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The Regional Dimension to the United States of Africa ‘Grand Debate’

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INTRODUCTION

Of increasingly pressing importance is the question of the regional or sub-regional dimensions of building a pan-African continental political community. This question came to a head at the last heads-of-state summit of the African Union (AU) in Accra, Ghana. The summit was devoted to what was billed as a 'Grand Debate' about establishing a 'United States of Africa.'

The bone of contention was Libyan leader, Col. Muammar al-Qaddafi's bid to have the AU agree to construct the United States of Africa in little more than eight years (establishment of union government in 2009; its consolidation in 2012; US of Africa by 2015).¹ In the aftermath of the summit, what follows is a revision of the initial discussion draft. It attempts to factor in some of the discourse generated by the build-up to and the immediate aftermath of Accra. To a large extent, the bias of this brief toward the need for Africa to focus on a regionalized path to continental union government, aligns with the actual outcome of the summit.

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THE ACCRA DECLARATION

This was underlined and reiterated as the very first priority cited in the Accra Declaration. Namely: "to rationalize and strengthen the Regional Economic Communities..." As a follow-up to stressing the regionalized approach to pan-African community-building toward a 'Union Government,' the declaration mandated the establishment of a Ministerial Committee to examine the following:

- Identification of the contents of the Union Government concept and its relations with national governments;
- Identification of domains of competence and the impact of the establishment of the Union Government on the sovereignty of member states;
- Definition of the relationship between the Union Government and the Regional Economic Communities (RECs);
- Elaboration of the road map, together with timeframes, for establishing the Union Government; and
- Identification of additional sources of financing for the activities of the Union.

¹ The focus of this debate revolved around an AU document or 'non-paper' titled, 'Study on an African Union Government towards the United States of Africa.'

The outcome of the audit and the work of the Ministerial Committee is to be submitted to the Executive Council of the AU as a basis for making “appropriate recommendations to the next ordinary session” of the Union. Be that as it may, the Accra Declaration needs to be viewed as a bench-mark in what has been and will continue to be an ongoing debate concerning what this author contends to be the question of consolidating Africa’s ‘continental sovereignty’. An added sense of urgency reinforcing this broader sovereignty dimension was reflected in South African Finance Minister, Trevor Manuel’s address to an International Corporate Governance Network Conference in which he said that the European Union had put pressure on African countries by tightened its definition of Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs). Manuel stressed the need for Africa to define the borders of the EPAs, not Europe. However, he urged that “countries in Africa needed to define what the timelines were and needed to drive towards enlarging those markets,” in reference to Africa’s regions.

SOUTH AFRICA AND THE CONSOLIDATED CONTINENTAL SOVEREIGNTY IMPERATIVE

Africa’s bottom-rung position within the international system is reinforced by its colonially-inherited partition

Conceptually, the notion of continental sovereignty has its lineage in what Ali Mazrui has sometimes referred to as the “idea of racial sovereignty,” which is linked to struggles against racial domination and subordination in white-ruled societies, especially in the former ‘white redoubts’ of southern Africa, but also in the African diaspora where New World racial alienation was a major inspiration in the evolution of pan-African thought. However, Africa’s disempowering post-colonial dependency and consequent lack of geopolitical autonomy within the stratification of world power, underpins the transference of the concept of sovereignty from the socio-racial realm to the realm of geopolitical power politics. The reality of Africa’s bottom-rung position within the international system is reinforced by its colonially-inherited partition which constitutes the root of its continued dependency and subordination in a rapidly changing post-Western order. Viewed in these terms, continental sovereignty reflects a situation wherein the national sovereignty of comparatively weak post-colonial ‘nation-states’ would concede sufficient powers at the sub-regional/regional and/or continental level to advance Africa - or significant geographical sections of it - to a mega-state level comparable to the United States of America, the multi-state European Union (EU), India, China, Russia or Brazil.

Given the transcontinental or sub-continental scale of these mega-states, the sovereignty of smaller political units (or, to a lesser extent, nation-states in the case of Europe) has been subsumed under a continental or continent-scale territorial umbrella. In an age when globalization challenges the sovereignty of small nation-states, a consolidated continental (or continent-scale) sovereignty

affords a degree of 'self-determining' autonomy within the international system that comes with the status of a great or major power within the changing global governance context of the 21st century. Framed thus, South Africa is seen as playing a catalyzing role in propelling Africa toward a status which it alone, as a middle-income regional power (albeit one with the unique capacity to engage in the international politics of global governance), cannot fill in a manner comparable to the mega-states of India, China and even Brazil.

Africa's continental sovereignty, in spite of the AU, is a colonially inherited fragmented phenomenon; a sovereignty divided among comparatively weak nation-states in which the trappings of sovereignty (or 'flag independence') are jealously guarded by nationalist elites, in many cases, without the legitimacy of popular sovereignty. This predicament of symbolic sovereignty within a fragmented continent is at the core of Africa's endemic weakness and low standing in the stratification of power in the global system. Put another way, 'colonialism' either emanating from external powers or from within the continent from an indigenous power like South Africa, is endemic to Africa's small-state fragmentation into separate sovereignties. Whether Africa is interacting with the U.S., the EU or China, it will always be at a disadvantage and the relations with these powers can be depicted as 'the one and the many'.

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Africans will constantly feel vulnerable to being 'colonized' by outside powers as is currently reflected in both African and self-serving Western preoccupations about China's growing energy, security and resource interests on the continent. Political unity and economic integration is the only answer to such insecurities. Should Africa seriously undertake to overcome its European partitioning and actually achieve some semblance of consolidated continental sovereignty, the international system would possibly undergo similar adjustments as are currently underway with the rise of Asia which, together with Russia's resurgence, is ushering a post-Western global order. Against this conceptual backdrop, the hope is that the Accra 'Grand Debate' marked the beginning of what will be an ongoing and rigorously unfolding debate over Africa's transition to a post-AU future as a 'United States of Africa' (or US of Africa). Other possible alternatives such as a Union of African States, a federation of African states or a confederation of regional federations of African states could be considered.

Regional Economic Communities (RECs)

Whichever path to a 'union government' Africa embarks on, central to this process will be the role of the AU's sub-regional (or regional) economic communities (RECs) as pillars of the existing union. The RECs, after all, are considered the natural 'building blocs' of the AU. As such, they are considered

the likely platforms for any progression from the AU to a more politically consolidated continental union. This unfolding discussion has serious implications beyond its almost topically entertaining quality for the futuristically inclined and a host of sceptics who consider an African union government a utopian flight from reality; reality being the highly fragmented Hobbesian chaos of an inter-African state system that defies any notion of manageable unity, irrespective of whether one calls this system the 'old OAU,' the current 'AU' or some future acronym.

EASTERN AND SOUTHERN AFRICAN SCENARIOS

What was apparently lost during the 'Grand Debate' over a US of Africa was any notion of interregional arrangements such as the unfolding East African Community (EAC) federation project. This initiative could conceivably accelerate Africa's evolution toward that goal. Further, how the EAC federation project unfolds could illuminate the relative strengths of sub-regional building blocs, and a step-by-step approach toward union government. From the vantage point of Accra, this would seem to have been a serious oversight.

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The EAC federation project, depending on its political viability (about which there are reservations), could serve as a geopolitical-economic fulcrum attracting integrationist buy-in from sub-regions to its north in the 'Greater Horn of Africa' as well as sub-regions to its west in the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) zone and south where Tanzania links east Africa to the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the Southern African Customs Union (SACU).

A northeast African expansion of a prospective East African Federation could begin to take shape should South Sudan opt out of 'New Sudan' and into an eastern African affiliation; it already has observer status in both the EAC and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA). Ethiopia and Eritrea will surely not be far behind, especially should the EAC federation begin to exhibit successful momentum and become an attractive option for making concessions toward pooling national sovereignty.

It is even more likely that the EAC federation project could take on an interregional configuration, joining eastern and southern Africa, should Tanzania opt to remain in SADC (as seems likely) and SADC progresses toward a customs union. This would entail a rationalization of the existing SACU customs union with an expansion-merger to eventually encompass all 14 SADC member states. Conceivably, this could lead to a linking of the eastern and southern African customs unions even as east Africa transitions from an EAC community into a federation.

The pregnant question here is whether or not South Africa will eventually overcome its anti-hegemon hang-ups to contemplate leading the evolution of a a cooperative political union in southern Africa revolving around a SACU core into which an accession process could begin incorporating the SADC periphery. This could conceivably start with Mozambique, while providing a framework within which Zimbabwe could eventually be rehabilitated as it transitions into a post-Mugabe era.

Meanwhile Khabele Matlosa of the Electoral Institute of Southern Africa (EISA) has, in an earlier CPS study, explored alternative integration scenarios between Lesotho and South Africa revolving around the issue of the cross-border free movement of people which could serve as a basis for laying the foundations of a SACU political integration process. Viewed strategically from the vantage point of an 'inner core'-'outer periphery' process, a prospective SACU political integration scenario could - indeed should - hold implications for South Africa's internal domestic debate over the future of its provinces. This debate revolves around whether to abolish them and/or cut down their number to make them more manageable politically and for purposes of service delivery and poverty eradication. In fact, from a regional integration perspective, the debate around how the national government relates to its provinces, becomes all the more compelling from the standpoint of South Africa becoming part of a 'federal republic of southern Africa' (or even a 'federal republic of eastern and southern Africa') given the potential interlinked convergence of east African and southern African processes through a Dar-es-Salaam-Maputo axis converging with a Pretoria-Maputo axis. The geopolitical-economic dynamics of overlapping REC affiliations in eastern, central and southern Africa suggest that the rationalization of RECs (within the AU) is not going to be a straight-forward process, but more than likely, uneven and 'messy.'

There has been a tendency for the politico-diplomatic issue of cooperation on security matters as a means of defusing conflicts, to overshadow the economic role of RECs

RECS: ECONOMIC OR SECURITY COMMUNITIES?

The proliferation of RECs has raised serious questions about their actual identity as 'economic communities' when motivations behind their establishment and/or motivations behind countries joining them or seeking membership may be for reasons other than economic. The DRC's induction into SADC, for example, had as much (if not more) to do with security considerations with geocultural-political overtones (competitive franco-anglophone geopolitics) and South Africa's bid to stabilize Congo for economic cooperation/integration reasons. Moreover, there has been a tendency for the politico-diplomatic issue of cooperation on security matters as a means of defusing conflicts, to overshadow the economic role of RECs. This is evident in the emergence of 'security communities' reflected in the establishment of conflict management-resolution-

prevention organs and mechanisms such as the SADC Organ on Politics, Defence and Security Cooperation (OPDSC) or similar mechanisms in groupings such as the Inter-Governmental Development Authority (IGAD), with the latter playing more of a ‘security community’ than a REC role.

Here, the AU has failed to designate demarcations and/or alignments between security and economic communities as a dimension of REC rationalisation. IGAD, for example, on the basis of its track-record, could very well evolve into a ‘security community’ aligned with a prospective eastern or greater east African political federation, since the current EAC lacks a pronounced security mechanism. IGAD could be rationalized to serve as that mechanism within the east African context.

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The fluid REC picture inescapably complicates any fast-tracked attempts to move toward or ‘proclaim’ a US of Africa in any meaningful sense. Before the AU embarked on its current momentum toward contemplating a US of Africa, some of its early ‘think pieces’ contemplated RECs evolving into ‘regional integration communities’ (RICs). RICs would, presumably, reflect the continent’s progressive evolution toward political as well as economic integration within its different sub-regional REC pillars of the AU. The problem, however, is that as pressure mounts among some member states of the AU for rapid movement toward a US of Africa, it is not clear where that leaves the RICs scenario which was not fully elaborated to begin with. Whether or not the AU mandated Ministerial Committee coming out of Accra will clarify such a process remains to be seen.

AN ACCESSION ROUTE TO A US OF AFRICA?

The reality that there will be an uneven commitment to fast-tracking the establishment of a union government will be further bedevilled by the fact that there appears not to have been thought given to putting in place an accession process by which member states and/or RECs will join a US of Africa or a Union of African States at ‘variable speed’. This, in fact, is where the AU could take a page out of the EU accession process in organizing a path toward continental political unity. Yet very little political imagination appears to have been applied to envisioning how such a process might be rationally and strategically structured, apart from establishing unrealistic time-lines that all countries are, on paper, supposed to achieve in establishing this US of Africa. In this regard, the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) and how ‘peer review’ might be adapted to an accession process seems not to have been placed on the table.

From the standpoint of REC evolution into RICs, there is no reason why the APRM could not be sub-regionalised as a mechanism of accession in determining a country's acceptance into a REC that is set to eventually become a RIC. Here again, the EAC federation project in east Africa and the establishment of a similar process in southern Africa are indicative of how 'peer review' and a process of REC assisted harmonization might be put into place to guide accession negotiations for countries that want to join a prospective EAC federation or a federated political union evolving out of SACU. This would be especially so if SACU were to consensually reconstitute itself as the core of a SADC Customs Union. The lack of creative thinking in this regard is indicative of the fact that, unlike Europe, Africa is woefully under think-tanked when it comes to the serious study of pan-African integration. Thus, there appears not to exist any institute or centre dedicated to the study of African integration anywhere on the continent, although there is ample intellectual preoccupation and overly-academic inquiry into governance and 'the reconstitution of the state' in Africa.

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The problem is that this intellectual inquiry conservatively assumes the status-quo of an Africa divided into 53 odd sovereignties - something that is at the root of Africa's endemic governance failures and state fragilities. There is an African intellectual acceptance of the status-quo of the continent's Eurocentric colonial legacy, while certain heads-of-state within the AU seek to engineer geopolitical agendas under the guise of Nkrumahist pan-Africanism without any serious study, analysis or strategic planning being brought to bear on a phased decolonization of Africa's inherited political legacy of a fragmented continental sovereignty. In real terms, Africa has yet to decolonize. Presumably, the current post-Accra AU exercise which will report back in January 2008, could and should, serve as a fitting point-of-departure for rectifying this intellectual, research and strategic planning deficit.

CONCLUSION

As the AU deliberates on the way forward, based on the mandate coming out of the Accra Summit, there are several policy and conceptual implications that emerge. The following are just a few:

- From a conceptual perspective, there is a need for pan-Africanism to increasingly find expression in political forms of trans-nationalism in African inter-state relations and, especially at the level of civil society; pan-African trans-nationalism should be a political corollary to regional economic integration. As a trend, trans-nationalism should involve the strengthening of parliamentary institutions amid the emergence of trans-national political

movements and parties that can contest elections in more than one country and, in so-doing, interject a bottom-up dynamic to integration.

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- Closely tied in with the need to conceptually and politically develop trans-nationalism, is the need for African governments, RECs and the AU to strengthen parliamentary institutions, an emphasis that in turn, should receive increasing donor support as a means of assisting the progressive forces of African governance. Here, the coming East African Federation and the existing East African Legislative Assembly could provide an excellent pilot for strengthening the parliamentary role in the regional integration and pan-African governmental union-building process; one that converges and interacts intimately with the potential development of trans-national political parties. By the same token, this applies as well to the empowering of the Pan-African Parliament as the legislative arm of the AU.
- The AU, coming out of Accra, re-committed itself to prioritizing the rationalizing and strengthening of the RECs. This is, perhaps, the most important policy priority on the African integration agenda. This priority needs to engage the policy development resources of: national governments; the existing RECs; the AU; the African Development Bank; the Development Bank of Southern Africa; the economic ministries of REC member states (as well as foreign affairs ministries); and the Pan-African Conference of Ministers of Public Service and Administration.