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Can Africa ever achieve continental sovereignty in the shifting West-to-East strategic landscape? *The geopolitics of integration and autonomy*

BABATUNDE FAGBAYIBO

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‘So, first things first. If we don’t have the power, we can’t implement whatever type of society we choose to have in Africa. If we don’t create enough power to guarantee our autonomy, we can implement only such reforms as the bigger powers advocate or tolerate.’

Chinweizu, 2011: 95

Introduction

For decades, the process around the quest for continental integration in Africa has remained a puzzle to observers. This puzzle stems mainly from the inherent contradictions that have marked attempts to put into practice the rhetoric on pan-African unity. This has, in turn, raised questions regarding the feasibility of navigating some of these contradictions in order to bring to life a qualitative and truly transformative continentalism. These questions have revolved around issues such as the dependence of regional institutions on external funding; the routine disrespect of fundamental regional norms and practices by member states; the exclusion of civil society from the crafting and implementation of regional norms; the continued inability of the African Union (AU) to successfully harmonise the standards and policies of regional economic communities (RECs); the lack of consensus on the institutional nature of continental integration; and the role of global actors from the East and West blocs in shaping national and regional agendas (Fagbayibo, 2017; Fagbayibo, 2018; Karbo & Murithi, 2018: 1–9; Olukoshi, 2010).

Cumulatively, these issues have in the past decade intensified efforts in the transnational policy development space regarding the determination of processes that will strengthen the geopolitics of African integration and autonomy in global realpolitik. Drawing from the transformation of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) to the AU in 2002, with an

institutional mechanism projected to provide supranational regionalism, these processes have prompted an avalanche of policy proposals. The proposals have covered matters such as democratic governance, peace and security, free trade, free movement of persons and reform of the AU, including its financing. The AU's Agenda 2063, adopted in 2015 by the AU Assembly, is the most recent push towards the goal of collective continental sovereignty. Under Aspiration 2 of its Seven Aspirations agenda, the document stipulates the imperative of an integrated Africa (AUC, 2015a: 4), and defers a decision on the type of continental government to be established until 2030 (AUC, 2015a: 7). Working within the context of the aspirational goals of Agenda 2063, a number of activities have been embarked upon in the three years up to 2019. Chief among these are the institutional reforms of the AU, led by Paul Kagame (Kagame, 2017); the 2018 adoption of the Protocols of Free Trade and Free Movement (AU, 2018a), and the adoption of the Donald Kabureka report on financing the AU (AU, 2016).

The call for the reform of the AU is seen as the central motif of achieving true continental sovereignty in Africa, or, in alternative words, a supranational continental organisation that is able to establish binding norms on the continent and also assert itself as a global authority on African issues. Such reform is expected to be carried out within the context of increasingly complex global realpolitik, where global actors such as China, Russia, European Union (EU), United States of America (USA) and other powers are engaged in various activities in Africa aimed at enhancing their global influence. Coupled with this are internal uncertainties that are currently determining the global projection of these powers. These include the rise of right-wing parties in many parts of Europe and their anti-immigration stances; the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the EU; and the populist position of Donald Trump in the US. In spite of these trends, Africa remains an object of interest. Its natural resources endowment; proximity to Europe and the Middle East; the destructive presence of terrorist groups in North, East and West Africa; and burgeoning population all combine to make the continent a turf for global actors to flex their geopolitical muscles, build alliances and settle geostrategic scores (Bach, 2017: 140–3; Karbo & Murithi, 2018: 3–5; *The Economist*, 2019, 18–20).

The extent to which the policy interventions turn into an active, geo-strategic plan for achieving continental integration is dependent on how political elites are able to balance what this chapter considers to be the 'tritych dynamics'. These are internal dynamics (issues such as enhancing the AU's technocratic efficiency, self-restraint mechanisms and bottom-up regionalism); external dynamics (the role of global actors on current and future issues that affect regionalism in Africa, including domestic uncertainties determining the global projection of these powers); and the syncretic dynamics (which speaks to a practical policy position on balancing both internal and external dynamics and determining the suitability of application). In addressing these, the chapter starts with a discussion of approaches to the idea of continental sovereignty in Africa. It then proceeds to analyse the internal, external and syncretic dynamics of achieving qualitative and transformative continental integration, and how these could provide a useful methodology for achieving continental autonomy.

Approaches to continental integration Africa

Scholars, political elites and transnational technocrats (whom Tieku (2017) refers to as 'Africrats') have over the years adopted a number of epistemic framings for understanding Africa's quest for continental integration. The questions and intervention strategies have been around the issue of the pace, nature and the context of continental integration. With regard to pace, the questions have centred on whether or not the continental integration should proceed at a gradual or a much faster speed. On the nature of the continental integration process, the debate has always been around whether continental regionalism should be state-centric, supranational, (con)federal, or built around the strength of the RECs. Finally, others have pointed out the imperative of continental integration responding to an Afrocentric approach, one that is rooted in Pan-African knowledge systems and contextual realities. These points are elaborated on in the following paragraphs.

The evaluation of the pace of continental integration is one rooted in the robust debates and engagements that preceded the establishment of the OAU in 1963. Kwame Nkrumah's 'unite or perish' (Nkrumah, 1973: 234) aphorism came to define the doctrinal approach of those who argued that the only way to counter neo-imperial interference in African affairs, and the diminished continental sovereignty flowing from such interference, is dependent on

moving with transnational institutional development at a much faster speed (Nkrumah, 1963). Kwame Nkrumah regarded sub-regional integration and attachment to national sovereignties as nothing more than 'a form of balkanisation on a grand scale' (Nkrumah, 1963: 214). In this regard, he pushed for continental instead of sub-regional federalism (Nkrumah, 1963: 214–15):

The idea of regional federations in Africa is fraught with many dangers. There is the danger of the development of regional loyalties, fighting against each other. In effect, regional federations are a form of balkanisation on a grand scale ... the best means ... is to begin to create a larger and all-embracing loyalty which will hold Africa together as a united people with one government and one destiny.

Although Nkrumah's quest for a much faster and rapid continental integration process failed to materialise, it inspired others such as the late Muammar Ghaddafi to pursue the same line of thought.

As a counterpoise to the demand for a faster pace is the idea of an incremental approach, one that has become the dominant feature of Africa's continental integration process. The incremental approach advances the imperative of building continental integration from sub-regional levels, with a phased transfer of powers to continental organisations. The AU's Agenda 2063 is built around this ideology, as it encourages the gradual attainment of goals and the deferment of a position on the type of continental government to 2030 (AUC, 2015a: 7). It could be argued that since the adoption of the AU Agenda 2063 in 2015, the gradualist approach has encompassed a more pragmatic ideological component. Composed of 'Africrats' and national political elites, this pragmatic component has introduced far-reaching reform measures; ensured the adoption of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), and the Protocol to the Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community Relating to Free Movement of Persons, Right of Residence and Right of Establishment; and the decision to finance the AU through 0.2 per cent import levy on all 'eligible imports' into the continent (AU, 2016; AU, 2018b). This is further evidenced by the increasing acceptance of some of these policies as shown through rapid ratification and implementation. An example is the coming into force of the AfCFTA on 30 May 2019, at the point of ratification

by the minimum number of 22 member states, about a year after its adoption. However, there have been criticisms levelled against the institutional reform process that was led by President Paul Kagame of Rwanda. According to Adebajo (2017), the report is:

... rushed, lacks substance, and its fluffy recommendations are on a level of vacuity as to be of no real utility. These are physicians who are proposing half-baked cures to ills that have not been properly diagnosed.

The former South African president, Thabo Mbeki, also expressed concerns about the reform process, noting that it will likely turn the AU into a more technocratic, UN-like organisation rather than a truly politically autonomous organisation (cited in Onyango-Obbo, 2019).

The discourse around the nature of the continental integration process remains the most topical of the three approaches. In addressing the question of the nature of the integration process, scholars have employed two analytical prisms: intergovernmental (or state-driven) and supranational (technocratic driven) (Tieku, 2017: 221–2). The former speaks to a state-driven regional integration process where member states are the supreme rule-making structures, while the latter denotes the empowerment of neutral, technocratic, regional institutions to make binding rules and regulations. This binary analysis has defined continental integration from the time of the OAU through to recent processes aimed at implementing Agenda 2063. While there exists no consensus on the type of continental government, the recent adoption of norms on free trade, free movement and the need to transfer more powers to the AU indicates a symbolic acceptance of supranational integration, albeit in a more manageable and gradual fashion. The tilt towards supranationalism is as informed by Kwame Nkrumah's federalist approach to Africa as it is influenced by the European integration process. This process provided the template for the transformation of the OAU to AU in 2002, and it continues to influence continental integration through the EU's continued financial assistance and the colonial heritage of regionalism in Africa (Bach, 2017: 81–2; Hansen & Jonsson, 2018). Until 2017, AU member states only contributed about 27 per cent of the organisation's budget, while external donors bore the remaining cost (Vanheukelom, 2019a). The EU alone contributed 63 per

cent of the entire external donation to the AU budget (Madu, 2017). Such influence continues to undercut the agency of continental authority (Olukoshi, 2010: 53; Staeger 2016: 993; Vanheukelom, 2016: vi), and has thus informed the policies and processes of the transformation of the AU. However, the AU took a decision in 2018 to reduce its 2019 budget by 12 per cent, increasing member states' contribution to 46 per cent, with the remaining 54 per cent covered by development partners (AU, 2018a).

It should, however, be emphasised that there is a range of perspectives within the Afro-supranationalism school of thought. The continental-federalist approach, which advances the establishment of a 'United States of Africa', remains the most extreme element of the supranational paradigm (Nkrumah, 1963; Diop, 1987). Another element is the ideological expectation of a supposed supranational continental government. While some advance a leftist ideology, others argue for a neoliberal approach that is more in tune with globalisation (Taylor, 2003; Adesina, 2004; Fagbayibo, 2018: 631–3). The latter approach continues to define transnational policy development processes in Africa, with the AU Agenda 2063 markedly affirming this approach (Fagbayibo, 2018: 632). There also exists another paradigm that sees an EU-like supranational AU as either an imperative precondition for the creation of a 'United States of Africa' or as a more feasible substitute (Tieku, 2017: 222). This paradigm subscribes to the idea that sub-regional organisations are building blocks for continental unity, enhancement of democratic governance in member states and a strategic intergovernmental approach that can be carefully utilised in firming the foundations of continental supranationalism (Fagbayibo, 2011; Tieku, 2017: 222; Byiers et al., 2019: 16).

The last approach, or context, is one that speaks to the imperative of building continental regionalism around Africa's peculiar contexts and in particular the adoption of indigenous knowledge systems in the development of policies and processes. As some scholars have emphasised, regional integration is essentially an idea built around the EU's experience and history and has had little successful application elsewhere (Agyeman, 1990; Acharya, 2012: 7; Draper, 2012). This school of thought notes that epistemological lessons from pre-colonial African kingdoms and African societies in general on state-building, trade practices, resolution of conflicts and diplomatic processes are essential pointers (Chinweizu, 2011: 83;

Ochonu, 2015; Ani, 2019: 145–7). The adoption of theories and practices of European integration, the prescription of either leftist or neoliberal approaches to African integration, and the unbridled attachment to Westphalian sovereignty, are seen as antithetical to achieving an authentic Pan-African integration (Chinweizu, 2011: 83; Ndhlovu, 2017). This approach, however, does not necessarily call for the wholesale abandonment of all external knowledge systems, rather it advocates for what Ndhlovu refers to as ‘translative adaptation’, which is (2017: 106):

an innovative blending and integration ... of these development models into home-grown, Africa-centred theories and philosophies that are rooted in endogenous linguistic and material cultures in order to enhance the unlocking of local creative capabilities and potentials for innovation.

Relatedly, Chinweizu (2011: 83) observes that in addition to pre-colonial Africa, lessons can also be gleaned from non-African countries such as modern Japan, Sweden, Cuba and China. While numerous transnational documents and norms have emphasised the need to recognise and take into account African traditional values and principles in the implementation of strategies, there exist no serious measures for achieving this. For example, under Aspiration 5 of AU Agenda 2063, it is stipulated that African cultural heritage will be at the centre of strategies aimed at facilitating Pan-African approaches (AU, 2015a: 8). The practicalities of achieving this task are missing from the implementation documents of Agenda 2063 and other transnational development blueprints (AUC, 2015b). What remains prioritised is the adoption of Eurocentric and neoliberal strategies that seek the integration of African economies into global markets (Taylor, 2003; Adesina, 2004; Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2014: 43–4).

A triptych analysis of the feasibility of meaningful continental autonomy

The ability of a continental regionalism to project meaningful power and autonomy within and outside Africa is predicated on numerous fundamentals. However, this chapter adopts a triptych lens, one that views external and internal strands as continuous and contiguous.

Internal dynamics: Repositioning the centre

The politics of the internal management of the continental integration process has in recent years become more focal. At the core of this is the question of agency, in particular the extent to which this informs the ownership and quality of decisions on the direction of continental regionalism. The lack of such agency is often linked to the excessive influence of external parties, including uncertainties around the parties' national political and economic processes, and how these negatively alter the calculus of continental integration. This point will be further explored in the next subsection. Of significant importance in this subsection is an understanding of the critical internal pillars that will determine the shape of continental regionalism. The first is the technocratic context and competence of continental regionalism. This factor speaks to the imperative of determining what role transnational technocratic agencies should play in driving the continental integration process.

According to the Kagame Report on institutional reform, the functions and priorities of the AU should be streamlined and limited to issues such as political affairs, peace and security, economic integration, and Africa's global representation (Kagame, 2017: 7). In furtherance of this objective, Kagame proposed that the chairperson of the AU Commission should be empowered to appoint his or her own deputy and commissioners (Louw-Vaudran, 2018). This recommendation was rejected by the AU Assembly (Louw-Vaudran, 2018). The Assembly, however, approved the recommendation to reduce the number of commissioners from eight to six (Louw-Vaudran, 2018). In addition, it was recommended that the second annual AU Assembly should be solely dedicated to a coordination meeting between the AU and its RECs (Louw-Vaudran, 2018). Another development was the adoption, by the AU Executive Council on 19 March 2018, of the AU African common position on negotiating a post-Cotonou trade agreement with the EU (AU, 2018c). This common position proposes that Africa should negotiate as a group, to be represented by the AU, separately from the African Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) group of states (AU, 2018c). Carbone (2018: 487), however, notes that the common position was far from being consensual as member states were divided between removing Africa from the ACP or remaining within the group.

In assessing the nexus between these measures and continental regionalism, a number of points are worth considering. One is the recruitment and appointment process, one that

balances politics and meritocracy, and also places relevant AU organs such as the Pan-African Parliament (PAP) at the heart of the quality-control process (Fagbayibo, 2012: 24–5). Another is whether the functions should be delivered along corporate lines (like a private sector organisation), facilitatory ones (where the AU's role is only to facilitate the correct application of norms at sub-regional and national levels), or a blend of intergovernmental and supranational elements (where roles are strategically assigned and shared between national and transnational agencies). Each of these elements has measures that could be useful for sharpening the AU. The corporate model brings to the table the prioritisation of lean, efficient and performance management-driven organisational processes. Together with the facilitatory model, it highlights the need to carefully identify feasible governance, security and capacity-building measures, and, therefore, deploy resources towards achieving such objectives. Lastly, the blend of supranational and intergovernmental elements brings together the corporate and facilitatory models by identifying issues of low and high politics, and then strategically mainstreaming continental integration goals into sub-regional and national processes. Another dimension to this is the imperative of learning lessons from sub-regional bodies. For example, the AU could adopt and adapt useful operational methods of organisations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the East African Community (EAC) in the implementation of its protocols on free movement, free trade and private sector involvement in continental integration.

The second pillar deals with the need to strengthen self-restraining institutional and normative measures. Mazrui used the term 'self-pacification' to denote the imperative of devising political methods of preventing the escalation of competition to conflicts or large-scale civil wars in Africa (1994: 39). Building on Mazrui's thesis, the AU has developed governance and security platforms such as the Peace and Security Council (and its early warning systems mechanism), the African Standby Force (ASF), the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) and the African Governance Architecture (AGA) to stem the spate of conflicts. Furthermore, the AU Agenda 2063 envisages the resolution of conflicts by 2020. While quantitatively speaking the number of conflicts has reduced on the continent, the AU still struggles to effectively curb excesses that have the potential of snowballing into conflict and other humanitarian disasters in member states. These include the manipulation of

elections, autocratic tendencies and the brutal suppression of dissenting voices. In addition, the AU's supposed promotion of democratic values is further undercut by its inability to prevent leaders with questionable democratic credentials from either heading the AU Assembly or driving programmes aimed at improving integrative objectives (Fagbayibo, 2017: 166–7). In essence, the AU has only marginally moved away from its predecessor's regime-boosting and club-diplomacy approach, which emphasises solidarity among heads of state over and above affirming democratic tenets.

The third pillar speaks to investing in bottom-up continental regional integration initiatives. One of the essential features of Africa's integration process is its elite driven, top-down approach, with very little room for civil society to make effective contributions. Beyond the nominal recognition of civil society platforms in the AU, there remains little or no consideration of citizen participation in the articulation and implementation of integrative goals. Some relevant issues remain peripheral concerns, such as referenda on continental integration measures; coordination and mainstreaming of various private sector activities into a well-articulated continental agenda; utilisation of traditional authorities in enhancing awareness; promotion of the use of African languages in driving continental integration (Diop, 1987: 11–14; Ndlhovu, 2017); incorporation of informal cross-border trades into the architecture of continental free trade arrangements; and exploring realistic ways through which citizens can fund and benefit from continental programmes. The absence of these explain the disconnection between and regionalisation. The former refers to official programmes and policies aimed at consolidating regional institutions, while the latter describes interactive engagements among non-state actors in processes that do not necessarily involve regional organisations or state actors (Acharya, 2012: 12; Bach, 2017: 5–6). The issue of devising bottom-up effective processes for regional integration in Africa is discussed below.

These three pillars are further impacted by two key variables. One is the extent to which the AU is able to manage and eventually harmonise the structures of the eight recognised RECs under a continental umbrella. This point has been a key issue since the establishment of the AU in 2002. The legal framework, the 'Draft Protocol on the Relations Between the African Union and the Regional Economic Communities' (2007), is yet to be adopted, and its provisions on the primacy of the AU regarding intervention are ambiguous (ICG, 2017: 15;

Kaaba & Fagbayibo, 2019: 29). Furthermore, these RECs are at different stages of development, thereby making a definitive time period of harmonisation almost impossible (Byiers et al., 2019: 2–3). As Byiers et al. (2019: 3–6) note, issues of geography (contiguous boundaries and resources, geo-strategic calculations to access bigger markets and gain influence) and history (shared colonial inheritance of regional structures) play important roles in participation in RECs. In addition, there have been cases of rivalry and competition between AU and RECs regarding subsidiarity functions and access to substantial resources from donor organisations (ICG, 2017: 14–16). These issues have raised the question of whether RECs, having attained the requisite level of success and influence, would be willing to cede powers to the AU. The answer to this lies in a pragmatic understanding of what continental integration means. In other words, it speaks to accepting the diversity and different dynamics that continue to push and pull regional integration efforts at the RECs, and how these connect with AU objectives. This would require the acceptance of the strength of certain RECs regarding AU objectives on free trade, free movement and infrastructure development, and then proceeding to place such RECs at the heart of the continental implementation of those projects, with the AU managing the quality-control process.

The second variable is the North Africa/Sub-Saharan Africa divide that has been in existence since the creation of the OAU. The politics of many North African countries (which looks towards the Arab world and Euro-America), and the treatment of black Africans in those countries, have enhanced the perceptions that North African states such as Morocco, Egypt, Tunisia and Libya do not consider themselves as part of the continent (Lambert & Ramadan, 2015; Sawahel, 2019; Minority Rights Group International, 2019: 31). The discovery of ‘slave markets’ in Libya, where black African refugees and migrants were sold at auctions by Libyans further highlighted the problematic issue of racism and discrimination in North Africa (Quackenbush, 2017). Although the limited participation of North African states in AU activities has in recent times changed, with Morocco’s re-admission into the AU, and Egypt becoming the chair of the AU Assembly for 2019, there are still concerns about how these will change the perceptions of division. Another problematic issue is that a platform such as the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), which is one of the eight recognised AU RECs and is composed of North African countries, is essentially inoperative due to internal wrangling

and conflicts among member states. An effective AMU could have provided a platform through which North Africans are able to play a more meaningful role in continental integration.

This line of division is one that undermines the possibility of a strong continental unit. The way out of this quagmire is to utilise the increasing engagement of pivotal states, such as Egypt, in continental integration activities as a platform for combatting the scourge of racism and discrimination. This will require policies that legislate against discrimination and racism in North African countries; promote people-to-people interaction and raise awareness around the idea of pan-Africanism; and place continental integration agenda at the heart of national programmes through the adoption and implementation of programmes on free movement and trade.

External dynamics: Navigating the shifting West-to-East strategic landscape

The AU's relationship with external actors remains an integral, albeit controversial, component of its institutional existence. Okumu and Makinda identify three key contexts in which Africa and its continental organisations engage with external parties (cited in Makinda et al., 2016: 141). The first is whether such partners view Africa as a source of problem or a source of opportunity (Makinda et al., 2016: 141). The second speaks to the extent of the genuineness of respect shown by external partners towards African core values, equality and joint ownership of projects and policies (Makinda et al., 2016: 141). The third relates to competition by external actors in pursuit of interests across Africa (Makinda et al., 2016: 141). The issue is not so much about the need for external engagement as it is about the quality of such interaction. In other words, the overriding question is whether such interaction enhances the legitimacy of the AU. The organisation's programmes and projects are excessively funded by external partners, thereby bringing into question the credibility of its existence, and its claim to being the prime driver of integration in Africa.

As things stand, the EU provides the bulk of the funding for the AU's peace and security budget, and also funds a number of governance, human rights and democracy-building initiatives by the organisation (ICG, 2017). Since the inception of the AU Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), the EU has remained its biggest funder by allocating EUR 50 million

annually to APSA for the 2014–2020 programme phase (Vanheukelom, 2019b: 7). Other partners such as China, Japan, India and individual EU member states also provide strategic financial support. Although China prioritises bilateral arrangements with individual African countries, it has in the past decade funded continental integration projects such as the building of the AU secretariat, the China-Africa Peace and Security Fund, the Pan-African Infrastructure Development Fund, and the development of information technology infrastructure (Monyae, 2018: 288–9). These external funding sources remain the lifeline of many AU activities, thereby putting the organisation in a vulnerable and compromising position in terms of the sustainability of projects, and also in asserting itself as the primary driver of continental sovereignty within and outside the continent. While this reality has spurred initiatives such as a 0.2 per cent import tax levy, the readjustment of member state contribution, and a substantial decrease of the AU budget, the practicability of the proposals and the tepid commitment of member states to decisions remains a key concern. The increasing interest in African issues is seen by some as the new scramble for Africa. External actors are increasing their diplomatic presence on the continent in an unprecedented fashion. Between 2010 and 2016, more than 230 embassies and consulates were opened across the continent (*The Economist*, 2019: 18). The ‘new scramble for Africa’ description is not far off the mark considering how some of the global actors openly question each other’s (mercantilist) motives. Such contestation is sometimes akin to parents – global actors – jostling over the custody of the children, which in this case is Africa. Introducing the new White House strategy on Africa, the then US national security adviser, John Bolton, described the Chinese and Russian involvement in Africa as predatory and exploitative. He said it has only encouraged corruption, deepened debt crisis in many African states, and thus poses a threat to US national security (Pilling, 2018; *The Economist*, 2019: 18). While the volume of Chinese investment has been a major source of concern to countries in the global north, its expanding military presence on the continent, particularly in Djibouti, remains a bigger nagging issue for the US government (Osborne, 2018; *The Economist*, 2019: 18). For Washington it is seen as a way of entrenching China’s political and economic interests in Africa to the exclusion of the US (Osborne, 2018), apart from seeing China’s military presence as a rival to the US African Command (AFRICOM).

While the top sources of foreign direct investment (FDI) in Africa are from companies in the US, Britain and France, China has recorded an impressive increase in its African investments by reaching a \$40 billion mark in 2016 (*The Economist*, 2019: 19). The EU has responded to China's growing presence in Africa by adopting the geo-strategic option of cooperating rather than competing with China on African issues (Hooijmaaijers, 2018: 448–9). However, this has not prevented the EU from privately expressing reservations that despite huge European contributions to continental integration, the AU seems to always give preferential treatment to China (ICG, 2017: 20). Observers have raised questions about China's pursuit of its national geopolitical interests in Africa; the presumed neo-colonial elements of its relations with African countries; the lack of consideration of democratic governance and human rights in its dealings with AU member states, and the link between its loans and the growing debt crisis in some Africa states (Chutel, 2018; Were, 2018; Dahir, 2019).

These external support sources are not particularly altruistic as certain situations have shown how their operations have been used to undermine the legitimacy of the AU. For example, it is alleged that after handing over the AU secretariat building, China deliberately left open the AU computer network, a factor that allowed it to spy on the organisation from January 2012 to January 2017 (Tilouine & Kadiri, 2018). Through its extensive funding, the EU has also engaged in many activities calculated at undermining the legitimacy of the AU. These include channelling funds to regional security arrangements outside the purview of the AU security framework; choosing to negotiate its economic partnership agreements (EPAs) with sub-regional groupings rather than an AU-composed negotiating team, and the cherry-picking which projects to support, regardless of compatibility with continental integration priorities (Sicurelli, 2010: 183; Vanheukelom, 2016: 11; ICG, 2017: 12–13; Carbone, 2018: 491).

In addition to the factors noted above are uncertain global trends that will, in the medium-to-long term, have varied impact on relations with Africa. China currently faces sluggish economic growth, a ballooning debt problem, and growing domestic concerns regarding the spending of taxpayers' money abroad (Dahir, 2019). The rise of right-wing, racist and xenophobic parties across Europe, with strong anti-immigration sentiments that are fuelled by the influx of African and Middle East refugees into Europe, is increasingly influencing the EU's approach to security and migration policies on Africa (ICG, 2017: 8–9). In this respect,

the EU has channelled more funds towards military operations, securitisation of borders and the offering of incentives for stemming migratory flow to repressive governments in Africa (ICG, 2017: 8). Similarly, the present US government is unabashedly opposed to migratory flows from Africa and the Middle East. As expressed in its new African strategy, the US is more concerned about funding security and anti-terrorist programmes, and securing US business interests in Africa (Pilling, 2018). What these point to is that global actors have intensified the paradigmatic lenses of security and business for engaging with Africa, and would not hesitate to remove any obstacles to achieving such objectives. The vacuum created by poor and compromised leadership at national levels further aids the deepening of this skewed and non-beneficial relationship (Murithi, 2018: 304–06).

As these global actors continue to extend and deepen their tentacles around the continent, with the AU compromised by its dependence on their funding, the pertinent issue is how to reset and re-centre the calculus of engagement. In its current state, the AU is even in a weaker position than some small member states to follow through on measures that promote power and autonomy. This is further accentuated by the peripheral negotiating role played by the AU in forums such as the Forum of China-African Cooperation (FOCAC), the Tokyo International Cooperation on African Development (TICAD), the India-Africa Forum Summit (IAFS) and the EPAs. Navigating this fraught West-to-East landscape requires a refocused AU, one that is properly situated at the centre of the integration matrix, with the powers to take binding strategic decisions in, and on behalf of, member states. This is the focus of the next subsection.

Syncretic dynamics: Towards 'strategic hybridisation'

The last frames for assessing the feasibility of continental sovereignty is what this chapter terms 'strategic hybridisation'. Strategic hybridisation is premised on the logic that both the external and internal dynamics affecting feasibility are interlocking, and as such require a pragmatic approach that centres African peculiarities and issues in internal and external dealings. The reality is that many of the external factors that directly and indirectly negatively impact continental sovereignty and autonomy have become entrenched, and thus require careful planning to address. For example, issues such as the military presence of external powers; France's (paternalistic) hold over its former colonies; growing Chinese

investment and loans, and how they diminish good governance; the debt crisis that has made some African governments beholden to external parties, and the AU's continued reliance on EU funding are some of the intricate variables.

It is against this background that this chapter proposes three broad objectives to guide the feasible implementation of 'strategic hybridisation'. These objectives weave together strands of engagement that seek to balance internal and external dynamics, out of which a beneficial strategic approach can be developed. It has to be emphasised that these suggestions are not a one-size-fits-all idea considering the diversity of the continent and how this informs the dynamics of regionalism. Rather, the suggestions are a response to these dynamics, having at their essence adaptation and flexibility of implementation. Thus, while the central goal is continental integration, the design and implementation of these suggestions should be flexible and based on the context of particular regions and member states. This then requires member states and/or RECs that are already advanced in terms of the suggested measures to come on board and to share strategies and lessons with the rest. The central role of the AU in terms of assessing implementation and overseeing quality control is key.

The three objectives are investment in area studies, prioritisation of an Afrocentric epistemic framework in the design and implementation of continental objectives, and a feasible guideline for the adaptation of best practises from elsewhere to move ahead with continental regionalism. The importance of area studies should not be underemphasised in the matrix of building continental sovereignty. One of the ways in which external parties have been able to extend and entrench their national geopolitical interests is by carefully studying and gaining acute knowledge of the variables that shape the continent. This is especially done through governmental and non-government research institutes, funding of projects, and the funding of programmes that enable their citizens to explore the African continent. The EU, US, China, Japan and individual EU member states all invest aggressively in area studies programmes, and have been able to use this to enhance their soft power status across the continent (Tella, 2016a; Tella, 2016b). The task now is for Africa to move beyond being the object of study by sharpening its own tools to qualitatively explore the intentions and approaches of others. In this respect, the AU should be at the forefront of

partnering with research and academic institutions across the continent on programmes that explore the intimate link between the (inter)national dynamics of external actors and how these impact on regional integration programmes. Another key component of area studies is the need to take programmes that build the negotiating capacity of stakeholders across different sectors. Beyond corruption, one major impediment to managing external political and economic relations in Africa is that many African countries lack well-trained negotiating teams. Addressing this requires a multidimensional understanding that encompasses the acquisition of technical negotiating skills as an integral element of knowing who and what the other party is. The AU should also encourage its Pan African University (PAU), situated in Africa's five geographical regions, to have in-built programmes that encourage area studies. The PAU has already started operations in West, East, Central and North Africa, and the process of establishing the Southern African wing is ongoing (University of Pretoria, 2018). The AU should, in the process of establishing and operating these institutions, be mindful of the risks associated with outsourcing the financing of these programmes to external parties.

The second objective speaks to the imperative of positioning Afrocentric initiatives and methods at the core of continental regionalism. This should go beyond the oft-repeated platitudes in normative documents and political rhetoric. The first measure in this respect would be to build a broad-based movement of non-state actors that continues to scrutinise aspects of continental regionalism, and ways in which grassroots ideas and strategies could help make a substantial contribution. Issues that require immediate concern include citizen funding of continental integration programmes; the direct elections (and granting of binding legislative powers) of PAP representatives; design of curriculum on the nexus between indigenous knowledge systems and the advancement of continental regionalism; investment in innovative technology ideas that enhance people-to-people connections and also provide solutions to issues obstructing regionalism; and the involvement of traditional authorities in the dissemination and implementation of integration values at community level. A follow-up step would be for the AU to develop an effective communication stream that collates and feeds these discussions into AU structures and processes. For example, the AU might adopt innovative communication channels to transmit its objectives, and then allow for a window period to allow citizens to present their views; next the AU can provide a final report to address concerns and issues raised. In this respect, the AU would have

created an effective two-track interactive system that balances engagements with both state and non-state actors. These bottom-up processes could help provide continental regionalism with much needed legitimacy and momentum to address some of Africa's challenges. They also help bring into sharp focus the need to translate national policy priorities into transnational policy dialogues for the attainment of policy sovereignty at continental level.

The third objective provides that in order to turn continental integration into a truly transformative phenomenon, Africa, in the words of Mazrui (2008), 'must stand ready to selectively borrow, adapt, and creatively formulate its strategies for planned development'. Such 'translative' process is one that recognises the centrality of Africa's cultural contexts and peculiarities, but is also mindful that external interactions and ideas could serve useful purposes. Infrastructure development and management, agriculture, energy, communication technology and poverty alleviation strategies are some of the measures that for which one cannot ignore lessons from the rest, especially from countries in the Global South. The AU has thus far failed to properly situate some of its adopted policies and programmes within a cultural/contextual feasibility paradigm. The AU has adopted neoliberal, Eurocentric strategies on trade, socio-economic development, negotiations with external parties and its institutional set-up without systematically assessing these measures against its oft-stated pan-Africanism philosophy. In going forward, the organisation would benefit from being more introspective and critical by developing assessment mechanisms that include discursive platforms where ideas are rigorously debated before application.

Conclusion

In terms of its population size, diversity of cultures and landmass, Africa remains one of the biggest continents in the world. In addition, its peculiar geo-strategic advantage continues to attract the global light beam. The challenge of turning its geo-strategic placement to its advantage rather than providing the turf for traditional and emerging global players to whet their resource-seeking appetite is an issue of urgent concern. Moghalu (2013: 21–3) refers to this as the imperative of a strategic review of Africa's worldview, one that places enlightened self-interest at the heart of its relationship with others. It is this strategic worldview that is at the heart of Chinweizu's (2011: 95) call for Africa to 'create enough

power to guarantee [its] autonomy'. It is impossible to create such power without a pragmatic understanding and control of the dynamics that shape how the African continent relates within itself, and then use this as a platform for strategically engaging others. The link between autonomy and power is one that essentially speaks to getting one's house in order before interacting with outsiders. The inability to show unity and strength of purpose continues to expose the continent to incalculable exploitation and diminished stature in the global matrix of power relations.

It is against this backdrop that this chapter has shown the essential points that are necessary for a viable continental integration process. It is only through an effective and efficient continental integration process that Africa can build the capacity to drive sustainable socio-economic and political development. In advancing this framing, the chapter adopted a 'trptych' notion of discourse. These are the internal, external and syncretic dynamics. Under the internal dynamics, variables such as technocratic context and competence of continental regionalism, strengthening self-restraining measures, and bottom-up approaches to continental integration were considered. External dynamics looked at the influence of global actors on processes that impact on continental sovereignty and autonomy. Syncretic dynamics viewed both external and internal dynamics as continuous and contiguous, and thus recommended a methodical approach that balances both in order to provide a feasible strategic path for realising meaningful continental autonomy. It termed this approach 'strategic hybridisation'. It includes measures such as investment in area studies, prioritisation of an Afrocentric epistemic framework in the design and implementation of continental objectives, and feasible guidelines for the adaptation of best practices. The implementation agenda of continental integration, in particular the AU's Agenda 2063, cannot afford to ignore these variables, and actors will have to be innovative in applying them. To paraphrase Julius Nyerere, Africa has no choice but to 'run while others walk' (cited in Mkandawire, 2011: 9) towards the goal of enhancing its position as a key player in the global political and economic order.

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