The BRICS’ African Safari

It’s not just China; the BRICS are all active in Africa and taking divergent paths.

By Oliver Stuenkel
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China’s growing presence in Africa has attracted considerable attention from both academia and the international media over the past years, partly because the rapidly growing influence of the BRICS in Africa may portend the future for other regions.

While opinions about the consequences of China’s presence in Africa diverge, most analysts know very little about India, Brazil, South Africa or Russia’s activities across the African continent. In this context, Pádraig Carmody, who teaches at Trinity College in Dublin, has written a well-researched and highly readable analysis of the BRICS in Africa.

One of the obvious questions is whether the rise of the BRICS portends a mere extension of the “Great Game” in Africa, or is South-South cooperation somehow less competitive and more responsive to the needs of the poor? Carmody favors the latter interpretation early on in his book, arguing that in the South, “material flows and purportedly more equal, and less exploitative, social relations than those of North-South relations.”

This is a big statement to make – and paradoxically, the reader comes across a considerable amount of information that seems to undermine the argument. For example, a mere page later Carmody admits that “over 90% of China’s exports are manufactured goods (…), whereas Africa still exports mostly primary products, largely reinforcing a colonial division of labor (…)."

Carmody quotes another scholar who points out that the most important characteristics of South-South cooperation are 1) a shared experience of colonial exploitation and consequently developing country status, 2) based on this, experience in appropriate technologies of development, 3) a rejection of hierarchy in the international system and an emphasis on respect for sovereignty and non-interference, and 4) an emphasis on ‘mutual development’ and win-win situations.

Since several of these affirmations are highly controversial, Carmody would do well to position himself more clearly regarding their content, yet he seems to largely remain on the fence. This rather passive approach remains evident throughout the book. Heavily footnoted, each chapter somewhat excessively lists what other scholars have written about the matter, leaving little space for Carmody to develop his own ideas.
The book’s main analysis is divided into five chapters, each dedicated to one BRICS members’ presence in Africa. Chapter 2 is about China and includes an interesting case study on China’s economic presence in Zambia, yet the reader is left wondering how far this example is representative of China’s activities on the whole continent. Carmody concludes that “while there have been some benefits to Zambia in terms of employment creation and poverty reduction, a dependency on China is being created.”

Chapter 3, about South Africa’s role on the African continent, is perhaps the most interesting, given that there is so little available on the subject. For example, many readers will be surprised to learn that less than 11 percent of South Africa’s overall trade is with the African continent — symbolizing how poorly integrated the country is with its neighborhood (under apartheid, this figure was even lower). Carmody concludes that South Africa is not a competitor with the other BRICS, but a junior partner.

The analysis of India’s role in Africa is equally engaging. Carmody rightly points out that India has often benefitted from acting in China’s shadow. For example, in Sudan—where it behaves very similarly to China—the international media only took the latter to task for its support for the Sudanese regime. In any case, Indian trade with Africa is booming, amounting to $45 million in 2010-2011, and increasing by 400% in the last five years. Carmody’s assessment of India’s activities, particularly in Ethiopia, is very negative, and he believes some countries may soon experience anti-Indian protests and even violence.

Russia’s presence in Africa is, as Carmody rightly points out, very different from the other BRICS due to the Soviet Union’s profound engagement on the African continent, for example in Angola and Mozambique. After the end of the Cold War, a dozen Russian embassies and consulates were closed in Africa, yet recently this trend has been reversed, and Russian companies such as Gazprom, Renaissance Capital, Lukoil and Rosneft have built a growing presence in many African countries. In many ways, Putin’s Africa strategy must be understood in the context of Russia’s quest to regain geopolitical status.

Finally, Brazil’s stronger engagement in Africa is also unique, given its cultural and historic ties to the continent. Of all African slaves brought to the Western Hemisphere, only 4.4 percent arrived in North America whereas 35 percent came to Brazil. Of all BRICS countries, Carmody seems to regard Brazil’s engagement as the most successful one. One reason is that Brazilian companies tend to hire more local staff, which positively affects public opinion. At the same time, the author expects Brazil to remain a ‘secondary power’ in Africa, except in Portuguese-speaking countries.

While one may criticize the lack of a grand conclusion, Carmody’s book serves as an important reminder that we should be wary of metanarratives about highly complex phenomena such as emerging powers’ growing engagement in Africa. China’s, India’s and Brazil’s engagement is far too diverse to simply conclude that BRICS, in overall terms, harms or benefits the continent.

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