

Reviews

The Rise of the BRICS in Africa: The Geopolitics of South–South Relations

by PÁDRAIG CARMODY

London: Zed Press, 2013. Pp. 192. £16.99 (pbk)

doi:10.1017/S0022278X14000263

The book by Pádraig Carmody is an important contribution in the study of the rise of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS). This remains an under-researched and under-theorised area, in an era of declining power of Western countries.

This is a hugely ambitious study that looks at the history of the BRICS countries' engagement in Africa. What the book has succeeded in doing is to demonstrate the changing character of the BRICS countries' foreign economic strategies against the backdrop of Africa's own rise. After going through the introduction, the reader is likely to be left with the impression that the book devotes a large space to the discussion of the BRICS as a collective grouping, but this is not the case as each of the BRICS countries is treated individually.

The book does not sufficiently problematise the BRICS formation as an arbitrary and socially constructed grouping, beginning with Goldman Sachs's speculative research to the establishment of the diplomatic forum amongst the political elites of these countries. It also makes strong assertions without robust evidence provided.

For example, the introduction points out that 'the influence of policy ideas, prescriptions, and practices flowing from international financial institutions to states in Africa is waning, while those from China and other BRICS powers is increasing under the current round of global economic restructuring' (p. 9). The impression this leaves is that there is some material and ideational de-coupling between Africa and global institutions that are influenced by Western powers. The rise in power and influence of the BRICS is taken for granted in this work, despite the recent negative developments in these countries' economies, in particular with respect to economic slowdown and uncertainty over growth paths in most of the BRICS countries.

In the case of China's engagement strategies, Zambia is a chosen case-study, with focus on how Chinese socio-economic engagements are expressed on the ground. The notion of Chinese flexipower, which entails the use of both hard power and soft power in the development of a special economic zone in Zambia, is used to explain the unique nature of Chinese engagement.

This section makes reference to acculturation of soft power of the Chinese actors, using the example of the Chinese-built hospitals in Zambia, in particular the Sino-Zambian Friendship Hospital in the Kitwe copperbelt as a soft power complement to hard power projects such as the Chambishi copper smelter. It is not clear how this hospital is used to project soft power.

On South Africa, the focus is on discussing the expansion activities of various South African companies into the region, from retail to ICT to media. Notions of South Africa as a sub-imperial state and its leadership role in various multilateral institutions in the continent is well documented in the literature, leaving the book with very little value to add in deepening our understanding of the interplay of South Africa's political and commercial power in the rest of the African continent.

On India, large-scale Indian agro-investments abroad are, according to the book, a result of declining groundwater tables in northern and central India, and a looming decline in agricultural productivity. Here there are clear domestic economic imperatives that drive the behaviour of India's agro-corporates and their expansion into Africa. The book details India's agricultural companies that are active in land deals in Ethiopia, and these total 35.

India's case is highly focused. It deals in an area that is rarely covered in the literature about India's engagement with Africa. An important point that the section highlights is the fact that African governments are not just passive victims but active participants, if not facilitators, of 'land grabs'.

On Russia, the book traces the acceleration of Russia's re-emergence to Putin's era. The section manages to capture incisively the different phases that Russia went through: from being a superpower, to being an aid recipient, and to being an aid donor again. The author argues that Russia has a preoccupation with Great Power status or international prestige, and Africa is a critical outlet to express this. Further, the section makes the point that Russia is carving its own space in global affairs, has given up on trying to be accepted by the West, and sees itself as a centre in its own right.

The author gives little attention to the ideas Russia may be holding regarding the reform of the global governance mechanism, and the awkward position of projecting itself as a bearer of an alternative power pole, yet seems content with maintaining the status quo in respect of the UN Security Council (UNSC).

Brazil's foreign policy, as the book argues, was lent strong weight by President Lula da Silva who, according to the author, helped to reorient the country towards multilateralism, regional integration and South-South cooperation. The section points out that Africa is an important market for Brazilian goods. There is very little that is distinctive about this: Africa is an important market for many other major actors in the world, not just the BRICS.

Various other companies from the West, including consumer goods, energy, automotive and infrastructure companies are actively involved in the African continent to catch the wave of its promising rise. Further, Brazil's strategy in Africa remains limited to the Lusophone countries, and the country has shallow footprints elsewhere.

While overall the book helps to lift a veil on political and foreign policy developments within the BRICS, in their own regions, and on how the BRICS countries project their identities on the global stage, there are very little points of connection that are drawn between the BRICS countries. As such, these countries are observed in their individuality, and with limited insights on where

they converge or diverge in their shared identity as members of the BRICS Forum.

MZUKISI QOBO
University of Pretoria

Governance for Development in Africa: Solving Collective Action Problems

by DAVID BOOTH and DIANA CAMMACK

London: Zed Books, 2013. Pp. 176. £16.99 (pbk)

doi:10.1017/S0022278X14000275

This timely book by David Booth and Diana Cammack packs an impressive amount into 139 pages. One of its main achievements is to synthesise key elements of what some have termed the ‘new mainstream’ in development thinking, which calls into question the tired ‘good governance’ agenda that has underpinned much development policy thinking for over two decades. There is more to the book than this, however. It presents a considerable body of empirical academic work emerging from the ‘Africa Power and Politics Programme’ led by the Overseas Development Institute from 2007–12. Thematically, while one eye remains on the question of economic growth (with references to the programme’s other work on this issue), the book is primarily focused on the provision of a range of public goods including maternal health and local security. As such it is admirable in scope, managing to link broader debates on the political drivers of economic development with a focus on local solutions to pressing community challenges.

The strength of the book lies in the concise framing of its core thesis regarding the failure of ‘principal-agent’ modes of thinking about blockages to development, and the superiority of approaches that conceive of these instead as collective action problems. There is a gratifying simplicity in the way that the zeal to reform corruption-ridden bureaucracies and the vogue for ‘active citizenship’ are presented as two sides (the supply-side and demand-side) of the same ‘principal-agent’ coin. Both of these approaches to governance, the authors argue, misguidedly assume benevolent, development-driven principals let down by their (bureaucratic or political) agents. Some caricaturing of these perspectives is forgivable in such a short treatise. The book aptly highlights the role of ‘politically-induced policy incoherence’ in explaining why both approaches tend to fall short. At the same time, sustained attention is devoted to cases of relative success in collective action for development; a commendable feature given the prevalence of negative analyses dedicated primarily to explaining why governance reforms and development programmes don’t work.

Despite these strengths, the argument is not quite fully threaded together. The relationship between principal-agent relations (or indeed state-society relations) and collective action problems, while alluded to, is not adequately explored. Relatedly, there is a lack of in-depth engagement with theories of collective action in the book. Even in a short piece, a little more theoretical depth would be beneficial given that so much is staked on the collective action idea. A further problem is that the analysis of elite collective action successes sits somewhat awkwardly with explanations of successes at a local, community level. The relationship between the two is somewhat unclear, largely because the