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Canada-Africa Relations in Changing Core-Periphery Dynamics: A Chance to “Come Back” Differently

Abstract

The Department of Foreign Affairs Canada sees the dynamism at play across the African continent as calling out for Canadian engagement. Africa in the twenty-first century is no longer the continent emerging from colonial rule; it seeks new forms of relationships with international partners. The African Development Bank, for instance, has identified five priorities for inclusive growth on the continent. The challenges are huge, as is the potential for transformative change. But the conditions for international collaboration in achieving these goals have changed; African leaders are seeking new forms of associations and teamwork. Canada has an opportunity to “come back” differently if it can look beyond its narrow mining interests and become an active partner working with public authorities in need of new and bold international partnerships. Unfortunately, Trudeau’s “Canada is back” campaign does not look set to change the status quo. And, in a world where the political economic power is moving east, African countries do not have much reason to listen to Canada.

Keywords: Africa, Canada, African Development Bank, development, China

Résumé

Le ministère canadien des Affaires étrangères voit le dynamisme qui anime le continent africain comme un appel à l’engagement du Canada. L’Afrique du XXI^e siècle n’est plus le continent qui se libère du joug colonial ; elle cherche à établir de nouvelles relations avec des partenaires internationaux. Ainsi la Banque africaine de développement a-t-elle défini cinq priorités accélératrices de développement intégré du continent. Les défis sont comme le potentiel de profonds changements. Mais les conditions de la collaboration internationale à l’atteinte de ces objectifs ont changé ; les leaders africains sont à la recherche de nouvelles formes d’association et de travail en équipe. L’occasion s’offre au Canada de faire les choses différemment s’il s’efforce de porter le regard au-delà de ses stricts intérêts miniers et de devenir un partenaire actif travaillant de concert avec les pouvoirs publics à la formation de partenariats internationaux nouveaux et solides. Malheureusement, l’affirmation de Justin Trudeau selon laquelle « le Canada est de retour » ne semble pas l’éloigner du statu quo. En outre, compte tenu du déplacement du pouvoir politico-économique vers l’Est, les pays africains sont peu enclins à écouter le Canada.

Mots clés : Afrique, Banque africaine de développement, Canada, Chine, développement

I hope Canada's new government is looking for partners in the [African] continent and not a Santa Claus role in an ever-changing continent that is in need of new and bold leadership.

—Getachew 2016

Is Canada ready to forgo the Santa Claus role to build a different foreign policy with this quickly changing continent? This does not seem to be the case thus far.

Bumping into Stéphane Dion on a freezing Ottawa day in 2017, Canada's former Minister of Foreign Affairs informed me that "*on est de retour en Afrique.*" In 2016, Dion visited Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Kenya as part of Trudeau's "Canada is back" campaign. The goal of the trip was to broaden the Conservative's former narrow African focus to countries beyond South Africa (Black and Hornsby 2016). Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs sees the dynamism at play across the African continent¹ as calling out for Canadian engagement. But what does Canadian engagement and being "back" in Africa mean in the twenty-first century, for Africans and for Canadians? Does it mean being back after a notable decline in international solidarity efforts brought on by decades of neoliberal policy? Or does it mean slipping back into the idealized role of "Canada as a humane country deeply engaged with Africa" (Hornsby 2014, 334)? Defence Minister Harjit Sajjan visited Mali in 2016 without making firm commitments to assist international security missions under way in West Africa. This disappointing outcome indicates that Trudeau's policy of "being back" in Africa does not appear, so far, very different from Harper's "economic diplomacy" (York 2013).

Mining is the largest source of Foreign Direct Investment into Africa (McHenry, Doepel, and Urama 2017), and, as far as investment in the extractive industry is concerned, Canada has never been more involved (Engler 2015). Canada occupies a special mineral/financial niche where 70 percent of global mining equity capital is raised on the Toronto (TSX) and Venture (TSXV) exchanges (Minesonline 2013, 1). Canadian mining investment has increased more than 100-fold over the last two decades (Leon Moorsom 2017), all the while advocating the retreat of African governments from this lucrative sector (Campbell 2011). Canada's mining in Africa is buttressed by a national myth, endorsed by the government and the mining sector, of "Canada as a humane, rights-respecting, globally responsible state" (Butler 2015, 18–19). But Canada's history in Africa is more one of consistent inconsistency (Black 2015), as mining activities are associated with human rights violations, unethical behaviour, deforestation, and land degradation.

In this short article, I argue that Canada has an opportunity to “be back” differently if it can look beyond its mining profits and become, as Getachew highlights in the above quote, a partner in this rapidly changing continent in need of new and bold international partnerships. If it can do this, then maybe African countries will be listening to Canada in 25 years. If it continues along the path of “consistent inconsistency,” as Black (2015) puts it, then African leaders will be listening to other countries, most likely from the Global South.

I briefly review, in the first section of this article, whether Africa is set to effectively take on increased importance in Trudeau’s “Canada is back” strategy. The rest of the article then proceeds along the lines of Minister of Foreign Affairs Chrystia Freeland’s (2017) observation that there are two global forces to which we need to pay attention: the rapid emergence of the Global South, and “the woes of our middle class.” As I point out in the next section, these two global forces point precisely to global structural changes impacting on Canadian-African relations. In this context, as I highlight under the heading “First Point: Africa Is in a Global Political Economy Moving East,” the most significant structural change is the shift of the global economy toward Asia (Arrighi 2007; Quah 2011). African countries are increasingly listening and looking eastwards as leaders look for new partners to assist in meeting the multiple development challenges it faces. African actors and leaders are no longer in the undesirable position of depending predominantly on North Atlantic countries for aid, trade, and political alliances. This is followed by my second point, “Africa Wants to Be Middle Class, Too,” where I critically assess Freeland’s claim that Canada can help the people of the world’s fastest-growing countries join the global middle class. There appears to be a lack of analysis that capitalism’s progress is usually globally uneven and that maybe the rise of the global rest will mean less middle-classness in Canada. After all, the next significant growth of middle-class populations is predicted to take place in Africa. The other side to this coin, however, is to note that most of the world’s population growth will happen in Africa, posing a momentous challenge for inclusive development across the continent. The last section therefore draws attention to the African Development Bank’s (AfDB) collaborative “High 5” priorities; I argue that this strategy offers an opportunity for Canada to come back to Africa differently as a bold partner in meeting these goals.

So, It Is Not Usual Business as Usual

Canada, like countries worldwide, recognizes that Africa’s narrative is changing because of the region’s economic potential (Global Affairs Canada 2014). Canada’s new foreign affairs minister, Chrystia Freeland (2012), made the case that Africa was effectively the world’s new economic tiger. This “African tiger,” however, no longer wishes to feed global corporate profits through unfettered laissez-faire capitalism (Dawson 2013). The AfDB (2013) targets inclusive growth that will build human capital and transform African societies.

This is a deliberate move away from a model of unrestrained growth privileging global corporations and the elite (Berman 2015), which speaks directly to Canada's less than stellar historic role in Africa's extractive industry.

Along these lines, let us turn to Freeland's speech on Canada's foreign policy priorities given on 6 June 2017. Freeland asked an important question, relevant to the country and of interest to this special issue: "Is Canada an essential country, at this time in the life of our planet?" The minister highlighted the roles Canada has played in establishing the current liberal world order: being involved in the 1944 Bretton Woods Agreement, establishing the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, partaking in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, and Lester B. Pearson's receiving the Nobel Peace Prize for the creation of modern peacekeeping. According to Freeland, this world order is now being challenged by two global forces:

1. the rapid emergence of the Global South—Asia in general and China in particular—and the need to integrate these emerging powers into the international multilateral system built by the Atlantic powers of North America and Western Europe; and
2. what Freeland calls "the woes of our middle class"—the growing doubt that a globalizing political economy will continue to deliver benefits to those used to receiving them.

Now these two global forces—the rise of Asia and what we can refer to as the "uneven development" of capitalism (Harvey 2006), where benefits are not experienced equally around the world—point precisely to global structural changes under way. The traditional three worlds of the twentieth century are giving way to new geopolitical imaginings, where third-world/underdeveloped/backward/developing countries are now emerging markets (Sidaway and Pryke 2000). It is about the geography of politics and the politics of geography (Smith 2008). Canada's relations with African countries will be shaped by these geopolitical reconfigurations as we wait to see where the new core and peripheries emerge. As the next section argues, for African countries, the new core is Asia.

First Point: Africa Is in a Global Political Economy Moving East

The world is undergoing important shifts, and Africa's place is changing as we move away from the Western-centred neoliberal world order (Gray and Murphy 2013). Importantly, African countries are integrating a global economy driven by the growth and rising prosperity in (mainly Asian) emerging markets, which account for 38 percent of all global flows (Manyika et al. 2014, 3). Africa is the second-fastest-growing economic region after East Asia. Exceptional conditions of the last decade have spurred this growth: the financial crisis of 2008 pumped liquidity into the global system as the US Federal Reserve put in place its quantitative easing policy (Fiano 2015; Tan 2015); Africa is seen as a new frontier market (Moghalu 2010; Napier 2010) and was recipient of

global flows searching higher returns on investment; and emerging economies, particularly Asian countries, are trading and investing more heavily in Africa (Nowak 2016; Taylor 2012). All of these factors, along with the continent's average growth of 4.5 percent over the past two decades (World Bank 2015), supports the observation that African economies are in fact (still) rising.

In *Adam Smith in Beijing*, Arrighi (2007) revisits the rise of the West, its eclipse of China in the nineteenth century, the rise of US hegemony, and China's recent rise to greater centrality in the world economy. Working with data from 700 locations around the world, Quah (2011) projects that the economic centre of gravity, the global "core," will be located between India and China by 2050. In 1980, the centre of gravity was the mid-Atlantic. This position shored up what was to be an "end of history" moment of triumphant liberalism; however, the global economic passed over the West, reaching Bucharest by 2008. China, as the *Financial Times*'s chief foreign affairs commentator Gideon Rachman (2017) wrote in the wake of the nineteenth Communist Party Congress in Beijing, is challenging the West on three fronts: ideological, economic, and geopolitical.

These three fronts are clear in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI is a geopolitical plan, as well as an economic one, and it is, I argue, a large technical system (LTS). The importance of LTSs within global politics is apparent through intersectionality with political authority, power, geopolitics, infrastructure, trade routes, military power, and territory. The BRI will incorporate a variety of subsystems along its routes as it links Asia, Europe, Africa, and Oceania. Notable is the inclusion of East Africa as a strategic region for China's new global trade and investment network. East African countries will act as gateways feeding into this LTS. What is the extent of competition, divergence, or convergence being generated through China's initiative? In other words, countries deepening their integration into the global economy, as is the case of African states, need to manage competition in the broader global context of geopolitical fragmentation brought on by new global powers.

The twentieth century was marked, as noted by Freeland (2017) in her speech, by the growth of liberal institutionalism. This places emphasis on the role of common goals in governance and the ability of international organizations to foster co-operation between states. If we turn to consider materialism in global governance, as Mayer and Acuto (2015) suggest we need to do, by moving LTSs to the centre stage of analysis, I contend that we need to consider China's BRI as an emerging global system of political economic power that will operate alongside Western-led liberal regimes. African countries are therefore concerned with remaining part of the liberal world order and its key institutions, such as the World Trade Organization, but recognize that development, growth, and wealth will increasingly come through Asian-led mega projects like the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative. While this project is portrayed as an opportunity to strengthen Sino-

African relations and provide economic development opportunities, only African countries of strategic value will be directly prioritized and benefit most from the initiative (Bagwandeen 2017). This means that there will be heightened geopolitical competition, as African states attempt to control sites of privileged access—gateways through ports, logistics parks, and transportation corridors—to China’s global networks. As Adam Ward (2017) of Chatham House puts it, “in the cracks which geopolitical fragmentation is opening up, there is more space, opportunity and compulsion for antagonists to compete.” This can be observed as Kenya and Tanzania each endeavour to direct flows moving inland—to Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, and parts of Zambia—doing so through their respective national infrastructure systems.

Additionally, the global economic core will continue to move eastward over the Eurasia land mass, along the Indian Ocean Rim, and into the Asia-Pacific. What emerges is a changed landscape for African countries as they navigate overlapping world orders. This different global context describes a radically different picture compared to that of Freeland’s declaration that the North Atlantic axis of political economic power must incorporate Asia into its world order. Noticeably, Canada appears to be falling behind in the reshuffling global order (Macdonald and Paltiel 2016). It is rather more the case that Canada too will be looking beyond the North Atlantic axis of power as the Indian Ocean Rim and the Asia-Pacific region become loci of global political economic power.

Second Point: Africa Wants to Be Middle Class, Too

The second point made by Freeland was what she called the woes of Canada’s middle classes. While there is some debate as to whether middle-class families in Canada have stagnated economically over the last decades (Boudreaux and Lammam 2016), it is very clear that too many Africans continue to live in poverty. After two decades of unprecedented economic growth, the number of Africans living in extreme poverty still increased by more than 100 million people (Beegle et al. 2016, v). On the other hand, however, developing and emerging economies lost US\$7.8 trillion in illicit financial flows from 2004 to 2013 (Kar and Spanjers 2015). Yet, Freeland suggests that Canada’s model of globalization, which “embraces multiculturalism and diversity,” can keep the rise of extremist politics and ultra-nationalists at bay as it “better supports the middle class, and those working hard to join it”:

The countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa and Asia are on the ascendant, delivering ever-increasing living standards to fast-growing populations bursting with innovation, creativity and enterprise. . . . Let us seize the great opportunity we now have to help the people of the world’s fastest-growing countries join the global middle class and the multilateral system that supports it. (Freeland 2017)

Uneven development has been the bread and butter of the Global South for centuries (Oyelaren-Oyeyinka and Rasiah 2009). Accordingly, the concept of class has been widely discussed in Africanist scholarship (Resnick 2015), with any definition minimally needing to include security from economic vulnerability and prospects for social mobility (Thurlow, Resnick, and Ubogu 2015). So yes, Freeland is correct. Africans have been struggling to join the middle classes as they work to overcome colonial legacies and structural political economic global power favouring Western industrialized economies.

Freeland is also right to point out that we live in a more unequal world: as 233 new billionaires are added to *Forbes'* 2017 list (Forbes Staff 2017), income inequality is rising (OECD 2015); those with wealth of more than \$30 million reached 226,450 in 2017, an increase of 3.5 percent (Greenhalgh 2017). Eight men now own the same wealth as the 3.6 billion people who make up the poorest half of humanity (Oxfam 2017). This is taking place in a world where global unemployment is set to rise to 200 million (International Labour Organization 2016). This is compounded by ongoing effects of the global financial crisis as the world lives through times of great political uncertainty, the rise of populism, and renewed economic nationalism and turbulence. Africa's experience, in particular (Bond and Ruiters 2017), challenges the (liberal) idea that globalization is a tide that lifts all boats (Warwick Research Collective 2015).

It may just be that in a world where economic production and wealth moves east, Western countries will begin to experience more uneven development within their own borders, and African countries will be lifted by a different tide, increasing continental growth and wealth. Will Canada remain part of the privileged group of the twentieth century, or will it find itself more at the margins and peripheries of global political economic power?

Conclusion: Canada, Listen to African Countries

To prosper, Africa needs a massive, concerted, ambitious effort to transform our economies. . . . The High 5 priorities will get us there more quickly.

—Adesina 2016

In answer to the question of whether African countries will be listening to Canada in 25 years, I suggest, rather, that Canada listen to African countries. It is in Africa, I argue, that we get a glimpse of global transformations under way as the continent sits at the heart of overlapping worlds, between the West and rising Asia, between Global North and Global South, with the fastest rising youth population. As Comaroff and Comaroff (2012) point out in *Theory from the South*, the Global South is at the epicenter of contemporary global transformations. It is here that we see that unfolding developments are contradictory, uneven, contested, and, for the most part, undocumented.

In the same year as Dion's sub-Saharan African tour, the African Development Bank launched its High 5 strategy: light up and power Africa, feed Africa, industrialize Africa, integrate Africa, and improve the quality of life for the people of Africa. This five-pronged policy is crucial for Africa's economic transformation and inclusive growth. The AfDB's request for concerted and collaborative effort around these strategies suggests that Canada has an opportunity to come back and act differently in Africa. This does not mean closing down Canada's investments in Africa but doing things differently. In particular, the AfDB's (2017) *Light Up and Power Africa—The New Deal on Energy for Africa* policy could be of interest to Canadian businesses as it aims to mobilize international capital for innovative financing in Africa's energy sector. This would mean for Canada to develop an African foreign policy beyond its narrow extractive interests and to understand that the structural game is changing—for African countries as well as for Canada. The degree to which African countries will therefore be listening to Canada is in direct relation to the extent that Canada is listening in return and coming back to Africa differently.

Note

1. Africa is 55 countries—a continent, not a single country. To cite Pius Adesanmi (2011), “You are not a country Africa, you are a concept, fashioned in our minds, each to each.” It is in this spirit that I refer to “Africa” in this article; I will not be referring to some/all countries.

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