Elusive Agency: Africa's Persistently Peripheral Role in International Relations

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Introduction

Twenty-first century international relations are characterized by a transition from a bi-polar to a multi-polar world, via a moment of American unipolarity in the wake of the Cold War. Whereas shifts in power and influence between Western states and their main competitors among the emerging markets, most notably China, have received much scholarly attention there has been decidedly less attention paid to how this transformation of the international order is affecting states in marginalized regions. This essay focuses on implications for an African continent which, despite increasing natural resource demands and improved prospects of economic and market growth, remains peripheral and relatively powerless in international affairs. A ‘new scramble for Africa’ notwithstanding, the continent’s continued marginalization – defined in terms of standard economic and developmental indicators, such as GDP per capita, trade and investment flows, educational and technological advance and levels of poverty – is a key indicator of persistently weak state agency. This derives from weak state capabilities that contribute to an inferior position in the international system of states. This explains the difficulty for African states to take advantage of the shifting dynamics of international relations, the drivers of which remain largely exogenous to Africa. This remains the case even for a regional power like South Africa beset by serious challenges to its (internal) capabilities and, therefore, external agency. We can draw important lessons from Africa and South Africa regarding the continuity of North-South relations and the enduring relevance of state-centric perspectives on international relations, even in an era of great transformation where non-state actors and non-state forms of agency proliferate. Alas,
the Thucydidean perspective on power relations remains highly relevant, in particular for those on the margins of the international system.

**State agency in international relations**

This essay examines agency as exercised by African states in an emerging markets century characterized by an increasingly influential role of non-Western states in the global political economy, and in the international system of states more generally. Following Grieco (1988) in downplaying sharp distinctions between ‘classical’ realism and neo-realism to instead emphasize continuity across these approaches to international relations, and drawing in particular on the seminal contributions of Waltz (1979; 2001), agency is here defined as the agency of sovereign states. It refers specifically to the ability of states, as the primary actors in the international system, to generate and deploy a range of capabilities (hard and soft) in the pursuit of their national interest. This national interest, ultimately, is for states to improve their relative positions in the international system of states. This is crucial as the distribution of capabilities across states, and consequently their relative positioning in the hierarchy of states constituting the international order at any given time, is the key indicator of states’ abilities to pursue a range of subsidiary interests, such as ensuring domestic stability and promoting socioeconomic development.

Thus, the main question here is not what kind of agency is exercised by African actors but rather ‘how much’ and whether prospects for ‘more’ or ‘stronger’ agency may be improving. State agency is not the only relevant form of agency, as other contributions to this volume demonstrate.¹ But the capabilities-cum-agency of sovereign states remains in the international

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¹ For a broader and more inclusive conceptualisation of ‘African agency’ in international relations, see also Brown (2012).
system the most important form of agency for understanding the dominance and centrality of some states and the subservience and marginalization of others, as well as the probability of stability, ascent and descent within the system. Whether emphasising military capabilities and incidences of war, as is Waltz’s main concern, or whether examining economic capabilities and national development which is the key focus here, the international system remains a self-help system. This claim is plainly demonstrated by the stark inequalities and injustices that remain a stark feature of the international order. The self-help nature of the system means that ‘the power position of the nation is paramount to all other considerations’ (Dunn 1937:13, quoted in Waltz 2001:160). The nature of the system, in turn, suggests that the primary measures of successful state agency are the enhancement of hard and soft state capabilities – military power, technological and economic development, social stability, cultural influence, etc. – resulting in any given state’s ascent in the international hierarchy of states.

A parsimonious focus on the sovereign state and its relative position in the international system provides in one sense only a partial picture, and Waltz (2001:ix) recognises clearly that ‘[e]xplaining international outcomes requires one to examine the situations of states, as well as their individual characteristics’. Wendt (1987:341), too, acknowledges this by arguing that neo-realists integrate state-centric and systemic approaches to explicitly ‘recognize the causal role of both state agents and system structures’. Indeed, Waltz’s approach is holistic and he concludes his enduring contribution to international relations theory, his ‘three images’ of international politics as developed in Man, the State, and War, with the following observation:

The third [system] image describes the framework of world politics, but without the first [individual] and second [state] images there can be no knowledge of the forces
that determine policy; the first and second images describe the forces in world politics, but without the third image it is impossible to assess their importance or predict results (Waltz 2001:238).

For Waltz and other neo-realists the internal developments of states are relevant only insofar that they can alter the relative capabilities of states which can then be deployed to change a state’s position in the international order to better take advantage of global political and economic changes, but not to change the nature of the system itself. This is what Hobson (2001:400-01) refers to as the ‘continuity assumption’, Waltz’s ‘principal observation … that the conduct of IR has never changed’ (author’s emphasis). State capability, whether it is strong or weak, is important – as the subsequent examination of African states collectively and South Africa in particular makes clear – because understanding shifts in state capabilities provides us a ‘positional picture’ of states and their relative ability to influence the international system to meet their needs. But since the nature of the international system is unchanging, characterised by self-help and inter-state competition, uniformity in international outcomes (i.e., the unchanging nature of the system) cannot be explained by variation in domestic characteristics (Hobson 2001:401).

The weak African state

Across the entire range of conventional measures of development (and the distribution of capabilities and attendant position in the hierarchy of states that such measures indicate), whether measuring technological and military capabilities or the economic, educational and health indicators comprising the United Nations Development Programme’s Human Development Index, African states are clustered towards the bottom, and therefore on the margins of the international system. While all African states are obviously not alike, the
generalization that African states are relatively weak is empirically justifiable and a worthy case of investigation. After all, African experiences with marginalization and lack of development are relatively uniform when compared to other regions. While Africa’s economic and political conditions have in some respects improved, the continent remains decidedly marginalized in terms of world trade and global investment flows as well as by its very large share of the world’s poor and least developed countries (Soko and Lehmann 2011:101). This marginalization, in turn, explains continuing attempts to understand Africa’s persistent developmental difficulties and impediments to pursuing national (and regional) interests in the international arena (e.g., Kornegay and Landsberg 2009; Qobo 2010).

Following Jackson and Rosberg’s (1982; 1986) account of the lack in post-independence African states of the ‘essentials of statehood’ – that, in Africa, statehood is often ‘juridical’ (i.e., de jure recognized by international actors) rather than ‘empirical’ (a de facto ability to exercise sovereignty) – it is evident that, in a self-help system where strong states are able to more effectively pursue their national interests we can understand why Africa remains peripheral by looking at why African states are weak and therefore less able to exercise effective agency. Their description of the weakness of African states might today appear harsh, even condescending. But similar problems persist a quarter-century later:

In Tropical Africa, many so-called states are seriously lacking in the essentials of statehood. They are ramshackle régimes of highly personal rule that are severely deficient in institutional authority and organisational capability. The writ of government often does not extend to all parts of the country... Most African states are also, of course, highly dependent on the external world for the material aid needed for their development. Millions of Africans in more than a few countries are dependent on
food aid for survival. In short, many states in Tropical Africa are as yet far from credible realities (Jackson and Rosberg 1986:1-2).

These remain characteristics generally more evident in African countries than among their international competitors. The writ of government throughout the state’s territory, a core attribute of a sovereign state, often remains elusive (Herbst 2000). A propensity for destructive factional competition for the spoils of government often occurs along communal lines and irrespective of whether governments are democratically elected or not (Lindberg 2003). Aid dependence characterizes relations with external actors, with several African states unable to properly feed their populations without external assistance. Following the realist logic as applied in a self-help system of states, this weakness ultimately places in doubt the viability of many African states as enduring sovereign entities, as the descent of some into ‘failed states’ demonstrates.²

Herbst’s (2000) account of Africa’s problem with state-building applies from pre- to post-colonial eras and carries serious implications for those who seek to improve Africa’s role in international affairs as it is an account determined partly by geographic, ecological and demographic factors less amenable to reform than are political and economic ones. Africa’s very low population densities, as measured over the last five hundred years in comparison to other regions of the world, and in particular those regions in which strong state systems developed (most notably Europe), means that African states have found it exceptionally difficult to extend authority from central administrative cities or regions throughout the entirety of their territories. Herbst’s argument identifies a fundamental weakness at heart of the African state, the origins of which antedate politics and socio-economic organization.

² I am grateful for David Williams prompting me to consider this possibility.
However, Herbst (2000:257) is also critical of the (Western) historical emphasis placed on the sovereign state as the necessarily fundamental unit of socio-political organization in the international system. In particular he is sceptical of employing ‘realist assumptions’ (by which he seems to mean neo-realist theory á la Waltz) to account for the historical development of the state in Africa, and therefore also Africa’s particular problems with state-building in the modern era. He notes that the general weakness of the African sub-system of states means that cooperation rather than conflict has characterized inter-state relations, resulting in relatively few inter-state conflicts as compared to the prevalence of such conflicts during the emergence of the European state system. The relative lack of external threats of force from neighbouring states generated less impetus in Africa for the development of strong states. This fact ‘directly challenges traditional realist assumptions about the anarchical nature of international society and the importance of the threat of force’ (Herbst 2000:16).

But the African situation actually reinforces realist claims. The troubled history and nature of African state-building is an important pre-systemic predictor of Africa’s persistent lack of effective state agency and persistent marginalization which, in turn, become negatively reinforcing attributes of African states. It may well be true, as Herbst implies, that a system in which non-state entities were the primary agents would benefit Africa. But this is a normative claim which disregards reasons why the state remains the primary unit of the international system. It also disregards whether it is at all likely that any other unit of socio-political organization could eclipse the state and produce a more stable, equitable or somehow mutually beneficial system of international relations better suited to addressing needs of marginalized and relatively powerless regions. Instead African governments have consciously ‘abandoned’ their pre-colonial past and its alternative forms of socio-political organization:
The attachment by Africans and others to the current state system is extraordinary, given that even the parties to the 1885 Berlin Conference noted explicitly that they reserved the right to change principles “as experience may show to be expedient” (Herbst 2000:258).

African statesmen realize that they have emerged independent into an international system in which strong states reap the rewards. No states occupying dominant or ascending positions in the international order, whether the USA, or China, India, Russia or Brazil (the BRICs), are likely to cede state sovereignty to any significant degree where vital national interests are concerned, irrespective of their recognition of, and participation in, regional and global organizations at the supra-national level. Nationalism is a notable force in these countries. Strong, and therefore successful, states in a state-centric system are those with a significant capacity to determine the shape and nature of the system. But their status as regional or global powers means that they have no major incentives to change the system in ways that erode the significance of the state strength on which their influence is primarily based. If the EU is the prime example of transition to supra-national governance, its current economic crisis and the increasingly evident manifestations of fundamental problems inherent in its economic and political integration makes a return to a greater preference for state sovereignty and agency more likely. Powerful EU member states may also reconsider and perhaps repatriate aspects of their sovereignty already ceded to EU institutions.

Kagan (2003) argues that just as the US moved from initially relying on strategies of the weak to employing strategies of the powerful as it developed into a superpower, former European powers, and especially the EU, are now increasingly relying on the strategies of the weak. These are strategies which seek to restrain unilateral state agency by instead emphasizing international law and norms, as well as appeals to universal rights and moral considerations –
arguably the softest of soft power. These strategies of the weak are an indicator of weaker state agency and they are of course the primary strategies employed by African states in foreign policy, trade and other diplomatic negotiations, standing in sharp contrast to the more assertive behaviour of powerful developing states like China or Russia.

**The enduring relevance of the state**

While Spruyt’s (1996) seminal analysis of the emergence and eventual dominance of the sovereign state in Europe recognizes that ‘change in the nature of the constitutive units of the international system’ is not always slow and incremental, but can indeed occur suddenly, in a chaotic and revolutionary manner (Herbst 2000:260-1), recent experiments with supranationalism do not suggest an approaching tipping point where transformational upheaval results in units other than the sovereign state dominating the international system. If anything, we are likely to see an increasingly pronounced reliance on, and safeguarding of, state sovereignty (understood as national authority over, and autonomy of, policy choices). This is a tendency fuelled not only by rational considerations conditioned by the dynamics and incentives of a state-centric self-help system. It is also fuelled by the re-emergence of isolationist and otherwise defensive tendencies in an environment of global economic crisis where increased uncertainty and aversion to risk make appeals to the state, rather than to abstract international organizations, more appealing to leaders and peoples alike.

Herbst is correct in identifying fundamental impediments to African state-building and the effective exercise of African state agency, but he overstates the degree to which alternatives to the state system are apt to emerge, even at the level of the African sub-system. New states like South Sudan may be generated by internal conflict, but an eclipse of sovereign states
themselves is unlikely. Contra Wendt (2003), the ‘World State’ or any other world government is certainly not inevitable.

So much of what is written about globalization is wrong when applied to Africa, precisely because leaders have actually constructed more institutions to mediate the pressures from international markets and cross-national flows of people compared to any time in the past... Far from the nation-state melting away in the face of pressures for globalization, national boundaries, broadly defined, are, in a number of ways, more relevant than ever before. Indeed, despite the enormous emphasis on global political and economic forces in the literature... the geographic and demographic facts on the ground are still crucial to understanding political processes in Africa (Herbst 2000:252-3, emphasis added).

Weak states are difficult to strengthen and they remain the African norm in an international context where state strength also remains a crucial determinant of the ability to effectively exercise state agency and to pursue development and other basic needs. We demonstrably exist in a world where state weakness engenders marginalization, subordination, underdevelopment and ultimately suffering. This remains so despite an increasing, if reversible, interconnectedness of the global economy and importance of international and regional organizations like the UN, WTO, NATO, EU and AU.

Whether or not one agrees with Davidson’s (1992:290) lamentation that the nation-state is a ‘curse’ and constitutes ‘a shackle on progress’ for postcolonial societies (in Africa), states, like the poor, remain with us. Waltz (1979:95) famously considered the state likely more durable than the multinational corporation. It is therefore futile to suggest that a theory of
international relations positing state capabilities and strength as crucial for understanding why, echoing Thucydides, the strong benefit by doing as they can and the weak suffer as they must is misconstrued, because it shows that states which are manifestly deficient in those capabilities and strengths which the theory posits as crucial are in fact doing so poorly relative to stronger states, just as the theory predicts. And Africa’s historical experiences of international relations demonstrate the value of the Thucydidean analytical lens. Indeed, the underlying assumption here is that throughout the course of history stronger parties dominate weaker ones to thereby shape the international environment according to their own interests. This understanding of international history as series of recurring relational patterns can be traced from Thucydides to Huntington and stands in contrast to teleological accounts of history in Hegel, Marx and Fukuyama.³

Dunn (2000), Malaquias (2001) and others have accused realists (and ‘Western theories of international relations’ generally) of simply analysing Africa through a Western historical and cultural prism which takes for granted the Westphalian system of sovereign states, thereby failing to understand that African history and socio-political organization is different from that of the West, that nation-states are not compatible with African realities and that therefore ‘Western’ theories of international relations are of little use in understanding Africa’s role in international affairs (cf. Brown 2006). The opposite is in fact the case. State capabilities and strength remains central to the pursuit of national interest, however defined and irrespective of the degree such interests are sometimes mediated through international institutions.⁴ Thus

³ I am indebted to Aviezer Tucker for making this point.

⁴ Although international organizations do mediate states’ interests, they can be ineffectual and it is usually powerful states who shape their actions in the first place – most obviously in
Africa’s by comparison to other regions widespread problems of weak or, in the case of ‘failed’ states like Somalia, even lacking of empirical statehood (stemming from external as well as internal factors) explains its historical experiences of colonial domination and neo-colonial subordination, as well as a general inability to influence current shifts in the international order to better meets Africa’s interests and needs.

Quite contrary to Chabal and Daloz’s (1999) claim that ‘Africa works’, albeit not along the lines presumed by state-centric ‘Western’ theories of politics and international relations, most African countries do not work well in stacking up to international competition and maintaining the internal order necessary for effectively pursuing long-term national interests as demonstrated by Africa’s continued marginalization and relative lack of socio-economic development (Soko and Lehmann 2011). And whether stronger regional co-operation, or even consolidation of a continent-wide organization like the AU, would in the long run be desirable for promoting Africa’s role internationally and its developmental needs domestically, the relative inefficiency of regional and continent-wide bodies is not the cause of internal weaknesses in African countries but instead one additional symptom of such state weakness. Whereas China is able to exercise a sufficient degree of sovereignty over a very large geographical territory and population, the USA can do the same and even the EU can do so where specific ‘competences’ have been delegated to it by its sovereign member states, most African states can generally do nothing of the sort, or at least very seldom to a comparable degree (cf. Kornegay and Landsberg 2009).

instances where some states exercise a de jure or de facto veto on crucial matters (see, for respective realist and liberal accounts of this Waltz 2000 and Ikenberry et al. 2009).
India displays many similar weaknesses to those of African states. But India is nevertheless able to effectively assert itself as one of the world’s major emerging markets with an increasing influence in international forums and affairs because it is a single state of considerable size with sufficient nodes of rapid economic and technological growth and expansion. Africa, on the other hand, remains a collection of many generally weak states operating within an African framework (the AU) which is a relatively weak actor in terms of international affairs. The most productive way to think about improving Africa’s role and strengthening African agency in the international arena is to place first in the order of priorities a strengthening (internally) of state capabilities, however difficult given Africa’s marginal role in the international system. In this sense, a comparative analysis of state and capacity building offers a valuable complement to our understanding of Africa’s role in the international order as provided by theories of international relations (cf. Herbst 2000).

**Africa in the emerging markets century**

High hopes have been pinned on African states being able to enhance their agency as manifested primarily in trade and development-related diplomatic negotiations in a new era characterized by shifts in economic and political power. This era is producing a new multipolar order in which major emerging markets – notably China and India – are becoming increasingly powerful actors in the international system. But given African state weakness and the persistence of a state-centric self-help system, the hypothesis to be evaluated when examining Africa’s international relations, and those of its strongest states, should be as follows: because key actors in the international system are states, and because African state agency is weak as African states share few of the characteristics of major emerging market states in the ascendant, we should expect that African states remain decidedly peripheral in
international affairs, and that this is the case even for regional powers like South Africa in comparison to major emerging powers like the BRICs.

That Africa should remain peripheral, with the footprint of African agency on the emerging order hardly discernible, is not because Africa is uninteresting or irrelevant to established and emerging powers. On the contrary, Africa has remained peripheral despite a greatly renewed interest in Africa’s natural resources, driven by economic growth in emerging markets and multinational corporations looking for growth potential in a saturated global marketplace (cf. Andreasson 2011), and also despite a greatly renewed interest in Africa as a potential breeding ground for terrorism in the wake of ‘9/11’ and commencement of the US-led ‘war on terror’ (Whitaker 2010). In terms of global resource demands and security concerns, Africa remains firmly on the map. But in the context of a shifting economic and political gravity away from the West, Africa’s continued marginalization stands out.

To understand why Africa seems left behind we must examine how asymmetric relations are perpetuated and how they disadvantage the exercise of African state agency internationally. While Africa’s neo-colonial ties with former European colonial masters and the USA are well documented, it is increasingly important to examine evolving forms of ‘South-South’ cooperation between African states and organizations and corresponding actors elsewhere in the developing world, and in particular Africa’s rapidly expanding relations with China as the major new entrant on the African scene (Alden 2005). Africa-India relations are less developed but rapidly evolving and increasing in importance given India’s role second only to China in transforming the global economy (Mawdsley and McCann 2010). Furthermore, we cannot understand Africa’s external relations without understanding why individual African
states find it difficult, or are unwilling, to articulate ‘common positions’ when interacting with external actors at the international level (Kornegay and Landsberg 2009).

African states are ‘confronting the geo-political and geo-economic trade winds’ generated by the current power shift in the international system from West to East and South (Kornegay and Landsberg 2009:171):

The substantive cut-and-thrust of developed-developing world interactions are between the larger developing world ‘emerging power’ economies and the developed world, with Africa’s ‘least developed’ economies sidelined even as the emerging powers seek to gain a foothold on the continent (Kornegay and Landsberg 2009:186-7).

Martin (2008:352) notes that Africa lacks ‘middle powers’ or ‘semi-peripheral’ states, perhaps with the exception of South Africa. But even in the case of South Africa, ‘the evidence is not … encouraging’ and, ironically, the more advanced nature of South Africa’s economy as compared to others economies in Africa means that South Africa is more likely to be disproportionately hit by competitive exports from the world’s major manufacturing competitors, notably the BRICs (Martin 2008:353).

Kornegay and Landsberg (2009) also identify what they understand to be a puzzle but which refers in fact to expected developments. Why, they ask, should an African continent containing less developed countries rather than emerging markets or powers of significant stature yet again become the focus of political and economic competition by powerful states (Kornegay and Landsberg 2009:172)? The answer is that powerful states will act where and
as they can. Given weak African states, asymmetrical power relations favour external actors whose demand for natural resources and interest in new markets ensures continued attention to Africa. Because African states are weak individually and cannot act as a bloc to effectively balance and thereby confront major powers outside Africa, they are less likely to extract more genuinely beneficial deals in negotiations on trade and development. This is a key indicator of the weak agency of African states. For Kornegay and Landsberg (2009:173), the crucial problem is that Africa lacks ‘continental sovereignty’, i.e., the ability to act as a bloc – a function they argue that the AU ought to fulfil. But they fail to consider that other major actors do not possess ‘continental sovereignty’ either, but strong state capabilities. The EU can at times act effectively but that depends primarily on the sovereign strength of its constituent parts. Perhaps it could be argued that because African states are weak, they have no choice but to pursue strategies aiming at supra-national agglomeration of power – something resembling ‘continental sovereignty’. But this is not likely a winning strategy in a state-centric system rewarding strong states and certainly not regional bodies constructed on weak states.

The AU’s lack of effectiveness should not be surprising given the weak foundations on which the organization rests. Kornegay and Landsberg (2009:184) are troubled by individual African states pursuing their separate interests within the AU and in intercontinental forums like the New Asian African Strategic Partnership (NAASP), but such efforts by individual states are to be expected. If the EU, comprising states with quantitatively and qualitatively better sets of capabilities, finds it difficult to coordinate and act as a ‘sovereign’ entity we should expect even greater difficulties facing the AU. Kornegay and Landsberg’s argument seems to implicitly support a kind of ‘top-down’ regionalization in Africa in order to make the AU a more effective actor on the global stage and to counteract advantages of ‘the one’ (i.e., China)
bargaining with ‘the many’ (African states) (cf. Shaw et al. 2009:35-8). But such an aspiration might be tantamount to betting on a losing horse given difficulties with supra-national experiments elsewhere and considering also Africa’s prevalent and relative lack of state strength.

For Cornelissen (2009:24) it remains unclear whether Africa’s increasing ‘self-awareness and assertion’ in the international system will or can result in a ‘tangible repositioning’ of the role and status of African states in the international order as a ‘profusion of Southern-based multilateral bodies has in fact weakened rather than bolstered Southern solidarity.’ Cornelissen’s scepticism dovetails with the contention herein, that Africa remains peripheral in international relations despite African countries’ at times vigorous involvement in networks intended to boost South-South cooperation and the role of developing regions generally. While North-South relations have undoubtedly shifted, little has changed for African countries negotiating their interests in an international arena characterized by asymmetrical distribution of capabilities and power stacked in favour of Africa’s external competitors. There is, in terms of the overall positioning of African states in the international order, nothing new under the sun – even in this emerging markets century.

African countries would be amiss if they did not investigate every avenue for improvement at a time when so many aspects of the international system seem to be in flux – its economics, politics and cultural relations, if not its fundamental units. Certainly more powerful developing states have taken advantage of these shifts, notably the BRICs. But does it make sense to expect that African agency will have a significant impact on shaping a reconfigured international order as it currently emerges or will the reconfiguration of global power merely see Africa trade old masters for new ones? Mohan and Power (2008) predict that even with
the much-heralded entry of China into African markets and politics, little changes in terms of Africa’s role in the international order:

... China’s involvement will not fundamentally alter Africa’s place in the global division of labour. It simply adds a new and significant market without challenging the continent’s extraversion. History suggests that in some states this will entrench rentier states, concentrate ownership in a few hands, and deliver limited multipliers to marginalised Africans (Mohan and Power 2008:36).

Given the West’s now increasingly precarious role as a driving and dominant force in the international system, international relations may revert back to great power rivalries when vestiges of US-centred dominance recede (cf. Ikenberry et al. 2009). Multilateralism in the context of international organizations will likely become less important than bilateral bargaining between major powers, and between major powers and those states in marginalized regions providing natural resources, cheap labour and expanding markets for goods.

**South Africa in Africa and with the BRICS**

As Africa’s largest and most developed economy, South Africa has long been considered pivotal in driving African development and increasing Africa’s profile internationally. The end of *apartheid* and the ANC government’s initial cachet worldwide meant that South Africa was able to punch above its weight diplomatically, thus enjoying a prominent if not necessarily deserved role in international politics (Alden and Le Pere 2009). South Africa’s ‘success’ remains however an example of pursuing what Kagan (2003) describes as strategies of the weak. Following intense lobbying by the South African government of the BRIC
nations, the country was in 2011 rather surprisingly admitted into this informal grouping of major emerging market powers – henceforth known as BRICS (Andreasson 2011:1173). If one must identify a relatively strong state in Africa, it is South Africa.\footnote{Other African states, like Botswana and Rwanda, may also be considered relatively strong internally. But they are far too small in terms of population and economic size to have any significant influence in the international system, and African states of sufficient size in this respect, like Nigeria, are notoriously weak internally.} If any African country should be able to effectively exercise its agency in negotiations with powerful states and in international forums it should be South Africa. In this sense, South Africa constitutes a hard test case: if not even Africa’s strongest states contain a sufficient degree of the capabilities and strengths which make for \textit{de facto} sovereign states, then the hypothesis that African state weakness explains Africa’s continued marginalization and, \textit{ipso facto}, the weakness of African agency in international relations seems vindicated.

Flemes (2007) argues that regional powers support international organizations as a way to enhance their influence vis-à-vis great powers:

> South Africa’s success in influencing the processes and structures of the international system will depend largely on its ability to build a coalition with its peers, Brazil and India for instance. As the realist approach emphasises: a multipolar system can only be achieved by the emergence of cooperating regional unipolarities that balance the superpower (Flemes 2007:52).

The recognition of peers is also an important factor in determining any particular state’s regional power status, and South Africa has indeed been recognized as one:
Peers like Brazil and India accept South Africa’s leadership role as Pretoria accepts theirs implicitly when these countries cooperate in multilateral institutions like IBSA, WTO (as G-3), NAM or the UN. When the US and European and Asian great powers negotiated trade issues with South Africa, e.g. at the WTO-conference in Cancun, they accepted it as an advocate of the developing world (especially of Africa). And the invitations to President Mbeki together with his Indian and Brazilian colleagues to the recent G-8 summits or to the World Economic Forum meetings in Davos, Switzerland, reflect substantial acceptance of South Africa’s leadership role by the most powerful players of the international system (Flemes 2007:40).

Flemes (2009) indicates similar success for South Africa in pursuing its interests via the India-Brazil-South Africa Dialogue Forum (IBSA). Flemes’s analysis of South African agency stands in contrast to more cautious assessments. For Taylor (2009), the creation of IBSA in 2003, to enhance South-South cooperation, in particular economic cooperation between major emerging markets is in fact a manifestation of ‘inherent frustration with the results of WTO negotiations for key exporting states from the Global South...’ (Taylor 2009:45). It is significant that Taylor’s (2009:51-2) discussion of the increasing global presence of IBSA primarily concerns India and Brazil, while it is unclear where South Africa fits into these developments. And, in any case, ‘bilateralism and agreements with the North seem paramount and trump so-called South-South cooperation strategies’ (Taylor 2009:53). Because the IBSA member states are competitors for export shares to developed markets rather than ‘natural collaborators for cooperation’, one can only surmise that in this game African states will be the ones least able to reap whatever benefits may materialize.
In the final analysis, Taylor (2009:55) argues that IBSA, as developing states in general, displays a rather naive view that the WTO represents a ‘fair and rules-based global trading regime’ in which developing states on the margins of the international system can confront and challenge world’s dominant powers and their interests. Even though Taylor is critical of state-centric perspectives on development and global economic affairs, his argument about IBSA fits with the argument put forth here about the ultimate importance of state strength and location in the international system for the effective exercise of agency and for the developmental prospects of any state. While South Africa may see some benefits of participation in IBSA it is in particular India and Brazil who stand to benefit on account of their many advantages over South Africa in terms of economic and other material capabilities.

Criticisms of South Africa’s socio-economic foundations at home and hitherto lauded diplomatic influence and moral standing internationally, including in Africa, suggests furthermore that the country’s regional power status may be difficult to sustain (Alden and Le Pere 2009, cf. Andreasson 2011). ‘While many extra-regional actors have welcomed Pretoria’s self-assigned role as Africa’s pre-eminent advocate, some fellow African states are not so sure about its true intentions’ (Flemes 2007:40). Despite South Africa’s ‘near-obsession with [exercising leadership in] Africa … the evidence that actual practice in the post-apartheid years has matched the rhetoric is sparse, at best’ (Blumenfeld 2010:16-17), and there is a tendency among Western powers to ‘misread the empirical basis of South African power in Africa’ (Alden and Le Pere 2009:149). The most serious challenge to Africa’s strongest state in this regard is the increasing threat to its domestic order, i.e., the Weberian ideal-type sovereignty on which all states must rely to effectively pursue their interests externally (Alden and Le Pere 2009:161-4; cf. Andreasson 2001:1175-8). This threat to South
Africa’s empirical statehood is what Alden and Le Pere (2009:167) refer to as the country’s ‘own horsemen of the apocalypse in the form of endemic poverty, crime and inequality’.

The basis on which South Africa can claim status as a regional power is also outlined and questioned by de Kadt (2010:29-30). South Africa risks failure across most essential priorities for meeting the challenges of this century. In terms of ensuring that economic growth is ‘not complicated by political factors’, the costs of Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) are becoming increasingly controversial (Southall 2008). South Africa’s need to invest more in human capital is complicated by a net out-migration of skilled professionals which creates an ill-affordable brain drain that is not properly tackled by government policies (Wa Kabwe-Segatti and Landau 2008). South Africa lags behind international competitors in ensuring that education promotes scientific and technological innovation (cf. Kruss et al. 2010). Improving state performance and delivery capabilities has encountered continual difficulties and setbacks, prompting increasingly violent and potentially destabilising ‘service delivery protests’ (Booysen 2007). Ensuring that elites hold to the ‘normative principles of the constitutional order’ – i.e., that they safeguard democratic consolidation – is undermined by increasing corruption in government (Southall 2008). Africa’s strongest state faces very serious problems combining to pose a more important threat to its empirical statehood and, therefore, its position in the international system, than do similar challenges in other emerging markets.

South Africa’s manifest difficulties and resultant hampering of its effective agency internationally when compared to the other BRICS illustrates the general rule, that African states remain weak by international comparison. Indeed it is partly the notable weakness of other African states which makes South Africa stand out as a regional power and as the one
African state that could possibly be included in the category of major emerging markets. And if South Africa’s worsening internal challenges are damaging the country’s future standing and capability to exercise regional power, the South African case suggests further confirmation of the previously stated hypothesis: even Africa’s undeniably strongest state faces severe and possibly insurmountable pressures hampering it significantly in international affairs. These difficulties are most obviously manifested in comparisons to, and in recent relations with the BRICS to which South Africa has now officially been joined. If this is the case, we might, to paraphrase Jackson and Rosberg (1986), eventually come to view South Africa’s designation as a major emerging market in the same category as the other BRICS as a case of ‘juridical’ rather than ‘empirical’ BRICS status.

Conclusion

Looking beyond present flux in the international system we can, as expected (cf. Hobson 2001: Waltz 2001), perceive a degree of overall continuity. This is perhaps counterintuitive at a time of global economic turmoil, acute crisis of the Eurozone, Arab uprisings, growing concerns about declining US hegemony, and the economic and possibly military rise of China. But just as Wallerstein’s (1974) Modern World System suggested little scope for movement up and down the system, with most of this movement reserved for those hard to categorize ‘semi-peripheral’ states (today’s emerging markets?), it is likely that the majority of states located on the periphery, home to the vast majority of those to whom Collier (2007) refer as the ‘bottom billion’, will remain peripheral. The great global economic convergence, such as it is under way today (cf. Scott 2001), will likely be a phenomenon primarily affecting the relative positions of the developed West vis-à-vis major emerging markets where levels of overall economic and technological development, as well as military capabilities, will
converge throughout the century. Such convergence will hardly improve the relative position of the weakest states in the system, a majority of which are in Africa.

An international system developing along these lines does not preclude absolute gains for its weakest states. But there are few indications of substantial relative gains that could result in a more equal international order. It is hard to escape a sense that the window of opportunity for convergence between the most and least developed regions of the world which opened up with decolonization in the latter half of the twentieth century is now being closed. Instead, a gulf too wide to bridge by processes of convergence along lines generally presumed by orthodox theories of economic development might prevent any meaningful catch-up by the most marginalized states lagging behind even Gerschenkron’s (1962) ‘late late developers’. If this is the case, countries in Africa and elsewhere who on account of weak state capabilities are ill equipped to exercise agency by effectively competing and promoting their national interests might have to set their sights first on gradual improvements to the various capabilities that constitute empirical statehood. Only then might they examine possibilities for balancing more powerful states, by building bilateral and multilateral alliances anchored first and foremost in the interests of sovereign state rather than in the ephemeral power of regional and international organizations. As long as sovereign states remain the key actors in international affairs, efforts to improve the prospects of marginalized states and peoples must begin at home.
References


