Cautious Optimism for Africa's Future

Can America help move the continent forward?

By Stephen Hayes | April 5, 2013 | 3 Comments

A ship, left, loaded with shipping containers filled with goods bound for markets across the world await departure at a port in Cape Town, South Africa, Thursday, March 28, 2013. Leaders of five of the world's emerging economic powers agreed Wednesday to create a development bank to help fund their $4.5 trillion infrastructure plans - a direct challenge to the World Bank that they accuse of Western bias. But the rulers of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa - known as the BRICS group - were unable to agree on some basic issues including how much capital the bank would need.

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Barring catastrophic climate change or some random asteroid, it seems now that the economic development of Africa is irreversible. Construction is in every city, roads are connecting distant destinations in each country, and wars and rumors of wars are on the decline. It would seem that the continent is entering its own era of manifest destiny, a destiny of greater harmony, where commerce flourishes from the Mediterranean to the Cape, and from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean.

The conundrums of Africa and most of its individual countries no longer seem intractable, and new organizations are springing forth in Washington, like daffodils of spring, all seeking some claim to responsibility for bringing on the development of Africa. The Cold War is behind us and the problems of Central and South Asia are much more confounding and discouraging than the promise of Africa, and who really wants to face the growing competition at all levels with the China colossus?

Merrily we all go to Africa. I suppose worse things could happen to Africa, and the foreign policy elite who largely ignored Africa until now need something to keep themselves relevant. After all, what
possibly could go wrong?

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The optimism throughout Africa is as contagious as a common cold. Opportunities abound and it would seem that the old ways of doing things are passing, just as they do in every civilization and just as happens generation to generation in America, with the possible exception of Washington, DC. With a far greater ability to communicate through IT, change seems like a giant tsunami to those resisting it. There is no levee to stop it for the waves of technology leap over all barriers eventually. Again, what could go wrong?

Well, there are always the culture wars, the battles fought by those who resist the tsunami of change. Those battles are being fought in the Sahel, northern Nigeria, Somalia, and Sudan mostly, but the undertone is deeper and broader in various parts of the continent. It seems a long battle for hearts and minds awaits us, one requiring as much understanding of the cultural contexts of the conflict as the art of war.

There is also the rapidly growing population of Africa, growing far faster than jobs are made available, creating a reservoir of discontent and apathy, and with such conditions will come a new spike in diseases, communicable and non-communicable.

With the new pollutants of progress, cancer is on the rise in Africa at a higher rate than anywhere in the world, with the possible exception of China, which seems enveloped in a permanent smog of pollution giving new meaning to "the hidden kingdom." That some in Africa seem so eager to adapt to the China model of development is disturbing if one worries about the health of Africa.

Then, too, there is AIDS. Its earlier destructiveness has left a new threat in its wake. The AIDS orphans now number in the millions, and in South Africa there is growing discontent among the millions of unemployed and often uneducated.

[See a collection of political cartoons on health care.]

The Lords of Cocaine have moved operations from Latin America to west Africa, bringing with them a new form of corruption of governments, bodies and souls and for many a route out of poverty seemingly with little consequences. Old leaders are slow to allow new ideas into some countries, yet nearly all appeal for greater investment in their lands. They look to alternatives to western expectations and find them in the Chinese, the Indians and others, unbound by OECD rules. And in the richest parts of Africa, the eastern Congo, the cruelest of inhumanities, especially towards women, are allowed to continue through the tacit approval of some of the region's leaders.

Against this is a growing optimism for Africa's future. Backing up the optimism is the construction and the development of infrastructure and a push for greater regionalization. There is also anecdotal evidence of a college-educated diaspora returning to some countries in greater numbers than they ever have. Much of this returning diaspora has been U.S.-educated.

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Yes, Africa is changing, and like all change, it is uneven and erratic; the bad comes with the good, and brings with it the clash of generations and ideas. Technology hastens the change as much as it does the conflict. In nature, when systems clash, there is a storm of chaos, eventually bringing destruction and then calm as we build anew. The storms of Africa have not passed entirely, and there will be challenges enough for future generations to confront. What is at stake now is whether development can outpace the problems that poverty brings.

If America is to remain relevant in Africa, we need a very comprehensive and coherent plan for our engagement, and a more persuasive case for models of development favorable to democracy, transparency and economic development. America has largely been the world's policeman, for better or worse, and we attack crises better than most, it would seem. What we have been less good at is developing a long-term vision for our engagement with Africa that includes economic development,
especially the development of its private sector in cooperation with our private sector.

In the end, Africa itself will determine the fate of its continent, and we should accept that. However, we can best influence the decisions Africans will make by working more closely with its emerging leadership and developing its middle class through private sector development. These are areas that play to America’s strengths. It cannot be done with a piecemeal approach.

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