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Between Jakarta and Geneva: why Abbott needs to view Africa as a great opportunity

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Australia’s engagement with Africa during the Rudd and Gillard governments was primarily driven by the national interest, which revolved around three issues: humanitarianism, support for mining corporations, and the United Nations Security Council seat. This article argues that there is a need for the Abbott government to retain the same depth and breadth of relationships with Africa. It is in the interest of both Australia and African states for the Australian government to remain committed to humanitarian objectives and to help African countries meet some of their Millennium Development Goal targets. Moreover, the continued support of Australian mining corporations operating in Africa, especially through the training of African policy makers in mining governance, is good for both Africa and Australia. Finally, Australia’s continued success in multilateral diplomacy will depend on support from all parts of the world, including Africa. Australia’s success at the multilateral level will, in turn, result in bilateral benefits in other regions, including the Asia-Pacific.

Keywords: Abbott; Africa; governance; Millennium Development Goals; mining; policy

Australia may have been a latecomer to Africa’s rise, but ... we were there when it mattered for South Africa and Zimbabwe—and more recently Australia has been there for South Sudan and for the people living in the Horn of Africa. Most importantly of all—we are there now. Regularly engaging with the African Union, diplomatic relations with 51 countries ... and through our aid program, which has more than tripled since 2008 (Rudd 2013).

I contend that while China, Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, India and other countries in our region will be primary drivers of economic activity for many years to come, we should not focus too narrowly on the potential of the Asian Century. We should be outward looking and seek opportunities wherever they exist (Bishop 2012).
Introduction

At the height of what has been described as Australia’s ‘new engagement’ with Africa (Mickler and Lyons 2013) between 2008 and 2013, some critics claimed that relations between Australia and various African states revolved around the two-year United Nations Security Council (UNSC) seat, which Australia won in October 2012 (Benson and Kenny 2012). By associating the improved Australia–Africa relations largely with Canberra’s desire to win the UNSC seat, these critics assumed that the relationship would be short-lived. Even the then opposition leader (and now prime minister) Tony Abbott’s claims on several occasions that there would be ‘more Jakarta and less Geneva’ in his foreign policy were implicitly driven by the assumption that Australia’s commitment to Africa would not last long (Packham and Massola 2011). I believe that the UNSC seat played an important role in Australia’s ‘new engagement’ with Africa, but it was only one pillar among several. Therefore, focusing on this single pillar as if it were the sole driver of the ‘new engagement’ has the potential to distort Australia’s broad-based national interests in Africa.

The aim of this article is to highlight the significance of the other bases of the Australia–Africa engagement and to argue that Australia’s national interests in Africa go beyond the UNSC seat. While Australia does not have, and does not seek, as much involvement in Africa as it does in the Asia-Pacific region, its interests in Africa include the provision of humanitarian assistance, the leveraging of Africa for multilateral diplomacy, and support for Australian-based mining corporations. Indeed, for decades, Australia’s policies towards Africa were designed to facilitate humanitarian assistance and good governance, and were supported by the two major political parties—the Liberal Party of Australia and the Australian Labor Party (ALP)—from the 1970s. Australia’s promotion of human rights and good governance in Africa has partly demonstrated its credentials as a middle power that seeks to be recognised as a good international citizen (Linklater 1992). In the six years to 2014, Canberra increased its engagement with African states, with the result that Australia appears to have become far better understood in Africa than at any other time previously. Australia’s ‘new engagement’ with African states has also reflected its keen interest to support about 200 Australian mining corporations that operate in Africa. These corporations help expand Australia’s trade with some African states while also generating jobs and prosperity for Australians.

It was the ALP-led government that undertook the deepening of engagement with African states from 2008 to 2013, while Abbott, as opposition leader, sought to reduce aid to Africa. Abbott is now prime minister and, given his previous lack of interest in engagement with Africa, coupled with the decision in May 2014 to reduce Official Development Assistance to sub-Saharan Africa in the 2014–15 budget by 23.3 percent, from AU$243.8 million to AU$186.9 million, there is reason to ask whether his government might continue to wind back the achievements of the past few years (DFAT 2014). The Abbott
government has also reversed the decision, which the ALP-led government made, to join the African Development Bank. I argue against a radical change of direction and suggest that the Abbott government needs to maintain a strong engagement with Africa. The principal reason for preferring this position is that the former prime ministers, Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard, who shaped the policy between 2008 and 2013, were convinced that Australia’s engagement with African states served the national interests mentioned above. These interests have not changed since Prime Minister Abbott assumed power in September 2013. Therefore, notwithstanding the recent reduction in the foreign aid program, the Abbott government could maintain the engagement with African states as part of promoting Australia’s national interest.

The remainder of this article is divided into three sections. The first illustrates how Australia’s engagement with African states under the ALP promoted the Australian national interest, while at the same time helping Africans meet some of their political, economic and social needs. In other words, the provision of humanitarian assistance is an integral part of the national interest. The second section examines the politico-economic context in Africa and shows how Australia’s continued engagement would serve the interests of both Australia and Africa. The third section explains Australia’s role in the UNSC and shows why it needs continued African support to pursue other important multilateral interests successfully.

The national interest and humanitarianism in Africa

Recent publications on Australia’s foreign policy towards African states have come to at least two broad conclusions. One is that the policy is driven by self-interest, while the other is that Australia’s engagement has made a difference in Africa (Lyons 2012; Makinda 2013; Mickler 2012). If Australia’s national interest was not drastically altered following the September 2013 election, there is little reason for the Abbott government to change direction substantially. While there is no single definition of the national interest (Camilleri 2003), Morgenthau (1967, 8) described it in terms of power, but he pointed out that its meaning is not ‘fixed once and for all’. He claimed that ‘the kind of interest that determines ‘political action in a particular period of history’ depends on ‘the political and cultural context within which foreign policy [was] formulated’ (Morgenthau 1967, 8–9). Thus, in general terms, the national interest is historically contingent.

The Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT 2003, vii) defined the national interest in a 2003 White Paper as ‘the security and prosperity of Australia and Australians’. DFAT (2003, xviii) further claimed that the national interest could be understood broadly to include humanitarian assistance, as well as the promotion of ‘good governance, human rights and development’. According to the DFAT White Paper, the Australian government believes that the ‘improvement of governance around the world can help create
an environment that contributes to the security and prosperity of Australia’
(ibid.). More recently, a report for the Australian government entitled
Independent Review of Aid Effectiveness, prepared by a panel led by Sandy
Hollway (hereafter the Hollway review), conceptualised the national interest to
cover ‘economic, security and foreign policy interests; from the commercial
interests of individual companies, to the safety of Australian citizens and
Australia’s international image and reputation’ (Hollway et al. 2012, 105). The
various claims by policy makers about the national interest imply that the
national interest encompasses much of what Australia has done in Africa
since 2008.

The objective of Australia’s Official Development Assistance program is
partly to assist African states in their efforts to meet some of their Millennium
Development Goals (MDGs) and tackle other problems in sectors in which
‘Australia has expertise and experience, and is best able to make a difference’,
such as agriculture and food security, water and sanitation, maternal and child
health, public policy, and mining services (JSCFADT 2012, 41–76). However, I
contend that Australia’s primary objective in Africa is not to help Africans, but
to promote its own image as a good international citizen and pursue other
national interests, which include assistance to the Australian-based mining
corporations. Support for the mining sector is a bipartisan goal, which the
Abbott government is expected to pursue. To the extent that Australia’s foreign
policy towards Africa revolves around the provision of aid and the promotion of
Australia’s mining interests, this section briefly explains these two areas of
policy. Australia’s desire to leverage Africa for multilateral diplomacy, and to
win a UNSC seat, will be considered in a later section.

The Australian aid program in Africa partly reflects Australia’s evolving
national identity, which, in turn, tells us how Australia’s past and present have
shaped its future aspirations. It is about Australia’s self-image and its role in the
world as a whole (Makinda 2014). Therefore, the Africa aid program needs to
be placed in the context of Australia’s historical provision of aid to developing
countries, which started with the Colombo Plan in the 1950s and has been
driven by an assessment of Australia’s strategic, political and economic interests.
Given space constraints, I will highlight only two initiatives to illustrate the
manner in which Australian aid policy towards Africa has been constructed: the
1984 Jackson report and the 2012 Hollway review. These and similar reports,
including the Simons review entitled One Clear Objective: Poverty Reduction
through Sustainable Development (Simons, Hart, and Walsh 1997), represent a
particular ideational framework, through which successive Australian govern-
ments have viewed Africa since the mid 1980s.

The 1984 Report of the Committee to Review the Australian Overseas Aid
Program (hereafter the Jackson report, after Gordon Jackson, the committee’s
chair) proposed an eligibility framework for foreign aid (Jackson 1984). At the
top was the Asia-Pacific region, followed by Papua New Guinea and the Pacific
and Indian Ocean islands. China and India came in the third category, while
Africa was placed in the fourth. As one critic argued at the time: ‘The stated reasons for the consigning of Africa to category four were essentially that Australian bilateral aid was unlikely to be cost-effective in Africa, or sufficient in scale to make any worthwhile contribution’ (Goldsworthy 1985). Gordon Jackson (1985, 13) maintained that: ‘an aid program can serve three ends: the humanitarian one of bettering the lot of people less fortunate than ourselves; and the two more self-interested of strategic and economic benefit to Australia’.

Jackson suggested three other guidelines to go with his recommendations. The first was that if a conflict emerged between the needs of the aid recipients and Australia’s national interests, ‘the interests of the aided should prevail’ (Jackson 1985, 13). The second guideline was that: ‘forms of aid which assist real development are to be preferred to those which give only transitory relief’ (Jackson 1985, 13). The third guideline was that: ‘whatever other considerations are taken into account, Australian aid should always be given effectively and efficiently’. There is no evidence of the guidelines having been upheld in relation to Africa. Moreover, following the Jackson report, Australia closed its diplomatic missions in Ghana and Tanzania, with the mission in Ghana only reopening in 2004 following a surge in mining interests. The contradictions in the Jackson report resulted in Australia reducing, rather than increasing, aid to Africa. The Jackson report’s recommendations are an example of what the Abbott government should avoid in its dealings with Africa.

From the mid 1980s until 2008–9, Australian government committees on overseas aid recommended a focus on the Asia-Pacific region and a move away from Africa. Their reports also argued that aid should be effective, but the term ‘effective’ appeared to convey shifting meanings. Sometimes it meant a policy that was capable of advancing Australia’s national interest, while at other times it referred to a policy that could lead directly to the alleviation of poverty in the recipient country. For example, the Simons review, One Clear Objective, argued that: ‘the objective of the Australian aid program should be to assist developing countries to reduce poverty through sustained economic and social development’ (Simons, Hart, and Walsh 1997, 12). In response to the Simons review, the former Australian aid agency, the Australian Agency for International Development, claimed that the aim of aid was ‘to advance Australia’s national interest by assisting developing countries reduce poverty and achieve sustainable development’ (AusAID 1997, 16).

The most recent aid-related report with major implications for Africa is the 2012 Hollway review, which, among other things, has pointed out the need to separate the national interest from humanitarianism. It has highlighted a need for careful analysis if humanitarian objectives are to take precedence over the national interest. It argues that if clarity is not prioritised, there is a risk of oversimplification and confusion about the role of the national interest. The Hollway review maintains that the national interest should never take the place of the alleviation of poverty, but the two will sometimes be complementary. The national interest should be principally apparent in the geographical allocation of
Foreign policy, security and economic interests should figure mainly in focusing Australia’s geographical effort (Hollway et al. 2012, 8). The Hollway review claims that: ‘choosing aid activities because of specific national interests is, and should remain, the exception’. It also argues that: ‘Australian industry will benefit from the aid expansion, but it should be on the basis of a level playing field and not preferential treatment.’

However, the Hollway review has also emphasised many of the sentiments contained in the 1984 Jackson report. It provides an aid eligibility scheme, through which the Australian government is expected to allocate resources. The three criteria against which countries or regions are measured in the Hollway review are: ‘poverty, national interest, and Australia’s capacity to make a significant difference’ (Hollway et al. 2012, 124). Countries such as Indonesia, which score highly against all three criteria, receive the greatest proportion of aid. Sub-Saharan Africa only scores highly against one of the criteria: poverty. The national interest is rated ‘medium’, but this is partly because the Hollway review defines the national interest in a relatively narrow sense. According to the Hollway review, Australia’s capacity to make a significant difference in Africa is rated ‘low’. Several factors influence this rating, including: the strength of partner governments; the degree of ‘donor-crowding’; Australia’s relationship with—and diplomatic reach in—the region; donor accountability for the funding received; whether or not Australia has the capacity and expertise to offer what is needed; and Australia’s desire to ‘stay the course’ (Hollway et al. 2012, 107). The Hollway review also argues that aid has to meet at least two criteria. It ‘must be sustainable over the long term, and this means that it must be firmly based on a public consensus’ (3). Furthermore, it argues that ‘aid is not just about efficient delivery of services to clients. It is an expression of human values. It is about helping people living in deplorable conditions to overcome poverty’ (ibid.).

The Hollway review’s framework divides states and regions into five ‘focus’ categories, with the countries in the top two categories allocated the lion’s share of the aid program. Sub-Saharan Africa is deemed to be category three. In the 2013–14 financial year, Australia’s aid to Africa increased to AU$243.8 million per year. This reflected a substantial increase over the previous five years, considering that it was only AU$75 million in 2005–6 and AU$116 million in 2008–9 (Negin 2013, 133). The Hollway review recommends that most of this aid be delivered through partnerships with multilateral institutions and non-governmental organisations with wide representation on the ground, owing to the perception that Australia has a limited ability to effect change. If the Hollway review’s recommendations were implemented in full, Australia would reduce its visibility in Africa, which would, in turn, diminish Australia’s influence on the continent. A diminution in Australia’s influence in Africa could then harm the national interest.

Despite recommendations from official government reports, the ALP-led governments under prime ministers Kevin Rudd (2007–10, 2013) and Julia
Gillard (2010–13) decided to increase aid to Africa between 2008 and 2013, much of which went to humanitarian causes and education. On the humanitarian underpinning of Australian aid to Africa, Negin (2013, 134) has argued that: ‘While there are a variety of reasons for deeper aid engagement in Africa—including geopolitical, cultural and economic interests—the strongest rationale for Australia’s development assistance to Africa remains the moral humanitarian imperative to reduce global poverty’. In addressing the humanitarian needs in Africa, the Australian government has focused on areas that fall within four MDGs: agriculture and food security (MDG 1); water and sanitation (MDG 7); the improvement of maternal health (MDG 4); and a reduction in child mortality (MDG 5) (JSCFADT 2011, 42–48). The Australian Agency for International Development insisted that these were areas where Australia had expertise and comparative advantage (JSCFADT 2011). Going by the parliamentary report of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade (JSCFADT 2011), there is bipartisanship on the breadth of Australian aid to Africa.

In the area of education, the number of Australian scholarships to Africa increased from 100 in 2007–8 to 1000 in 2012–13. As the level of privately funded foreign students coming to Australia was declining due to the rising value of the Australian dollar during this period, the increased intake of African students on the Australian Awards for Africa program was a fillip to the Australian tertiary sector (Lyons 2013; Makinda and Turner 2013). The scholarship program facilitated the export of Australia’s education to Africa, which is in the national interest. On the basis of this increased focus on Africa, more than 20 Australian universities established a framework, the Australia–Africa Universities Network, in July 2012. Through the Australia–Africa Universities Network, Australian universities have established links with their counterparts across Africa, which promotes Australia’s soft power. Moreover, the fact that many of these students were studying and living in Australia meant that about 90 cents of every dollar of scholarship money remained in Australia and helped to stimulate the Australian economy in various ways. Most importantly, some of these students established links with their counterparts in Australia, which might endure for many years. The scholarship program has provided real value for money. This is why the Abbott government needs to maintain it.

The needs of Australia’s mining sector have also played a role in shaping the breadth of Australia’s diplomatic presence in Africa (Hawker 2013). It is estimated that about 200 Australian-based mining and exploration companies have approximately 650 mining projects in 42 African countries (Burrell 2013). They range from the biggest, diversified mining corporations, such as BHP Billiton and Rio Tinto, through medium-sized and/or single-resource companies, such as Paladin and Sundance, to numerous small and exploration firms. As of late 2013, the estimated value of the investments of Australian-based mining corporations in Africa’s resources sector was AU$65 billion (ibid.). While some of
these corporations can get round Africa without Australia’s diplomatic support, some of the small ones have occasionally required Australia’s diplomatic assistance.

The exploitation of mineral resources is capital-intensive and only large companies with access to large funds can undertake it. This means that African states have to negotiate with private companies. But such negotiations require certain skills, most of which are lacking in Africa. Acquiring these skills requires capacity-building, and this is where Australia comes in. In order to help African states negotiate successfully with private companies, Australia has offered to train African policy makers in mining governance. This is why Australia’s former foreign minister, Bob Carr, told the 2012 Africa Down Under conference in Perth that:

> It is clear that mining companies ... are the driving force needed to unlock mineral wealth. But we need look no further than the Australian success story to understand that governments also have an important role to play. Resources must be managed well—with legislation, governance frameworks, sustainable environmental practices, and a skilled workforce. Australia has more than 100 years of experience in harnessing natural resources to build our economic future. And we are committed to sharing this experience with Africa (Carr 2012).

In order to share its mining experience with Africa and other developing countries, the Australian government has funded the International Mining for Development Centre, which was established at the University of Western Australia in 2011. This centre, which is jointly run by the University of Queensland, is expected to train at least 2000 policy makers in the management of mineral resources by 2015. It ‘helps developing countries to understand, negotiate and analyse the complex financial, legal and environmental aspects of mining agreements’ (ibid.). It is in the Australian national interest to maintain this type of engagement with Africa, irrespective of which political party is in power.

The context: why both Africa and Australia would benefit

Africa is a huge continent that comprises 55 countries. A variety of languages are spoken in these countries, which are governed by diverse political systems and have reached different levels of development. Some, like Uganda and Zimbabwe, have been ruled by one leader since the 1980s, whereas others, like Kenya and South Africa, have adopted constitutions which limit presidents to two terms of five years each. Some African states, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo and Somalia, have experienced political turmoil since the 1990s (Makinda 1993), while others, such as Rwanda, have overcome their political and economic malaise and established relatively stable societies. A large
percentage of the world’s least-developed countries are found in Africa, but, at the same time, six of the ten fastest-growing economies in the world are in Africa. The needs of African states may be similar in some respects, but they can also be very different in others. Gender inequality has retarded development in a number of African states, but one of the world’s top countries in achieving gender equality is Rwanda, where there are more females than males in the national cabinet. At the same time, African states continue to play an important role in the multilateral system. The African Union, which was established in 2002 to replace the decaying Organisation of African Unity, has been helping Africans address the challenges of globalisation, security and governance, but it has also consolidated the diversity on the continent (Makinda and Okumu 2008). Thus, Africa is a continent of contrasts, which defies a simple classification. Given this political, economic and cultural diversity, any external development partner requires deep engagement in order to find its way round and benefit from African support.

During the launch of the Australia–Africa Universities Network in Canberra in July 2012, the former secretary of DFAT, Dennis Richardson (2012), whose first posting as a diplomat was to Nairobi in 1969, argued that the macro-indicators of Africa’s transformation over the previous decade were remarkable. Its economic output had tripled since 2002, and Africa was increasingly becoming a continent of opportunity and growth. Moreover, foreign direct investment in Africa grew by over 80 percent between 2000 and 2011. In 2000, Africa was a begging continent and heavily reliant on handouts from developed countries. A report released by Oxfam in 2002 highlighted imbalances in trading relations and unfair terms of economic engagement between Africa and the West, and called for new terms of engagement focusing on market access rather than development assistance. According to Oxfam’s calculations, if the developed countries had allowed African goods to access about 5 percent of their markets, this would have equalled four times the amount of aid that was being given to the continent (Watkins and Fowler 2002). By the end of 2011, foreign direct investment in Africa totalled AU$80 billion. It is believed that this transformation is creating a genuine middle class and that, by the end of 2015, Africa’s middle class could number 100 million.

This rapid transformation of the African landscape has been due to many factors. The principal platform on which these changes have been constructed is the improvement in the quality of governance and the growing political stability. In the mid 1990s, pro-democracy groups in Africa were vocal, but their sense of direction was not clear (Makinda 1996a). However, a decade later, there appeared to be much more clarity in democracy-building. Indeed, democratic and responsive governments in Africa in the past few years have become a norm, rather than an exception. Overall, human rights (Abe 2009; Makinda 2005) are respected in more African countries than was the case a decade ago. Several long-standing civil wars, such as those in Angola, Mozambique and Sudan, have been resolved. There are still a few cases of political instability in
places such as the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Libya, Mali, Somalia and South Sudan. Despite these cases, voters in many countries have been empowered, and political power increasingly changes hands at the ballot box rather than through the barrel of a gun. Indeed, in 2011 alone, there were 45 elections in 30 African countries. In addition, the region’s powerbrokers and organisations, including the African Union, are now less tolerant of military coups than was previously the case. And, finally, African governments are no longer pursuing the state-centralised and heavily regulated economic models that characterised much of the immediate post-independence period. Instead, they are not only open to trade and foreign investment, but also presiding over market-oriented economies.

The second major factor that is driving Africa’s multi-sectoral transformation is technology, particularly information and communication technology and the telephone, which have revolutionised farming practices, trade, finance, banking and other related activities. Over the last 10 years, the use of telephones has grown from a mere 0.7 percent to over 70 percent, with mobile phones being used for banking and money transfer services. Mobile phones have empowered women and facilitated rural transformation in several countries (Okumu and Makinda 2013). Kenya was the first country in the world to design the technology for transferring money through mobile phones—the M-Pesa system (Atieno, Barako, and Bokea 2011; Hughes and Lonie 2007). It has been claimed that Vodafone plans to export this technology to the rest of the world (Business Daily 2012).

The third significant factor behind Africa’s dramatic transformation has been rapid urbanisation, which has lured investors to the capital cities and other large urban centres, thereby creating a demand for services. This has helped to transform the character of several African economies from predominantly agrarian to significantly service-oriented. Rapid urbanisation, which comes with a multitude of other problems, and a rising consumer African middle class are fuelling the economies. It is estimated that Africa’s consumer spending will total US$1.4 trillion by 2020, when around 128 million households will have moved into the ranks of the middle class (McKinsey Global Institute 2010).

There is plenty of evidence to show that the economic growth and transformation in Africa over the past decade have been phenomenal. For example, 22 African countries have over $1700 per capita, making them ‘middle-income’. If this trend continues, the World Bank estimates that most African countries will be middle-income by 2025 (Economist 2012). This is why economist Steven Radelet (2010) and similarly minded analysts believe that ‘there’s good news out of Africa’. After analysing 17 African countries, Radelet observed that the following five fundamental changes are under way:

(1) more democratic and accountable governments; (2) more sensible economic policies; (3) the end of the debt crisis and changing relationships
with donors; (4) the spread of new technologies; and (5) the emergence of a
new generation of policymakers, activists, and business leaders (ibid.).

In addition to turning round their economies, from zero economic growth per
capita between 1975 and 1995 to over 3 percent annually between 1996 and
2008, these countries have also doubled their trade and investment, increased
school enrolments and improved health indicators.

Besides these crucial building blocks, Africa has had several factors working
in its favour. African economies, taken together, grew at an average annual rate
of 5.7 percent between 2002 and 2012 (Carr 2012). Moreover, the continent is
commodity-rich. It contains an estimated 30 percent of the world’s mineral
reserves, but attracts less than 7 percent of exploration expenditure. It also has
huge potential as an agricultural producer: 60 percent of the world’s uncultivated
arable land is in Africa (Okumu and Makinda 2013, 21).

As already shown above, these uplifting stories do not mean that everything
in Africa is in ‘top gear’, moving forwards. Some African states still face serious
challenges in the areas of political leadership and governance (Makinda 2012).
They also have weak infrastructures and low levels of human capital. Recent
experience has shown that once these challenges were addressed sufficiently in
some countries—such as Botswana, Ghana, Rwanda and Tanzania—their
economies quickly took off. As DFAT (2003, xviii) has claimed that the
‘improvement of governance around the world can help create an environment
that contributes to the security and prosperity of Australia’ and is, therefore, in
the national interest, the Abbott government would do well to help. In most of
these areas, Australia would not need to go it alone. It could cooperate with
Africa’s other international partners, including non-governmental and multilat-
eral organisations.

The multilateral dimension: why Australia might need Africa’s support again

When Abbott, as opposition leader, repeatedly claimed that there would be
‘more Jakarta and less Geneva’ in his foreign policy, he implied that he would
place more emphasis on bilateral, rather than multilateral, diplomacy (Packham
and Massola 2011). However, it is generally acknowledged that it is not prudent
for a political leader to prefer bilateralism to multilateralism under all
circumstances. The issues and circumstances will determine whether one
approach will yield a better outcome than another. In many cases, bilateral
and multilateral actions reinforce each other.

It was partly for these reasons that, within one week of becoming Australia’s
first female foreign minister, Julie Bishop flew to New York, where she presided
over a UNSC session (Connolly 2013). It was the first time that Australia had
held this position since 1985–6 (Langmore 2013). The former foreign minister,
Bob Carr, attributed Australia’s winning of the UNSC seat to the overwhelming
support it received from African states. The UNSC has responsibility for the
maintenance of international peace and security, and it currently oversees the deployment of more than 120,000 peacekeeping personnel in 16 missions. By presiding over it, Australia has participated in the prevention, management and resolution of global conflicts. Australia’s membership of the UNSC in 2013–14 has contributed enormously to its high international standing and prestige, which are an integral part of the national interest. At a personal level, Bishop has followed in the footsteps of her three role models (Rimmer 2013). Just before the federal elections of September 2013, Bishop told Perth Now: ‘There are three women that I see as role models in this field—Madeleine Albright, Condoleezza Rice and Hillary Clinton’ (Phillips 2013).

If Australia’s historical role in the UNSC were compared with the roles played by other countries of similar size, its record would appear to be extremely good. Australia was among the first six non-permanent members to serve on the UNSC in 1946–7, and it was the first country to hold the presidency of the UNSC in 1946, with Norman Makin as the Australian ambassador to the UN. Between 1946 and 1986, Australia served on the UNSC every 10 years or so: 1946–7, 1956–7, 1973–4 and 1985–6. Why, then, did Australia not serve on the UNSC for 27 years between 1986 and 2013? The answer revolves around the end of the cold war, the politics of geographical groupings within the UN, and Australia’s commitment to international law and multilateralism.

The 10 non-permanent members represent five geographical groups: three from Africa; two from Asia; two from South America; one from Eastern Europe; and two from the West European and Others Group (WEOG), to which Australia belongs. For many years, the WEOG respected an informal arrangement, in which the CANZ caucus (comprising Canada, Australia and New Zealand), Nordic countries and Western European states shared equitably the two seats allocated to it. Under this arrangement, a Western European state would occupy one seat, while the second seat would alternate between the Nordic countries and the CANZ caucus. It was under this arrangement that Australia served on the UNSC four times. However, with the end of the cold war, the informal arrangement within the WEOG collapsed, and Australia found it difficult to win a UNSC seat. Australia made an attempt in October 1996, but lost to Sweden and Portugal (Makinda 1996b). Alexander Downer, the former foreign minister, announced in 2002 that Australia would go for a UNSC seat in 2006, but when Australia joined the USA and the UK in the invasion of Iraq in 2003, he gave up. The invasion had violated the UN Charter and international law, which would have made Australia’s bid for a UNSC seat futile.

It was against this backdrop that, in 2008–9, Australia renewed its commitment to multilateralism and sought African backing for its UNSC bid in 2012. While some critics have viewed Australia’s engagement in Africa under the ALP leadership as a cynical move that would largely benefit Canberra, Africa’s stability can easily be linked to the debates within, and the activities of, the UNSC. In the past two decades, more than half of the UNSC resolutions...
have been on Africa, and the majority of peacekeeping forces have been deployed to this region. In this respect, it is logical for any country that wants to serve on the UNSC to familiarise itself with the political, economic and social dynamics in Africa (Mickler 2013). This coincidence between Australia’s national interest and Africa’s struggles to achieve stability is important. While it would be an exaggeration to argue that the UNSC seat was the main determinant of the ‘new engagement’, it played a major role in shaping the tactics and strategies of three Australian foreign ministers: Stephen Smith (2007–10), Kevin Rudd (2010–12) and Bob Carr (2012–13).

Australia’s winning of a UNSC seat in 2012 with African support underlines the significance of a strong engagement with Africa if Australia intends to maintain a high profile and achieve other goals through multilateral diplomacy. In his address to the Australia–Africa Universities Network, Dennis Richardson (2012) argued that: ‘Africa’s international weight [was] growing’. He observed that Africa was an ‘increasingly cohesive actor on global issues, often speaking with a single voice through the African Union’ (ibid.). Therefore, continued engagement with Africa will serve Australia well, not just for UNSC business, but also in other international forums.

Conclusions

It is self-interest that has primarily shaped Australia’s policy towards Africa in the past few years, and this self-interest has revolved around three issues: humanitarianism, support for mining corporations, and multilateralism. It is in the interest of both Australia and Africa for the Australian government to remain committed to humanitarian objectives and to help African states meet some of their MDG targets. Such a commitment is not just about projecting Australia’s identity as a middle power, but also demonstrates that Australia remains a good international citizen. In this sense, it is in Australia’s interest for the Abbott government to retain a strong engagement with Africa.

Moreover, the continued support of Australian mining corporations operating in Africa, especially through the training of African policy makers in mining governance, is good for both African states and Australia. At a time when Africa’s other international partners, including European Union member states, China, Turkey and Brazil, are seeking a stake in Africa’s resources sector, it would be in Australia’s national interest to have African policy makers who understand Australia. In addition, as Dennis Richardson (2012) has pointed out, the growing mining investment in Africa ‘is driving an increase in trade, especially in areas such as mining equipment, technology and services’.

Finally, Australia’s continued success in multilateral diplomacy will depend on support from all parts of the world, including Africa. Australia’s success at the multilateral level will, in turn, result in bilateral benefits in other regions, including the Asia-Pacific. This is why it makes sense for Abbott to continue closer relations with Africa.
References


