



GAME OF EMPIRES

A political economist offers a unique perspective on the role Africa — and South Africa — could play in a changing world

Is this Trump moment a strange blip? Or is this part of an epochal transformation of empire grade? According to Prof John Rapley, this is empire-level stuff.

The co-author with Prof Peter Heather of *Why Empires Fall: Rome, America and the Future of the West*, he offers a unique perspective on the question. A political economist formerly of St Edmund's College, University of Cambridge, Rapley somehow combines teaching in ghetto communities and engaging with prime ministers as well as inner-city gang-lords, with more than 2,000 academic citations. He was recently in South Africa to talk about and explore Africa's place in a changing world.

"Empires have a life cycle," he argues. "Many times we've seen the periphery gain power and eventually overthrow the empire. Think of Barbarian invasions of Rome. Today it will more likely be through outcompeting the hegemonic power than through invading. The likes of China will continue to rise. The centre of gravity will continue to shift east and south.

"Part of the reason is that the US is so enamoured with its own greatness. It is now turning its back on some of the most dynamic technology we've ever seen. Recent moves away from renewable energy are a bit like shunning the internal combustion-powered car when it emerged because you already make the most advanced horse-drawn carriages."

Rapley cautions against a story of abrupt meltdown. "We may not see an absolute collapse," he explains. "The US may simply lose its edge and be overtaken. However, President Donald Trump's approach does risk a major collapse. For one thing, his instinct to refuse the legitimacy of any election result other than 'Trump wins' poses a major risk to democracy. Contrast this with South

Africa and a growing number of other African nations. The ANC, despite its many serious flaws, recently showed its dedication to democracy by accepting a decline in power at the polls."

Pragmatic policy

He's quick to catch my bad habit of speaking of Africa as a single unit of analysis. "This continent is so diverse. The tech trailblazers of Kenya are a vastly different prospect to the creative industries in Nigeria. But there are some universal principles African countries can apply to take advantage of the ongoing shift in the worldwide centre of gravity.

"Technology can be a leapfrogging mechanism. It happened in some places with mobile phones. Millions of people bypassed the landline and went straight to cellphones. Renewable energy has the same sort of potential. Parts of Africa have the ingredients to achieve this."

This sort of megatrend demands commensurate capital. Africa, for the most part, isn't generating or attracting sufficient capital for such grand

schemes to come off. Rapley says it could. "Stock market returns in the West won't be what they have been. We can expect a new, lower normal.

"Capital is hungry for new places to go to. Demography gives us one indicator of where it is headed. Africa is the fastest-growing regional population in the world. In fact, Europe, the US, Japan and other places have a demographic problem. An economy benefits by having a large, youthful population entering the workforce. Africa can turn this into a demographic dividend if it can leverage it with skills and infrastructure."

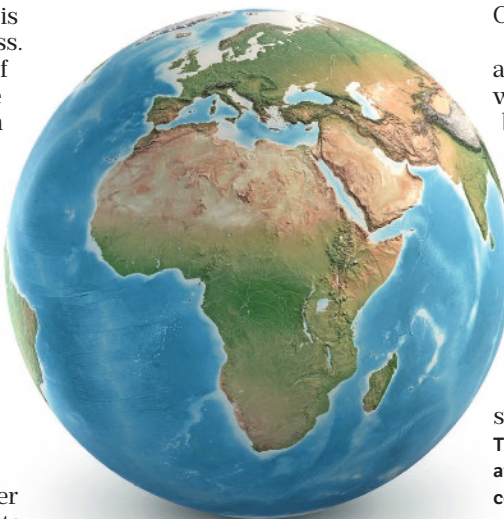
Which introduces the kicker: how can African nations navigate this shifting landscape politically to become the next growth hub? In short, pragmatically. "Foreign policy needs to be nimble," says Rapley. "This is an area where South African leadership has erred. ANC-led administrations have stayed married to traditional allegiances. This can limit potential economic partners. A wiser approach would be to keep all options open. You can play nicely with everyone and criticise poor behaviour where needed.

"Without suggesting mimicking China's foreign policy, this is something it has done well. Its only long-term alliance is with North Korea, and it probably regrets that. China is almost mercenary in its geopolitics. If there are potential gains from trade, China is in."

Rapley concludes by offering a parallel. "We're in a mirror of 1800. China was then the world's dominant player but it turned inward, convinced of its own superiority. The US was young and agricultural. It embraced technology. It has always had somewhat of an internal leaning, but its turn inward under Trump 2.0 is contrary to the more expansive stance that made it a superpower."

With geopolitical change gaining momentum, spoils at scale are in the offing. African nations ought to consider Rapley's playbook. ✘

The Centre for African Management & Markets at the Gordon Institute of Business Science conducts academic and practitioner research and provides strategic insight on African markets. Macleod is a founding member



123RF/titonz