

Trends In Global Geopolitics and Their Impact on African States

Macharia Munene

United States International University-Africa

Email: machariamunene15@gmail.com

There are, in the 21st Century, two happenings that forced change in the way people and countries relate to each other; they forced geopolitical realignment. These were first the terrorist attacks on the symbols of American power in New York and Washington DC on September 11, 2001. The second happening is the global outbreak of Coronavirus, CORVID 19, early in 2020 at Wuhan, China, which quickly spread to the rest of the world and seemed to target countries and people of means. The United States was at the centre of the two happenings and its decisions affected the rest of the world. African countries were at the decision-making periphery, but not the impact periphery. The two happenings exposed American weakness in terms of public policy readiness, devastated the economy, and increased the amount of self-doubt among the Americans. Other countries lost trust in the United States and its claim to global leadership. As the United States lost credibility, China claimed that position in numerous ways. With time, China became the centre of geopolitical realignment at regional and global levels. Although the United States is playing catch-up to China, both powers are realigning, the impact on African states is immense, both positive and negative.

There is, therefore, serious geopolitical realignment taking place. Smart leaders in various states are looking for their niche in that global realignment. The outbreak of Coronavirus gave countries hard times and exposed their inability to deal with forces beyond themselves. As each struggles to protect perceived interests, inadequate response capabilities partly relate to levels of leadership incompetence, which affects potential realignment. China has, somehow, convinced the rest of the world to pay attention. It has outpaced the United States, which used to behave as if Washington was the centre of the universe.

Several factors explain why China grew as the centre of geopolitical realignment. It has the largest population which translates to a large market for everything and anything. It is the third largest in terms of territory after Russia and Canada. It holds the record for historical longevity as an entity. It was a top maritime power in the 14th and 15th Century before it became complacent and inward

looking in its mistaken belief that it did not need, or could not learn, anything from ‘barbarians’. Becoming a forbidden country as symbolised by the Forbidden City imagery in Beijing, China suffered because white ‘barbarians’ came through the sea, partitioned its coast, and subjected the Chinese to a Century of Humiliation. The narrative on the Century of Humiliation is a constant in Chinese policy making circles.

There is something clever about the Chinese that enables them to penetrate the rest of the world quietly. They are brilliant in self-effacing and stress their weakness even as they flex geopolitical muscles. They study other states in order to determine the mode of engagement. In the process, China emerges as a global force that others have no choice but to acknowledge. As a show of power in geopolitical realignment, President Xi Jinping declared that China had eradicated poverty, a challenge to the rest of the world whose poverty level was increasing. It had reached ‘zero poverty’ while others are far from being near.

Few countries can beat China in exploiting the past to advance current policy. In that context, it likes reminding Third World countries that it too was subjected to European imperialism. The Century of Humiliation that started with the British manufactured Opium War in the 1840s and ended in October 1949 with Mao’s proclamation of the People’s Republic of China at Tiananmen Square is constant in China’s global narrative. Within that narrative are all the bad things that Western powers and Japan did to China which was then liberated by the Communist Party of China. Identifying with the plight of Third World countries gives China leverage and advantage that the *Conceptual West* does not have. ‘African brothers and sisters’, Mao reportedly said, put China at the United Nations. That meant closeness of the global oppressed.

Besides identifying with Third World countries, China beats the *Conceptual West* in other manifestations of power. In contrast to the arrogance, racism, and disregard for global commons that characterises the *Conceptual West*, especially the United States of Donald Trump, China projects itself as concerned with such common challenges as climate change. In this image projection, Xi is the direct opposite of Trump’s global trampling. Inadvertently, Trump’s United States promoted China’s interests by behaving terribly at home and abroad. Compared to the Trump callous imagery, Xi looked reasonable even as he pushed for the acceptance of Chinese

global influence. While Washington trumpeted its arrogance and racism on the world stage, Trump calling Africa toilet, Beijing worked to seem considerate of the interests of other countries. China is efficient, not as costly, and it delivers while the *Conceptual West* dithers, is costly, rarely delivers, and insults.

China's ability to realign the world to its liking is not accidental; it is carefully calculated to take advantage of the blunders by other powers. This started with Mao launching the New China as a global political reality in 1949, made a few mistakes like trying to export revolutions, and then changed to reach out to others. After Mao, Deng Xiaoping pressed for economic reforms, adopting capitalism and calling it 'socialism with Chinese characteristics', but remaining communistic in politics. He advised China to hide power as it moved its tentacles globally. There is also Xi whose grand strategy is to surpass Mao and Deng and any of the current world leaders and to reshape global geopolitics.

Xi aims at doing unto the West what the West did unto China in the Century of Humiliation. The whole thrust of the Belt and Road Initiative, BRI, therefore, is to bring Europe into the Chinese orbit in a two-pronged approach. A high-speed land railway links Xi'an in China to Rotterdam in the Netherlands and Duisburg in Germany. A sea route starting at Fuzhou in China connects to Western Europe through Kenya and the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea, and the Mediterranean Sea. China's success makes the European Union wonder how to link up with the new Biden administration in the United States to counter China's influence.

The subtleness of Chinese global penetration confounds Euro entities. Although China surpassed the economies of the previous "First World", the Chinese still insist that they are part of the Third World. China's global economic success was magnetic to other powers trying to learn the formula for success. African countries also show interest in partaking of Chinese geopolitical magnetism. China seeks two things from Africa, the untapped immense African wealth and geopolitical compatibility. This partly explains the African portion of Xi Jinping's One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative which, although it is comparatively small, appears big where it exists. Thus the African port cities of Dar es Salaam, Mombasa, Lamu, Djibouti, and the new Cairo are all part of the sea "silk road" that starts in China in one end and leads to Europe on the other. Kenya's section of

OBOR, the SGR starting in Mombasa and LAPSETT starting in Lamu, is projected to move westwards to Duala in Cameroon. It is very small in the big China global outward look.

In the geopolitical realignment taking place, Xi is a grand strategist, Trump was not, and the question is whether Biden can match Xi. Biden would have to reverse the Trump damage to the United States, among them being arrogance and racism. Failure to do that would mean letting Xi run geopolitical rings around Biden and continue to realign the world with the United States watching helplessly.

Biden knows he is playing catch-up with China. His team comprising Secretary of State Tony Blinken, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, and CIA Director William J. Burns all believe that China is their biggest headache, not Russia. To them, Russia is not a big threat for it can be handled, its limited military challenge managed, and it can even be moulded to behave the way the Americans would want. The same cannot be said of China which economically outperforms the United States and the European Union and stealthily penetrates every corner of the globe.

Before Biden can confront China, however, he has to undo the damage that his predecessor, Trump inflicted on the United States at home and abroad. Trump allowed China to lead in such crucial issues of global commons as Climate Change and World Health. He ignored coronavirus which led to over 500,000 people dead in the United States. The economy virtually collapsed while Trump watched and even encouraged invasion on Congress on January 6, 2021. The fact that Trump and the Republican Party continue to deny that he lost the election, although narrowly, to Biden undermines Biden's 'America is Back' slogan at the world stage. Since blaming Trump will not help Biden, the focus is on making domestic policy the cornerstone of foreign policy. Sullivan is one of the people who, in September 2020 wrote the blueprint on making middle class America the engine of American revival at home and abroad by increasing support to middleclass productivity. The emphasis, CIA Director Burns wrote, is on "enhancing the productivity of our workforce, investing in education, and reinvigorating research and development in biotechnology, artificial intelligence, nanotechnology, and other key pillars of our economy in the decade ahead."

In trashing Trump's 'America First' doctrine, Biden needs a 'grand strategy' of his own that would be credible beyond the Western mind-frame and match Xi's grand strategy. His team announces to the world that 'America is back' on the world stage and to lead, if only the rest of the world, particularly African countries, would want America's leadership. Biden's foreign policy statements end up being mixtures of 'messianic' streaks tempered by hard realpolitik. This is a common American behaviour; to be realists when facing tough opponents and idealists when bullying countries into compliance. Where American hard interests are concerned, realism will always prevail but where interests are peripheral, idealism will be elevated as an instrument of American policy. Realising that Xi's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) captured world imagination, Biden has responded by declaring that America and the West will outdo China in global infrastructure construction. He has also offered to supply the Third World countries with millions of corona vaccine doses 'without strings attached'. He, however, needs to do more than promise; inherent racism in Western foreign policy garbed in messianic language will need adjustment.

The on-going geopolitical realignment leaves many African states lost as to who of the competing powers, or whether, to follow. They are subjected to decisions made in Beijing, Washington, Moscow, or capitals of other major powers. In general, global giants treat Africans as peripheral, have condescending attitudes toward Africans, and see African states as pods in geopolitical chess games. To them, Africans are dependencies, home of aid and aids, and fertile ground for resource exploitation and denial to rival players. How each African state responds to the geopolitical realignment depends on the quality and amount of intellectual capital, and leadership willingness to confront the changes and create its niche. In turn, that depends on the history and the cultural make-up of the citizenry. The colonial and post-colonial history looms large in African states where leadership mostly remains a colonial construct in the form of neo-colonialism and post-modern colonialism.

Subsequently, among the questions that arise is whether African countries will have a common approach or take a non-aligned position in the Sino-American feud. Given internal continental divisions based on colonial experiences and identities, this might be difficult. In addition, in its effort to regain lost influence as the leader, the United States will press African states to distance

themselves from China with promises of development aid and assorted sanctions in case of a country not heeding advice. It is then up to the state concerned to weigh the likely material and moral benefits and losses in deciding how to react to Western pressure. In doing so, each country should be aware of the possible application of the ‘shock doctrine’ in fulfilling Biden’s ‘messianic’ dream of leading the world to accept the American way. In the past, some countries were treated to the ‘shock doctrine’ in effort to effect regime change.

Several African states are repositioning themselves and have three factors to consider. First, the leadership in each country worries about internal political dynamics and how to contain challenges to power from ambitious politicians. Such operators are often in league with foreign funded civil society, NGOs, and global institutions. Second are the interests of neighbours, whether compatible or incompatible, that affect perceived national interests. These include personalities, aspirations, and foibles of the leaders that compete for regional visibility instead of cooperating. The internal and neighbor factors set the environment for extra-continental involvement in local and regional matters. Third is the factor of extra-continental interests where tools of operation tend to be the corporations and organisations that de-border countries and each tool acts as an agent of its home country’s global interests. They constitute what is increasingly considered ‘minilateralism’ as opposed to unilateralism and multilateralism.

Kenya is likely to benefit from the emerging geopolitical realignment in part because it is aware of what is going on. It is aware of the interests of big powers operating through non-state actor proxies. The proxies have direct links with, and act for, other states in the guise of providing private security, issuing financial dictates, global communication systems, criticism of state activities, or speaking for “the people.” They all operate with geopolitical mind-frames of the home or sponsoring country, not that of Kenya.

In looking for its niche in the global realignment, Kenya has to contend with its geopolitical realities that put it at the top of calculations by other countries. The first reality was that it had a “revolutionary” anti-colonial image to maintain which attracted many players, continental and extra-continental, hoping to use Kenya to influence the entire Eastern Africa. The second reality is that it is a maritime country and an economic gateway to landlocked neighbours. The third reality

is that it is of geo-political interest to its close neighbours who tend to experience political volatility. These include Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Eastern Congo, South Sudan, parts of Ethiopia, Somalia, and even Tanzania. To such countries, stability in Kenya translates to sense of comfort because it is the place to run to when things go wrong elsewhere. They all have interest in Kenya's stability either as the gateway to the sea, or as the strongest regional political economy.

Although Kenya appears to be top in the geo-strategic and geo-political calculations of other countries and has managed internal conflicts relatively well enough to become a regional mini-power, it still has troublesome neighbours, particularly Somalia, to worry about. Somalia, a willing proxy of extra-continental activities in Eastern Africa, pushes its irredentism into the sea, forces Kenya to pay attention to maritime security, and remains a haven of such terror groups as the Al-Shabaab.

In pushing its interests, Kenya has limited weight, but it is not helpless. Although it cannot exercise the *prerogative of the mighty*, it can engage in acts of *symbolic toughness* when confronting unreasonable demands. It is in exercising *symbolic toughness* that the quality of a country's intellectual capital becomes useful since it has to out argue and out-perform powers with many resources. Kenya's successful campaign for the non-permanent position at the United Nations Security Council, UNSC, is one example of finding a niche in geopolitical realignment.

The global geopolitical realignment is a reality and each country tries to adjust so as not to lose. China leads the realignment, with the United States in hot pursuit to reclaim lost glory. African states are followers in the realignment and have different capacities in finding their niche. Many will remain as pods in the global chess game and lose, but some will push and have a respectable positioning in geopolitics. Insisting on the primacy of their interests in the realignment is the challenge facing each African country. They have no choice because, in geopolitics, each country is on its own.