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THE SOUTHERN AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITY (SADC): HEADING NORTH?

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In the Democratic Republic of Congo (former Zaire) a number of different currencies circulate. In and around the capital city of Kinshasa 50,000 'New Zaire' notes are used. In Katanga, notes issued in the last days of the Mobuto regime circulate. These are named after the 'Utenika'; the South African naval vessel in which Mandela was to broker talks between Mobuto and Kabila. There are also some 100,000, 50,000 and million New Zaire notes circulating in parts of the country as well as old Zaire notes in Kasai province (though these are not accepted elsewhere in Congo). A new national currency will be launched at the end of June. At the moment however, probably the only money acceptable throughout 'Congolese territory' is a currency issued by a far-away foreign power, the Dollar of the Federal Reserve of the United States of America.

The distant US has played a big role in the affairs of Congo, since around the time of its independence in 1960. As Africa became the domain of struggles for and over the form of decolonization, it was inevitable that it would enter the Cold War contest. For years after it was helped to power by the CIA and other Western 'intelligence' agencies, Mobuto's regime in Zaire was a loyal anti-Communist ally and an example to others of what could be done with Western connivance, a few foreign mining companies, some co-operative Swiss banks and the will to power. What was done amounted to the enrichment of Mobuto (famously elevated to the status of the 'richest African in the world') simultaneous with and directly linked to the wider collapse of Zaire as a functioning entity. It simply did not matter to Mobuto that the social and material infrastructure of the country fell apart. For the means of enriching himself did not need social and infrastructural development. Of course, infrastructure could be found inside the foreign

'compounds' which had helicopter pads, satellite links and electricity generators. Beyond them however, in the most basic material sense, the infrastructure disintegrated. Getting across the country (which admittedly is vast) without resort to aircraft could take months and cost a small fortune given the broken railways, the wrecked roads, the random riverboat schedules and the need to bribe unpaid officials and soldiers along the way. The 'underdevelopment' of Zaire was also uneven in other senses, for Kinshasa continued right through the worst years of corruption and decay to have a vibrant music and dance scene with an impressive network of bands, promoters and talent.

However, when referring to Zaire, commentators began to invoke Joseph Conrad's vision of the 'Heart of Darkness'. Conrad's novella (set in Congo and written at the end of the nineteenth century) is often read as a straightforward description of what Congo (still) is. A French engineer who I sat next to on a Rome-Johannesburg flight claimed to know plenty about the land that we over-flew. He told me that: 'The only things you need to know about that country [Zaire], you can find in that book [Heart of Darkness]'. Zaire was being represented as an area somehow beyond the rules and norms of the modern world. It was a 'primitive' land, 'darkest' Africa and so on. In academic analysis too, which claimed to be less bound-up with colonially derived visions of the world, Zaire was the archetype of the way that African states could go. A whole strand of political science literature grew up dedicated to analysing the malady of African states (for the spectre of 'decay' was detected elsewhere on the Continent). Analytical terms and categories such as 'patrimonial state', 'weak state', and 'kleptocracy' (government of thieves) were developed and 'tested' against Zaire.

Yet it is misleading to see Africa as so exceptional, or to revive a colonial paradigm such as Conrad's to understand Africa. Without losing sight of some African cultural specifics (which are anyway diffused throughout the New World, via the African Diaspora), more recent analysis has sought to move beyond these categories, stressing that no state, even those European ones from which our models and theories of what it means to be a state are mostly derived, has coincided with the imaginary model of perfect rationality, pure sovereignty and complete modernity contained by a territorially demarcated border that neatly envelopes a 'nation'. This exists only in text-books and perhaps in the minds of some who claim to represent sovereign authority. When diplomats do this, of course, they hope that it will be taken for granted that they speak for an already real sovereign authority, when the reality is that it is partly in making such claims that sovereignty is produced. Think of a Congolese diplomat. Is he or she representing a place called Congo at an international conference? Or just those bits of the country in which the Congolese government can claim to be the sovereign power? What about the concessions to the foreign mineral companies, the UN observers, Angolan government troops (or the many Congolese nationals integrated into the Angolan army), the 'Interahamwe' militia who control the refugee camps on the border with Rwanda, the NGOs and UN who feed their occupants, or the US Federal Reserve, whose currency is the only universal medium of exchange throughout Congo?

Clearly when we talk about sovereignty we need to consider carefully what the definition wants us to take for granted. All this is worth bearing in mind when we think of the trajectory of the SADC. In the eighteen years since SADC¹ began it has gained new members and a new formal rationale. From its original status as an alliance of Front-Line States seeking to foster collective self-reliance (albeit on foreign aid!) and reduce their dependency on South Africa, it has become a development community, still seeking foreign aid for (mostly infrastructural) 'development projects' but now in pursuit too of a measure of 'integration'.

Still coming to terms with its revised rationale and the admission of Mauritius (1995), independent Namibia (1990) and post-apartheid South Africa (1994), SADC suddenly admitted the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Seychelles at its September 1997 Blantyre summit meeting. Many observers were surprised. Over the previous couple of years, there had been some discussion and press coverage relating to the prospects for Kenya and Ugandan membership, or at least some kind of formalised relationship between SADC and a revised East African Community (EAC) bringing together the existing SADC member of Tanzania with Kenya and Uganda.

At a joint EAC-SADC press conference, (held after a June 1997 meeting at SADC's secretariat building in Gaborone, Botswana), SADC's Executive Secretary Kaire Mbuende had announced that his organisation was extending a formal invitation of membership to Kenya and Uganda. At the time of the invitation to the EAC members, secretariat staff were not upbeat about the prospect of Congo joining.

Just a few weeks earlier, Kgosinkwe Moesi, SADC's long serving chief information officer, explained that a Congolese application would take up to a year to process. He explained to a visiting journalist that: 'As you are aware, SADC is going through a transformation and we need to consolidate ourselves. It would not be wise to open up to more members at this stage'.

However, four months later at the Blantyre Summit, Mbuende anticipated Congo's accession, allowing that it 'shares borders with Zambia, Tanzania and Angola and we do not consider it far away from the SADC'. He was not so sure about the other applicant, noting in the same reference to geography that 'Seychelles appears to be next to India, but they have applied'. Congo's admission was dressed-up as part of SADC's strategy for reinforcing 'democratic stability' and 'human rights' (a rhetoric that some SADC members are none too comfortable with, lest it be taken to apply to them too).

But there were other factors and prizes. Southern Congo's hydroelectric resources already feed SADC power-grids as part of a long-standing memorandum of understanding. Longer-term prospects for the diversion of water for irrigation from the Congo river southwards to Namibia meant that Windhoek was strongly in favour.

According to press reports, Namibian President Sam Nujoma had 'spearheaded' the campaign to admit Congo. Angola, whose troops had helped defeat Mobuto's already disintegrating army and Mozambique (who usually agree with their old MPLA allies on these things) were keen to see the new government in Kinshasa admitted, for this further isolated UNITA who were fighting on in the Angolan campo [bush] even though without much of the aid that once flowed from South Africa and the United States, latterly via Mobuto. Previously Angola and Mozambique had strongly resisted the prospect of Mobuto's Zaire being admitted, when South African delegates proposed it at the 1995 SADC summit.

By 1997, Zimbabwe was also a front-runner in supporting Congo's membership, partly to shift the balance of the Community northward - as part of a strategy to regain the Zimbabwean centrality lost when the relative giant of South Africa joined. Despite reservations voiced by South African civil servants

involved in SADC affairs (Foreign Minister Nzo supported it, but some other ministries, including finance, were less keen) there was the highest level of South African support. President Mandela's political commitment to supporting the new regime in Kinshasa - and recovering some of the ground lost when he called for a negotiated agreement just as Kabila was about to achieve a military victory, plus a complex of South African business interests (including those of some of Mandela's close comrades from his years in Robben Island) looking for rich mineral pickings, ensured that any reservations would be put aside.

In the event, the approval of Congo's membership, by the executive action of the heads of state, disregarded the previously agreed procedure of reviewing new applications. Furthermore, once Congo had been admitted none present at the Summit felt willing to speak up against the admission of the Seychelles whose application had also been received and which was reviewed next (although it was only strongly supported by Mauritius). For to do so - as one of the delegates explained to me - 'would have also have thrown the Congolese admission into some question' which had just been railroaded through. Potential clashes and differences were buried - via a complex alliance of interest.

Of late this burying of differences has not always been evident in SADC. In fact that part of the Blantyre meeting that was devoted to resolving disputes regarding the status of SADC co-operation on security affairs saw long and acrimonious discussions, including a clash between Presidents Mandela and Mugabe. Earlier in 1997 the extent of the dispute about the direction of SADC's 'security organ' (founded in 1996, following the demise of the loose alliance known as the Front-Line States) became public knowledge, eliciting considerable press coverage. The differences are complex - and must lie mostly beyond my scope here.² So much acrimony concerning the status of 'security co-operation' may have contributed to the feeling that the Blantyre meeting should be as consensual as possible in admitting new members. Blantyre had certainly been spruced-up for the event (caterers and hotel managers were flown in from South Africa and street-vendors were cleared out of town) and SADC could at least bask in its relative success in attracting new members and negotiating formal protocols. The fact that those protocols already established have only been ratified selectively by members (and so have not yet come into legal force) had not stopped others being negotiated. There are eight main formal treaties (protocols), including education, energy, shared water-courses, trade and the combat of illegal narcotic traffic.

Potentially the most important of these SADC protocols is the one on trade. Over the past few years, Southern Africa has seen a number of trade disputes concerning

tariff levels, protectionism and non-tariff barriers. Most notably there have been differences between South African, Zimbabwean and Zambian producers of textiles and consumer durables. An agreed SADC trade protocol could be a basis for *minimising similar* disputes in the future. However, what made it possible for SADC members to sign the trade protocol was that it was mostly a statement of intent. As a South African civil servant explained to me: 'The trade protocol is only really a basis and a framework for further negotiation'. There is a fair amount of this ahead if it is to have material impact. The protocol was signed in 1996 by all SADC countries except Angola. Whilst the signing of the agreement took place amidst some fanfare, it has become clear that ratification and implementation - which would lead to the phased elimination of most tariffs on trade between SADC members - is going to take time. Bringing it into force is made difficult not only by a complex set of contradictory business and political interests in different members, but by the continued existence of other formal agreements in southern Africa.

One of these other agreements has recently hit hard times. The Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) which had negotiated tariff reductions for its members, found that Zaire's adherence in 1995 was little compensation for the departure of Mozambique and Lesotho two years later. COMESA, which came into formal existence in December 1994, had begun life as a Preferential Trade Area (PTA) in 1981, sponsored by the UN Economic Commission for Africa. From the original eight states (Comoros, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Malawi, Mauritius, Somalia, Uganda and Zambia) that signed up for the PTA, all (excepting Somalia and Djibouti) became COMESA members as well as Angola, Burundi, Eritrea, Kenya, Lesotho, Madagascar, Mozambique, Namibia, Rwanda, Sudan, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zimbabwe and Zaire. This was always an disparate grouping.

Despite certain early achievements, including the establishment of a clearing house to expedite processing of customs duties, COMESA has increasingly run into problems. A trace of the original pan-Africanist rhetoric, as well as a long-standing rivalry with SADC cropped up at the COMESA press conference held in December 1997, a few days after Mozambique and Lesotho announced that they would be pulling out. By announcing that they would not be paying any more COMESA membership dues these states formalised what had already been taking place. But the then COMESA secretary general Bingu Wa Mutharika launched a plea for them to 'reconsider': 'On behalf of member states of COMESA, I earnestly appeal to both Mozambique and Lesotho, in the name of pan-Africanism and African unity to reconsider ... It is really difficult to understand what promoted

Mozambique and Lesotho to decide withdrawing'.

It became less 'difficult to understand' the withdrawals a month later, when Mutharika was suspended for alleged misappropriation of COMESA funds (held to be related to his growing involvement in Malawain politics). Although the departing members will not now be paying membership fees, they plan to continue to implement agreed tariff structures. Whilst this sounds like having one's cake and eating it, it could be a model and portent for COMESA more widely, notwithstanding public commitments to it by Zambia, Zimbabwe and Kenya (from where COMESA new acting head originates).

The existence of the Southern African Customs Union (SACU) between South Africa and its neighbours of Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia and Swaziland is a further complicating factor in Southern African trade relations. SACU is one of the oldest surviving customs union agreements anywhere. In its original form, it dates from colonial agreements negotiated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. An agreement to share customs revenues from a variety of southern African territories was worked out by Britain and South Africa, who then both considered that Bechuanaland (Botswana), Basutoland (Lesotho) and Swaziland would be incorporated into South Africa. No permanent secretariat or democratic re-negotiation was ever envisaged. SACU membership was therefore inherited by the post-colonial states of Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland and Namibia.

In the context of their relative underdevelopment, the customs union became a significant source of revenue for all of them. Although subject to periodic amendments - the last big one in 1969 - it has only been since the end of apartheid that the prospect of a full re-negotiation of the SACU has emerged. This re-negotiation is ongoing and a series of differences have emerged especially in respect of the relationship that the customs union should have to the wider SADC. South Africa in particular would rather reinforce capacity at the SADC secretariat than establish some kind of permanent SACU secretariat. South Africa also wants to see wider 'development' policy elements within a re-negotiated SACU, a prospect that is mostly regarded with some suspicion by other members. SACU's future is unclear.

When the complexities of Southern African relations with other blocs (such as the European Union) and powerful 'regulatory' agencies external to the region (such as the new World Trade Organisation and the World Bank and International Monetary Fund) are added, it becomes easy to see how difficult it will be to resolve the differences that continue to shape the formats of regional integration in Southern Africa and which frustrate the visions of many of its proponents. Thinking about what these visions portend and what they take for granted, bears out too how rather more is at stake than usually meets the eye, when Southern African politicians and diplomats talk about regional integration.

ENDNOTES

1. SADC began as the nine-member Southern African Development Co-ordination Conference (SADCC).
2. Suffice it to note that the clash between Mandela and Mugabe revealed much wider differences in interpretation about the direction of SADC, of which the least that must be said is that South Africa favours rationalisation and formalisation of structures, whilst Zimbabwe supports a (continuation of) more *ad hoc* arrangements.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

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