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Empires of Deception: Africa and the Transformation
of the International System

by Professor Tim Murithi

EMPIRES OF DECEPTION: AFRICA AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine last year, many African countries declined to take a strong stand against Moscow. Seventeen African countries refused to vote for a UN resolution condemning Russia, and most have maintained economic and trade ties with Moscow despite Western sanctions.

In response, the United States and other Western countries have berated African leaders for failing to defend the "rules-based" international order, framing African neutrality in the Ukrainian conflict as a betrayal of liberal principles. During a trip to Cameroon in July 2022, French President Emmanuel Macron bemoaned the "hypocrisy" of African leaders and criticized them for refusing "to call a war a war and say who started it."

But the truth is that the rules-based international order has not served Africa's interests. To the contrary, it has preserved a status quo in which major world powers —be they Western or Eastern—have maintained their positions of dominance over the global South. Through the UN Security Council, in particular, China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States have exerted outsized influence over African nations and relegated African governments to little more than bystanders in their own affairs.

For decades, African countries have called for the UN Security Council to be reformed and the broader international system to be reconfigured on more equitable terms. And for decades, their appeals have fallen on deaf ears.

If the West wants Africa to stand up for the international order, then it must allow that order to be remade so that it is based on more than the idea that might makes right. For most of the last 500 years, the international order was explicitly designed to exploit Africa. The transatlantic slave trade saw ten to fifteen million Africans kidnapped and shipped to the Americas, where their forced labor made elites in Europe and the United States exceptionally wealthy.

European colonialism and apartheid rule were likewise brutal, extractive, and dehumanizing for Africans and their legacies are still felt across the continent. The persistence of and of white economic power in South Africa offer daily reminders of this historical subjugation, reinforcing the perception that today's international order still treats Africans as global second-class citizens. Many Western pundits are quick to demand that Africa "get over" these injustices and stop harping on the past. But African societies do not see the past as past. They see it as present, still looming large over the Pan-African landscape.

Moreover, the tormentors of yester-year have not changed their mindsets and attitudes—just their rhetoric and methods. Instead of taking what they want with brute force, as they did in the past, major powers now rely on preferential trade deals and skewed financing arrangements to drain Africa of its resources.

And of course major powers still use force. Despite claiming to uphold an international system based on rules, these powers and their allies have frequently imposed their will on other countries, from the NATO bombardments of Yugoslavia and Libya to the U.S.-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq to the Russian invasions of Georgia and Ukraine.

In 2014, the United States, United Kingdom, and France led a military intervention in Syria in support of rebel forces, which was followed, in 2015, by a Russian military intervention in support of the Syrian government. Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine is not a departure from this pattern but rather a continuation of the reign of the powerful over the less powerful.

Major-power interventions have steadily eroded the pretense of a rules-based order and made the world much less stable. For instance, the illegal invasions of Iraq and Syria stoked violent extremist movements, including al Qaeda and the Islamic State, which have since spread like a virus across Africa. Thanks in part to the chaos spawned by NATO's intention in Libya, Islamist terrorism has taken root across the Sahel region, affecting Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. Similarly, in East Africa, religious extremism imported from the Middle East is undermining stability in Kenya, Mozambique, Tanzania, and Somalia, all of which are terrorized by extremists known as the Al-Shabaab.

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These threats are not acutely felt in Washington, London, Paris, Brussels, Moscow, or Beijing. Rather, they are faced by Africans who had little say in the interventions that ignited them.

The major powers have created a curious juxtaposition: on one hand, illegal interventions that have sowed terror across the global South and, on the other hand, international failures to intervene in humanitarian crises—in Rwanda in 1994, Srebrenica in 1995, Sri Lanka in 2009, and now in China, where millions of Uyghurs are being imprisoned in camps. This discrepancy exposes the lie at the heart of today's international system. Those who continue to call for the protection of an illusionary rules-based order have evidently not been on the receiving end of an unsanctioned military incursion. Many Africans see them as part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

The illusion of a functioning system of international norms that constrains the whims of nations must now be discarded. World powers must acknowledge what African countries have known for decades: that the dysfunctional international system poses a clear and present danger to many developing countries. The United Nation's system of collective security is slowly dying, suffocated by the egregious actions of some its most powerful members.

Not only does this system exclude a majority of the world's population from international decision-making but it also often leaves them at the mercy of hostile powers and forces. It is past time to rethink and remake the global order. That doesn't necessarily mean throwing the UN baby out with the bath water, but it does mean reimagining multilateralism and redesigning international institutions to create a more effective global system of collective security.

An African vision for global order would be based on the principle of equality and the need for redress of historical wrongs. Africa's intellectual tradition draws on its experience as a freedom-seeking continent, deriving insights from the anti-colonial and anti-apartheid struggles. This emphasis on self-determination is evident in the work of many African governments to advance economic development, which is the ultimate form of empowerment. Solidarity among African states and societies helped sustain the campaigns against colonialism and apartheid in the twentieth century.

Today, that sentiment underpins the African Union and its Agenda 2063, a development plan seeks to transform the continent into an economic powerhouse.

And although the pan-African project remains a work in progress—and more must be done to consolidate democratic governance across the continent—it has much to teach the world.

Africa is constantly struggling for a more equitable global order. As targets of historical injustice, Africans are leading voices for justice—defined as fairness, equality, accountability, and redress for past harms. African societies have also shown the world how to promote reconciliation between warring groups and communities, most notably in South Africa but also in other parts of the continent. Africans are "reconciliactors," as they proved at independence.

When the former colonial powers withdrew from Africa, Africans did not rush to seek revenge against Europeans for the brutal and dehumanizing system that they imposed on the people of the continent.

This long record of pursuing peace and reconciliation gives Africans the moral authority to demand a reconfiguration of the global order. Indeed, segments of the African foreign policy-making community are clamoring to reform the multilateral system, replacing an order based on might makes right with one grounded in the pursuit of self-determination, global solidarity, justice, and reconciliation. In particular, they are pushing to transform of the UN system into something fairer and more consonant with Africa's own historical experiences.

No institution epitomizes the paternalistic exclusion of Africa more than the UN Security Council. More than 60 percent of the council's agenda is typically focused on Africa, according to the International Peace Institute. Yet there are no African countries among the Security Council's five permanent members, who are empowered to veto any resolution. The continent must make do with three rotating non-permanent member seats that lack veto powers.

It is a travesty of justice that African countries can only participate in deliberations and negotiations about their own futures on such unequal terms. For the multilateral system to be seen as fair and legitimate by Africa and the rest of the global South, the Security Council would have to be fundamentally reformed and its permanent members stripped of their veto power.

Africa has made the case for reform of the UN system before. In March 2005, the AU issued a proposal for reforming the world body that noted that "in 1945, when the UN was formed, most of Africa was not represented and that in 1963, when the first reform took place, Africa was represented but was not in a particularly strong position." The AU went on to state that "Africa is now in a position to influence the proposed UN reforms by maintaining her unity of purpose," adding that "Africa's goal is to be fully represented in all the decision-making organs of the UN, particularly in the Security Council."

But for almost 20 years, this appeal has been rebuffed by the permanent members of the Security Council, many of which are now scrambling to enlist African countries in their struggle over Ukraine.

Instead of attempting to resuscitate the 2005 AU proposal, which has largely been overtaken by events, African nations should go back to the drawing board and begin a new process for reforming the multilateral system. The founders of the UN recognized that the world body would not be able to survive indefinitely in its original form. As a result, they included a provision to review and amend its charter. Article 109 of the UN Charter enables a special "Charter Review Conference" to be convened by a two-thirds majority of the UN General Assembly and a single vote from the nine-member Security Council. Such a vote cannot be vetoed by the permanent members, which in the past have sabotaged attempts to reform the council.

Theoretically, therefore, there are no major obstacles to convening a Charter Review Conference, apart from securing a two-thirds majority in the General Assembly. A coalition African countries and other progressive states could immediately begin drafting a General Assembly resolution to put a Charter Review Conference on the agenda.

Such a review conference would have the power to substantially alter the UN Charter and introduce new provisions that would transform multilateral system.

Unlike the current system, which privileges the interests of a few powerful states, the conference would be relatively democratic, since Article 109 states that "each member of the United Nations shall have one vote" and that provisions shall be approved by a two-thirds majority. Its recommendations would therefore hold a high degree of moral legitimacy, and it could further buttress its standing by conducting broad-based consultations with governments, civil society, businesses, trade unions, and academics.

The next version of the UN should be able to achieve even more for the war-affected refugees and down trodden. In particular, through a broad-based dialogue among UN member states and societies, discussions can outline the establishment of a World Parliament and a supranational council composed of the AU, EU, Organisation of American States, ASEAN and the Arab League, which will would balance the authority of an assembly of nation-states. A dedicated International Security Force which would enforce the decisions of a Global Court of Justice.

In addition, in a new system of global democracy, it should have its own predictable source of funding, sourced for example from taxing financial capital flows or issuing a levy on imports, which the African Union has recently adopted as a proposed policy for funding its own operations.

It would be naïve to think that the beneficiaries of the current system, notably the five permanent members of the Security Council, would allow a review of the UN Charter to happen simply because African countries have demanded one. Consequently, Africa will have to build a coalition of the willing to remake the multilateral system, rallying fellow UN General Assembly members to campaign for activating Article 109 of the UN Charter.

But an institutional overhaul on this scale is not without precedent: other international organizations have transformed themselves in the past, notably the European Economic Community, which turned itself into the European Union, and Organization of African Unity, which became the African Union.

African countries have an important role to play in reforming a multilateral system that is failing a majority of the world's population. But until their interests and concerns are taken seriously, African governments will continue to pursue a strategy of nonalignment and intentional ambiguity in their dealings with major powers. Attempts cajole or strong-arm them into picking a side in the latest might-makes-right contest in Ukraine are bound to fail, since no one in Africa believes that the international order is based on rules.

It doesn't have to be that way, however. Africa is providing direction on how to transform the international system in a manner that makes it more inclusive and equitable.

Prof. Tim Murithi, Head, IJR Peacebuilding Interventions Programme, Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, Cape Town, and Extraordinary Professor of African Studies, University of Free State and Stellenbosch University, South Africa, @tmurithi12

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