

Is Africa becoming more powerful? A positive story – but a few tricky issues

Karlijn Muiderman

Is Africa becoming more powerful in the world order? At a small expert meeting at this Knowledge Platform, Jakkie Cilliers of the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) spoke about Africa's progress towards becoming a more powerful global player. Cilliers supports the current discourse of a rising Africa, but claims it is being disrupted by a lack of good governance, high inequality and population growth. Now it is important to discuss how valuable Cilliers' forecasts are when the future is so unpredictable.

Dr Jakkie Cilliers, co-founder of the Institute for Security Studies, recently presented his latest publication, an ISS study entitled ['Power and Influence in Africa'](#), at the Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law. The book, which Cilliers co-authored, forecasts the changing power capabilities of the 'Big Five' in Africa: Algeria, Egypt, Ethiopia, Nigeria and South Africa. Sandra Pellegrom of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ivan Briscoe of the Clingendael Institute gave their comments, and Jort Hemmer (also from Clingendael) moderated the discussion. The study examines several models, of which the Hillebrand-Herman-Moyer Index is most prominently reviewed. According to this index, the Big Five have the largest current or forecasted capabilities based on data from 1960 onwards and projections to the year 2040.

The study supports the current discourse on a rising Africa. Unlike most traditional models, which measure 'hard power' with indicators of economic, demographic and military strength, it incorporates indicators of 'soft power', including wealth, trade, aid and investment flows, technological capabilities, governmental capacity and human capital. The researchers argue that integrating these soft measurements enable better statements to be made about global power relations.

The capabilities of the Big Five

Cillier says his measurements are a tool to think about the future based on knowledge of the past, and to enable necessary decisions to be made. They show that each country will progress in a very different way (see table 1). Surprisingly, **Ethiopia** is expected to become a powerful player, and is now being hailed as an African Lion, by analogy to the Asian Tigers.

Although it will be much more powerful, Ethiopia will also continue to ‘punch above its weight’, which is where soft power comes into play. Ethiopia benefits from a perception of power by not having been colonized and as Africa’s peacekeeper, with the seat of the African Union in its capital. But the conflict-torn country still had the lowest GDP per capita on the continent in 2014. **Nigeria** has the largest economic and power potential. Its economy is expanding; it is now worth \$525 billion and is expected to grow to \$4.2 trillion by 2040. This could be even higher if the country had a coherent foreign policy and did not have the highest rate of corruption of the Big Five. It currently ranks 136 out of 175 countries on the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index.

Table 1: Current capability and trends for power projection among the Big Five

Country	Current capability	Future trend	Current power projection
Ethiopia	Low	↑	Above its weight
Nigeria	High	↑	Below its weight
South Africa	High	↓	Above its weight
Egypt	High	↓	Below its weight
Algeria	Modest	↓	Below its weight

South Africa is the voice of Africa at the United Nations, the African Union, the G20 and the BRICS, which also allows it to punch above its weight. But the country is stuck in a middle-income trap, with rising wages in the manufacturing sector making it less competitive for investors. Additionally, its economy is declining and it still has high levels of crime, inequality, unemployment and poverty. **Egypt’s** priorities are seen to lie elsewhere than Africa. It has a greater Arab focus: the Arab League headquarters are in Cairo, and it has a long history of promoting Arab nationalism, co-founding the Non-Aligned Movement and supporting independence movements globally. But it is still a powerful country and it has the most foreign embassies of the Big Five. **Algeria**, too, is a powerful country: it has the highest military expenditure in Africa, the legacy of a brutal war to gain independence from France (1954-1962), but it is now stuck in stasis. Politically, it suffers from an ailing and elderly president; economically, it suffers from ‘Dutch disease’ (natural resources strengthen its currency, making exports too expensive) and the ‘resource curse’ (limited diversification and employment); and militarily, it requires a heavy presence along its borders to protect them from its tumultuous neighbours. It’s future does not look bright.

No longer a lost continent, but there are troubles ahead

So will there be a new model of inclusive development and good governance in Africa? Asking this question, Ivan Briscoe called into doubt the usefulness of making generalized statements, while reality is much more uncertain. Briscoe mentioned issues that affect human development, including the urbanization of rural areas and climate change. In reply to a warning from the floor/a member of the audience?? that Ethiopia's projected progress consists of bubbles that will burst along the way, Cilliers said that African countries have many governmental shortcomings but that the study identifies a general trend. But this does raise the question whether it is these deficits that determine whether a country is heading towards success or decay. Take, for example, the massive population growth on the continent. It can be seen as increasing Africa's power: more people mean more economic activity. But when there is a lack of decent jobs, especially for young people, this can increase instability and make a country prone to conflict, as we have seen in Arab Spring countries.

The ISS study warns that forecasting comes with uncertainties and progress is troubled by a toxic mixture of poverty and inequality, religious radicalization, poor governance and high levels of corruption. The path of development is messy: there is a wide gap between the high growth levels (compared to global standards) and low access to political and economic systems, which frequently leads to instability. So, under these circumstances and with such uncertainties, how can these forecasting exercises benefit the political debate? The study does not answer this question, while recommendations for making decisions on how to guide this future path would be useful, especially because of the many barriers along the way. At the national level, countries are plagued by institutional fragility, inequality and insecurities. Can the study serve as advice to these five countries on how to improve their policies and advance political and economic access? Or can it perhaps be a warning to all African countries or to countries worldwide? At regional level, spill-over effects from conflicts in nearby states can affect a country's stability and economy. And while its neighbours may benefit from a country's increase in power, they may also see it as a threat. At international level, foreign governments partner up with countries when it is in their economic or diplomatic interest. Would it be wiser for them to partner up with the Big Five and advance their global power potential and the African economy as a whole, or should they promote inclusive development in all countries? Sandra Pellegrom's Ministry of Foreign Affairs for example mainly partners up with governments of other countries than the Big Five, like Tanzania and Angola. These interests of national and international partners influence reality and should be taken into account.

So can we build on the forecasts in the ISS study, see them as representative for the continent, and use them to guide our policies? It is difficult to see where these countries are headed, and

how unexpected shocks might redirect their courses. A report with predictions can be proven wrong, but can also serve as a catalyst for addressing these tricky issues and advance the debate towards political, economic and social inclusivity. Hopefully the ISS will continue to play a part in that debate.