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Publisher: Routledge

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Journal of the Indian Ocean Region

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rior20>

New engagement: contemporary Australian foreign policy towards Africa

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Published online: 24 Mar 2014.



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To cite this article: Daniel Baldino (2014) New engagement: contemporary Australian foreign policy towards Africa, *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, 10:1, 119-121, DOI: [10.1080/19480881.2014.896508](https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2014.896508)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2014.896508>

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BOOK REVIEW

New engagement: contemporary Australian foreign policy towards Africa, edited by David Mickler and Tanya Lyons Carlton, VIC, Melbourne University Press, 2013, 264 pp., \$59.99 (Paperback), ISBN 9780522862614; \$49.99 (E-book), ISBN 9780522862638

Africa has long been a discernibly enigmatic topic for scholars. On the one hand, it is portrayed as a continent in chaos filled with humanitarian alarm. Alternatively, others tend to view Africa as a land of progress, geopolitical importance and commercial opportunity. The book *New engagement: Contemporary Australian foreign policy towards Africa* is characterised by a more sanguine orientation and an appeal to Australia's enlightened self-interest. Stereotypes such as Africa as a 'mono-cultural economy' or as a 'basket case rather than a bread basket' are also compellingly disputed. Additionally, the book offers a first-rate starting point to help to unpack the logic and momentum behind Australia's new-found 'discovery' of Africa as an expanded foreign policy priority. The importance of Africa is highlighted due to a range of strategic issues, economic interests, human rights concerns, technological innovations and political openings.

The book's structure is centred on two central components. First, it aims to address the key contexts for contemporary Australian foreign policy (and other international players) towards Africa – including perceptions, interests and values and competition for influence. Secondly, it explores particular dimensions of greater Australia–Africa engagement including challenges in development policy and co-ordination and ongoing national security concerns for Australia. In addition, the format of book offers a high-quality collection of diverse contributors, many of whom are African or have African backgrounds. Targeted topics range across a variety of topical issues, such as political and social responsibilities and 'altruism' in foreign policy to the political upheavals that are represented in the people-power movements of the 'Arab Spring' to the significance of the 2009–11 JSCFADT Inquiry into Australia's Relationship with the Countries of Africa.

The principal scaffold of the book appears very much about enhancing strategic partnerships. Such engagement is characterised, in part, by amplifying assistance programmes and capturing Africa's unfilled potential in business circles and related commercial and entrepreneurial initiatives. Further, the notion of helping to bolster Africa's capacity does capture the spirit of theories such as the 'democratic peace thesis' articulated by Michael Doyle – that more ballots will equal less bullets – as well as more popular literature that highlights the benefits of good governance alongside the risks stemming from the breakdown of fragile or 'failed' states. With a general emphasis on the new spirit of optimism about Africa, a state's internal characteristics are fundamentally viewed as a critical facilitating factor in explaining the causes of violent-conflict phenomena, sustainable development and economic growth.

The book therefore does not act to comprehensively illustrate the central arguments of sceptics such as dependency theorists – who see that underdevelopment is intimately connected with the expansion of the industrialised capitalist countries, and that development and underdevelopment are different aspects of the same universal process. With Australia pictured in a stronger position to use its power and influence to ensure the fullest benefits of integration into Africa and foreign markets, in this sense, those looking for a radical or a hard-edged focus on forms of neo-colonial exploitation and how global, neo-liberal markets undermine African security will be somewhat disappointed.

Several chapters of course do identify the challenges of effectively and appropriately managing an African landscape with vast growth potential. Nikola Pijovic and Geoffrey Hawker in particular, pick up on a track-record of ‘one-dimensional’ trade and investment activity and the risk of short-lived or inequitable economic relationships between the haves and have-nots. Additionally, they promote the desirability of robust regulatory frameworks and a greater corporate responsibility in social and environmental investments. But many cited methods to ‘soften’ the negative impacts of mining and deal with the ‘resource curse’ appear to remain hostage to the altar of private-sector efficiency. The goal to improve governance and accountability sits alongside the push for greater market efficiency – restructuring that is often linked to systems of only voluntary compliance, weak or non-existent enforcement mechanisms, flimsy incentives for honest trading and patterns of continued exploitation, coercion and cronyism. So while the book clearly states that Australia should seek to avoid being seen as just another aggressive ‘resources exploiter’, identified solutions to eliminating such image-problems still largely rest the primacy of globalised free-market forces, the intellectual prism of *laissez faire* and a faith in ‘open economy’ mechanisms such as the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI).

Yet, a number of critics have questioned the ability of mechanisms such as the EITI, with its emphasis on full disclosure of the management of revenues, to mitigate problems such as corruption. Ivar Kolstad and Arne Wiig (2009, p. 1), for example, argue that transparency is insufficient on its own, and suggest that the emphasis ‘of the EITI on revenues rather than on expenditures appears misplaced’. Critically, the EITI reveals only how revenue is accumulated rather than how it is allocated and distributed – for instance, whether revenues are then being spent on areas such as wider social development. Further, it completely fails to cover concerns aligned with the actual sustainable development of these natural resources. And in dealing with the use and misuse of resources, others – such as Fenster (2005–2006, p. 885) – caution about the hype supporting superior transparency as a sort of magic bullet: ‘Transparency theory’s laws result from a simplistic model of linear communication that assumes that information, once set free from the state that creates it, will produce an informed, engaged public that will hold officials accountable.’

Another limitation of the book is that, while it is right in stating that Australia had been a relative ‘latecomer’ to Africa’s rise, the project does remain very much a Rudd-centric exercise. The book’s orientation is overwhelmingly linked to diplomatic and other pro-Africa initiatives during the short-lived Rudd era: for example, items such as Rudd’s push for the Security Council, his piloting of a parliamentary inquiry about Africa and his Defence White Paper, which is praised for giving Africa more direct attention and so on. It is clearly Rudd’s conduct, rather than Gillard’s, that is seen as the crux of fresh ideas about Africa.

As such, many of the book's recommendations and elevations of Australia foreign policy towards Africa remain precariously attached to the Rudd legacy. For instance, Mickler's hope that Australia should use its influence inherent in its 2012–2014 term on the UN Security Council to, in part, 'develop a deeper knowledge of the causes and consequences of insecurity in Africa' (p. 150) does appear much more ambivalent with the arrival of a new government. Of course, in January 2014, the Abbott Government further revealed it would slash foreign aid by more than \$100 million by mid-year and concentrate budget allocations towards the Asia-Pacific region. Such belt-tightening will translate to African programmes being cut in half – in a region that still has the lowest human development indicators in the world.

In this confused picture, such a policy announcement to cut aid to Africa might connect with the book's broader visible frustration at a historically ad hoc and disjointed approach to Africa that lacks a predictable and consistent set of parameters, philosophies and programmes. Rather than Africa being the 'new frontier' for Australia, such budget re-positioning could arguably be reflective of an ongoing and unsolved sense of confusion and maybe apathy about how to best characterise, and build relationships with, African nations – particularly beyond rudimentary commercial affairs. And politicians are not the only culprits. Even key Australian foreign policy textbooks and related security-themed works in recent years are guilty of having a recurring blind-spot in not giving too much attention to Africa (p. 7–9). It also remains true that policymakers have struggled and arguably failed to build a consistent national consensus around the importance of Africa. Such a task will inevitably have to coexist in a setting in which an increasingly complex Asia-Pacific region will remain the instinctive spotlight for the foreseeable future.

Despite the book's constricted economic and political concentration, it does present a valid and stimulating articulation of African revival, 'mutual benefits' and indicators of closer and longer-term Australian engagement. It provides an admirable contribution that offers a variety of solid foundations to help spur and/or strengthen future empirical and policy-orientated perspectives. Each of its 11 chapters contains a cogent and detailed analysis of tangible reputational challenges for Australia as well as inherent tensions in areas such as development, commerce, security and governance. The book also makes good use of academic surveys and statistical publications. Overall, it is a book of scholarly and policy relevance that adds a much-needed dimension and weighty contribution to contemporary debate about Australian foreign policy towards Africa and why Africa should no longer remain the forgotten continent.

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