

The Tswalu Dialog

BY MICHAEL MIKLAUCIC

*“A fountre for the world and worldlings base!
I speak of Africa and golden joys.”*

The Second part of King Henry the Fourth
William Shakespeare

For centuries Africa has provided the stuff of dreams for explorers, adventurers, conquerors, colonizers, soldiers, plunderers, and state-builders. It has also been the backdrop for the nightmares of slavery, famine, war, genocide, and other tragedies. Africa is at once a geographical illusion and a potent political symbol. Its emergence and recent impressive economic growth have altered the geo-strategic calculations of all the global powers. With its abundant natural and human resources generating increasing political and economic capital, Africa’s importance on the global stage will only continue to grow. However this growth will be conditioned by how African states individually and collectively respond to the myriad challenges and opportunities facing the continent.

What do we mean by describing Africa as a geographical illusion? Look at the map of Africa: fifty-four states, each distinct and discretely colored to convey the attributes of sovereign identity and equality. Yet the fundamental Westphalian principle of sovereignty is actually challenged throughout Africa as in no other region of the world. Of Africa’s 54 recognized states, how many can actually claim to effectively govern their territory, so as to prevent serious challenges from indigenous security threats? How many effectively govern their borders to control the flow of goods and persons, licit and illicit, in and out of the country? How many can claim that national identity overrides other sub-national identities for the majority of the population? While not implying the legitimacy or illegitimacy of national sovereignty claims, the answer in each case is a small minority of Africa’s countries. The map of Africa has the additional historical handicap of having been drawn not from organic political development as in Europe, but by the hand of Europeans with little concern for or knowledge of the state-building enterprise, leaving many African states with a substantial legitimacy deficit among their populations. Thus the political

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map of Africa conveys the illusion of much more sovereignty than is actually present.

A further geographical illusion derives from the classic Mercator projection of the world and the way Africa is taught in many places as a single entity. In the Mercator projection, the continent's actual size is vastly under-represented. Moreover, it conveys an illusion of integration that underappreciates the radical diversity of Africa. Africa is indeed a single continent, but one that, by some counts, is home to, over 3300 different ethnic groups and distinct languages. Cultures in Africa vary widely from region to region, and even within regions. They often provide a stronger identity for populations than their respective states. While Mauritians and Mozambicans are both Africans, they share little else in common, and the likelihood of a Mauritanian ever visiting Mozambique is slight. The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the 11th largest country in the world, has fewer than 1500 miles of paved roads. For ordinary citizens the most common options for transportation are their feet, bicycles, and dugout canoes. Congolese from Goma rarely ever get to visit their capital Kinshasa and vice versa – there is no way to get from one to the other besides air travel, which is far beyond the means of the ordinary Congolese. This is “real geography:” as with the real economy, real geography takes into consideration contextual factors that distort the nominal value of a measure. In a country with only 1500 miles of paved roads, the distance between Goma and Kinshasa is much greater than the equivalent distance in the U.S., where many people cross the country daily. The implications of real geography throughout Africa are self-evident: the problems of infrastructure, regional and

continental integration, communication, trade, and transportation are merely a few of them.

As diverse as Africa is, there is nevertheless a continental solidarity borne of the shared experiences of slavery, colonization and wanton exploitation. When Libya won its independence from Britain in 1951, it became only the fifth independent African state. In the next 15 years, 34 more African states achieved independence. The Organization of African Unity was established in 1963 (with 32 signatories) to promote the unity and solidarity of the African states, and to speak collectively for Africa. Nearly every African state is a member of the Non-Aligned Movement, reflecting a shared detachment from the interests of the great powers and an independence of purpose. A widely felt African spiritualism bridges the numerous distinct cultures, and for many, their African identity is far stronger than their national identity. From these shared attributes and experiences comes a symbolic political salience for the continent that exceeds the actual unity or level of real cooperation among and between African countries. This political salience gives meaning to such phrases as, “African solutions for African problems.”

For the United States, Africa's recent emergence offers both challenges and opportunities. U.S. national security is threatened – perhaps not yet directly, but certainly potentially – by the proliferation of violent extremism in many of the continent's sub-regions. Boko Haram in Nigeria, al-Shabaab in Ethiopia, and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in both the Mediterranean and Sahelian States practice extreme violence against their own populations and those of neighboring countries. They are also virulently hostile to the United States and American interests. Although they have

not yet engaged in overtly anti-American acts, as have their counterparts in al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, the potential for such direct violence against the United States is not a figment of the imagination.

Such violent organizations pose a direct, even existential threat to some of America's most important partners in Africa. Nigeria is a key troop contributor to peace, stabilization, and military operations throughout the continent, and is at serious risk of losing sovereignty over its northern territories due to escalating violence and aggression by Boko Haram. Kenya, another key U.S. partner, has been repeatedly attacked by al-Shabaab terrorists. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb was nearly able to bring down the Malian state. Previously considered a great development success story, Mali was only saved with the help of French military intervention. In the twilight of the United States' big footprint interventions, growing reliance on partner nations in the struggle against terrorism, against narcotics and other illicit trafficking, against violent extremism, and many other national security concerns, such threats to major partner states are very disturbing.

The increasingly pervasive presence of China in Africa adds another factor in the security algorithm for the United States. Proliferating economic and financial relationships between China and many African states reduce America's strategic leverage. With access to Chinese capital, conditional U.S. or international financial institution aid has less impact. China is an alternative provider of military hardware, but without the western proselytizing about human rights or democracy. Moreover China's stunning economic growth over recent decades, coupled with its authoritarian form of capitalism, provides an

attractive politico-economic model for many African states not persuaded that democracy represents the most sensible political course for their future development.

In addition to direct and indirect security threats, the major social disruptions caused by insurgency and constant conflict weigh heavily on the international community. Substantial U.S. resources are committed each year to respond to the heartbreaking plight of large refugee and internally displaced populations throughout Africa.

This is also, however, a time of opportunity for the United States in Africa. A strategic backwater throughout the better part of the 20th century, Africa today offers important economic and geo-strategic opportunities for the United States. Its dynamic economies represent market opportunities for American business while the development of its natural and human resources broaden global competition, increasing choices for goods and services. From a security perspective many African states are in peril, facing both internal and external threats. The threat posed by violent extremism and radical Islam is existential to many. Their recognition of the American commitment to defeating global terrorism makes the United States a partner of choice in this enterprise. U.S. Africa Command, launched as a full-fledged combatant command in 2008, has established military-to-military relations with nearly all countries on the continent, and supports a wide range of activities, from counterterrorism training to the global effort to contain the Ebola virus outbreak. We might even hope that America has learned from the backlash against its aggressive and sometimes singular promotion of democracy in recent decades. A more nuanced and humble approach to calibrating our relationships will

permit less cantankerous relations with those African states pursuing social change along other trajectories or at slower velocities.

For Africa and its 54 countries and thousands of ethnic, linguistic, and cultural groups, this is a time of accelerated transitions with attendant challenges and opportunities. African economies are coming of age, and information, telecommunication, and transportation technologies are enabling African states to integrate into the global system as never before. African institutions promoting good governance have arisen and recent evidence suggests a declining tolerance for military disruptions of civilian governance. Most African states have adopted basic democratic political institutions and, although the practice of democracy varies widely throughout the continent, the aspiration for freedom in Africa has never had greater potential to become reality.

Many challenges remain and the progress of recent years could be reversed. Even though economies are growing, they are subject to deceleration. Economic sluggishness in Europe and Japan, and a slow-down in Chinese commodity imports will inevitably have an impact on African economies. Demographic trends are alarming with a growing youth population in many countries. It will be difficult for economic growth to keep pace with population growth in many countries. Africa continues to be a geographical region plagued by violent conflict. In 2014, twenty African states experienced an increase in violence, contributing to a 13 per cent increase in violence overall on the continent for the year. Violent conflict impedes economic development and creates large, disfranchised refugee and displaced populations that become hotbeds for more violence.

Will African leaders rise to meet the challenges of the 21st century? Will they build institutions capable of harnessing the continent's human, natural, and capital resources to generate sustainable progress and development? Or will the opportunities be squandered, lost to interminable and intractable violent conflict, corruption, and waste? The United States and other countries may offer and provide assistance, but ultimately the responsibility lies upon the leaders of Africa's 54 diverse states. Many of them are not only cognizant of this responsibility, but indeed deeply committed to relieving the poverty and suffering still plaguing the continent, reducing and ultimately ending the many violent conflicts, and realizing the potential of the great African peoples.

The Tswalu Dialog, hosted annually by the Brenthurst Foundation, in the Kalahari Desert, is a venue for discussion of these challenges and opportunities among African thought leaders. The most recent Tswalu Dialog focused on the growing African institutional capacity for peace operations. As many of the following articles describe, African armed forces have gained a great deal of experience in peace operations, and are able to accept growing responsibility. However, much more capacity is needed before the armed forces of Africa can fully provide an African solution to the problem of violent conflict in Africa. Although not all the articles featured in this issue of PRISM were presented at Tswalu, the Dialog was the catalyst for putting them all together in this issue of PRISM. This issue would not have been possible without the partnership of the Brenthurst Foundation and the support of United States Africa Command. **PRISM**