

Pan-African internationalism through partnership, not neo-paternalism



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By Chris Landsberg

The two strands of Pan-Africanism continue to be pitted against each other. One is moving towards the “one African nation”, the United States of Africa (USAf); and the other towards a Union of African States (UAS), in which African states live by common norms, values and interests. In this context it is important to continue to consider how African states as a grouping of states seek to assert their agency in world affairs.

While it is not often recognised by outsiders, or even many Africans, Africa has a rich history of agency in which African state and non-state actors sought to assert themselves and claim their right to autonomy and self-determination. For purposes of this article, we will look at the decade 1998-2008, what I have called elsewhere the “golden decade” of Pan-African diplomacy in the 21st Century, as the continent sought to claim the 21st Century as “the African Century”.

This decade saw the emergence of a second generation of Africans whose primary agenda was to end centuries of humiliation and colonial domination, in which they were treated as second class citizens. This new generation of leaders wanted to redefine relations with the outside world, and in particular create a new relationship with former colonial masters and outside powers – the industrialised powers in particular. They were tired of paternalism, arrogance and neo-colonialism, and they wanted a relationship of genuine partnership in which Africans and not outsiders set the agenda.

At least since 1998, African states, spearheaded by South Africa’s second democratically elected president, Thabo Mbeki, and backstopped by continental partners and allies like Nigeria’s Olusegun Obasanjo, Ghana’s John Kufor, Ethiopia’s Meles Zenawi, Tanzania’s Benjamin Mkapa, Mozambique’s Joachim Chissano, Algeria’s Abdelaziz Bouteflika, Senegal’s Abdoulaye Wade, and others, engaged the G8, the UN, Japan’s TICAD, China’s FOCAC, and other international actors and players, in favour of a new paradigm and relationship, namely strategic partnership.

Indeed, in 2000, during the annual

G8 summit in Okinawa, Japan, history was made when African leaders first engaged the G8 leaders in search of this new post-Cold War development model. They showed real leadership when they proposed a move away from an historical paternalistic and dependency relationship to one of genuine partnership, based on the principles of mutual respect, equality, responsibility and accountability, responsiveness and an equitable world order, advocated under the AU/NEPAD framework. Accordingly, African expectations were that the new partnership would be, in the true sense of the word, a relationship based on equality, with both sides (Africa and the rest) having something to contribute, not the one-sided donor-recipient relationship that had characterised past interactions. No longer could agendas

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be imposed on Africa, but rather its own identified needs and priorities would be addressed.

The new partnership framework was supposed to draw on existing arrangements, while bringing strategic consolidation, coherence, expansion and a result-oriented focus to the new architecture, which included the 2001 New Partnership for Africa’s Development; the 2002 Monterey consensus; the G8-Africa Action Plan; the 2005 Gleneagles agreement, and others. It would, thus, need to forge relationships with strategic partners willing to engage in its development agenda. Imbibing the core partnership principles was considered vital as a result of a growing sense amongst a new generation of Africans that development partners had to adhere to

such evolving norms and standards, to redress the injustices of the past.

In particular, given the need to underpin African ownership and leadership of Africa’s development agenda and process, the G8 offered the possibility of establishing a political process that could translate political will into mutual accountability, as well as an effective monitoring of commitments, vital to translating them into effective strategy and policy.

This new partnership model was based on the theoretical framework of internationalism – African internationalism if you like – with the wish on the part of these African states to play a role, on behalf of the continent, to negotiate international power redistribution models and extract commitments from industrialised and former colonial powers in areas ranging from aid to market access. South Africa and other continental powers, like Nigeria, Senegal, Algeria, Ghana, and the African Union Commission, have been key voices in favour of new modalities for resource mobilisation, such as better and more effective levels of aid to be channelled to it. These states appropriated for themselves the role of partnership negotiator with the Western powers, notably the G8 countries and European Union countries, and together with other African partners specifically campaigned for international support in five areas: more accelerated and predictable levels of aid; market access for African goods; debt relief; a free and fair global trade regime that would benefit Africa and the outside world; and resources to enhance the continent’s peace support operations capabilities.

Where do we currently stand with this partnership model? There is a palpable sense in which African agency and leadership has been weakened since 2008, and the past seven years has seen the important matter of Africa’s strategic partnerships agreed between 2000 and 2008 being put on the backburner by both African and external partners. The continent’s leadership failed to show collective or individual agency, and there is currently a real leadership vacuum playing itself out in the continent. One demonstration

of this lacuna is that they have failed to embrace the partnership paradigm as espoused by their predecessors. African politics are highly personality-driven affairs, and because the African Agenda of 1998-2008 was so closely associated with the personalities of Mbeki, Obasanjo, Wade, Chissano, Mkapa, Kuofor, Zenawi, Bouteflika and others, some of their successors felt the need to distance themselves from these projects. The end result was lack of ownership, and this gaping diplomatic lacuna. The Zuma government and its new African allies have allowed the important issue of Africa speaking with one voice to drift, and have not banded together with other pivotal African states, like Nigeria and Senegal. At present, there appear to be few signs of an African “concert of powers”, through which key states come together and co-ordinate their efforts in favour of a single African voice and continental interests.

The G8-Africa Action plan, crafted from 1999 and coming to fruition in 2002, has been allowed to merely waver, and African states are currently doing little to hold the feet of the Western powers to the fire so as to ensure that they live up to commitments made to Africa. G8 powers made more than 120 commitments to Africa, and it is now up to them to try and ensure that these states live up to their side of the bargain in the areas of trade, aid, market access, debt relief, and resources for peace support operations. The G8 countries have conveniently pushed their Africa Action Plan off the table and onto the backburner; they have found myriad excuses not to meet their obligations towards Africa, but had no difficulty in finding the resources and will to engage in an illegal war against Libya. At present, Western powers are in breach of the principle of *pacta sunt servanda vis-à-vis* their compact with Africa. While they all talk about Africa as the “next frontier” and “growth point”, they also tend to ignore African voices politically, and marginalise the continent in the international arena.

Within the context of the G20, where South Africa became Africa’s only representative, there was an expectation by Africans that South

Africa would articulate a clear continental agenda, and pursue Africa’s interests. However it has not taken up the challenge of articulating this African Agenda, and another opportunity for African leadership and agency had been lost. South Africa has merely focussed on narrow issues of capital flows and fiscal issues. Expectations were that South Africa would ensure that African interests were well-represented, and that the G8-Africa Action Plan would be pushed by South Africa. To date, this has not happened and African development concerns enjoy little attention. This is despite programmes such as NEPAD and the APRM, as well as institutions such as the AU.

Now that Nigeria has overtaken South Africa as Africa’s largest economy,

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and is ranked no 20 in the world on the PPP basis, and South Africa has slid to the 30th position, the Republic will come under more pressure to justify its leadership status in world affairs. Nigeria is likely to raise questions about South Africa’s continuing occupation of seats on the G20, the BRICS constellation, and IBSA. If nothing else, Nigeria would probably highlight the need for formations like MICTA and MINT to consolidate their efforts to rival BRICS and IBSA. This would not bode well for the continent, as it obviously needs both these regional pivots to co-operate if the continent is to realise its important social, political and developmental goals.

In fact, in order to realise the continent’s strategic goals, the onus is

more on its states and leaders rather than outsiders to take responsibility and initiative for their own agency. Outsiders do not have Africa’s interests at heart, and tend to only exploit the sense of vacuum that is currently besetting the continent. It remains up to Africans to assert the continent’s sense of agency, pride and ownership, and there is a responsibility of partners like South Africa and Nigeria to restore their relationship and move beyond fissures and divisions so that they can play leading roles in articulating for the continent an agenda worthy of being called the continental African agenda.

South Africa and Nigeria should of course guard against an egotistical notion that they are hegemon bent on dominating others and dictating to them what they should do and how they should behave. Instead, they should work with other African states in their respective sub-regions and beyond to come up with coalitions and partnerships that will help Africa overcome its fractured status and start to speak with one voice. Africans are challenged to come up with notions a common sovereignty so as to stop others from playing us off against each other.

Sub-regional bodies like SADC, ECOWAS, IGAD, the EAC and others should co-ordinate policies amongst and between themselves more effectively so that they help Africa and not outsiders set and determine the agendas. But African states and sub-regions should also learn to work more closely with the African Union Commission in Addis Ababa and other AU organs to band together and co-ordinate positions more effectively in order to maximise the continent’s agency.

If the continent is to extract commitments from external actors, and ensure that the international community makes good on pledges such as the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals, then we will first have to become more united as Africans before waiting on outsiders. External players are not going to hand to Africa agency and influence on a silver plate. It is up to us to ensure our unity in decisions and action. ■