Over the past two decades, the conference circuit has been awash with events to reflect on ‘Africa strategies’. The irony though is that many of these engagements are organised by, and on, other continents to review other countries’ approaches to a region that has started to show much promise. Instructively, Africa itself – and indeed a majority of the countries on the continent – does not have an America or Asia or Europe strategy.

The growing interest in the continent over the past two decades is understandable. Africa is showing great potential and its future development trajectory, undergirded in part by vast natural endowments, is becoming clearer. Countries such as China, India, Russia, Brazil, Turkey, South Korea and Malaysia are enhancing their involvement in Africa and thus reconfiguring the continent’s multifaceted international relations that were historically informed by colonialism, neo-colonialism and the

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By Joel Netshitenzhe
dictates of the Cold War. At the same time, the so-called “war on terror” has elevated Africa’s strategic significance in international security considerations.

In the context of all this, and on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the OAU, it is appropriate to pose the question: whither Africa! Where will the continent be in another 50 years, in 2063? Africa not only needs to map out scenarios about where it wants to be in the medium- to long-term; it needs to do this proceeding from the premise that it is Africa’s own actions or omissions that will define its 50-year rendezvous.

In this period, Africa’s collective discourse has revolved around the notions of Pan-Africanism and an African Renaissance, as philosophical underpinnings to its endeavours. What is the relevance of these concepts?

From luminaries such as Marcus Garvey and WEB du Bois – with the latter asserting that the problem of the 20th Century would be about the colour-line1 – to Kwame Nkrumah (Ghana) and Nnamdi Azikiwe (Nigeria), Pan-Africanism has been about the recognition of the common experience and common destiny of Africa’s people against colonialism and slavery, and for unity, independence and self-determination.

From Puleka Seme (South Africa) on the regeneration of Africa and a new and unique civilisation that is thoroughly spiritual and humanistic2; to Sheikh Anta Diop (Senegal) in his essays on culture and development3 and Thabo Mbeki (South Africa), the African Renaissance has been conceptualised as rejecting the notion that Africans are exotic objects of others’ curiosity but that the people of the continent have immensely contributed to, and should by their own actions help to shape, human civilisation.

It is in this context that the continent should reflect on what the successor to the OAU, the African Union (AU), characterises as Agenda 2063. The notions of Pan-Africanism and African Renaissance have not lost their relevance. But their inheritors are more than just fighters against what Africa does not like. Today’s generations are – and should in their mindset act as – architects of a new socio-economic system in what should be an all-encompassing Continental Democratic Revolution.

The question though is whether the regeneration of the continent, signalled in a variety of ways over the past two decades, is sustainable! Do endogenous and exogenous conditions point in the direction of an accomplished Pan-African Renaissance by 2063?

To answer these questions, it would be critical to identify the key driving forces that have shaped Africa’s trajectory in the past 20 years.

In most regions of the continent, peace and stability have been attained. South Africa, the last bastion of white colonial domination, has been liberated. Debilitating conflicts in countries such as Angola, Mozambique, Ethiopia, Sudan, Sierra Leone and Liberia have been resolved.

Already, parts of Africa are starting to experience such relocations as labour and other costs in Asia ramp up. For instance, a Chinese shoe maker, Huajian Group plans to build a manufacturing zone in Ethiopia that may generate $4 billion of exports a year within a decade.3

In most African countries, a new corps of leaders has emerged; capable states are being built; law-governed systems are being forged; and democracy and citizen participation have improved. A critical element of this is the activism of the African intelligentsia and much of the middle strata, including the media.

These and other factors have contributed to higher rates of economic growth, coupled with a discernible improvement in people’s quality of life. According to the United Nations, in sub-Saharan Africa4:

- the proportion of the working population with income of less than US$1.25 a day decreased from 67% in 1998 to 58% in 2008
- primary education enrolment grew from 58% in 2000 to 74% in 2007 and this is increasingly reflecting gender balances
- under-five mortality rates declined from 165 deaths per 1 000 live births in 1990 to 118 in 2009 – about 20% in 20 years.

This is on the back of an economy in which average real GDP growth per capita has increased by 2.3% per annum between 1995 and 2009(5); trade with world has increased by some 200% since 2000; and foreign debt has declined by 25%6.

It is in this context that Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Christine Lagarde, acknowledged earlier this year that Africa’s emerging nations had become a driving force for world economic growth7. Her compatriot, France’s Finance Minister Pierre Moscovici was more direct about external self-interest: “It’s evident that China is more and more present in Africa... (French) companies that have the means must go on the offensive. They must be more present on the ground. They have to fight”8.

The Economist, which a few years ago designated Africa ‘a hopeless continent’, was by 2011 even more effusive in its optimism:

“From Ghana in the west to Mozambique in the south, Africa’s economies are consistently growing faster than those of almost any other region of the world. At least a dozen have expanded by more than 6% a year for six or more years. Ethiopia will grow by 7.5% this year, without a drop of oil to export. Once a byword for famine, it is now the world’s tenth-largest producer of livestock...

Severe income disparities persist through much of the continent; but a genuine middle class is emerging. According to Standard Bank, which operates throughout Africa, 60m African households have annual incomes greater than $3,000 at market exchange rates. By 2015, that number is expected to reach 100m—almost the
same as in India now.”

If these are some of the driving forces that have helped shape Africa’s recent progress, what are the factors that inhibit faster movement? Among the insidious negative factors are issues of identity and control of resources that drive recurrent conflicts in countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali and the Central African Republic. Added to this is the failure to extend formal democracy to embrace genuine inclusivity, which, for instance, is nibbling at the outcome of the ‘Arab Spring’ in Tunisia and Egypt. Similarly, even in cases where conflicts have been resolved and formal democracy attained, economic growth in many countries is coupled with an accumulation regime that worsens inequality as rent-seeking elites amass wealth at the expense of their states and populations.

The fundamental question is whether these insidious negatives will overwhelm the positives going forward! While internal developments are fundamental, the answer to this question cannot be delinked from global developments.

Many positive global shifts have undergirded the rise of Africa. The high growth rates in China, India, Malaysia, Brazil, South Korea and other emerging economies have resulted in economic power and growth centres steadily shifting from the North. As a consequence of the thrust of these countries for Africa’s primary resources and their deliberate activism on the continent, we are starting to witness global economic decoupling and recoupling that, for instance, have resulted in China in 2012 surpassing the US as Africa’s largest trading partner(10); and growth correlation of 92% between Africa and China since 1999(11).

Arvind Subramanian of the Peterson Institute argues:

“Cyclically – that is, in the short run – everyone is coupled: if the US slows, so will China; and vice versa. That is a fact of interdependence. But the phenomenon of convergence suggests there is structural decoupling: in the medium to long term, the rise in living standards relative to that of the rich world depends mostly on what developing countries themselves do and less on the external environment.”

Yet there have been many insidious negatives in the global arena, with profound implications for Africa.

Among these challenges is the economic crisis in Europe and North America which reflects the inability and unwillingness to tame the markets and stabilise the polities. The manner in which the political leadership in the United States of America has handled the threats of a fiscal cliff and sequestration reflects a political paralysis with major implications for the global economy. What the leader of the Social Democratic Party in Germany referred to as the victory of “two clowns” in Italy’s
apolitico-military level, the US will still be the dominant power, with its military strength currently greater than that of about 10 of the next powers combined. This is besides the dominance of the capitalist socio-economic system of which the US is the epicentre. It can thus be argued that, for most of the next 50 years, global relations will be characterised by primary unipolarity with secondary multipolar features – albeit with significant shifts towards multipolarity.

Another global trend which should intensify in the coming decades is the constant migration of production sites. China is already climbing up the manufacturing sophistication ladder and the current production sites such as Vietnam will steadily follow suit; and the multinationals will seek new locations. Already, parts of Africa are starting to experience such relocations as labour and other costs in Asia ramp up. For instance, a Chinese shoe maker, Huajian Group plans to build a manufacturing zone in Ethiopia that may generate $4 billion of exports a year within a decade.

Further, Africa’s infrastructure programme, which the Africa Development Bank says will require some US$360-billion by 2040, should continue apace. With this, as well as development of mining, agriculture and green technologies, the continent should experience major opportunities for industrialisation through backward and forward linkages. This will also be underpinned by the demographic dividend, an increase in numbers of employed people and the middle strata and urbanisation, with massive growth of consumer demand and ensuing opportunities for manufacturing.

As shown in the cellphone industry including cellphone banking, Africa will also be able to leapfrog some of the stages through which other regions had to pass in their development trajectories.

“Macro-projections are that, by 2050, the global economic pecking order will have China as the largest global economy, followed by the US, India, Brazil, Russia and Japan as the top 6 economies. However, at the politico-military level, the US will still be the dominant power, with its military strength currently greater than that of about 10 of the next powers combined. This is besides the dominance of the capitalist socio-economic system of which the US is the epicentre. It can thus be argued that, for most of the next 50 years, global relations will be characterised by primary unipolarity with secondary multipolar features – albeit with significant shifts towards multipolarity. Another global trend which should intensify in the coming decades is the constant migration of production sites. China is already climbing up the manufacturing sophistication ladder and the current production sites such as Vietnam will steadily follow suit; and the multinationals will seek new locations. Already, parts of Africa are starting to experience such relocations as labour and other costs in Asia ramp up. For instance, a Chinese shoe maker, Huajian Group plans to build a manufacturing zone in Ethiopia that may generate $4 billion of exports a year within a decade. Further, Africa’s infrastructure programme, which the Africa Development Bank says will require some US$360-billion by 2040, should continue apace. With this, as well as development of mining, agriculture and green technologies, the continent should experience major opportunities for industrialisation through backward and forward linkages. This will also be underpinned by the demographic dividend, an increase in numbers of employed people and the middle strata and urbanisation, with massive growth of consumer demand and ensuing opportunities for manufacturing.

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Maybe this is a tad too optimistic? What we do know, as shown over"
the past 15 years, is that high rates of economic growth can be achieved – along with an improvement in quality of life indicators. In some scenario planning exercises, the middle-range storyline posits an Africa that in 2050 will collectively be where China is today: in terms of economic power, infrastructure development, manufacturing, extrication of millions out of poverty, as well as some of the spatial imbalances that China today experiences. Along the same lines, Arvind Subramanian asserts that, if the current pace of growth in Africa is maintained, “sub-Saharan Africa – and, indeed, 80 per cent of all countries – could in 50 years be in a situation comparable to that of Chile today.”16

The trajectory could be higher or even lower. And this will be conditional primarily on what Africans do. Some of the critical questions in this regard are:

- Will the capability and effectiveness of the African state, the quality of leadership and the activism of citizens be attained?
- Will formal democracy be deepened to include adept management of social contradictions, promotion of social inclusivity and forging of social compacts?
- Will there be preparedness across Africa to pool sovereignties in political and economic policy and praxis including regional and inter-regional trade – not so much in grand ideas of an African government but, as East Asia did, in mutually-beneficial osmosis?
- Will there be strategic acumen to manage changing economic power balances across the continent or will these changing balances lead to increased unhealthy competition and even conflict?
- Will non-state actors such as academics, researchers and activists in the media and the arts be afforded, or themselves capture, the space to act as midwives and nurturers of the Pan-African Renaissance?

To reiterate: how all this pans out in the coming 50 years will depend on the African people themselves. However, we cannot altogether rule out the possibility of global “black swans” exerting such a profound impact on humanity that Africa’s own development is massively enhanced or circumscribed. For instance, a China that succeeds in breaking out of a middle-income trap, achieving higher levels of domestic consumption and moving further up the manufacturing sophistication ladder would have a positive influence on Africa’s growth and development.

On the other hand, failure on the part of humanity to address the challenges of global warming would redound negatively on the continent. And the ‘black swan’ of debilitating wars in parts of the globe cannot be entirely ruled out, given that in history, qualitative changes in global power balances have come along with increased international tensions and conflict. Does the sabre-rattling from North Korea, the Sino-Japanese tensions and the US Pacific pivot presage such global disaster?

Africa is poised for a renaissance across all indicators of human endeavour; and it should develop its strategies taking into account a variety of possibilities on the continent and further afield. The Continental Democratic Revolution which should underpin a Pan-African Renaissance should be informed by a deliberate strategy to develop the continent’s productive forces, ensure inclusive economic growth and foster an environment in which the creative energy of Africa’s peoples finds free reign. Improvement in the condition of life of Africa’s people should entail attention to all aspects of human rights – political, economic, social, environmental and ‘informational’.

In relating to the world, the continent should be inspired by the need to pursue the interests of Africa’s people, while at the same time ensuring the kind of diversity that transcends the erstwhile relations of colonialism and neo-colonialism. It should rebuild external efforts to divide, dominate and rule.

In Africa’s pre-colonial history, the continent enjoyed strong relations with Asia and the Middle East, as a natural consequence of geography. The strengthening of such relations should come naturally, as part of post-colonial geo-strategic normalisation; and it should not be seen as a threat to anyone. As this happens, the continent cannot afford to lower its guard on such tendencies among some of the “new actors” as backward practices in labour relations and mass importation of labour. Nor can Africa shirk its responsibility to ensure global security of supply of the resources it has in abundance.

A Pan-African renaissance will not come of its own accord. It requires foresight in leadership, activism of society and a renaissance of Africa’s ‘think industry’. In this regard, the successor to the Organisation of African Unity, the African Union should play a more active role particularly through bodies such as the AU Commission and the Pan-African Parliament. In partnership with the intelligentsia and the rest of civil society, these bodies can serve as critical continental thought-leaders, facilitators and monitors.

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