

Essay

The Donkey and the Thorn Tree: Reappraising Globalisation and Africa

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Abstract: Africa is vulnerable to a perfect storm which comprises a burgeoning youthful population, insufficient infrastructure, benign donor neglect and more malign foreign interference, much of which can be traced to decades of weak economic performance. African excuses for such failure have focused largely on external factors. But countries from similar domestic environments and in the same world order across Asia, Europe and Latin America have developed in leaps and bounds. This would suggest that, for at least some countries, Africa is poor because its leaders have chosen the wrong path. This essay provides a reappraisal of globalisation vis-à-vis Africa, arguing that the continent does not have too much globalisation, but too little in the form of open competition for business and markets, and that politics, not economics, is the principal development impediment. Examples on the continent (Somaliland) and elsewhere (Singapore) illustrate what impact effective politics can have, highlighting that a major challenge for Africa is an inability to create regional exemplars of prosperity that other states can emulate and feed off in a positive cycle of development. To this end, getting the (democratic) politics right in Africa makes good development sense.

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1. Introduction

Thomas Friedman produced *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* in 1999, on the cusp of the new millennium. A pro-globalisation tome, Friedman argues that technology has connected the world, making it ‘flat’, allowing greater input and participation from outside the developed world, or the West (Friedman, 2012).¹

The Lexus and the Olive Tree is based on an idea that the age of the nation state has ended and has been replaced by ‘globalisation’. The Lexus is taken to symbolise the drive for prosperity and global homogenisation (for which read consumerism), and the Olive Tree that of traditions and identity. Friedman posits that these two contradictory pressures should be in balance in order for the world to progress. This global transformation was already underway when Friedman, a celebrated *New York Times* columnist, wrote this book. Indeed, he argues that the global arena includes more input and contributions from nations outside the ‘industrialised West’. This is particularly the case in Asia, which has seen its share of global per capita GDP increase from around half to more than the global average. And yet, as shown in Figure 1, Africa’s share of global per capita GDP has fallen during this time to around 15%.

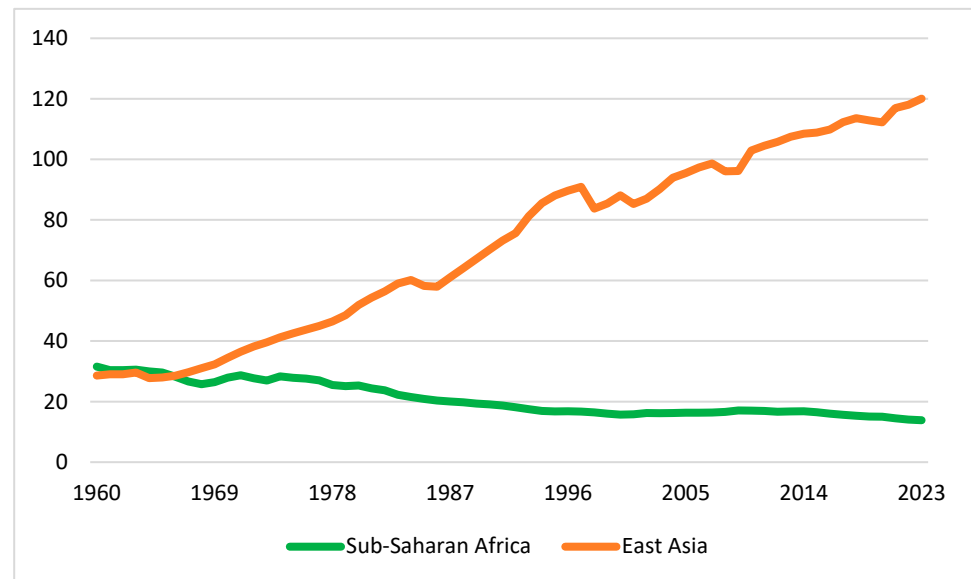


Figure 1. Share of World GDP Per Capita (%). Source: Authors' calculations using World Bank data.

As a consequence, Africa is today the repository of the world's poor. Even before COVID-19 struck in 2020, one-third of Africans—445 million people—lived in extreme poverty (living on less than US\$1.90 a day), a figure which increased by 30 million two years later, a figure nearly ten times the average for the rest of the world. Africa has 22 of the world's poorest 25 countries.²

If Africa had managed nothing spectacular in terms of economic growth but had only been able to retain its comparative global position of 60 years ago, the income of the average sub-Saharan African would have grown (in real terms) threefold from USD 1135 (in 1960) to USD 3475. Instead, the average African per capita income is today USD 1597. During this time, average global wealth has leapt more than 300% to USD 11,010, whereas Africa's has increased by just 40% in real terms.

Instead, now, the wealth of Africans is but a fraction of their global peers and continuing to fall. This reality, coupled with demographic changes, might have dramatic political consequences unless something changes. Business as usual offers no solution. Africa will experience an extraordinary population increase in the next generation, the continent being projected to increase from 1.3 billion to over 2.5 billion people by 2050. The business-as-usual approach taken by donors and Africans alike is simply not going to suffice. The swell of young people, and their demands and possible anger, will likely create a sense of urgency. As the 2022 African Youth Survey illustrates, more than half of young people in Africa, aged 18–24, are likely to consider emigrating in the next few years, citing economic hardship and education opportunities as the top reasons. Just less than one-third of those polled across 15 countries felt their country was headed in the right direction (Ichikowitz Family Foundation, 2022).

But emigration is not necessarily the solution for those young Africans in search of greater opportunities and improved livelihoods abroad given the barriers associated with it and the difficulties many endure when attempting to assimilate to their new homes. While the European migration crisis of 2015 does not accurately represent African migration in its entirety—for example, in 2020, an estimated 21 million African emigres remained on the continent compared with 19.5 million who lived abroad—it does offer a glimpse into the dangers associated with such endeavours and the impact it can have on host countries, not least their political landscapes.³ Africa's youth, it would appear, are stuck between a rock and a hard place.

Even if globalisation has ushered in an era of global growth and, through China in particular, the upliftment from poverty of more than a billion people in a single generation, why is it so difficult to translate these lessons and replicate the elements of success from one situation to the next?

The polymarble statue of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles was erected on Singapore quayside in 1972, on the spot where the man considered the founder of modern Singapore is believed to have landed 150 years earlier. The white statue is a copy of the original bronze figure now just a short stroll away in front of Victoria Memorial Hall. Sculpted by renowned English artist and poet Thomas Woolner, the bronze edition was unveiled on Jubilee Day on 27 June 1887.⁴

Dozens of African delegations visit Singapore every year to learn from the island's success in transforming from a (real) per capita GDP of USD 4214 to USD 67,360 since its independence in 1965. Singapore's share of global per capita GDP has increased from slightly below the global norm of USD 4257 in 1965 to now being six-times greater than the 2022 average of USD 11,315. Singapore's GDP is, at USD 380 billion, now slightly more than South Africa's, though its population is ten-times less. In 1965, South Africans were, on average, ten percent wealthier than Singaporeans.

It is not as if the costs of the failure to follow a similar reformist path to Singapore is missed on African leadership.

Raila Odinga was the Prime Minister of Kenya from 2009 to 2013. Before and during that time he headed Kenyan delegations to study Singapore's success. 'It seems extraordinary today that in the 1960s Singapore looked to Africa for insight on growing its economy', he recalls. 'In 1968, a team of Singaporeans came to Kenya to learn our lessons, since we were then a more developed country than they were. Four decades later I led a study trip to Singapore with six ministers. That was the latest in many trips taken by the Kenyan government to the island, about which no report was ever written, and where the participants kept everything to themselves . . . This, I am sure, is the depressing experience of many an African government official and politician. Lots of studies, followed by much less in the way of action' (Mills et al., 2020).

There are many good lessons to be extracted from Singapore, not least embracing the past, but also the willingness to make tough decisions and maintain attention to detail, which require a combination of sound leadership and a highly capable, meritocratic civil service. Corruption is severely punished, quite the contrary to most African and other Asian political economies and, fundamentally, (economic) growth matters. If, for example, Africa had increased its wealth at the rate of Vietnam, which had a difficult passage to independence, it would be touching the global average instead of being seven-times less.

And if it had grown at the pace of Singapore, Africans would be twice as wealthy as the global average.

If there is one key lesson to be taken out of Singapore, it is about pragmatism in running government.

It is not about the need for more time, since most African countries have been independent longer than Singapore. Lee Kuan Yew might have been Prime Minister for three decades but his duration was long because delivery was impressive. If the latter had been poor, it is doubtful LKY would have lasted, whatever his authoritarian tendencies.

Geography and the neighbourhood have helped, but it was not so for a long time—there was a time when the region was defined by wars, from Korea to Vietnam. China's poor performance was a blight for the first 40 years of the existence of the People's Republic. This is also not because Singapore managed to stay out of the clutches of nasty multinationals; to the contrary, Singapore actively has gone out to attract these businesses into the country, given their role in introducing skills, technology, finance and, crucially, knowledge and

practice of markets. The number of multinationals has been a key and longstanding metric of success. Central to achieving this has been Singapore's openness to external advice and ideas, typified by the 25 years of (unpaid) work of Dutch consultant Dr Albert Winsemius, which, among other achievements, provided the early plans for developing the city state's economic base.⁵

It is not because of the relative absence, either, of neo-colonialism, however that may be defined, since America and the West have maintained a steady presence since 1945. Again, the role of Western companies and countries has been actively encouraged, on Singapore's terms.

Why, when we know how Singapore, among others, did it and where the island came from, do African (and other) leaders choose to (largely) ignore its lesson of the need for leadership at every level, including the need for a highly professional civil service?

The questions about the spread of globalisation as an operating principle applies also to politics. Friedman also put forward a capitalist peace theory in *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, first published in *The New York Times* in December 1996, called the 'Golden Arches Theory of Conflict Prevention', stating that no two countries that both have a McDonald's have ever fought a war against each other; that when a country has reached that point of economic development with a sizeable middle class, it would not be interested in fighting wars. Of course, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has disproven this theory, and restated the role of leadership and tradition in managing affairs of state.

2. Values and Globalisation

The war in Ukraine, and the technological changes illustrated at the operational and tactical levels on which analysis so often dwells, must be understood overall within the context of a shifting grand-strategic or geopolitical landscape—one in which the assumptions of the last 30 years no longer seem to hold.

At the beginning of that 30-year period, Francis Fukuyama's 1992 *The End of History and the Last Man* predicted the global triumph of political and economic liberalism. The book expanded on Fukuyama's essay 'The End of History?', published just months before the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, in which he wrote 'What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalisation of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government'.⁶

The fall of the Berlin Wall paved the way for a Europe 'whole, free, and at peace', a vision set out by President George H.W. Bush in Mainz, Germany, on 31 May 1989. The collapse of Soviet hegemony in Europe quickly delivered a remarkable outburst of freedom and prosperity, a success story for Europeans from Narva in the Baltic to Constanta on the Black Sea.

Then, at the start of the 1991 Gulf War, President Bush expressed the threat posed by Saddam Hussein in terms of risks to a New World Order. In a speech to a joint sitting of Congress on 29 January 1991, the president said that 'what is at stake is more than one small country; it is a big idea: a new world order, where diverse nations are drawn together in common cause to achieve the universal aspirations of mankind—peace and security, freedom, and the rule of law. Such is a world worthy of our struggle and worthy of our children's future'.⁷

For a while, such a new order seemed possible, even probable. The countries of the Warsaw Pact quickly moved to liberalise and democratise, escaping the political repression and economic claustrophobia of the Soviet era. The Soviet Union itself collapsed at the end of 1991 and a new Russia emerged, more democratic and more open to the West. China had earlier liberalised its economy, though as the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre and

subsequent widespread repression demonstrated, it was far from a liberal society. East and West Germany unified, and it seemed globalisation would allow humanity to leave behind a divided world and the deadening isms of Marxism, socialism and the competition with capitalism.

Yet this process was incomplete, where states were orphaned by diplomatic and strategic delinquency, by a failure to fully include, and a failure to permit them the resources to maintain their own course. In this way, the Ukraine episode should be considered as part of the failure to transition effectively from war to peace at the end of the Cold War.

And then the wheel turned—to an era of increasing great power competition, where populism and authoritarianism took the place of other past, competing ‘isms’. Critics contended that Fukuyama was wrong, in that subsequent history turned out far differently from his prediction, and that he was incorrect too in celebrating American-style democracy as the ultimate form of government. But Fukuyama, who served in the US State Department’s policy planning section before reverting to academia, has written that it was more the model of the European Union and its version of transnational power than America’s ‘continuing belief in God, national sovereignty, and their military’ that he had in mind.

Others criticised *The End of History* because it failed to note the rise of ethnic and religious loyalties that would replace ideological divisions as a source of disorder. Harvard academic Samuel Huntington’s 1993 essay (and 1996 book), *The Clash of Civilizations*, argued, for instance, that the conflict between ideologies would be replaced by a more prosaic and enduring conflict among civilisations. The events of 9/11 gave prominence to this critique—the notion that history, in the words of one critic, had ‘returned from vacation’.⁸

In some respects, it never left.

While nuclear weapons have shaped and limited war since 1945—creating escalation barriers to direct conflicts between the United States and Russia and constraining conflict between India and Pakistan, for example—they have clearly not eliminated it, even when superpowers are involved.⁹ Rather, there is strong evidence that the presence of nuclear weapons has diverted conflict among great powers into other channels including insurgency, hybrid and proxy warfare, and grey-zone conflict. And in any case, the nature and effects of war remain the same.

Even in the bitter Russian invasion of Ukraine, with its ongoing conventional war on several fronts costing hundreds of thousands of lives, nuclear weapons have remained taboo, perhaps because using them would widen the conflict to include active participation by NATO.

No matter the disillusionments of the past three decades, and no matter how quickly the elder Bush’s 21st-century vision was betrayed by political reality, the hope for a more just world remains, particularly in an environment of instant information and media flows.

A common vision has been made possible by the speed and extent of global mass media. This, too, has an impact on political decision-making. It is worth reflecting on the political consequences if it had been possible to post on social media from Omaha Beach in real-time. Would D-Day have been called off before noon? In Ukraine, Israel and Gaza, real-time footage drives a swathe of social media opinion long before policy makers have reflected on the conflicts. Rushing to conclusions has never been easier but it also belies introversion on the part of information consumers. That many opt for the echo chamber of their choice rather than diversity of opinion says something about human nature, cognitive overload and the mental bandwidth savings involved in reinforcement of prejudice and introspection rather than greater understanding and diversity of options. The changing nature of publicly available information has made attempts to manage narratives by politicians much more difficult because of the media landscape decision-makers have to navigate as well as its social impacts.

Twenty years ago, it was not easy being an autocrat (Mills, 2024b). No longer could they easily turn to violent methods and blunt weapons to keep people under their thumb, as Stalin had done in sending perhaps as many as ten million of his countrymen and women to their deaths in the gulags, through executions and engineered famines; or as Mao had done with his Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution, which together cost as many as 35 million lives. Right-wing dictatorships ended with the collapse of the Metapolitefsi in Greece and the death of Franco in Spain in the wake of events in Lisbon, followed by junta after junta in Latin America. Then came the collapse of the East Bloc governments in Eastern Europe after 1989.

After the end of the Cold War, there was a surge in democracies as the number of countries classified as 'free' increased from 56 out of 165 in 1987 to a record 81 of the world's 191 nations qualified as free¹⁰—the highest number recorded in the then 25-year history of the survey. With the end of the Cold War, many of the repressive regimes had lost their principal sponsor in the form of the Soviet Union and eventually succumbed to their peoples' wishes for greater openness. With the advent of social media, for a while, the costs of tyranny were raised to unprecedented levels.

In Africa, two-thirds of those polled by Afrobarometer¹¹ consistently prefer democracy to other forms of government, including 43% in South Africa, 47% of Angolans, 75% in Zimbabwe, 79% of Tanzanians, 49% in Mozambique, and 55% of those polled in Namibia. The longer you have tasted one-party rule the more you appreciate democracy.

But autocrats quickly learnt to adapt, keeping the shell of democracy in place after hollowing it out by removing free and open political contestation. As a result, global liberty declined for the 17th consecutive year in 2023 according to Freedom House, which has been charting these trends for half a century.¹² Freedom of trade is increasingly constrained, as economic decoupling between China and the United States takes hold, and with the widespread imposition of sanctions against Russia following its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Democracies now inhabit a world, as the British Member of Parliament Tom Tugendhat has noted, 'where multilateral institutions can no longer provide the stability or security they once promised'.¹³ This weakness of course does not only apply to Western democracies. As Hanna Maliar, then Ukraine's deputy minister of defence, told us, 'the main lesson between 2014 and 2022 is that all the instruments elaborated since World War II are not working anymore'.¹⁴

This may help to explain why, for instance, despite unprecedented levels overall of global prosperity, today conflict rages in parts of sub-Saharan Africa, North Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and Central Europe.¹⁵ There are other, worrying longer-term trends. Anthony Cordesman writes of 'winter wars', which include nuclearisation, the arms race, terrorism, population pressures and threats from 'fragile, divided, authoritarian, and undeveloped states', along with regional areas of tension including the Koreas and North Africa in addition to those already mentioned.¹⁶ The contemporary simultaneous nature of the threats is unusual, perhaps unique. One senior European intelligence official of a southern Mediterranean country summarised the 'threat vectors' facing Europe from the Sahel as the combination of jihadism, weak domestic governance and widespread corruption, economic collapse worsened by climate change, ethnic division and its corollary in nationalist struggles, and an exploding demography coupled with an external spark in the form of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict along with foreign interference, both directly and indirectly through influence operations and contestation over supra-national structures including the United Nations. As a consequence, he said, the Sahel region, which will hold a population of 330 million across its 12 nations by 2050, double what it is today,¹⁷ 'is on the brink of becoming a failed macro-state'.¹⁸

Such an existentialism is rising as the business-as-usual premise of most African leaders in the face of a galloping demography rings hollow. It is one thing to kick the reform can down the road with at least another billion mouths to feed in Africa by 2025. The rash of instability currently in the Sahel offers a window into the dystopian consequences of inaction.

This setting demands a hard look at how we got to this point, and how the failure of external policies has contributed.

3. The Donkey and the Thorn Tree¹⁹

A dirty, white, bullet-pocked house, without electricity and running water, does not merit a second glance in the town of Burao, high in the east of Somaliland. Yet, this former colonial governor's residence, shaded by a giant acacia, was the site of the Grand Conference of the Northern Peoples in Burao, held over six weeks, which concluded with the declaration of Somaliland's independence from Somalia on 18 May 1991. It is a hard-scrabble environment, with life on the outside characterised by pastoral livelihoods, goats, donkeys and camels, with little more than dust and thorn trees, and inner workings dependent on flows of remittances.

Since 1991, however, despite the poverty, and the continued political and security difficulties in neighbouring Somalia to the south, Somalilanders have stuck with a winning formula, despite the absence of international recognition and the tepid democratic enthusiasm of much of the Horn of Africa. Only, Somaliland, among the Horn of African countries, is not ranked as 'unfree' (with a score of 43/100, where 100 is the maximum 'freedom' achievable) on Freedom House's political rights and civil liberty rankings. Ethiopia (20), Djibouti (23) and Somalia (8) are all listed as 'unfree', the same status as Uganda (34), Rwanda (23), Burundi (14), Egypt (18), Sudan (6), South Sudan (1) and Eritrea (3) in the next regional ring. Only Kenya (52) to the south, like Somaliland, enjoys 'partly free' status.²⁰

Whatever the extremes of donkeys and thorn trees, Somaliland uses representative democracy to keep its 6 million people and diverse clan system together.

Its steady democratic performance and progress is a breath of fresh air in a continent that, by comparison, is an uphill struggle for democrats. Only nine African countries of 54 were, by 2023, in the 'free' category. This is the lowest figure since 1991, with just 7% of the continent's population thus living in countries classified as 'free'.²¹

The reasons are simple. Incumbents have little interest in changing things, even though a vast majority of Africans regularly polled prefer democracy to other forms of government, despite the popularity among elites of the big-man thesis.

Somaliland also shows that you do not have to be rich to be democratic. Despite a tiny national budget of just USD 250 million for its 6 million people and a tough geography and hostile climate, Somaliland is showing much richer countries how to do it.

'A place that has made something out of virtually nothing' is how the former Nigerian president, Olusegun Obasanjo, describes the progress made by Somaliland. His trip there in May 2019 was the first by an African president, current or past, since the territory re-declared its independence in May 1991.²²

In June 1960, Somaliland gained its initial independence from Britain before making an ill-fated decision to join former Italian Somalia five days later in a union that was envisaged ultimately to include French Somalia (now Djibouti), the Somali-dominated Ogaden region of Ethiopia (now Region 5) and a chunk of northern Kenya—the regions denoted by the five-pointed star on the Somali flag.

In the centre of the capital, Hargeisa, is the independence memorial, comprising a MiG-17 fighter-bomber erected on a plinth. This commemorates the event when, having lost control of the province, Siad Barre—the third president of Somalia—ordered his air force, operating

from the local airport, to bomb the city, which had been briefly captured by the local Somali National Movement (SNM) liberation fighters in May 1988. Flown by Rhodesian mercenaries, among others, this resulted in many thousands of civilian casualties.

By the time of Siad Barre's fall three years later, the main cities of Hargeisa and Burao had been razed to the ground. Not for nothing was Hargeisa known as the 'roofless city' after systemic looting by Mogadishu had stripped it of roof sheeting and even doors and their frames.

Somalilanders have since sought stability on the principle of maximum ownership and the reality of minimum resources.

Peace did not require vast external financing; there was none available anyway at the time. In fact, the absence of outsiders, namely foreign governments, may be precisely the reason for its success, at least compared to its southern neighbour, Somalia, which has lurched violently from peace conference to initiative, peacekeeping mission to external military intervention, and from failing government to fragile coalition, seemingly with little discernible progress. In Somalia, 'conflict entrepreneurs' have fed off both the fighting and the talking in a top-down process financed by donors and mostly taking place outside the country.

Somaliland's peace conferences were, by contrast, managed and financed by locals, bringing their own food and shelter. The last conference in 1993 was held over five months under the trees in the western city of Boroma, on the border of Ethiopia.

Such dialogue, long a feature of Somaliland society, was organic and bottom-up rather than top-down. Somalilanders concentrated on achieving peace, not on acquiring comforts and financial rents for delegates from a peace process. Despite its obvious dysfunctionality, Somalia somehow refuses to countenance Somaliland's right to divorce, clinging chauvinistically to the notion that the marriage can be repaired. And Africa blindly stumbles on with hopes for reunion and fears of the wider impact of accepting the current two-state reality.

The recovery since has similarly demanded persistence and the principle of inclusion.

The former British protectorate has developed a stable, democratic system of politics, merging modern and traditional elements. In 2002, Somaliland made the transition from a clan-based system to a multi-party democracy after a 2001 referendum, formalising the Guurti as an Upper House of Elders, which secures the support of traditional clan-based power structures.

There have since been regular elections and a frequent turnover of power between the main political parties. The 2003 presidential election was won by Dahir Riyale Kahin by just 80 votes in a poll of nearly half a million, defeating Ahmed Mohamoud Silanyo.

The tables were turned in 2010, with Silanyo winning 49% of the vote to his opponent's 33%. Muse Bihi Abdi, a former SNM fighter, who had earlier served as a Soviet-trained fighter pilot in the Somali Air Force, was elected in November 2017, receiving 55% of the vote, becoming the country's fifth president and cementing a tradition of peaceful handovers of power that are rare in the region.

On 31 May 2021, around the 30th anniversary of Somaliland's independence and the 20th anniversary of its multi-party democracy, and despite COVID-19, the parliamentary and local district elections went off smoothly, with 1.1 million voters registered by the National Electoral Commission (NEC) and the establishment of 2709 polling stations countrywide.

Unlike Somaliland's previous six elections, which were mostly funded by outsiders, 70% of the USD 8 million budget was financed internally. And despite delays in the election, caused by a standoff between the presidency and opposition parties over the nomination of members of the NEC, and challenges with the iris biometric voter registration system,

this was the most competitive poll yet, with 246 candidates standing for 82 parliamentary seats and 966 for 249 district municipality posts across the six regions.

A lack of wealth does not mean instability. Somaliland is synonymous with grinding poverty and dirt-scrabble hardship. A high percentage of the population is illiterate, requiring assistance at the polls, many of which were run by university students. The slow pace of voting was accompanied by constant grumbling on a high Somali volume setting, but with no violence or obvious intimidation.

Regardless, the enthusiasm was palpable, not least among the very old and young. Preference was patiently given to disabled and women voters. A voting age of 15 might seem low, and a cynical way of vote-stealing, but it serves as a de-radicalising mechanism for the largest demographic; 70% of Somaliland's 3.5 million population is under the age of 30. The younger generation sees democracy as a means of diluting the impact of the clan system. The crowds were not voting just for political parties, they voted for nationhood and the pride of self-determination.

Somaliland has relevance for those outsiders seeking to get insiders to do their jobs better, and in recognising the imperative of a local peace and ownership to get things done. Somaliland's commitments to improving democratic norms and standards, and its regular change of leaders at the polls, have made it a regional democratic superpower. Rather than trying to manufacture success in Somalia, outsiders would be much better off recognising Somaliland and reinforcing domestic success where it already exists.

As President Muse Bihi Abdi says about the Somaliland approach, 'One of our advantages was that we had a local constitution'. The bottom-up success of Somaliland contrasts with the top-down failure of the Somali model. 'Aid', he says, 'can be a curse, depending on how you use it'.

Despite its considerable aid effort, no matter the administrations in power in Washington or across Europe, the West has consistently found itself on the back foot in its relations with Africa, both on the continent and in building partnerships in multinational organisations such as the United Nations, losing ground to its strategic rivals in the process. Moreover, the slow improvement of African governance and democracy also suggests that such aid programmes are wrongly premised and executed.

The most remarkable aspect about aid is that, despite USD 500 billion being expended in Africa in this way since the end of the Cold War and there being very little to show for it (measured in terms of economic wealth), the system of giving has scarcely changed. There is an imperative now to do so, however, since business as usual risks failure on an even grander scale (using migration as one metric, for instance) given Africa's changing demographics. Moreover, the West has, for all of the above reasons, been reluctant to apply conditions to its aid giving, worsening rather than strengthening governance given that elites are buffered against failure at one level while undermining the very values that Western liberal democracy supposedly holds dear—open markets and open societies.

One reason for the relatively poor development performance of donor aid to Africa since independence is because African elites are willing to take the money and never carry out their part of the bargain in terms of reforms. In part, this is because they routinely have not felt the groundswell of popular discontent at the polls, and aid can in fact buffer these political pressures by removing or distorting the link of accountability between populations and their governments.

To a degree, this reflects both the apathy of populations and the extent to which they can be bought off or divided by rulers, and how African leaders have figured out how to manage democracy (read elections) without losing power and without risk of censure domestically, or worse, from outside. An African version of the 'Beijing Consensus' (or 'Putin Consensus') has emerged, offering elites relatively untrammelled access to

economic spoils without the threat of political change. Unlike East Asians, Africans have not organised themselves enough to demand structural growth sufficient to enable societies to go from rural to urban and peasant to middle class in a generation.

Conditionality on aid, leveraging economic assistance with governance conditions, has also predictably been successfully repelled by African leadership as an unwarranted intrusion in the domestic affairs of aid recipients, and in the process successfully linking governance reforms to the colonial history, ensuring the West is as much a prisoner of its past as African populations. The efficacy of conditional aid is closely linked to recipient countries' levels of democratic freedoms, as research has shown with the IMF and World Bank programmes (Montinola, 2010). That the freer the country generally the better the development outcomes is fundamentally unsurprising, given the correlation between democracy, judicial efficiency and independence, and policy openness, thus encouraging investors, both local and foreign, and driving growth.

To this end, any new development approach to Africa should seek to play to Western strengths in terms of democracy and open markets and, thereby, align itself with the majority of African populations which prefer such systems.

Unlike the record in East Asia, the clear empirical correlation between standards of democracy and growth performance in Africa suggests that getting the (democratic) politics right makes good development sense. Any foreign engagement that ignores the moral economy and puts profit before people and financial reward before human rights is designed to fail, at least in terms of building a relationship between the recipient governments and their populations.

There are advantages to incentivising better performance by African partners. For example, categories of donor assistance could be more explicitly linked to governance and democratic performance, while at the same time ensuring those at the 'poorer' end of the scale do not fall off completely.

All this matters for Africa, where countries are vulnerable to a perfect storm of a burgeoning youthful population, insufficient infrastructure, benign donor neglect and more malign foreign interference.

This has its roots in decades of weak economic performance. That is not to say things have not improved—they just have not improved at the same rate as the rest of the world.

African excuses for such failure have focussed, understandably from a political vantage, on external factors. Change the world, and the unfair and uneven distribution of benefits, so the argument goes, and Africa can prosper. By this thesis, increase aid, make the world an easier place in which to do business, and Africa can change.

But from similar domestic environments and in the same world order, countries across Asia, Europe and Latin America have developed in leaps and bounds. This would suggest that, for at least some countries in Africa, they are poor because their leaders have chosen the wrong path, and that repressive politics, not poor economics, is the principal development impediment.

Examples of African failures to reform and diversify abound. The strategic challenge which has led to systemic micro-, tactical-level disappointments in African development rests fundamentally in the inability to break out of the colonial model of economic extraction and growth. Rather than liberating the economy of its protections, monopolies, frictions and inefficiencies, post-colonial African regimes simply replaced one elite with another and maintained the same extractive, commodity-heavy model as their colonial forebearers. In this they were encouraged, aided and abetted by external powers and interests who had too a vested interest in the continuation of the relationships, both inward in terms of goods and outward for commodities, earlier established.

And as problems of slow growth, weakening governance and social instability took hold in the post-colonial era, the response was to undo constitutional bounds and tighten the reins of power, leading to repression and ever greater violence, including military coups, in response. The Cold War provided greater political wiggle-room as countries manoeuvred in soliciting superpower patronage, though this amplified the focus on power and control rather than growth and development. As the Cold War waned, so democracy waxed as authoritarians had fewer options (and excuses), and the pressure for change and rights grew and became a concern for some outside power and less impeded by others. But the narrowing of ideological options and strengthening constitutionality still fell foul to the entrenched, vested interests operating in the half-light of government enterprises and boards, the bureaucracy and crony capitalist schemes. And so African growth has not reached the heights required for its burgeoning youth, in the main because government has not made the policy decisions or allowed the space for business to grow. Small- and medium-sized businesses are the backbone of the global economy, accounting for one-third of GDP and 45% of the workforce in high-income countries and 98% of employment in the Asia–Pacific region.

There is upside in Africa's relatively weak development performance; demographics will, for one, drive demand and direction insofar as businesses will pivot production towards markets where labour is more affordable. Europe and Asia's aging populations combined with increasing wage expectations could result in as many as 150 million jobs being up for grabs by Africans, even with reskilling, the *graying* of the workforce elsewhere, and substitution by automation.²³ China's manufacturing boom grew six-fold between 2004 and 2017, for example, to USD 3.5 billion, or one-quarter of the world's manufacturing base. Yet real wages also increased by around 10% between 2005 and 2014. Moreover, China is now moving from light manufacturing for exports toward diversification into services and higher technology.²⁴

Africa will, however, have to position itself to gain this investment and employment, or these jobs could be filled by migrants in Asia and Europe. There are challenges. For one, Africa is not a low-cost environment both in terms of wages and the costs that influence investment, such as the quality of roads and ports, the extent and reliability of electricity infrastructure, political stability, and the level of excessive bureaucracy and corruption. Encouragingly for Africa, the formula for doing so, for doing things better, is hardly unknown, not least given Asia's recent economic transformation.

Second, the political economy will have to shift from one of extraction to inclusion, where policies are pursued in the interests of the wider population rather than the elite.

The performance of Asian countries has been remarkable over the last 75 years, starting with Japan and progressing through the four Tigers (Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong) through the rest of the ASEAN region. This history could have been vastly different if leadership had made choices shaped by their past. Instead, Asian countries generally exemplify many of the steps others seeking fast-paced development should take, and the pitfalls to be avoided, as summarised in Table 1.

This is not an irrelevant template for Africa, though the question is why does it not follow these lessons? The answer lies in understanding Africa's political economy. This term, 'political economy', describes the relationship between government economic policy choices and people—how the state affects the market and, subsequently, peoples' livelihoods.

Table 1. Lessons on Development from Asian Countries.

#	What To Do	What To Avoid
1	Listen to business	Favour elites
2	Ensure openness	Mistake trading for a means to develop
3	Instil the basics—political and macro stability	Seek silver-bullet solutions
4	Boost agriculture yields	Focus on land alone as the solution
5	Prioritise necessary infrastructure	Adopt high-debt infrastructure-led growth
6	Invest in education and skills	Close avenues to outside talent
7	Pursue growth as an inclusive agent	Ignore the environment for the next generation
8	Improve productivity	Fail to improve the quality of life
9	Attach laser-like focus to job creation	Look to the state as the only solution
10	Use evidence to act fast and decisively	Be a prisoner of your past

Source: Authors' construction.

4. A Political Economy of Exclusion²⁵

Across Africa, the political economy has been described as 'rentier'—where the economy relies on extracting income from rents, usually from foreign entities, rather than developing through improving productive capacity and competitiveness. As the World Bank describes with respect to Malawi, for instance (World Bank, 2018), 'Malawi's stagnation is in large part driven by a stable but low-level equilibrium, in which a small group of elites compete for power and political survival through rent seeking. The competitive-clientelist political settlement creates strong incentives for policies that can be seen to address short-term popular needs (such as agriculture subsidies, market and price distortions), while undermining the ability to credibly commit to fiscal discipline and long-term reforms needed to spur productive structural transformation'.

Essentially, the elite shapes policy choices and practices in a manner that enriches them before all others. This can take multiple forms, such as procurement contracts. Maintenance contracts on South African power-stations would be an example, or the coal contracts that drive dependency on that system of power and enrich the middle-men, many of whom have close connections with the ruling party. Another example is in terms of import substitution, where high tariffs on foreign goods penalise the poor while ensuring a local elite gain uncompetitive market share. The same applies to local ownership or, in the case of South Africa, racial ownership stipulations, ensuring a politically protected class. Fixed exchange rates are another method, such as in Nigeria and Ethiopia, where the difference between the government and the market rate creates the conditions for local arbitrage, essentially enabling elites to buy at one (fixed) rate and sell at another (market) price while, at the same time, reducing the competitiveness of exports. In Malawi, cited above, this takes the form of state intermediation in agriculture pricing while preventing exports, ensuring the price to the farmer is low. In one of the most egregious forms of exploitation, the produce is stored and then sold back to the farmer at a higher price later in the season, when hunger bites.

The list is endless. The engineered failure of railways to drive road transport monopolies to fuel importers benefitting from the collapse of power grids; rents from the ownership of a resource (such as oil) to the political engineering around both the volume and the distribution of aid especially emergency humanitarian assistance; and the transit charges and systems of fuel and agriculture subsidies. As Douglas Yates puts it with regard to oil

(Yates, 2015), ‘The rise and fall of these states is more than just another boom-and-bust cycle of resource dependency. Instead of cultivating an ethic of hard work, oil rentiers follow an easy path to quick riches, spending money which they have not earned. The more eagerly they spend their unearned oil revenues striving to reach development, the farther they recede from it’.

The problem is clear. Not only does the existence of these systems hinder development progress through improving productive capacity, it has a negative impact on the development of open political systems. While elites are reluctant to give up their preferences, in an unhealthy development pact, the relative absence of taxation as a means of state income makes citizens less demanding and politically engaged. Perhaps the most astonishing aspect of Nigeria’s abject economy is that government revenues (including from oil) are around just 6% of GDP compared to the global norm of 13.5% or the developed world norm of 15.3%.²⁶ Nigeria’s rate is amongst the lowest in world—virtually implying anarchy—but, in fact, is the minimum required to ensure access to patrimony flowing from control over various aspects of the economy. And this is way too low to enable the state to invest in and look after the people.

Nigeria is Africa’s largest economy, though it ranks just 133 out of 184 in terms of GDP per capita (at USD 2429). This reflects low growth and a rapid increase in population, having increased from 45 million at independence in 1960 to 215 million 60 years later. Now four out of ten Nigerians live below the poverty line (World Bank, 2022), and many—especially in the north—lack education and access to basic infrastructure including potable water, electricity and sanitation. Most are engaged in subsistence activities, with just 17% holding wage jobs.²⁷ Young people under the age of 35 comprise 76.5% of the population, yet politics are notable for low levels of youth participation and representation. There is endemic insecurity in parts, especially in the north-eastern states of Adamwa, Bauchi, Borno, the Federal Capital Territory, Gombe, Nasarawa, Taraba and Yobe due to Boko Haram, which had produced 3.3 million internally displaced people.

It is a governance system that incentivises corruption. Take Mohammed, a young immigration officer based in Lagos. He earns USD 400 per month and spends USD 1500 annually on his accommodation, USD 10 per day on food, and USD 1 on transport to and from work. He has to make some money on the side just to survive, let alone prosper. A few steps from his desk, at passport control, the officer tapped a USD 10 bill under his computer keyboard. ‘I need some help’ he said, increasingly agitated.

Altering this political economy is difficult, requiring both strong leadership and a sustained effort likely over generations. For example, during the civilian administration of Obasanjo in Nigeria, between 1999 and 2007, the economic growth rate rose to 6.6%, two percentage points higher than the sub-Saharan average, helped by higher oil prices but also driven by improved governance and a strategy for debt relief. The growth rate for the ten years following was 4.7%, as politicians descended once more into rentier habits without a plan for recovery, reform and growth.

For all of the setbacks, Nigerians are today much more aware of their democratic rights and threats. The extent of electoral and political inclusivity—in terms of youth; gender; regional voting accessibility and patterns; registration; media coverage; cyber-integrity; voting technology; and voter education—is firmly on the agenda, representing a refinement of expectations and standards beyond simply holding elections per se, free of violence. This is reflected, too, in the increasingly sophisticated agenda of international observer missions beyond simply declaring elections ‘free and fair’. The Nigerian election held on 25 February 2023 was an example of both the complexity of running polls in a large country with weak institutions and of an increasingly sophisticated electorate.

This poll required the establishment of 176,846 polling stations across the country's 36 states (plus the Federal National Territory around the capital) capable of processing 93.4 million registered voters involving 547 million ballot papers and more than one billion pieces of paper in total, with the mobilisation of 310,000 police officers and 94,000 other security officials plus 1.4 million election officials. As the chairman of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), Professor Mahmood Yakubu, admitted, 'We understand the benefit of credible elections, not only in our own country in terms of peace and stability, but in terms of the ripple effect across the region'.

Nigeria has much going for it, including a dynamic media environment (with more than 100 television and nearly 200 radio stations in 2019) and a high-energy population which constantly finds ways to get around the lack of institutional capacity. 'No water, sink a borehole. No decent education, send your children to private schools. Get sick, fly out of the country. With lockdown, people are no longer cushioned from bad governance', says Aisha Yesufu, a Nigerian human rights activist.

Not for nothing is it said that in Nigeria things 'collapse into place'.

On the flip side, the corruption, violence and vote-buying surrounding the elections and pervasive '*e mi lo kan*' politics, translated as 'it's my turn now', along with the dynastic and corrupt practices that go with this sentiment, are synonymous with the democratic process, while representation remains skewed in favour of vested interests. 'Democracy has been commercialised' notes Emanuel Njoku of Connected Development, an NGO promoting government accountability. Parties pay scant regard for imposed limits on spending of USD 7 million for presidential candidates, and donations more than USD 7000 per individual. The chairman of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), the main opposition in the 2023 election, Iyorchia Ayu, says 'Funding limits are observed more in the breach than compliance. If you were able to stick to them you would not actually be able to run any elections ... No serious political party observes these limits'.²⁸

There are also issues of representivity; just ten percent of all candidates were women in 2023, for example, well below the global mark of just above one-quarter of all parliamentarians. While 18 to 35 year olds comprise more than half of total registered voters, Nigeria's past five democratic elections are notable for low levels of youth participation as candidates. Students comprised the largest single voting bloc, with 26 million registered, almost twice the number of the second largest constituency, farmers and fishermen at 14.7 million. Still, the use of biometric voting (facial and fingerprint recognition) technology boosted confidence in the voting process.

Take Kano, Mohammed's home town, Nigeria's second-largest city after Lagos, located at the edge of the savanna and on the trans-Saharan trade route. Politically it is better known as the birthplace of two military heads of state—generals Murtala Mohammed, the military leader in 1974–1975, and Sani Abacha, the last military strongman before the transition to democracy in 1999. Abacha has the dubious distinction of being involved in five of Nigeria's military coups—the 1966 'counter coup' along with those in 1975, 1983, 1985, and 1993, the last time before democracy returned.

A centre of the Hausa language, Kano's politics and past history of sectarian rioting plus the fear of rigging and exclusion in an environment of economic scarcity, constantly poses a threat of violence. The day before the election, three people were killed in a clash between APC and Kwankwaso supporters. On the day, however, 25 February 2023, all was relatively calm, though there were other problems. INEC turned up very late, some polling stations barely getting going just before the cut-off at 1430—a trend across the whole country. Many of the polling units were staged in the open, with the non-existent marshalling of the crowds and absence of many voting booths meaning it was, at best, chaotic. Problems of control were compounded by a lack of signage and basic facilities

including tables and chairs. Tallying was transparent but hampered by the lack of training and experience of the election officials and a lack of lighting for those who carried on into the night. The event was, in the words of one foreign observer, ‘an extreme sport’.

The best conclusion on the process is that people who wanted to vote eventually got to vote; the biometric system worked and only a few people died. Of greater concern was the slowing of the transmission and release of results, usually a tell-tale sign that the rig is in. It is worth asking the following questions however: At what point is the credibility of the system compromised by myriad logistical problems, and to what extent were the problems encountered in the transmission of results deliberate? Second, if money politics and the ability to re-engineer tallies is pervasive, convincing even, and the means of remedy weak, what are the mechanisms then available to change the political incentives to reform? Having started out as bag-carrier for Chicago drug dealers and moving on to become the Godfather of Lagos, Tinubu was not going to let the Presidency slip from his grasp easily.

Samson Itondo of IYAGA Africa, the civil society group dedicated to the promotion of governance, says that there is, in this regard, a clash between the faith of Nigerians in democracy as an opportunity ‘to reclaim the state, a stake heightened by the expectation that their vote will count’ in a country ‘polarised along ethnic and religious lines’ compared to ‘political actors who are still the same and playing by the same rules . . . and for whom this is their only chance to seize power’.²⁹ Though the opposition cried foul, the election was officially won by the ruling party’s Bola Tinubu, an aging powerbroker who campaigned on a Muslim–Muslim ticket in a country divided equally between Christians and Muslims. Despite expectations to the contrary, the turnout was just 27%—lower than the 2019 election of 35%.

Thus, the question is moot.

Can the political economy be changed when it functions, albeit in a pernicious manner and when weak and predatory elites will fear the impact of attempts to change things? Politics is about agonisingly difficult choices, and often the inertia of the grave can overcome the desire for reform. Change is possible and can have a tremendously positive effect; witness the impact of liberalisation in the telecom sector. But when state operating systems are soaked in such methods, changing them is hard and requires tough-minded leadership with a plan and a mandate to carry out reforms. Good examples of change can also help. Can the international community be reshaped to assist?

5. Refocusing the External Environment?

The writer and activist Carl Ogelsby is credited with inventing the term ‘global south’ in an article published in 1969 by the Catholic journal *Commonwealth*. Writing in a special edition dedicated to the Vietnam War, he was describing centuries of northern ‘dominance over the global south’, creating what he described as ‘an intolerable social order’.³⁰ The notion of the Global South has, in the years since this 1969 article, become a catch-phrase for the ‘developing world’, including parts of Asia, the whole of Africa and Latin America, Central America and bits of the Middle East.

The ‘Global South’ includes the world’s second-largest economy, China, and many of the world’s smallest. There are countries that have experienced remarkable economic growth, such as Singapore, Taiwan and South Korea, and others that have languished in the economic backwaters.

And, when it comes to political systems, there are democracies, autocracies, monarchies and theocracies.

Writing in the *International Politik Quarterly*,³¹ Miriam Prys-Hansen summed it up as follows: ‘There is neither agreement on who this Global South actually is, nor fundamentally

on whether the Global South exists at all, given the great heterogeneity and the dynamics of those who are typically classified within it’.

Despite this, however, the term ‘Global South’ is on the rise and has re-entered public life—but this time with a difference. Nowadays, ‘Global South’ refers to all who have a grievance with ‘The West’ and the ‘world order’ which they believe to be rigged to keep the ‘Global South’ in perpetual poverty. This is confused, deliberately, with the racialised concept of the ‘Global Majority’, used by some members of the BRICS countries to denote the majority of (85%) the world’s population of indigenous, African, Asian or Latin American descent, supposedly thus different in origins and political outlook to the West.

It is a deeply problematic paradigm entrenching victimhood rather than agency; it overlooks the obvious examples of economic success and development within its ranks and plumbs for the lowest common denominator; and it externalises the causes of failure and excuses the member states from taking a long hard look at their own failings, be they of political repression or of poor economic choices.

This notion of victimhood is typified by statements such as the following one made by South Africa’s then International Relations and Cooperation Minister, Naledi Pandor, at a G77 summit in Havana, Cuba:

‘The struggle for the soul of the South and for unilateral global dominance has never been more intense and as the South, we must seize this historic moment to ensure we develop the ability to be free agents of a development agenda that will advance our battle against poverty inequality and unemployment. It is vital for us to be aware that our ambition will not be a popular one as control of global innovation grants immense power over us to developed countries, thus it is not in their interest that we succeed’.³²

This view is laced with victimhood and paranoia, speaking of ‘many so-called partners will strive to divert our attention and break our unity’. Who are these global players who do not want South Africa to succeed?

Perhaps the better question to ask is ‘whose interests are served by the idea of a ‘Global South’ struggling for freedom against a tyrannical ‘Global North’?

The answer is, of course, those nations who want to rewrite the world order to normalise their autocracies and stigmatise democracy. This is not the only irony. The Global South is attempting its own reformation and reset of international relations at a time when geo-economics is being trumped by geopolitics. The paradox is that ideology has shifted. The past era of globalisation, which has led to more people being lifted from poverty than during any previous period of economic history, was shaped by three intersecting forces of ideology, technology and great power interests. As Pascal Lamy,³³ the former head of the World Trade Organisation, points out, the challenge is not that the South, led by China and India, is uncommitted to contemporary globalization through openness—‘They are’, he says, ‘because it has been and is good for them’. Rather it is the North, led by the United States, which is less convinced by the path of openness and is moving to isolation, he warns, driven by a combination of domestic factors and technological and geopolitical rivalries. Yet since ‘less growth’, he warned at a meeting in Athens in April 2024, ‘is not going to make people more happy’, deceleration of globalisation is more likely than its collapse. Yet there are others, in a further irony, including South Africa that seem more interested in compensating the negative effects of global flows on the poor than benefitting from its overall thrust. In so doing, they risk undoing the structure of the very system that has delivered so much prosperity to the post-Cold War world.

There is a simple equation at play; to gain a share of global growth, you need to trade abroad, and to trade abroad, you need to be willing to accept imports. Protectionism threatens access to richer markets. Any legal, political or other frictions that raise the

cost should be resisted, especially by those who need to ramp up their rates of domestic growth. While there is every justification for the BRICS, as the centrepiece of the Global South, 'to criticize the global order' says Lamy, 'so far they never came with a Plan B'. As a consequence, he says that the BRICS 'are a geopolitical system much more than a geo-economical system, as is clear by the list of candidates to join the group'. There is little to share in economic terms between India, Russia, China, South Africa and Brazil.

Turning the nebulous Global South into a forum of shared grievances about the world order is useful; it offers a warm hearth of friendship and dulls the chill of global isolation. And, tragically, free and democratic nations of the Global South are falling for the idea that it is okay to embrace autocrats and malign states than it is to embrace other democracies.

Freedom House, which produces a map of countries that are free, partly free or unfree, put it this way: 'Autocrats persist in flouting laws and norms in part because they do not believe democracies are serious about upholding them', it reads. 'Economic prosperity and a more secure global community require a global order based on the rule of law, anticorruption safeguards, and a willingness to abide by international security norms; only democracies can maintain such an order. Democratic leaders who ignore this fact imperil not just global freedom, but also security and economic growth'.³⁴

More useful would be the notion of the 'Free South'—countries of the developing world that want to build democratic and open societies with thriving economies.

And they would also require a laser-like focus on growth.

6. Conclusions: More Globalisation, Not Less

The end of the Cold War showcased the relative power exhibited by the West over the East but also to reinsert the moral component in Western foreign policy lost in the Soviet occupation and, later, political and economic control over Eastern and Central Europe.

Both these components of power—military and moral—are at risk today. What can be done?

Extraordinary circumstances demand extraordinary actions. As Harry Hopkins, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's trusted friend and colleague, put it in a memo to the president, 'Democracy must wage total war against totalitarian war', he wrote. 'It must exceed the Nazi in fury, ruthlessness, and efficiency'.³⁵

One reason for the relatively poor development performance of donor aid to Africa since independence is because African elites are willing to take the money and never carry out their part of the bargain in terms of reforms. In part, this is because they routinely have not felt the groundswell of popular discontent at the polls, and aid can in fact buffer these political pressures by removing or distorting the link of accountability between populations and their governments.

To a degree, this reflects both the apathy of populations and the extent to which they can be bought off or divided by rulers, and how African leaders have figured out how to manage democracy (read elections) without losing power and without risk of censure domestically, or worse, from outside. An African version of the 'Beijing Consensus' (or 'Putin Consensus') has emerged, offering elites relatively untrammelled access to economic spoils without the threat of political change. Unlike East Asians, Africans have not organised themselves enough to demand rapid growth sufficient to enable societies to go from rural to urban and peasant to middle class in a generation.

Conditionality on aid, leveraging economic assistance with governance conditions has also been successfully repelled by African leadership as an unwarranted intrusion in the domestic affairs of aid recipients, in the process successfully linking governance reforms to the colonial history, ensuring the West is as much a prisoner of its past as African populations.

Despite its considerable aid effort, no matter the administrations in power in Washington or across Europe, the West has consistently found itself on the back foot in its relations with Africa, both on the continent and in building partnerships in multinational organisations such as the United Nations, losing ground to its strategic rivals in the process. Moreover, the slow improvement of African governance and democracy also suggests that such aid programmes are wrongly premised and executed.

Yet, democratic standards, practices and values could overall be better employed as an advantage and tool for donors. However, to achieve this, there is a need for a long-term strategic focus—a clearer division between the longer-term strategic imperative of democracy and governance, and shorter-term tactical security and commercial impulses.

Unlike the record in East Asia, the clear empirical correlation between standards of democracy and growth performance in Africa suggests that getting the (democratic) politics right makes good development sense. Any foreign engagement that ignores the moral economy and puts profit before people and financial reward before human rights is designed to fail, at least in terms of building a relationship between the recipient governments and their populations.

Sanctions are routinely suggested as a means to discourage human rights transgression, increasingly this century, in the form of a targeted ‘smart’ variety against individual perpetrators. The problem with this approach is, however, that sanctions are themselves often seen as the goal rather than a tool and do little to encourage better standards of governance as opposed to penalising the worst. Moreover, as the example of East Asia’s development success illustrates, the challenge is overall to create regional exemplars of prosperity that other states can emulate and feed off in a positive cycle of development. East Asia’s development revolution started with Japan and progressed quickly to the Tigers of Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea and Hong Kong followed later by Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam and others. Africa has few such continental exemplars, save perhaps Ghana, Botswana, Namibia and, more controversially, Rwanda. Ostensibly rewarding failure from outside rather than reinforcing conditions of success—the difference between Somalia and Somaliland, for example—is an extreme version of this donor habit.

There are advantages to incentivising better performance by African partners. For example, categories of donor assistance could be more explicitly linked to governance and democratic performance while at the same time ensuring those at the ‘poorer’ end of the scale do not fall off completely.

Put differently, there is need to inculcate an environment where the responsiveness of government to demand-side factors from the population—rather than a supply-side agenda distributed by political parties—will increasingly shape the fortunes of political parties and the success or failure of their interventions. With social media and digital communications, power has shifted to the individual at the expense of traditional political party-based infrastructure. From a donor perspective, this requires investing in the democratic process per se, including civil society, rather than solely political parties. Working smarter to change regimes is a constant theme even further along this spectrum of international action.

Finally, what about the rules of the game?

One view, as pursued by several low- and middle-income countries and typified by the BRICS forum (comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa and, from 2024, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Ethiopia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt), is to reform the UN and in so doing diminish the power of the US and other (especially Western) vetoes and improve, supposedly, the power of others of uncertain democratic lineage in deciding their own fate.

But this is a disingenuous tactic and not simplistic; it makes it seem as if the world outside of the Permanent Five in the Security Council is powerless, which it is not. It also

makes it seem as if the P5, which includes Russia and China, is the stumbling block to UN reform, which it might be, but less so than the pretenders themselves.

It avoids the reality of UN operations. To pass a UN Security Council Resolution, nine affirmative votes are required, and no vetoes. China and Russia will not vote against the A3 (three African members). And the A3 should surely get at least two more supporters from the E10 (elected 10)—countries like Brazil and Vietnam will vote with the Africans. So, the A3 can deny the nine affirmative votes if they work together and lobby the others. Thus, while UNSC reform is undoubtedly desirable, the A3 already has what is in practice an effective veto, including, indeed especially, on African issues.

The problem is different. Africans should start *acting* as though they have the power to block anything and use that for leverage to create positive momentum. They will also have to learn to not continue to use that power to block any Council scrutiny of human rights violations and conflicts in Africa—including in eSwatini or BRICS members such as Ethiopia—but instead develop a positive agenda. A great redeeming feature of democracies, for all their faults, is their ability to criticise everyone, including other democracies. That seldom if ever happens between authoritarians.

Africa already possesses agency, then, but prefers to play the victim card.

It makes sense for Africa to have a voice in UN affairs, if only because historically more than half of all Security Council meetings and nearly three-quarters of its resolutions are concerned with the continent. But this means playing the game according to the rules that one develops. While Africa, or at least the bit represented by South Africa, likes to fight against the current rules-based international order, it is difficult to get the South African government (or anyone else for that matter) to tell you what alternative rules they might like or who is going to pay for these ideals. Moreover, the so-called Ezulwini African consensus on UN reform—the two permanent seats with veto powers for Africa—would effectively ensure that other regions ask for the same, and that reform would thereby never happen since the result would be a Security Council with ten or more veto-wielding members, which would guarantee irrelevance. Be careful what you wish for—but only if reform is in fact the aim.

Meanwhile, nobody apparently stops to think that the relative growth and peace of the 'Global South' over the last thirty years has no precedent. This generation has seen, driven by Asia, the largest upliftment out of poverty in human history. According to the World Bank, today 712 million people (nearly 9% of the world's population) live in extreme poverty; in 1990, the figure was two billion, or 38% of the world population at the time.

But understanding why this transition has not happened in much of Africa has very little to do with the UN or, remarkably, even about Israel for that matter. It is to do with choice, and the fact that Africa does not have too much globalisation but too little in the form of open competition for business and markets.

If the premium of development is on what Olusegun Obasanjo has identified as 'transformational, focused, courageous and determined' leadership,³⁶ the question is how to encourage it down this path?

Ironically, the answer lies in having local role models of the sort that Singapore provides for others in the region, and just as Japan provided earlier for the Asian Tigers' own reforms.

This aspect is personified just 100 meters down from Raffles' statue along the Singapore River in the bust of Deng Xiansheng, the original name of Deng Xiaoping, considered the father of modern China.

Unveiled by Lee Kuan Yew and Chinese Vice President Xi Jinping in 2010 in celebration of the 20th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Singapore and China, the memorial features the quote by Deng that 'Development is of overriding importance' in laying out

Deng's accomplishments—detailing his early life, political activities, his (only) visit to Singapore in November 1978, and his role in Singapore–China relations.

Deng was the first senior Chinese leader to visit Singapore. His 1978 visit spurred subsequent interactions in various fields between the two countries. The same year he initiated his dual policies of economic reform and openness. Following his famous 'southern tour' in 1992, when he referred to Singapore's good social order and management, many Chinese officials were sent to the island for training, illustrating that even the largest most complex societies could—with a necessary dollop of political direction—adopt lessons from the smallest.

Deng is remembered as one of the great modern statesmen—the architect of China's economic transformation through reform. Despite remaining a staunch communist, his reforms were notable for their pragmatism—of socialism with Chinese characteristics—best captured in his following words: 'It does not matter if it is a yellow cat or a black cat as long as it catches mice'. He was proved right, and with the unleashing of the power of the market to allocate resources, China engineered the greatest economic turnaround in modern times.

Heroes and examples of development are important. While Raffles' legacy remains complex and, in some quarters, controversial, his role reminds of the necessity to take the best out of the past to make progress in the future.

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² See McLachlan and Atkins (2022).

³ For an example of how migration has affected political voting behaviour in Italy, see (Campo et al., 2024).

⁴ The contributions on Singapore in this paper are drawn from (Mills, 2024a).

⁵ See 'UNDP and the Making of Singapore's Public Service: Lessons from Albert Winsemius', *UNDP Global Centre for Public Service Excellence*, Available at: https://issuu.com/undppublicserv/docs/booklet_undp-sg50-winsemius_digital (accessed on 3 January 2025).

⁶ See (Fukuyama, 1989).

⁷ At <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/archives/public-papers/2656> (accessed on 3 January 2025).

⁸ See Fukuyama (2001).

⁹ Dr Mills is grateful to Air Vice Marshal (rtd.) Mike Hart for his inputs in this regard.

¹⁰ See <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/50-Year-Timeline> (accessed on 3 January 2025).

¹¹ See <https://www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis/> (accessed on 3 January 2025).

¹² At <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2023/marking-50-years> (accessed on 3 January 2025).

¹³ See Tugendhat (2022).

¹⁴ Interview with Drs Mills and Kilcullen, Kyiv, 1 August 2023.

¹⁵ See International Crisis Group (2023).

¹⁶ See Cordesman and Cormarie (2022).

¹⁷ At <https://www.prb.org/resources/demographic-challenges-of-the-sahel/> (accessed on 27 December 2024).

¹⁸ Zoom Conference. 7 February 2024.

- 19 This section draws from (Mills, 2021).
- 20 See <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores> (accessed on 28 December 2024).
- 21 At https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/FIW_World_2023_DigitalPDF.pdf (accessed on 3 January 2025).
- 22 This chapter is based on several visits by Dr Mills to Somaliland, and meetings in person with presidents Silanyo and Muse, most recently in October 2019 and May 2021, and Zoom call on 19 October 2021.
- 23 By 2060, one of five of the world's oldest countries will be in East Asia, compared with just one in 25 in 2010, according to the World Bank. See <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/eap/brief/rapid-aging-in-east-asia-and-pacific-will-shrink-workforce-increase-public-spending> (accessed on 28 December 2024). In Europe, as the post-Second World War baby boom generation retires, the ratio of over-65-year-olds to the working age population is set to rise dramatically, while the number of under-15s declines by nearly 15% by 2060. The 2015 age dependence rate is 27.5 on average in the EU. The rate is projected to jump to 49.4 in 2050, when there will be only two people of working age for every retiree. See <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-demographics-idUSKCN0JF1KA20141201> (accessed on 28 December 2024).
- 24 See Altenburg (2019).
- 25 This section draws largely from (Mills, 2023b).
- 26 At <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/GC.TAX.TOTL.GD.ZS> (accessed on 27 December 2024).
- 27 At <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/03/21/afw-deep-structural-reforms-guided-by-evidence-are-urgently-needed-to-lift-millions-of-nigerians-out-of-poverty> (accessed on 3 January 2025).
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