened by CoDA is designed to kickstart structured conversations among Africans about the changes in the world order that they wish to see and the strategic actions that need to be taken in order to achieve their goals. The dialogue will focus on the discontents of the post-1945 multilateral system as seen by and from Africa, and the key demands of the continent for a wholesale revamp towards the making of a new order. The overarching objective is to ensure that there is a clear definition by African countries of what it wishes to see in a new global multilateral system, identify the underlying values and norms for that order drawing on its own history and culture, and articulate a collective strategy that will enable it to achieve its core objective of being a co-constructor of the rules and institutions for managing inter-state affairs in a changing world.

Format

The dialogue brings together various political leaders, thought leaders, civic leaders, captains of business and industry, elders statesmen and women, and senior diplomats in a joint policy-oriented engagement that is expected to yield concrete recommendations for action. Participation is by invitation only. It will be held over a period of two days in Johannesburg, South Africa, from 27 to 28 October, 2023. The recommendations formulated will be collared and serve as a basis for a post-dialogue series of engagements with the African Union and the Regional Economic Communities. For further information about the dialogue, please contact **Prof. Adebayo Olukoshi, Senior Adviser, CoDA at: olukoshi@gmail.com or Ms. Souad Aden-Osman, Executive Director, CoDA at: Aden-Osmans@africa-union.org**