THE BRICS IN AFRICA: DIVERSIFYING DEPENDENCY?

The African continent is currently encountering interesting dynamics. African per capita growth figures (if taken at face value) are relatively high and have been sustained for a decade or so. This has been constructed on the back of ‘a commodity price boom that was unprecedented in its magnitude and duration. The real prices of energy and metals more than doubled in five years from 2003 to 2008, while the real price of food commodities increased 75%’ (Erten and Ocampo, 2013: 14). To a large degree, this was intimately linked to new trading geographies and the emergence of “non-traditional” actors in Africa. The commodity price hike of the first decade of the twenty-first century has been credited to the robust growth performance by emerging economies (particularly China). Indeed, China was a central driver of high prices in a significant number of commodities (Akyüz, 2012). The increase in the activities of emerging economies across Africa are then said to be reshaping Africa's international relations. Analyses thus far have had a strong evangelical aspect to them, suggesting that Africa has turned a corner and that the emerging economies have been decisive in propelling this actuality.

In the context of depressed or stagnating economies in the core, at face value Africa’s growth does look comparatively healthy, setting aside for one moment the flattening out of over fifty variable countries into one entity known as “Africa”. But this in itself raises an interesting ontological problem. As Mentan (2010: xi) notes:

To understand Africa in global capitalism we may view it from two perspectives. That is, there are two ways of picturing Africa in the context of global capitalism. One is from the point of view of the people living and hoping to improve their lot in Africa’s fifty-four nation states with a considerable variety of kinds of “insertion” into the global capitalist economy, and a corresponding range of experiences of development (or lack of it). The other is from the point of view of capital, for which Africa is not so much a system of states, still less a continent of people in need of a better life, as simply a
geographic—or geological—terrain, offering this or that opportunity for global capital to make money.

The tropes surrounding a notional “Africa Rising” fully reflects this latter understanding, one based on the point of view of capital, where poles of accumulation and sites of investment have been identified by various actors as spaces offering this or that opportunity. In both the core and some emerging economies, a declining rate of profit means new markets have been sought after: the ‘need of a constantly expanding market for its products chase the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere’ (Marx and Engels, 1888/2004: 37).

What is interesting is the way in which the discourse about “Africa Rising” reflects—and is an extension of—the wider narrative surrounding emerging economies, mostly emblematically captured in the acronym BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa). The BRICS term has become a neologism symbolising a putative changing world order where the normative principles associated with the capitalist core are allegedly threatened by a new set of alternatives. Such an understanding of the BRICS is spectacularly wrong. Rather, ‘a new growth regime’ has developed through integrating “emerging markets” into the extant capitalist structures (Aglietta, 2008). This has serious implications for those who place hope on the BRICS as centres of resistance to the dominant neoliberal system. This is particularly (but not exclusively) so with regard to Africa, where numerous elites and intellectuals have greeted the BRICS as the heralds of a new dawn.

The BRICS concept and the “Africa Rising” trope reflect different spatial impulses of the same phenomenon. The BRICS hypothesis is, as Desai (2007: 785) points out, ‘more than a narrative about the sources of new growth in the world economy: it was a directive to first world political and corporate leaders about where new opportunities lay and another to Third World political and corporate leaders about the conditions—mainly consistency of neoliberal policy—they must secure if the fruits foreseen were to be theirs’. The “Africa Rising” narrative is a precise reproduction of this sentiment.
On the BRICS side there are articulations which aim to smooth out difficulties in the world order. This translates into stances that may at times delegitimise the dominant global (state) powers—in particular their hypocritical behaviour on trading matters. But these are firmly reformist and problem-solving. In fact, the BRICS’ multilateral diplomacy is largely restricted to pragmatically exposing occasions where the rhetoric of free trade is not actually implemented by the powerful. As Amin has put it, ‘governments of the South still seem to fight for a “true” neoliberalism, whose partners of the North, like those of the South, would agree “to play the game”’ (quoted in Herrera, 2005: 553). On the Africa side, the most that has been seen thus far is a clamouring for investment and claims that the BRICS are somehow going to change the world (and Africa’s place in it) for the better.

Clearly, the ever-increasing role of emerging economies in Africa has been of importance to the continent. According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa ‘trade with the BRICS has grown faster than with any other region in the world, doubling since 2007 to $340 billion in 2012, and projected to reach $500 billion by 2015’ (UNECA, 2013a: 1). What has accompanied such developments is the apparent sudden realisation that Africa is not marginal to the world. Sub-Saharan Africa is in fact very well integrated into the global system and has been for decades. It is the pundits, as well as diverse speculators and opportunists, who have abruptly discovered that Africa’s foreign trade represents 45 per cent of its Gross National Product (compared to 30 per cent for Asia and Latin America and 15 per cent for the core countries). Quantitatively, the continent is “more”, not “less”, globally integrated. However, the problem, are the terms of this integration.

Obviously the situation depends on national context, but broadly, ‘As a result of their colonial legacy, the present-day economies of the African countries are characterised by a lop-sided dependence on the export of raw materials, and the import of manufactured goods’ (Harris, 1975: 12). That this assessment was written nearly forty years ago and there has not been any radical departure from such a milieu for most countries, reflects the tragedy of much of Africa’s post-colonial trajectories. Set in motion by colonialism and the insertion of Africa into the global political
economy, the status quo has been ably assisted by the African elite political class—‘the policemen of...multinational corporations’ (Nkrumah, 1970: 63).

Any analysis of Africa’s relations with the rising powers (or any other external actors) needs to be grounded in the above understanding of the dialectical relationships engendered. This necessarily recognises that ‘government serve as the foreman to keep civil society producing a surplus to be accumulated by foreign finance capital and parasitic native social classes that enjoy almost absolutist power’ (Mentan, 2010: xii). Despite the celebration of “democratisation” across the continent and the attempts to link this to Africa’s recent growth spurt, there is little evidence that overall the quality of Africa’s democracies are improving or that governance is dramatically improving across the continent. The composite Mo Ibrahim Index of African Governance had a continental average of 47/100 in 2000—by 2013 it had increased to 51.6/100—hardly seismic and in fact, less than half (43 percent) of people living in Africa live in a country which has shown overall governance improvement since 2010 (Mo Ibrahim, 2013: 24).

“Africa Rising”

Currently a great deal of noise is circulating that Africa’s time has come and that the continent is embarking on a radically different (and better) stage in its history. This has been connected by many to the growing interest by emerging economies in Africa. Growth in GDP has been the central focus of such commentaries and talk of the “the hopeless continent” as The Economist had it in 2000 has been spectacularly dropped in various circles. Now, it is ‘A hopeful continent’ (Economist, March 2, 2013). The mood swing about Africa is ‘due, directly or indirectly, to the increasing global demand for the continent’s resources: notably for oil, but also for gas, minerals, and other energy sources. This was driven, above all, by the sudden appearance of China as a world economic actor, whose dramatic burst of late industrialisation fuelled a global upswing’ (ibid.). Yet this has been missed by the “Africa Rising” mantra. As Patrick Bond (2011: 31) notes:

Ongoing resource extraction by Western firms was joined, and in some cases overtaken, by China [and others]... Still, Africa’s subordinate position did not
change, and aside from greater amounts of overseas development aid flowing into fewer than 15 “fragile states”, the North-South flows were not to Africans’ advantage. One would not know this from reading reports by the elite multilateral institutions in 2011, which celebrated the continent’s national economies as among the world’s leading cases of post-meltdown economic recovery.

The flip-flop regarding the continent has, to a certain extent, refuted the familiar media images of fly-blown children that so dominates much discussion of Africa. This is a good thing. Yet equally, the narrative has swung almost entirely in the opposite direction, with little critical reflection. Growths in GDP and opportunities for investors are the new intonations in a crude binary construction of Africa that has shifted overnight from basket case to bonanza.

The “Africa Rising” discourse neglects a most fundamental context: ‘only for nine of the forty three [Sub-Saharan] countries were growth rates during 1980-2008 high enough to double per capita income in less than thirty years, and only sixteen in less than one hundred years. Performance would have been considerably worse had it not been for the brief years of relatively rapid growth in the mid-2000s’ (Weeks, 2010: 3). Africa needs to grow at least 7 per cent a year for the next twenty or thirty years if any serious tackling of continental poverty is to be realised. However, growth induced by commodity prices increases, new discoveries of natural resources or increase in sources of foreign capital ‘is simply not sustainable’ (Amoako, 2011: 24).

What GDP growth that has occurred ‘is overwhelmingly characterised by the deployment and inflow of capital intensive investment for the extraction and exportation of African natural resources. There is a distinct lack of value added on the African side. The principal focus of this activity is in oil which not only offers limited opportunities for local employment, but also deliberately and actively seeks to avoid the hiring of African labour for fear of encountering resistance and the costs of appeasing affected local communities’ (Southall, 2008: 148). Problematically, ‘while the hope of the development literature has been that higher rates of inflow of capital investment will have downstream effects on African employment (through increased
government revenues and spending alongside an injection of consumer wealth into local economies), there is little evidence that this will take place on a substantial scale. The fundamental reason for this is that the [growth] rests heavily on the engagements of foreign governments and corporations with African elites’ (ibid: 149). In most neopatrimonial administrations, sustainable and broad-based development is unlikely to occur (cf. Kelsall, 2013).

In late 2012 the Deputy Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa noted that Africa’s relatively good economic growth performance over the past decade had been driven mostly by non-renewable natural resources and high commodity prices. Alongside this, he noted, de-industrialisation had been a key feature, with the share of manufacturing in Africa’s GDP falling from 15 per cent in 1990 to 10 per cent in 2008, going hand-in-hand with an increase in unemployment (Addis Tribune, December 8, 2012). McMillan and Rodrik (2011) in fact show that since 1990, Africa has experienced a relative shift in the composition of employment toward sectors that create too few high productivity jobs. Manufacturing growth has been near the bottom in twelve growth sectors—only public administration lagged behind.

This of course is not to write off the recent growth as devoid of any value at all. At the minimum, improved fiscal space is being generated. Retail sectors are growing, with revenue increasing by around 4% per year, and there is growing investment in infrastructure (McKinsey Global Institute, 2010). Given that there is a correlation ‘between infrastructure and export diversification, and the current low levels and distorted composition of exports from SSA are partly due to poor trade infrastructure’, it can be stated that the improvement in infrastructure ‘has per se a positive impact on SSA growth and trade capacity’. (Sindzingre, 2013: 44). Africa’s debts have fallen, partly thanks to the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative (HIPC) and the Multilateral Debt Relief Initiative (MDRI), and partly due to improved management (although note that ‘in spite of the HIPC initiative, only half of SSA countries have witnessed a temporary reduction of their annual debt service’ (Petithomme, 2013: 119). In social sectors, performance is varied but increases in the years of schooling are reported across the continent, albeit unevenly. Health outcomes, particularly life expectancy at
birth, have also generally improved, in some countries substantially. These are all obviously to be welcomed.

However, there is a desperate need to convert natural resources and high commodity prices into structural change, ‘defined as an increase in the share of industry or services in the economy, or as the diversification and sophistication of exports...or as the shift of workers from sectors with low labour productivity to those with high labour productivity’ (Sindzingre, 2013: 26). This is not happening. Instead, with the arrival of emerging economies in Africa alongside traditional trade associates, the historical process of underdevelopment is in danger of being further entrenched.

*The New Saviours?*

Comprehension of the extent of the challenges facing the continent, as well as the actual nature of Africa’s insertion into the global order is vitally needed, as is a more critical look at some of the “new” actors engaging in Africa (see Carmody, 2013). These have been held up in some quarters as the new saviours of Africa—the latest cargo cult to latch onto. In the process, the huge variation in each economic and social profile is flattened out and all are collapsed together as The BRICS, as if they somehow constitute a unified bloc of similar-status nations.

It is true that the emergence of new or “non-traditional” actors in Africa has opened up varying degrees of space for African elites to manoeuvre. Problematically however, this has been seized on as evidence of a new and emerging set of dynamics in international politics, one that creates room for alternatives to neoliberal capitalism. Walter Mignolo, for example, asserts that ‘The economic success of the BRICS countries comes from the fact that the leadership is engaged in epistemic economic disobedience vis-à-vis the IMF and World Bank’ (2012: 43). Martyn Davies of Frontier Advisory (a research, strategy and investment advisory firm) similarly asserts about the BRICS that ‘After the onset of the (Western) financial crisis of 2008, there has been a deep questioning of the free market ideology’ (*Financial Times*, March 25, 2013). This naïveté really does need challenging.

Such jubilation is somewhat redolent of Bill Warren’s thesis (1973) that argued that the Third World, under the effect of local industrial development, was storming
ahead, playing a progressive role in reducing the gap between the core and the developing world. Yet just then as now, such predictions were based on growth per capita figures which seemed to suggest a noteworthy redistribution of world industrial power. However, as McMichael et al. (1974) wrote in their rebuttal of Warren's argument:

To measure distribution of world industrial power by “growth rates” of industry, which include economies starting from the barest minimum of industrial production and cover a generation, is delightful simplicity. The volume of production, the level of technology, the research capabilities, the allocation of resources, the development of education and the use of manpower, are equally or more relevant to measuring the historic capacity of a country to become a significant industrial power. Warren wishes to prove a “redistribution” of industrial power, but can only scrape up a one per cent difference in the industrial growth rate between the imperial centres and the Third World: a very slender reed upon which to hang such a weighty claim!

This might be reflected upon today. Whilst per capita growth rates are most relevant with regard to standards of living, from the evaluation of any notional distribution of industrial power and the growth of the market globally, industrial production rates are key. Aggregating figures from the World Factbook suggests that whilst the BRICS are doing well, they are not doing that much better than the capitalist core. Whilst in 2010, the average industrial production growth rate for the BRICS was 8.7 per cent and for the G-7, 5.6 per cent, in 2011 estimates were that the BRICS average was 5.24 per cent, whilst the G-7 was 1.96 per cent. This sounds substantial. However, if one leaves out Japan’s negative rates (distorted by the earthquake and tsunami), then the G-7 (minus Japan) have an average industrial production growth rate of 5.7 per cent. This might well indeed be ‘a very slender reed’ upon which to announce the replacement of the West by the BRICS.

Background noise about South-South solidarity aside, none of the rising powers have any serious agenda to change the world. There is no ideal world order that thy
wish to promote. Rather, increasing the bargaining power of the elites from these countries with the core is the sum total of any “vision”:

BRIC states, while officially denouncing US-originated neoliberalism are implementing neoliberal economic policies to boost their own economic growth. The rise of the BRIC states will not bring the new economic world-order bring the redistribution of economic power through the existing system, since the BRIC states have in general accepted (not all of them in the same degree) the neoliberal economic ideology and applied neoliberal economic policies or some of its aspects (Kurečić and Bandov, 2011: 30).

This is an important point to make.

Interestingly, the relative rise in profile of the rising powers has gone hand in hand with internal developments within Africa where, under strong pressure from the international financial institutions and Western donors, many African states have opened up their economies through deregulation, privatisation etc. In a number of African countries, the elites have bought into the neoliberal message and now actively seek to attract foreign investment. These two factors have served to facilitate the expansion of foreign capital in Africa more broadly, and from emerging economies in particular.

Yet alongside some new developments, a lot of continuities remain the same. There has been a huge rise in commodity prices and this has contributed in a big way to Africa’s impressive growth figures, if taken as an increase in GDP per capita, but the benefit to African economies in terms of providing a sustained platform for development is far more muted. After all, ‘growth is a quantitative process, involving principally the extension of an already established structure of production, whereas development suggests qualitative changes, the creation of new economic and non-economic structure’ (Dowd, 1967: 153). Pertinent to the notion of an “Africa Rising” are the words of Amin (2014: 139):

Emergence is not measured by a rising rate of GDP growth (or exports)...nor the fact that the society in question has obtained a higher level of GDP per capita, as defined by the World Bank, aid institutions controlled by Western
powers, and conventional economists. Emergence involves much more: a sustained growth in industrial production in the state [or region] in question and a strengthening of the capacity of these industries to be competitive on a global scale.

A key question about the role of emerging economies in Africa is whether routine collusion between exploitative foreign actors and dysfunctional regimes—a depressing and undeniable feature of Africa’s international relations—may be simply reproduced. This is precisely what Mallam Sanusi Lamido Sanusi, the Governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria warned against in March 2013 when, specifically speaking about Sino-Nigerian ties, he asserted that ‘China takes from us primary goods and sells us manufactured ones. This was also the essence of colonialism. China is no longer a fellow underdeveloped economy. China is the second biggest economy in the world, an economic giant capable of the same forms of exploitation as the West. China is a major contributor to the de-industrialisation of Africa and thus African underdevelopment’ (*This Day*, March 13, 2013). Talking more broadly of the BRICS, the UNECA notes:

[BRICS-Africa] trade is in primary commodities with few linkages to the rest of the economy and with most export earnings going to foreigners, and so Africa’s development and employment receive few gains. Also, the growth of the BRICS suggests it will become harder for African exporters to break into new (non-commodity) sectors—and their home country producers (as in footwear or clothing) may be hurt by the BRICS’ low-cost output (UNECA, 2013a: 1).

*Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose*

It hardly needs repeating here that most commodity-rich African countries, which are the main partners of the emerging economies on the continent, have poor records in terms of inequality, human development indices *etc.* With a few exceptions, such as Botswana (which is however an extremely unequal society—see Taylor, 2003), many are corrupt entities managed by leaders at the apex of neopatrimonial systems. These elites have been previously quite happy to extract rent from Western corporations
wishing to exploit their country’s resources. What is perhaps now new in Africa is the range of competitors vying for attention. As Rampa et al. (2012: 248) note, ‘It is clear that [emerging economies’] growing presence on the continent brings trade, massive investment in infrastructure and resources development. Politically it helps Africa become more assertive in the world and increases development aid and technical assistance’. This should not however be seen in terms of India vs. China or France vs. the USA but is rather an expression of inter-capitalist competition, something which has long been integral to the global system. What the emerging economies bring are more competitors and at times, different business practices, but the broad pattern remains the same. Yet, we are told confidently that ‘[T]he Africa-pessimists have got it wrong’ (presumably including The Economist a few years ago) as ‘the engines of development are still going strong. Democratic governance, political participation and economic management look set to improve further’ (Economist, March 2, 2013).

The patterns of continuity are of course taking place within the context of global capitalism, which historically has generated growth in the centres and peripheries but in different ways. ‘Whereas at the centre growth is development—that is, it has an integrating effect—in the periphery growth is not development, for its effect is to disarticulate. Strictly speaking, growth in the periphery, based on integration into the world market, is the development of underdevelopment’ (Amin, 1974:18-19). What is remarkable about the “Africa Rising” discourse is that this is generally ignored: growth is fetishised and taken as a Good Thing in its own right. There is no acknowledgment that what is occurring reflects an ongoing trend of polarisation, where there is ‘the concurrent construction of dominant centres and dominated peripheries, and their reproduction deepening in each state’ and continent (Amin, 2004: 13).

Exploitation by capitalist productive relationships and the appropriation of Africa’s economic surpluses characterises the continent’s political economies. Such a milieu encourages visionless African elites to focus on the static comparative advantages of the spaces which they control. Given the weak levels of diversification and strong concentrations in specific export sectors, it is remarkable that a narrative has been built that claims that Africa is “rising” in the absence of any indication of a
widening domestic manufacturing base or actual industrialisation. This is problematic given that a task ahead for Africa is to develop an industrial base that can assist the agricultural sector in its growth and transformation. Both of these sectors could potentially compose the engines of development, but only under conditions where the exigencies of global capital were not paramount, but rather domestic and internal requirements of various social formations were prioritised. A rebalancing away from allowing global capitalism to dictate the pace rather than the logic of domestic development is absolutely central.

Yet in the context of the new trading geographies being crafted, many extant pathologies are being reproduced, even reified. As one commentator puts it, the ‘BRIC’s trading approach towards Africa, while favouring bilateral trade, does not encourage a...necessary African coherence and regional integration. Rather, such an approach that is based on mutual benefits, and thus not necessarily need-based, marginalises countries with lower income, while favouring resource rich countries’ (Mbaye, no date: 3). Such dynamics also reproduce dependency.

Due to the colonial experience, Africa was inserted into the global division of labour in a particular fashion. This is well known and the effect has been to generate and reproduce underdevelopment. As noted, a central characteristic of capitalism is ‘development at one pole and underdevelopment at the other’ (Smith, 1990: 188) and this may be graphically witnessed in Africa. As James Ferguson (2006: 38) has noted:

Capital does not “flow” from New York to Angola’s oil fields, or from London to Ghana’s gold mines; it hops, neatly skipping over most of what is in between. Second, where capital has been coming to Africa at all, it has largely been concentrated in spatially segregated, socially “thin” mineral-extraction enclaves. Again, the “movement of capital” here does not cover the globe; it connects discrete points on it.

Replace New York with Brasilia or London with Beijing and the same logic of spatially uneven investment applies to the dynamics of the BRICS in Africa. Of course, the extraction of economic surplus by global corporations, without reinvesting it to transform agriculture and industry, has been a key feature of Africa’s political
An alternative?

Since around 2000, there has been greater engagement between Africa and the global North, reflected in various initiatives largely focussed on the issue of poverty with a strong emphasis on “good governance” (Cargill 2011). With this, conditionalities have been applied, often in a fairly static and dogmatic fashion—a continuation of a longstanding pattern. This has oftentimes been bitterly resented by African elites, even though Africa’s own NEPAD placed standard liberal definitions of governance at the centre of its project (see Taylor, 2005). What is interesting with regard to the BRICS is that they provide options outwith the traditional North-South axes. An emphasis on developing infrastructure has been notable in this new set of relations, in themselves issues that have been neglected by traditional actors (World Economic Forum et al., 2011: 108). Politically, this has also introduced new competitive dynamics into Africa’s international relations: Africa has ‘never been in such a strong bargaining position’ than at the present, with numerous ‘suitors’ (Cargill, 2011: viii). The growing diversity of partners potentially offers a ‘tremendous opportunity’, ‘as each country brings with it an array of capital goods, developmental experience, products and technology as well as new opportunities to trade goods, knowledge and models’ (World Economic Forum et al. 2011: 105). Trade with—and investment from—emerging economies potentially reduces the North’s political leverage and economic dominance in Africa (Southall, 2009: 31), which may ‘increase the negotiating power enjoyed by [African] governments seeking to maximise local benefits’ (Prichard, 2009: 254).

These developments may be interpreted in alternative ways. It may be put forward that these new actors now emerging are merely exploitive and self-interested, overall just as damaging to Africa as the extant and well-established set of relations with the traditional powers. Alternatively, these new relationships may be seen as somehow reflecting South-South values (whatever that may mean) and contributing to Africa’s developmental goals. This appears to be what many African elites believe.
Yet it seems obvious that Africa is the weaker partner in these new relationships. Specifically regarding the BRICS, actors from those states are in Africa not because of some notional love of Africa or Africans, but for reasons based on capitalist logics. Interest in gaining access to natural resources in Africa is often central (Naidu et al., 2009: 3). As Kimenyi and Lewis (2011: 20) put it, the attention of emerging economies towards Africa ‘is not based on an altruistic goal to improve the economic well-being of Africans’ but rather, just like most other external actors, actors from emerging economies are ‘trying to maximise their own strategic economic and political interests by engaging with African countries’. Their relationships with SSA do not exhibit any notable “exceptionalism”, displaying patterns that are ‘broadly similar to those of SSA “traditional” partners and mostly reinforce existing commodity-based export structures’ (Sindzingre, 2013: 45). This contrast with the diplomatic claims made by the emerging economies that their engagement with Africa is qualitatively different—and better—than that of the North, with relentless incantations about “South-South” ties, “solidarity”, “mutual benefits”, “win-win relations” and “partnerships”.

Given the ‘growing expectations among the citizens’ in countries targeted by the emerging economies ‘of the immediate upswings in their livelihoods and improvements in quality of life’ (Aryeeetey and Ashmah, 2011: 22), the solidarity rhetoric may backfire. It is obvious that the quality of a country’s governance institutions are crucial determinants in development and growth and though there have been some improvements in governance in Africa of late, the incidence of corruption and general pathologies of maldevelopment remains high. Possibly compounding this situation is the “non-interference” practiced by some of the new partners. What this means in practical terms is that until and unless the elites in Africa themselves promote pro-development policies, no such standards will be adopted. In such a milieu, the perpetual question will then be: How might Africa engage with and exploit the increased engagement by new partners in order to benefit ordinary people and promote development?

**Institutions, Africa and the rising powers**
Recently, a revitalised diplomacy has been initiated towards Africa. With regards to the emerging economies specifically, various summits, institutions and agreements have been established which has witnessed an outpouring of for a: the Korea-Africa Forum, the Turkey-Africa Partnership, the Africa-Singapore Business Forum, the Malaysia-Africa Business Forum, the Taiwan-Africa Summit, Brazil-Africa Forum and so on. All of these have (consciously or not) replicated the Chinese example set by the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), established in 2000.

The background to FOCAC can be traced to the visit by Chinese Premier Jiang Zemin to Africa in 1996, when he publicly unveiled a new Chinese approach to Africa. According to a Chinese report, "The guiding principle that China follows in developing relations with African countries in the new situation is: “to treat each other as equals, develop sincere friendship, strengthen solidarity and cooperation, and seek common development” (Xinhua, May 22, 1996). During a keynote speech to the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), entitled “Toward a New Historical Milestone of Sino-African Friendship”, Jiang advanced a five-point proposal for a new relationship between China and Africa:

i. fostering a sincere friendship between China and Africa and both sides becoming each other’s reliable “all-weather friends”;
ii. treating each other as equals and respecting each other’s sovereignty and not interference in each other’s internal affairs;
iii. seeking common development on the basis of mutual benefit;
iv. enhancing consultation and cooperation in international affairs;
v. looking into the future and create a better world (ibid.).

Jiang’s proposal was warmly received by the OAU and may be seen as laying the foundation for current Sino-African relations. FOCAC has subsequently been the official vehicle to realise these ambitions.

In October 2000 a Forum on China-Africa Cooperation Ministerial Conference in Beijing was held that culminated in the formation of FOCAC. Previously, in October 1999 President Jiang Zemin had written to all heads of African states, as well as the
Secretary-General of the OAU, to propose the convening of a Sino-Africa forum. When this was greeted with a favourable reception, the Chinese established a preparatory committee comprised of 18 ministries, with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation (MOFTEC) assigned the roles of anchormen. Interestingly, Chinese sources claim that it was African leaders who initiated and asked for a summit. He Wenping (2007: 147) asserts that: ‘At the end of the 1990s, some African countries proposed that as the US, Britain, France, Japan and Europe had established mechanisms for contact with Africa, it was necessary for China and Africa to establish a similar mechanism to fit in with the need to strengthen relations. After earnest study, China decided to echo the suggestions of African countries, and proposed to hold the Forum in 2000’. Whether or not it was Beijing or African states that called for and initiated the summit, FOCAC has quickly proved to be a major feature in Africa’s international relations.

The meeting in October 2000 was attended by 80 ministers charged with foreign affairs and international trade and economic development, from 45 African states. Representatives of international and regional organisations also attended, as did delegates from two African countries that did not then have diplomatic ties with China (Liberia and Malawi). Discussions were organised into four separate sessions: trade; economic reform (with China’s programme being showcased as a possible model); poverty eradication and sustainable development; and cooperation in education, science technology and health care.

At the meeting, Jiang Zemin gave the keynote speech, starting off with the implicit claim that China was the leader of the developing world, with the oft-reported refrain that ‘China is the largest developing country in the world and Africa is the continent with the largest number of developing countries’ (Peoples’ Daily, October 11, 2000). This Third Worldism was then made explicit by Jiang’s claim that the meeting was a tangible example of South-South linkages: ‘closer South-South co-operation and the establishment of an equitable and just new international political and economic order’ was needed (ibid.). Notably, Jiang cast Sino-African relations within an international context that ‘is moving towards multi-polarity and [where] the international situation is on the whole easing off’ (ibid.). This was seen as providing
new opportunities for trade and co-operation. These favourable conditions however were potentially threatened as ‘Hegemonism and power politics still exist’ (ibid.). Conflict and instability in the developing world was squarely blamed on the ‘many irrational and inequitable factors in the current international political and economic order [which] are detrimental not only to world peace and development, but also to the stability and development of the vast number of developing countries’ (ibid.).

Jiang then went on to outline four key ways that China and Africa could, working together, help establish a new global order:

1. ‘Strengthen solidarity and promote South-South cooperation’. South-South cooperation was seen as the main way developing countries could ‘give full play to their advantages in natural and human resources, tap to the full their respective productive and technological potential, take advantage of the others’ strengths to make up for their own weaknesses, and achieve common improvement’ (ibid.).

2. ‘Enhance dialogue and improve North-South relations’. According to Jiang, ‘Developed countries should take full account and care of the interests of the less privileged developing countries and increase financial investment and technology transfer to them to help build up their capacity for development’. Intrinsic to this point was the assertion by Jiang that ‘A smaller development gap and better political and economic relations between the North and the South is an important foundation for a just and equitable new international political and economic order’ (ibid.).

3. ‘Take part in international affairs on the basis of equality and in an enterprising spirit’. According to Jiang, China and Africa needed to increase consultation and cooperation on both ‘the bilateral and multilateral fronts’ and vigorously participate in international affairs and the formulation of international rules. Central to this was the promotion of reform of the international economic system as though this, ‘a fair international environment will be created and the
legitimate rights and interests of developing countries will be effectively safeguarded’ (ibid.).

4. ‘Look forward into the future and establish a new long-term stable partnership of equality and mutual benefit’. Jiang stated that increased exchanges, ‘especially direct contacts between top leaders of both China and African countries’ would be pursued as central to this goal.

FOCAC now meets every three years (alternately in Africa and China) and is a formalisation of China’s engagement with Africa. Its model has been copied by others. India, for example, instigated the India-Africa Forum Summit in 2008, which ‘marked the culmination of India’s renewed focus on Africa’ (Kragelund, 2011: 596). Fourteen African countries attended the summit, which gave rise to two declaratory documents: the India–Africa Framework for Cooperation Forum and the Delhi Declaration. Both documents stressed South-South cooperation, capacity building and mutual interests. A plan of action was launched, a clear replication of FOCAC’s own institutional framework (see Taylor, 2011b). Subsequent to the summit, New Delhi committed a $5.4 billion credit line over the next five years (rising from $2.15 billion in the past five years), grants worth $500 million and a unilateral opening of the Indian domestic economy to exports from all least developing countries (LDCs). Similarly, in April 2012 the first ‘Brazil-Africa Forum 2012’ met in Johannesburg in September 2012.

This growing interest in Africa has arguably also been reflected by a changing attitude towards a greater inclusion of African voices in international financial institutions. Though ultimately unsuccessful, the very fact that Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala led a credible campaign to become president of the World Bank speaks volumes. Setting aside her decidedly orthodox neoliberal position and status as a World Bank insider, along with former Colombian finance minister Jose Antonio Ocampo, Okonjo-Iweala helped create the bank's first-ever competitive race for the presidency. That an African was one of the candidates—and was taken seriously—is noteworthy. Previously, the World Bank Group’s Annual Meeting in 2008 agreed on reforms that created an additional Chair at the World Bank Board for Africa. The continent has
become ‘increasingly assertive in international forums and aware of its influence’ as a region making up nearly 25 per cent of the world’s countries and thus is a potentially influential bloc (Cargill, 2011: 43).

For its part, the IMF has been discussing reforming its voting structure in order to better reflect the contemporary world, rather than the world as it was when the IMF was founded. As part of this, it was proposed that emerging economies would be granted increasing voting weight. Of interest, African countries ‘reacted furiously’ to such proposals and argued that this would give undue priority to emerging countries ‘while delaying action to give the world’s poorest countries greater influence over the body that often dictates their economic policies’ (Elliot 2006). Rather than endorse the proposal in the spirit of South-South solidarity, African elites argued that such plans would leave them in an even weaker and dependent position than ever. Although they ultimately stalled (the US Congress refused to ratify the quota increase), such discussions do reflect a changing global reality: the plan is to make China the third-largest voting member and revise the IMF’s board to reduce Europe’s dominance, ‘part of a broader plan by the IMF to recognise within the organisation the growing economic clout of emerging economies’ (Reuters, October 8, 2012).

However, the reforms, supposed to be introduced in late 2012, were, at the time of writing, held up by interminable wrangling over the formula used to decide voting weight. What such development indicate however is that emerging economies’ elites are more and more pressing for some reform of global relations, albeit in problem-solving terms. Africa’s support in such questions is actively sought, although there remains no common African position and the AU continues to have no serious strategy for managing the continent’s burgeoning relationships.

Towards the African Century?
As noted, Africa’s generalised robust economic performance (in terms of growth) has coincided with increasing engagement with emerging economies. The diversification of Africa’s international relations has been increasingly influenced by the shift in relative capabilities to emerging economies. The financial crisis of 2008 had potentially significant repercussions for the international system in that a shift in
material capabilities from traditional to emerging powers appeared evident, not least in the absolute need by the guardians of the global liberal order to incorporate new partners from the South to legitimise the overall system. The debate over IMF quota shares and a reliance on emerging actors to provide capital injections in order to stabilise the global economy reflects this (Kose and Prasad, 2010: 7). The very decision to expand the G-8 to the G-20 as the key international institution to discuss future economic global governance was a further manifestation of these processes.

Until the turn of the century, it would be fair to say that many African economies were dependent on the Northern-based IFIs for establishing key ideas and approaches to their development models and for access to capital and policy advice. This has now changed somewhat. The emerging economies’ rise in material capabilities and their incorporation into the key global governance architecture has given rise to the notion that Africa’s international relations are in a process of change, perhaps away from the North and towards the South, with attendant debates over the possibility of alternative models of development. Certainly, the potential ability to access different methodologies and new ideas concerning developmental thinking could possibly lessen Africa’s dependence on the IFIs and their conditionalities (Cargill 2011: vii). Whilst conditionalities can be seen as reflecting neocolonial impulses—and the policy advice has been rigidly doctrinaire in its application of neoliberal prescriptions—it is uncertain that shifting to no conditions is better, given the governance modalities of many African states. Equally, the environmental and social models that the emerging economies base their rise on (intensified labour and environmental exploitation and a free reign to capital) is hardly a superior alternative.

As Africa is routinely ranked the most corrupt region of the world, a hands-off approach by the RISING POWERS over matters related to governance is not helpful. Furthermore, a set of new relationships based on the intensification of natural resource extraction will be equally problematic. One of the key lessons for Africa from the financial crisis was that those countries that were more diversified generally tended to be more resilient than those that were highly dependent on a few primary commodities (Mutenyo, 2011: 29). Reinscribing African dependence on commodities
hardly offers any novel framework to emerging relationships with Africa and undermines the RISING POWERS claims to be somehow “different”. Even if the emphasis placed by some of the RISING POWERS on addressing structural bottlenecks in Africa has been beneficial for the continent, new roads and railways in the absence of serious reforms will hardly make a sustainable and long-term contribution.

This returns us to the question as to whether emerging economies’ increasing engagement with Africa is exploitive or benign. This question can only be answered in a contextual manner, dependent upon which actors from which emerging economy and in which sector of which country in Africa is being discussed. But it is important to remember that actors such as the RISING POWERS have increased engagement with Africa as a means to achieve their own economic and political goals and that overall, Africa remains the weaker partner. The weakness is usually ascribed to the continent’s dependent relationship in the international system and Africa’s historic insertion into the global capitalist economy. However, dependence is ‘a historical process, a matrix of action’, that permits the prospect of alteration stemming from changes in the dynamics, processes and organisation of the international system and the fundamental tendencies within Africa’s political economy (Bayart, 2000: 234). Current emergent trends, such as robust economic growth and an increasing diversification of the continent’s international relations may play important roles in this regard, yet massive challenges remain. Africa’s world market share in processing industries is extraordinarily low: SSA exports just 0.9 and 0.3 per cent of world light and heavy manufacturing exports respectively (World Economic Forum et al., 2011: 15). The bulk of the growth in African exports in the last decade or more has been heavily underpinned by mining-related commodities, deeply problematic in terms of development. After all, the export growth that the Asian economies used to leapfrog development was based on an increasing list of manufactures. Africa is nowhere near that position.

Yet it is true that actors from both the global North and South are now actively pursuing closer engagement with Africa. This provides the elites of the continent opportunities to extract leverage in return for access. This may or may not be a good
thing, depending on the conjectural circumstances in each state formation and the
nature of the external partners. It cannot be taken for granted that actors such as the
RISING POWERS are interested in furthering Africa’s developmental priorities.
Though Africa has possibly never been in a stronger bargaining position than at
present, the key question remains: how can African leaders take advantage for the
benefit of the ordinary citizen. Currently, this does not seem to be happening.

Conclusion

It takes more to be a global power than pure economic resources, however impressive
some of the BRICS growth trajectories have been of late. As a bloc to be taken
earnestly as some sort of alternative to the North and which may affect Africa’s place
in the world, the BRICS require a developed, intelligible, vision for the global order.
This, and the political will to use their capacities to work at this, are the minimum
necessary conditions. But here we run into problems if we are take seriously some of
the more excited claims about the BRICS and the way they are supposedly changing
the world. Thus far, the enthusiasm for global leadership—once it is realised that this
comes with costs and responsibilities—seems highly constrained. Rhetoric only goes
so far, until practical action and practical alternative plans are demanded. There is
clearly no current new NIEO on the table. Furthermore, ‘Beyond annual meetings on
presidential and ministerial level, BRICS’ cooperation is not institutionalised in a
formal way. Other multilateral gatherings as well as bilateral negotiations are
reflecting existing asymmetries and differences within BRICS and are to some extent
undermining the BRICS-concept’ (European Parliament, 2012: 9).

Instead, the BRICS states seem content to engage in helping to legitimise the
ongoing order, improving it here and there in line with their own interests and
requesting some more roles in various decision-making functions. These are technical,
problem-solving activities and do not question—let alone threaten—the hegemonic
order. Given that much analysis places some of the blame for Africa’s ongoing
condition on this very same world order, the BRICS emerge as disappointing advocates
for the continent—or at least those elements that are dissatisfied with the extant
situation. Indeed, the notion that the BRICS pose a potential counter-hegemonic force
needs to be discounted. In looking at world order, Cox wrote that ‘A counter hegemony would consist of a coherent view of an alternative world order, backed by a concentration of power sufficient to maintain a challenge to core countries’ (1981: 150-151) It is clear that the BRICS do not offer a ‘coherent view of an alternative world order’, beyond appeals to a stricter adherence to state sovereignty norms.

The BRICS have a massive stake in the contemporary order and so wish to be involved in shaping and stabilising it. As Anand (2011: 70) notes, ‘the Western states can no longer push ahead their agenda unilaterally. However, one can see that this co-option is a disciplinary move and see the rise of the non-Western powers as a victory of the West... It is by working within the existing system, by focusing on the market economy, by adopting vehemently Western political ideas of state and sovereignty though not necessarily democracy, that the non-Western powers have become resurgent’. A stable external environment is vital for the emerging economies and the option of being bystanders is no longer possible. In this regard, the BRICS does provides a platform for debates regarding the fairness of the global order and issues related to representation in bodies such as the UNSC, WB, IMF etc.

Furthermore, by promoting multilateral solutions to global governance issues, the BRICS can push for closer adherence to UN normative values, particularly around sovereignty. This is an agenda that enjoys the support of African elites, given that sovereignty is routinely defined by them as the right to rule unhindered and which endows them with the agency through which to manage external ties (see Brown, 2013). Yet there is no real overall alternative agenda and no broad principles—other than greater representation—that underpins the BRICS. As Otero-Iglesias notes, specifically regarding Brazil, but which could easily be applied to the other BRICS, ‘it is very difficult to know what the Brazilian government actually wants other than more voice in global governance’ (2012: 5).

Due to this failure to develop any credible vision beyond securing seats at the top table, there is a real danger that the BRICS as an institutionalised expression of select emerging economies will be co-opted by the capitalist core, whilst at the same time the BRICS will be expected to contribute to the costs and burden-sharing of maintaining the extant global order—an order that ultimately disproportionally
benefits elites from the capitalist heartlands and which continues to underdevelop Africa. This brings with it a tension within the BRICS set-up. The more it institutionalises whilst accepting the hegemonic order, the greater the chance that it will be co-opted.

Conversely, if the BRICS lack institutionalisation, then their coherency is weakened and they are reduced to a mere talking shop. In other words, if the BRICS simply becomes a forum for big regional integration centres to converse, its value-added is limited. This reality is a profound contradiction that the BRICS members must face and may influence the eventual fate of the grouping along the lines suggested by Martynov (2011: 74):

[T]he redistribution of votes in the international financial institutions in favour of BRICS, as well as the proposed reform of the Security Council, still comes across as the BRICS countries fighting to achieve their own tactical goals, which have nothing to do with the proclaimed long-term strategy. Once those goals have been achieved, BRICS could enter a period of stagnation and slow decline, having outlived its usefulness or it could rapidly disintegrate, unable to cope with growing trade and economic rivalry between its member states. The short-term nature of the goals pursued by the BRICS members is quite obvious. It is equally obvious that the strategic aspirations of the BRICS organisation must be much more substantial and long-term than the tactical goals of its individual members.

Here of course the reality of many Africas re-emerges, just as does the issue of the “Global South”. What is the Global South today? What are its substantial and long-term goals? Related to this, which Africa are we talking about when discussing any given position? This is indeed a problem for any notion that the BRICS speaks for the South and for any analysis that the BRICS may or may not help Africa. The short answer is: it depends on both the structural position of each African economy in the global system and the needs and interest of the population versus the interests of dominant elites. As has been noted, ‘using the positive image of South-South cooperation to assuage international (development) critics, [BRICS engagement]
disproportionately benefits African elites’ (Jacobs, 2012: 77). Indeed, increased demand for Africa’s primary resources ‘has been based upon a reinforcement of alliances between international capital and political elites in resource rich territories, entrenching patterns of patronage, corruption and informalised economy’ (Southall and Comninos, 2009: 380).

Yet as has also been noted, the current pattern of growth in Africa, spurred on in a key way by the BRICS, is neither inclusive nor sustainable. There are various reasons for this. Firstly, African countries are heavily dependent on natural resources as drivers of economic growth. But most of these resources—fossil fuels, metallic and non-metallic minerals—are non-renewable and are being depleted at a very rapid rate with negative consequences for future growth and sustainability. The dependence on resource-based growth is also of concern to African policymakers because commodity prices are highly volatile and subject to the caprices of global demand. Such price instability has negative consequences for investment and makes macroeconomic planning challenging’ (UNCTAD, 2012b: 2). In addition, ‘higher resource rents are conducive to more corruption’ (Arezki and Gylfason, 2013: 3) which will likely further stimulate numerous neopatrimonial regimes across Africa.

Problematically, the upsurge in interest in Africa and the concomitant diversification of its political relationships may make unity more and more difficult. Constructing a pan-African agenda is already extremely difficult and continental responses (rather than bilateral) are likely to become more and more difficult to sustain as the diversity of Africa’s political and economic relations intensifies. This is problematic given that much of the “new” interest in Africa is hinged upon economic activities that threaten to deepen the continent’s dependent position in the global economy:

Africa’s terms of (mal)integration in the global political economy have not been fundamentally restructured with the rise of China and other ‘emerging economies’, or their increasing footprint within Africa. Overwhelmingly, Africa continues to be incorporated within the global economy and international division of labour on a subordinate neocolonial basis, coerced for the most part into primary commodity production...As such, the BRICs’ burgeoning
[economic role] in Africa reproduces, and arguably intensifies, Africa’s inveterate and deleterious terms of (mal)integration within the global political economy (Ayers, 2013: 23).

Furthermore, a by-product of this upsurge in interest in Africa is the deepening of uneven development across the continent. Given that the BRICS’ interest in maintaining the liberal order appears central to their efforts, it appears that externally-oriented African fractions are the most likely to share some basic agreement with the BRICS. Obviously, the strength of each fraction in each African country depends on the balance of forces within each state-society complex, but overall it does have to be said that apart from a few countries, this fraction is rarely dominant in Africa, other than as a manifestation of compradorism (see Amin, 2011a). These elites benefit handsomely from rents paid to them by actors wishing to access resources, but do little else (Shivji, 2009), hardly an element that progressive forces can identify with.