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Geopolitical Redux: why Africa ‘Exists’ in The Global System without Influence?

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Abstract

This essay forms part of my guest lecture to be delivered at the prestigious University of Johannesburg, South Africa, in August 2023. It is a scholarly arrangement within the broader partnership framework for research and internationalization of ideas. In this essay, I note that in the last decade, the relationship between African states and the rest of the world led by the US and China has burgeoned, albeit, remains skewed. I have likened this relationship to the analogy of a “butterfly”, in which case the western powers (led by the US and her allies) are akin to the “thorax” (center), while the African states represents the “wings” in the periphery. Further, the African diplomatic interaction with the emerging powers, notably, China and India, is no different from that of western powers. Before delving into the core of the lecture- which is, *Africa in the international system*, I have provided a framework of understanding how the global system works using a political philosophy prism. That is, ‘*existence*’/ *or* *inexistence*’ of African states in the global system. Closely tied to the philosophy of existence and truth, is the analysis of international system dynamism. The science of international system dynamism is explained using the British political geographer- Sir Halford J. Mackinder’s 1904 geographical pivot of history. Based on this theoretical framework and thinking of post-Mackinder world order, I have debunked the falsehood peddled by the western apologists, by bringing the audience to the understanding of the various versions of ‘*truth*’ and the role of intellectuals in rejecting a decorated ‘*truth*’ about the composition of the global system. I conclude by calling upon intellectuals who care for Africa’s progress to cause what I coin, a ‘*constructive disruption*’ in the global system. This disruption should be aimed at transforming African states from the comfort zone of interstate *stability* and *durability* being witnessed today, into a state of *being* in competition with each other. I argue, moving away from this *arm chair* status, African states will resolve the problem of intrastate conflict and give birth to an African Hegemone that is badly needed on the continent. The phenomenon of African Hegemone would eventually form part of the bargain on the international table to enable African states access to permanent membership (*veto* powers) into the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

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A very good morning/afternoon to everyone present over here:

- The University of Johannesburg Senior Management present;
- Leadership of the School of Humanities- Prof. Kammila Naidoo and Prof. Suzy Graham;
- Distinguished scholars present here;
- My fellow teachers of knowledge; and
- Dear students.

It is with profound humility that I accepted this opportunity to share with you my thoughts on why things are the way they are, and perhaps, we first try to discover the epistemological and phenomenological character of Africa's **existence**/ or **inexistence** in the global system, before we prescribe solutions.

The debate as to whether or not, Africa "exists" in the global system is endless and controversial. Yet, the system as it stands today does not justify the affirmative claim. For those of us who study the dynamics of global system we are not surprised the contemporary system is a mere **decoration** of an old system inform of international community. However, the painful reality is that, the type of a system shaping the international order is closely connected with day-to-day reality, i.e., skewed decision making, exclusion, domination and colonization of the system itself. It is therefore logical to compare and contrast the concept of **existence** with **state of being** or **nothingness**. In the phenomenological investigative methods of philosophers such as Paul Sarte, Kierkegaard, John Wild and others with similar approach to the discovery of knowledge, state of **Being** and **Nothingness** must be contrasted with state of **existence** or **inexistence**. It is important to note, state of being is not synonymous with existence. However, the two mirror each other. It is not true the global system is in a state of **Nothingness**. The question is that of inclusivity. It is therefore plausible to observe that the state of "**existence**" or lack of it is in mind. On this note, I will encourage you to read my book I edited with Prof. Douglas Yates on ***Illusions of location theory***, especially the chapter on mental mapping of space. What is it then that leads me to objection against the current construction of the global system?

For us to address the question of **existence** or **inexistence** of Africa in the global system, we must first be suspicious about the current "**truth**." The current **truth** is that, the architecture of the global system is inclusive and one that promotes

collectivism. **How true is this truth?** As such, understanding the global system begins with criticism of the traditional meaning of the **truth** about **truth** in the formation of new truth criteria. If the current **truth** about global system and some of its criteria are incapable of liberating people's minds about the untruth about the architecture of the global system, then our role as intellectuals is not to conform to the contested **truth**, rather to disrupt this form of **truth** and replace it with authentic **truth** based on empirical adventure. The reason for the analogies existing between **existence** and **truth** is their common rejection of ignorance as a basis for enslavement. I have a feeling the world is enslaved with the contested **truth** about the architecture of the global system.

Paradoxically, **truth** is a mirror of natural attitude. Natural attitude—it is a common-sense belief in **existence**. In many ways is reminiscent of Nelson Mandela's musings of "**truth**" about problems drooping Africans and humanity, he said, "It is not our diversity which divides us; it is not our ethnicity, or religion or culture that divides us". In his rejection of the prevailing truth, Mandela tries to define the natural attitude, which is, all aspects of our life- going shopping, visiting friends, giving lectures, holding high level meetings. But importantly, what Mandela wanted the world to appreciate is the ignorance about authentic truth: as we go on with our daily activities, we do not ask ourselves whether we have a right to believe that, that which we are dealing with "exist", neither do we torment ourselves questioning whether the people we talk to are really human beings and that they have minds of their own. Rather, we are preoccupied with self-deception going on with our daily activities, busy delivering lectures, signing conventions, going shopping, holding assemblies etc.

And because this lecture is delivered to the **School of Humanities**, it is important we acknowledge the fact that social scientists have much more elaborate intellectual tasks to perform than our counterparts in natural sciences. For instance, a zoologist investigating the anatomy of an elephant is not concerned with the question of whether the elephant exists or not. He dissects the animal in order to study its form and structure. Period! It is therefore none of his business to question physical existence of the elephant. But for social scientists, from time to time, we are confronted with illusions of existence of certain objects or phenomenon in the universe. This is the core of social sciences. Social scientists are preoccupied with the experience of things we study, as opposed to the "thing" itself. A philosophical question for a social scientist is not whether African states are bonafied members of the United Nations. No! After all, they are. It is, *why* aren't African states Permanent members of the UNSC? *Why* some states dominate decision making processes at the UNSC? Such are the phenomenological professions for social scientists.

My second argument is that **inexistence** (in our case absence of Africa in the global system) is not necessarily pathological (evil). It can be a transitional stage in the development of societal conscience of existence (good). Hence, geopolitical processes such as balance of power do not rest univocally either with **good** or with **evil**. In other words, nothing is absolutely 'black' or 'white.'

I recognize the epic works done by classic philosophers, especially those who have explored the problem of good and evil (Moore and the others). Most of their central concern is towards relations of good as it overlaps and intersect with perception of evil or bad. J.S. Mackenzie, showed that good has to be accepted as an ultimate dictum of a particular sensation of normalcy. If we agree with Mackenzie, it implies, if normalcy represents the state of **existence**, then, normal represents an equal international system. That is not absolute black or white. It is relative. Simply put; If I can see you, you

can as well see me. However, the difference is whether both of us see or perceive same colours. While this thesis provides the basis for understanding the basics of good and evil from classic ethics, this approach pulls in a form of **truism**, that authentic scholarship must reject. It assumes that life events are absolute and therefore, it is either right or wrong. Yet, the nature of global system is that, sometimes doing 'evil' can transform into 'good.' For instance, while it may be contentious (evil) to have the 5 permanent members of the UN with veto powers, deciding on behalf of "other" states, this may turn out to be "good", when there exist rogue states or leaders who might commit serious atrocities and crimes against humanity without any form of punishment. And therefore, the global system must have some form of Hierarchy or Hegemone.

This, and many other puzzles trigger ethical and geopolitical questions: whether existence or inexistence of African states in the global system is "good" or "evil"?

As I was finalising preparations for this lecture, I noticed the question of geopolitical existence/ inexistence cannot be solely handled by political philosophers. It requires much more input from Political Geographers. As a geographer and student of geography, I thought of Halford J. Mackinder's works on geopolitics. Most of you would know Mackinder's advisory role in the old British administration, and his seminal work published in 1904.

Mackinder identified 3 building blocks for what he coined "Geographical Pivot of History":

1. Distance
2. Terrain
3. Climate

He believed these 3 factors determines how **states relates** to each other. Today, with what is happening in eastern Europe and Russia border in the so called Eurasian **Rimland**, seems as if Mackinder's hypothesis is rapidly gaining approval. He rightly predicted that at some point, the Eurasian Rim will have to undergo land/sea power struggle. Isn't the war between Russia and Ukraine a fulfilment of Mackinder's prediction?

However, my reading of Mackinder and other political geographers in conjunction with Post-Kantian literature on state relations, reveals to me a **4th Force** has emerged, which is, "**geographical inequality**". It seems this force is becoming a key determinant in the global power balance, and perhaps the reason why even though Africa seem to "exist" in the global system, her pragmatic **existence** remains contested.

The old literature in political geography calls the New Force, **explosion of social forces**". In other words, "**geographical distance**" that Mackinder dealt with, is no longer the core issue. In the natural attitude conception, what seems to matter most is the "**social distance**" between states. Indeed, it is undisputable, today, in 21st C, Africa and other countries in the global south are geographically present in key decision making institutions- UN and other multilateral structures. However, what seem to be the issue is whether the perceived **existence** of African states can tilt the **Pivot/axis**? It should concern post-Mackinder's political geographers or any other scientist studying global politics that none of the African states have

Veto powers in the UNSC?

But before I delve into this **4th Force**, it is important to acknowledge Mackinder's foundational works on why some states yield power while others don't. In Mackinder's theorisation of the geopolitics, the 3 forementioned factors shapes the conduct of international relations- that is, how states relate to each other and resolve problems arising from their interactivities.

I note that the development of important concepts such as heartland, geopolitics, mental maps, power, space and IR draws from Mackinder's legacy and other political geographers such as Klaus Dodd, James Sidaway and the musings of Uzbekian intellectuals, who later on predicted the resurgence of, '**explosion of social forces**', is key to my lecture today. There seem to have been consensus among these terrific scholars that in 21st C, the geographical factor is less significant to the extent that states have to survive in the global system.

Therefore, my main argument in this lecture is that the dynamics (in this case geographical inequality), which formulates the notion 'geopolitics' are inadvertently contributing to the Africa's continent drifting further and further away from the centre of decision making in the global system. The drifting is caused, not necessarily by distance, terrain or physical forces, but by *potential* and *actual* interactivities. This debate is unsettled, and in today's lecture we can try to respond by understanding how states influence each other.

How do States influence each other?

For the sake of the audience who do not study IR or political science, I would like to share a bit of technical know-how in the manner in which international system works:

So, the evolution of international system can be likened to the structure of the Earth. From your basic Geophysical Sciences, we know the earth is made up of 4 main structures (Crust, mantle, Outer Core and Inner Core). These structures are arranged in **Concentrics**, but impact each other to form materials of the earth including rocks, minerals, atmospheric pressure, gases and fluids. It is also responsible for the geomorphological processes responsible for the form and shape of landscape. They operate within the geological timescale. The sophisticated seismic structure of the earth and its dynamism is akin to the dynamic nature of international system. The difference is that geologists study **Velocity variations** in order to obtain accurate spatial resolution of earth, while, political scientists study states interaction and the energy produced through this interactivities resulting into **Balance of Power**, sometimes, referred to as, the **equilibrium of power**.

Like the structure of the earth, international system is made up of 4 processes, responsible for the outcome of states interaction and global power balance:

1. **Bipolarity** - a system of international order in which 2 competing powers control the global processes (economic, military and political relations). Some states may choose to form alliances with others. In this system, the international order is based on the rivalry and conflict between the two superpowers. It occurred btw 1945-1989.

2. **Unipolarity** - a system in which one state is superior to others in all aspects. The most superior state is referred to as, **Hegemone**.
3. **Tripolar** - system of 3 powers. India, China and USA taking centre-stage
4. **Multipolarity** - power distribution in which more than two equally powerful states contest for dominance. It is rated as the most stable system- since the major powers can benefit through alliances and small wars that do not directly challenge the status quo.

What is the African Model of International System?

In my considered view, Africa, within the African Union coalition operates in what I coin **Zero-sum multipolarity system**:

What are the features of this model?

- Through the emancipated Pan-Africanism (similar to what happened in Europe btw 1814 to 1914- Concert of Europe), African states have managed to maintain status quo
- This system has maintained relative interstate stability and durability in Africa
- This system is responsible for the proliferation of intra-state conflict and wars, in which states benefit, since such wars do not threaten interactive states relationship and political installations
- The focus has shifted from international borders to domestic ethnic rivalries
- The equal powers among states means no state can take the challenge to wage war against their neighbours
- This system has operated in Africa for more than 60 years since majority of her states attained political independence

Why none of the African States is a Hegemone in the international system

- The tendency for the African states to keep the status quo has been increasing for the last 6 decades, resulting in interstate **stability** and **durability**

Evidence of increased intrastate interaction, include:

- In 2022, 82 non-state conflicts were recorded resulting into 20, 800 battle related fatalities, compared to 55 state-based conflicts (204,000 deaths)
- Non-state actors remain the drivers behind fatalities resulting from one-sided violence

Is Africa present in the global system?

- In terms of geography yes. Her states are members of international community, including the United Nations. They are also signatory to the international institutions- Bretton Woods, Rome Statue etc

What about the social forces?

- This is where the challenge lies. Africa is playing second or third feudal age

Some Facts:

- It is projected the debt- GDP ratio for Africa is expected to increase to 66 percent in 2023 and then to stabilize at around 65 percent in 2024
- In 2022, the sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) GDP growth was 3.6-4.7 % compared to the Global economic growth of 3.5%
- The leading African countries in terms of GDP worth are Nigeria (441.5 billion US dollars) followed by South Africa (418 billion US dollars). However, the two countries are oil and mineral dependent
- Most of the prospective states on the continent have their GDP struck by ever-increasing **oil rents** that stands at 47.1%- oil rent is the difference btw the price of a commodity and the average cost of producing it. In other words, the cost of production remains high with majority of them opting to export raw materials.

What is the psychology of geographical inequality?

We can examine the issues that droops Africa from the international influence in several ways.

First, while the West and Asia are playing the '*centripetal diplomacy*'- realigning themselves and creating alliances, African states are busy moving away from the centre ('*centrifugal diplomacy*'). The continent still grapples with the question of which pillar of integration should be prioritised; political or economic?

Why is this the case?

Given the **interstate stability** and **durability** established over the continent, the West have stealthily entrenched the "*butterfly diplomacy*",

- Thorax: West and now Asia has a share in the centre
- Wings: Africa in the periphery in all aspects of life

What are the effects of "butterfly diplomacy"?

- The psychology of *peripherism* has taken roots (it is perhaps for this reason that the recent shuttle diplomatic effort of southern African states led by the Republic of South Africa to Ukraine and Russia, has been trivialized by western media and commentators as '*Food and Fertilizer*' diplomacy)
- The old methods of building proxy wars and organised criminal gangs has rejuvenated- this time around the Russian Wagner group has joined the bandwagon

How do Powerful States Respond to Emerging powers such as China and India?

There are 2 scenarios the west deploys in controlling growth of any potential alternative power in the global system:

1. **“Jelly Spine”**: In this scenario, as China expands its strategic axis, other powers move to appease it. That explains why Russia is her closest ally.
2. **“Velvet glove”**: Rather than appeasing/applauding China, her rivalries led by the US respond to China’s rise with hard realism, throwing into stark relief issues such as open seas and alliances in Asia, sanctions and accusation of China’s support to Russia.

What is the future of Africa in international system?

Two options:

- Either Africa remains within the **Zero-Sum Multipolar system** OR
- Disruptive measures are triggered to eject the continent from the comfort of interstate **stability** and **durability**

My humble proposal is that if Africa has to influence decisions in the international system, deliberate efforts are needed to **disrupt** status quo.

If the system disruptive scenario is viable, then, what would it take to disrupt the interstate stability and durability in Africa?

- As I conclude, there is need for awakening Africa to **interstate competition** (whether this will lead to increased interstate wars I am not sure), so as to allow the birth and growth of an African Hegemone. This measure will lead to many benefits including, the most fundamental ones:
- 1) Reduction in the glaring **intrastate conflicts** in which majority of victims are civilians (I think African militaries are very comfortable in Barracks).
- 2) Creating power hierarchy will galvanize African assets into one bargaining power to challenge the west and Asian tigers in economic fronts.
- 3) The Great Power System of Africa will produce Permanent membership to the UNSC.

Further Reading

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Francis Onditi is Associate Professor of conflictology & Dean, School of International Relations and Diplomacy, Riara University, Nairobi, Kenya. An authority on the geography of African conflicts and their evolutionary nature, he is a distinguished research professor at the Institute for Intelligent Systems (IIS), University of Johannesburg, and was awarded the 2019 AISA Fellowship by South Africa's Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC). He was recently ranked among the World's Top 2% scientists/researchers of the year 2022/2023 listed by the Stanford University, USA. Having authored and edited 6 major volumes and over 100 articles and book chapters, in 2023, he was awarded the Erasmus Mundus Global teaching fellowship at Leipzig University, Germany.