

# At the table or on the menu?

## Africa's agency and the global order

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Africa has often been on the periphery of global processes and events. Where is its 'agency' in a changing global order? Does Africa have a clear unified 'voice' in a complex, polycentric and unstable world? And what can Africa do to strengthen its participation in a challenging global environment? This report reflects discussions by key African think tanks on promoting African agency in an international system that faces increasing pressure. It makes recommendations that could benefit the continent.

## Key findings

- ▶ Multilateralism is increasingly becoming ineffective in solving the world's problems, as countries such as the United States become more self-serving and selective in how they engage with global institutions.
- ▶ Africa could be largely described as 'a resilient but marginal player' in the international system.
- ▶ Key challenges African countries face in the General Assembly and UN Security Council relate to their ability to vote as a coherent group.
- ▶ Trends in demographics and migration, as well as trade and economic growth, are key challenges but also opportunities for the continent to increase its agency in the changing global order.
- ▶ Geostrategic divides lead to paralysis in the United Nations (UN) Security Council, creating difficulties in achieving common positions and approaches, particularly among its African members.
- ▶ African Union (AU) responses to peace and security challenges on the continent are increasingly being institutionalised. However, the AU continues to face dire challenges and dysfunctionality, including in the areas of funding, the adoption of common positions and logistics.

## Recommendations for South Africa

- ▶ Africa's 'Big 5' – Nigeria, South Africa, Egypt, Algeria and Ethiopia – hold more global influence than the remaining states on the continent combined. They should act as unifiers rather than dividers.
- ▶ Africa's Big 5 should become more active in pushing for coherent African views, to better coordinate among themselves and identify ways of overcoming divides.
- ▶ Changes in global dynamics, particularly in line with the relative increased power projection of China and India, mean that Africa should be better prepared to respond to shifting power balances.
- ▶ In the UN, African states should play a more prominent role in presenting broader African contributions to conceptual and practical discussions in the UN Security Council. The capacity of A3 states – African members of the UN Security Council – should be boosted significantly. This would allow them to contribute more meaningfully to thematic and regional issues on the UN agenda that extend beyond Africa.
- ▶ Where possible for such a diverse continent, African countries should strive to find common ground when facing external partners. They should develop clear patterns of engagement with external partners, which take into account power limitations, but also allow them to identify means to overcome such imbalances.
- ▶ To increase their agency, African states should put African concerns firmly on the international agenda, requiring solidarity, good governance, leadership and unity of purpose.

## Introduction

Thirty years after the end of the Cold War, one could argue that the global order is fragmenting into multiple nodes of power. Visible competition between big powers on political, economic and, increasingly, military fronts highlights the increasing dissonance within mechanisms meant to manage this order.

In particular, the United States (US) is seeing its dominance of the global order questioned, especially through ‘the rise of the rest’ – including China, India, the European Union (EU) and a resurgent Russia. At the same time, societal fissures the global financial crisis exposed in 2008 led to the rise of populist movements and, more recently, elections of populist governments in both the Global North and South.

The global rules-based system anchored in the United Nations (UN), which has governed international relations since 1945, is under increasing strain. Deepening geostrategic divides have once again paralysed the UN Security Council, as they did during the Cold War, with the face-off between the Soviet Union and the US. Forging common positions is difficult, making it more likely that smaller and weaker states in the international community – many of them in Africa – will be the biggest losers in the face of an eroding multilateralism.

Once the key guarantor of the global order, the US is currently – and selectively – moving away from multilateralism and collective approaches to solving the world’s problems. Concurrently, China and Russia are pursuing their own agendas and asserting their power globally. Certain elements of strategic rapprochement exist between them, but rivalries for markets and influence persist. France holds great sway over Europe’s Africa policies, particularly in its former colonies, and has been embroiled in African politics and security issues for decades. The exit of the United Kingdom (UK) from the EU – if it indeed happens – will certainly affect the way the country engages internationally, although its future global role is uncertain and largely questioned.

States such as Germany and Japan are increasingly being looked to as supporters and guarantors of multilateralism and the rules-based international order. A blunt way to describe the role of countries in the global order is, ‘You are either at the table or you are

on the menu’. And for African states this is no different. Thus, if such states are not strong and active players in discussions about the world’s future, they are likely to fall victim to the vagaries of the global powers and their interests.

This report reflects on these questions, assessing Africa’s agency within the international system and how best it can strengthen its participation in the global rules-based order. It will analyse how Africa has pursued its agency at different levels, including its role in the multilateral system, as well as its economic engagements.

The report is based on discussions during a workshop organised by the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA), the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) and the German Foreign Office on 29–30 November 2018, at SAIIA’s head office in Johannesburg, South Africa. The workshop, *At the table or on the menu? Africa’s role in a changing global order*, brought together 30 senior representatives from African think tanks and German officials to reflect on Africa’s position and agency in the changing global order.<sup>1</sup>

While the report does not make a conclusive assessment of Africa’s challenges and opportunities, it uses such discussions to raise questions and present recommendations from workshop participants.

## Africa’s place in the world

Africa’s agency in a changing global order – how far it is able to influence negotiations and policies affecting its interests, if at all – needs to be analysed against the background of global developments. Africa could be largely described as ‘a resilient but marginal player’ in the international system. This is a case of ‘extroversion’ – being stuck in a cycle of structural dependence on external factors and unexpected changes in the international system.

Domestic factors such as high levels of unemployment, inequality and poverty, as well as deficiencies in domestic governance, continue to affect African countries’ ability to participate in international forums.<sup>2</sup> Such challenges are also driven by cycles of structural dependency on primary commodities and former colonial powers, vulnerability to external economic and geopolitical shocks, and the perennial weaknesses and lack of capacity of the state.

Three important areas help us to describe Africa's opportunities and deficiencies in the world: levels of intra-continental trade, changing demographics and migration.

First, regarding intra-continental trade, the overall structural challenges Africa faces are heightened by low levels of trade between African states. Trade between African states has averaged just 12–14% of Africa's total trade basket for the past two decades, creating an over-reliance on external investments and aid.

Africa could be largely described as 'a resilient but marginal player' in the international system

To address such deficiencies and vulnerabilities to external shocks, and deepen regional integration, African Union (AU) member states created a new trade arrangement, the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA), which launched in Rwanda in March 2018. Once fully implemented, the AfCFTA is expected to create a common market for goods, services and investment, and eventually allow the free movement of people. Despite potential limitations, increasing the quantity and quality of African trade through this agreement will boost the economic development of the continent, foster closer regional integration and make Africa's voice stronger in international trade agreements.

Second, a key characteristic of Africa's position in the world relates to its demographics, particularly regarding the continent's significant youth bulge. According to the UN, Africa's population stands at 1.3 billion people. Around 37%, 410 million people, live below the poverty threshold of US\$1.90 per day.<sup>3</sup> The continent's population is projected to reach around 2.2 billion by 2050. In particular, Africa's youth population (15–29 years) represents around 60% of the total population and is expected to reach 830 million by 2050.

If Africa can successfully reap the 'demographic dividend' by carefully managing and channelling its youthful population, this could dramatically alter its development trajectory over the coming decades. But it requires the continent to go through a demographic transition that increases the number of workers in relation to dependents.

Finally, migration Europe – has branded the continent as a source of undocumented migrants, particularly from Africa and the Middle East. Data clearly show that migration and refugee movements affect developing countries to a greater degree than developed ones, but politics does not always reflect this reality.

This has prompted polarised positions and responses. While the EU prioritises stemming irregular migration, tackling smugglers and traffickers' business models, and re-patriating migrants, African countries focus on building resilience and employment in sending countries, addressing development concerns and harnessing remittances.<sup>4</sup> Migration is an emotive



ALIGNING 55 COUNTRIES'  
INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS  
IS DIFFICULT

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issue, and tends to dominate the current discourse in EU-Africa relations and domestic European politics.

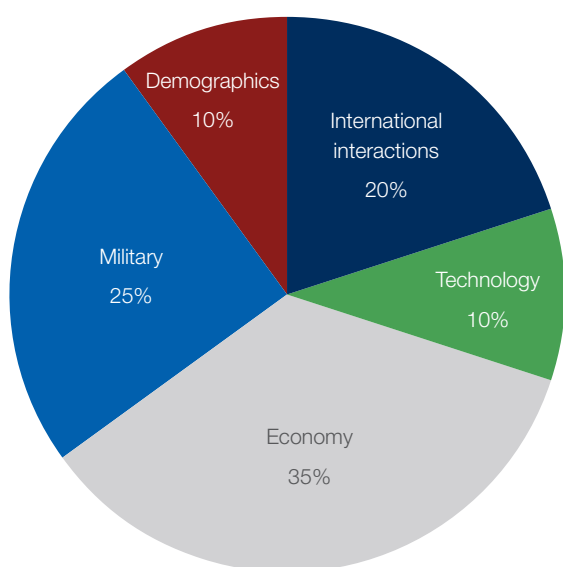
It remains to be seen whether it is possible to resolve the issues above to increase Africa's relative position in the world or if they present an insurmountable challenge to its economy and security. The outcome largely depends on African states' ability to manage population growth and foster the economic growth rates required to sustain their growing populations.

The following sections provide a wider overview of how current dynamics in Africa and its relations with the rest of the world affect its overall agency.

### Defining African agency

As described by Chipaike and Knowledge, African agency can be conceptualised as the ability of African actors to 'negotiate and bargain with external actors in a manner that benefits African themselves.'<sup>5</sup> Rather than being passive agents in international relations, African states have established a soft-balancing process in relation to powers such as the US, the EU and China.

**Figure 1: Breakdown of GPI indicators by sector**



Source: Adapted from International Futures (IFs) model

One way to assess Africa's agency is by comparing its power projection in relation to the rest of the world. A tool for this is the Global Powers Index (GPI),<sup>6</sup> which is calculated by weighing five indicators as illustrated in Figure 1 above. Actors with GPI scores above 3% are classified as big power actors. Middle powers have

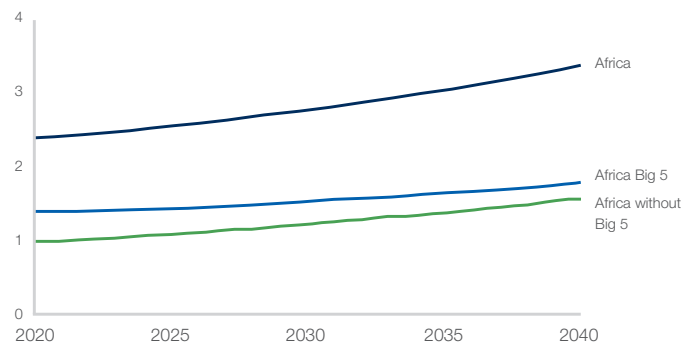
scores ranging from 3% to 0.3%, while the rest score below 0.3%. To put this in context, the US scores 22%, China 14.5%, Japan 5.2%, Germany 4.9%, France 4.7% and the UK 4.1%. Among the emerging countries Russia, India and Brazil score, respectively, 4%, 3.4% and 2.17%.

Africa's GPI scores reflect the disparities in global power distribution. Individually, African states are lagging behind in terms of global influence. South Africa, the continent's major power, holds its global middle power status, with a score of 0.38%. Nigeria and Algeria follow closely behind, scoring 0.32% and 0.35%, respectively.

The large gap in GPI scores between individual African states and global actors highlights the importance of pooling Africa's resources and abilities to increase its global power projection. Africa's cumulative GPI currently stands at 2.38% and is projected to reach 3.3% in the next 20 years. If the continent can effectively align its foreign policy objectives, Africa can expect to enhance its agency in global affairs.

Aligning the international affairs of 55 countries is not an easy task, even within the AU. Continental champions should be at the forefront of directing and aligning Africa's agency. Figure 2 below demonstrates the impact that Africa's 'Big 5' – Nigeria, South Africa, Egypt, Algeria and Ethiopia – have on the continent's overall global power projection. It shows the Big 5 collectively hold more global influence than the remaining 50 states on the continent combined. But it also shows that the gap between the Big 5 and the rest of the continent is narrowing.

**Figure 2: Africa GPI**



Source: Adapted from International Futures (IFs) model

Beyond continental integration, multilateral platforms also provide an opportunity for the continent to pool global influence. South Africa's participation in the BRICS group



of states – with Brazil, Russia, India and China – is an example of how African states can amplify their global position, despite internal power disparities in BRICS. The combined GPI of the BRICS states in 2019 accounted for around 25% of global power capabilities.

GPI scores also indicate shifting global dynamics, with the projected scores for the US in 2040 falling to 17%, against China's scores, which grow to 22%. India will overtake Japan in third place, with a score of 7.2%. This implies that Africa needs to be better prepared to respond to the shifting power balance.

### **African agency through multilateralism**

Robert Keohane describes a 'small power [as] a state whose leaders consider that it can never, acting alone or in a small group, make a significant impact on the system.'<sup>7</sup> By pooling resources and ideas, and searching for common approaches, multilateralism can be advantageous to smaller players, largely benefiting them by setting out the rules of the game, to which all states have to adhere.

Considering that most African states are included in the small power category, engaging in wider multilateral arrangements is often perceived as a mechanism for smaller states to exert greater influence in achieving particular international outcomes. Long-established alliances, such as the G77 and the Non-Aligned Movement, are examples of groupings of smaller states from the Global South that aim to strengthen and adjust international behaviour through coordinated action within multilateral organs.<sup>8</sup>

Africa's role on global economic and political stages is complex and multi-layered, yet still peripheral

Hence, it is important for Africa to enhance its position in multilateral processes on different levels. In particular, rapid changes in the global system require the continent to craft an approach that can respond conceptually and politically to a polycentric or multi-polar world.

Within such a challenging environment, Africa's roles on the global economic and political stage are complex and multi-layered, yet still peripheral. On the one hand,

Africa has historically been active in multilateral and global governance systems. On the other, the continent is perceived to be largely on the sidelines of global events and decision-making processes – a 'rule taker' rather than a 'rule maker'.

At times, the continent has pursued the means to strengthen its agency by developing common positions for a unified voice at the UN. This was the case in adoption of the Common African Position on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, which provided important leverage for the continent in negotiations on what eventually became the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The following subsections provide further thinking how this dichotomy operates within African peace and security engagements at the multilateral level, namely: the UN, the AU and the continent's Regional Economic Communities (RECs).

### **Africa and the United Nations**

When the UN was created in 1945, in the aftermath of the Second World War, only a small number of African countries were independent states. Today, out of the 193 members of the UN, 54 are from Africa, the largest regional grouping of the UN, representing 28% of its membership, a third of the World Trade Organization.

African member states in the UN can play an important role in the General Assembly, in which – unlike the UN Security Council – no members have the power of veto. Africa, in principle, has the numbers to make the continent influential in the decision-making of the General Assembly.

In addition, African member states comprise three of the 15 members of the UN Security Council, also known as the A3. The A3, while not a formal grouping, is elected on a rotational basis as non-permanent members by the General Assembly for two-year terms on the Security Council. A3 members have their candidacy endorsed by the AU member states, and the expectation is that they will fairly represent and be accountable to fellow AU member states. In 2019, the A3 comprised Côte d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea and South Africa. In 2020, Tunisia and Ghana are expected to join South Africa in the A3.

Africa is also the focus of much UN attention. The majority of the matters discussed by the UN Security

Council are about Africa. In 2018, 27 of the 53 country or regional issues on the Security Council agenda concerned Africa. The continent hosts seven out of 14 current UN peacekeeping operations.<sup>9</sup>

Acknowledging the increasing role of African multilateral organisations, A3 countries have strongly advocated enhanced partnership between the UN and the AU. This was an issue South Africa championed in its two previous terms on the Security Council, in 2007–2008 and 2011–2012, and it will surely continue to do so during its 2019–2020 term. Such demands have led to the development of a number of formal engagements, such as the annual meeting between the UN Security Council and the AU Peace and Security Council.

In 2017, the organisations signed the UN-AU Joint Framework for Enhanced Partnership on Peace and Security. As a result, they are increasingly working in partnership, at desk-to-desk level, but also through regular joint visits and communiqués.

Despite these institutional improvements, African countries in both the UN General Assembly and Security Council face challenges in voting as a coherent group. Achieving consensus on specific issues within any regional grouping is hard work. It bears repeating that ‘Africa is not a country’ but a diverse and heterogeneous continent. This complexity is seen in the fact that the A3 members have often not been able to demonstrate united voting patterns.<sup>10</sup>

In January 2019, for instance, the A3 members took different positions on the crisis in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. This highlighted the divide between African members, and their associations with positions held by the Permanent Members of the UN Security Council – China, France, Russia, the UK and the US, also known as the P5.

The continent has also presented a common approach on UN Security Council reform, known as the Ezulwini Consensus, developed in 2005 to drive discussions on how to make the global body more representative. The development of a common AU position regarding the UN High Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations has highlighted the importance of debating the use of UN-assessed contributions to support sustainable and predictable funding for African peace operations.

However, African member states often deviate from common African positions where their national interests are at stake, in particular, in the UN Security Council. This situation reflects some of the major challenges to strengthening African agency in multilateral organs.

As Paul Romita explains:

at times, hold-outs from smaller states find it difficult to resist the pressure placed on them by more powerful states to vote a certain way, especially if those powerful states have political or economic leverage over them.<sup>11</sup>

The limited staff capacity that many African countries have at their missions to the UN adds to this dynamic. It often results in less than optimal African representation and participation in the many multilateral discussions that constantly occur.

### African states in the UN General Assembly and Security Council face challenges in voting as a coherent group

Increasing coordination through more constant internal consultations, negotiations and consensus-building among the A3 could strengthen the African voice and its impact. It is clear that simultaneously representing national interests among 54 members would be impossible to achieve at all times. But, nevertheless, the A3 could enhance its accountability to the broader African membership of the UN. A recent study shows that UN Security Council members, including the P5, seldom object when presented with a united African position on issues related to the continent.<sup>12</sup>

There are several ways this could be done. First, African states should not only be active in discussions on UN-AU relations and specific African crises. They should also play a more prominent role in presenting broader African contributions to conceptual and practical discussions in the UN Security Council, including on peacekeeping and global issues.<sup>13</sup>

Second, the bigger African players – such as Egypt, Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya, Rwanda and Ethiopia – could act as unifiers rather than dividers. These countries should more actively push for coherent

African views, to better coordinate among themselves and identify ways of overcoming divides. Africa should not seek agency by automatically aligning with one side or the other. Rather, countries should adopt positions and actively pursue outcomes that benefit wider, shared, common continental objectives. In the EU, for example, if France and Germany jointly support and push for an issue, other states tend to fall in line – albeit at times reluctantly.

Third, the AU should play a more active role at the UN in New York by providing a space for internal negotiations and discussions among African members. The first step would be to strengthen its liaison office at the UN, which has historically played a limited role in bringing coherent views from African member states. The capacity of A3 states should be boosted significantly, to allow them to follow and contribute more meaningfully to thematic and regional issues on the UN agenda that extend beyond Africa. African delegations in New York tend to be small and thinly stretched too thinly over the multiplicity of agenda items being covered.

Bigger players such as Egypt, Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya, Rwanda and Ethiopia could act as unifiers rather than dividers

That P5 members – especially France, the UK and the US – tend to be the penholders on African issues in the Security Council highlights that the A3 countries provide less leadership than they ought to.

Last, Africa should think more systematically about how it can turn a polarised UN Security Council to its advantage. It needs to find ways to effectively leverage the different approaches of the P5 members to its benefit. It needs to tread carefully here, as the great powers have considerable economic and political clout, and could ‘punish’ states that fail to toe the line. The unity between the A3 countries and collectively standing up for their values and interests becomes all the more important.

### The African Union

The transition from the Organisation of African Unity to the AU, completed in 2002, was one of the most ambitious multilateral exercises led by the African continent. Since then, the AU has developed a series of mechanisms to enable the organisation to better respond to African challenges. For instance, the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) was established in 2003, based on the pillars of the Continental Early Warning System, the Panel of the Wise, the African Standby Force, the Peace Fund and the Peace and Security Council. In 2011, the African Governance Architecture (AGA) was formed, bringing together key AU organs and other pan-African institutions working on governance, democracy and human rights issues.

AU responses to peace and security challenges on the continent are increasingly being institutionalised. Since the AU’s first deployments, it has



AFRICA COULD LEVERAGE  
GAINS FROM A POLARISED  
SECURITY COUNCIL

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developed a number of supporting mechanisms with the UN to enable AU missions to be sustained. The AU has specialised in deploying peace support operations in environments where the rest of the international community has not been willing or able to do so; for instance, in the cases of Burundi (2003–2004), Somalia (2007–to present) and Mali (2013).

However, there have also been difficulties. The example of Somalia is poignant. At the beginning of its deployment in 2007 there was an expectation that the African Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) would be ‘re-hatted’ as a UN mission. However, divisions within the UN Security Council would not allow such a deployment.

AMISOM also highlights one of the critical challenges facing the AU, which relates to its own ability – or willingness – to provide predictable and secure funding for its own operations. As the organisation has become increasingly dependent on external assistance for funding and logistical support for its own missions, there have been attempts to increase member states’ financial contributions to AU missions.

The AU is in the process of making its structure fit for purpose, through a reform process spearheaded by Rwanda’s President Paul Kagame. This includes the capacity to implement its 50-year continental vision, Agenda 2063. Beyond Agenda 2063’s capacity to steer the AU’s course, it might prove to be an opportunity to drive the AU’s soft power internationally. Agenda 2063 echoes the UN’s SDGs while presenting Africans with the opportunity to own the continent’s development agenda.<sup>14</sup> This implies that Agenda 2063 could enhance the AU’s ability to push back against the global rise of nationalism and extremist right-wing politics.

The AU first has to mobilise local support for Agenda 2063. As one expert at the workshop pointed out, ‘African leaders habitually play away games while failing to draw in home matches’. This raises questions over whether the AU can overcome its weakness in bringing African citizens on board, before bringing Agenda 2063 to the global stage.

The AU reform process has yielded a number of proposals. They include streamlining certain organs and structures within the AU Commission, as well as increasing the expectation that member states should

contribute to the Peace Fund, and funding the AU itself from African sources.

The Peace Fund proposal, which expects to raise contributions from import levies from African states, would ensure that member states increase ownership of peacekeeping missions. The overwhelming majority of their running costs are supported by external partners, principally the EU and its members.

If successful, the Peace Fund would give the AU leverage in negotiations with the UN

External development partners fund 72% of the AU’s regular budget,<sup>15</sup> a percentage that becomes even greater when considering only the peace support operations budget (95%).<sup>16</sup> If successful – it is still early to assess whether it will be – the Peace Fund would give the AU leverage in negotiations with the UN to use UN-assessed contributions to increase the predictability and sustainability of AU operational funding.

Such proposals show a potentially useful model for how African member states could pursue positions globally. Identifying thematic champions on the continent that are pursuing solutions and galvanising positions, as in the case of Rwanda on AU reforms, provides important space for prioritising issues and keeping them in focus.

The above examples show a multilateral organisation full of contradictions. On the one hand, it is clear the AU has shown its willingness to intervene in spaces where the rest of the international community has been absent. The organisation has shown adaptability and flexibility in its deployments, security operations and missions. Examples include the number of different approaches the AU has undertaken in its peace support operations, including re-hatting to the UN, deploying hybrid missions (like the UN-AU Mission to Darfur) and using ad hoc security initiatives (including the Multinational Joint Task Force against Boko Haram).

On the other hand, the AU continues to face dire challenges and dysfunctionality, beyond the above-mentioned issues concerning lack of funding and logistics. Despite the AU Commission’s increased

capacity, it is still constrained in responding to the diverse challenges it faces. African heads of state and the AU Commission leadership have faced criticism for not doing enough in crisis situations.

This must be understood in the context of the concentration of power in the AU Assembly. The Assembly directs the Commission's mandate, meaning state-centric ideologies drive AU structures, and states have been reluctant to cede sovereignty to the AU.<sup>17</sup> One example is the inability – or unwillingness – of the AU to deploy a peace support operation during the Burundi crisis in 2015, when Burundi's government rejected such a move. The decision was reversed at the Assembly.

### Africa can increase its agency by investing in strengthening regional economic communities

The Assembly has shown little appetite to devolve any of its power to the Commission, hence such scenarios are likely to emerge in future. There is general consensus that the AU's member states should use the platform the organisation provides to be more systematic and focused in pursuing common positions. The bigger African powers need to provide more forceful and inspiring leadership, based on support from their subregions, especially when engaging in global debates and negotiations.

#### The emergence of Regional Economic Communities

RECs and Regional Mechanisms (RMs) have emerged as central actors in responding to Africa's challenges. They tend to bring states in the same geographical subregion of Africa together to forge common positions on trade, integration and security, among others. In the past 20 years, many RECs/RMs have developed a range of responses to peace and security matters on the continent. The role of RECs is an example of the complex and multifaceted spaces where Africa seeks to deal with its own challenges.

Due to their geographical, political and cultural proximity, through the principle of 'subsidiarity' – where the institution that is closest to the issue takes the lead – RECs/RMs are often perceived to be in an advantageous

position to contribute to peace and security efforts. Such engagements are provided for under Chapter 8 of the UN Charter. It describes subsidiarity by acknowledging the existence of regional arrangements dealing with matters related to maintaining international peace and security.<sup>18</sup> Similar views are included in the APSA Protocol of 2003<sup>19</sup> and the Memorandum of Understanding between the AU and RECs/RMs of 2007.<sup>20</sup>

While some in Addis Ababa, the seat of the AU, identify the connections between the AU and REC/RMs as a hierarchical relationship between the continental organisation and the subregional bodies, this idea is not widely accepted, particularly among the RECs/RMs themselves. Competition, tensions and lack of coordination at operational and strategic levels are therefore not uncommon. Some examples of this rivalry have occurred in mediation processes in the Central African Republic, Guinea-Bissau, Libya, Madagascar, South Sudan and Zimbabwe.<sup>21</sup>

Increasingly, the relationship between RECs/RMs and the AU is being framed as one of 'complementarity', where identifying comparative advantages is critical to ensuring that cooperation rather than competition occurs. This makes sense when the RECs/RMs in question have a long history of having had their own mechanisms, and of the institutionalisation of those mechanisms, as in the case of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

It is certainly impossible to group all the RECs/RMs at the same level. Whereas some have created more sophisticated mechanisms, such as the Southern African Development Community and ECOWAS, others are still in their infancy, as in the case of the North African Regional Capability.

The East African Community (EAC) unsuccessfully attempted to mediate the Burundi crisis, which also highlights problems that REC/RMs face in their engagements. Despite the EAC's willingness to play a role, it still had challenges regarding its own capacity, and there was a lack of strategic coherence between national and regional efforts in Burundi.

Adding to the complexity, new multilateral arrangements that fall outside traditional RECs/RMs have also emerged; for example, when countries in specific regions

show a willingness to respond to security threats. This is highlighted by processes such as the G5 Sahel and the Multinational Joint Task Force, two regionally led initiatives deployed to deal with Islamist threats in the Sahel and Boko Haram, respectively.

Such arrangements, also known as ad hoc security initiatives, create a new paradigm not only in the context of RECs/RMs, but also regarding the very concept of interventions and peace support operations. While traditional peace support operations have more clear reporting and accountability to their mandating authorities (e.g. the UN or AU), ad hoc security initiatives' interactions with international organisations are not so clear. This raises questions about the role of organisations such as the UN and AU that, despite authorising their deployments, do not have a direct role in the command and control of their operations.

Africa can increase its agency by investing more of its own funds in strengthening the institutions discussed above, bolstering evidence-based research to support policy positions, and clearly formulating and articulating its positions. There is no shortage of forums for these important discussions to take place, but they need to be used more strategically.

### **African agency and dealing with bilateral partners**

The above sections describe how Africa navigates a challenging world, particularly by directly benefiting from multilateralism. However, to further understand its agency, it is also important to understand how African states directly engage with external partners, and how this affects Africa's overall positioning in the world.

In this rapidly changing, multipolar world, Africa has once again become a theatre of competition between 'great powers', as it was during the colonial era and the Cold War. However, African countries are also beginning to recognise the need for a more strategic and coherent approach to external actors as a means to increase their global influence.

While there is renewed interest in the continent for reasons of security, trade and politics among a wide variety of outside countries – including China, France, Germany, the Gulf states, India, Israel, Iran, Russia, Turkey, the UK and the US – uncertainty in

the international system and the weakness of African states makes them vulnerable to decisions made outside the continent.

Given the right incentives and policy frameworks, will Africa be able to turn this time of crisis to its advantage? What African responses have there been to renewed great power competition for the continent's resources and political allegiances, and how has this affected African agency? And has Africa successfully leveraged the attention it is receiving from its multiple suitors?

The new 'Scramble for Africa' gives African states a chance to increase their leverage with outside powers

This new 'Scramble for Africa' poses political, security, economic and values-based societal challenges for the continent. It presents an opportunity for African governments to increase their leverage with outside powers, as they play one off against the other. Some of the responses to the intensive wooing of Africa have increased opportunities for corruption, patronage and rent-seeking.

Over the past two decades a number of platforms have been developed to provide impetus for the continental relations with such actors. Among these are the EU-Africa Strategic Partnership, which includes a summit; the India-Africa Forum Summit; and the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation; and also platforms with Turkey and South Korea.

These high-level engagements by external actors have been driven as much by a desire to access to Africa's minerals – in the case of China, in particular – as they have by geopolitical necessity or market access. At times, these events have been seen as vanity projects, which are more about the optics of leaders shaking hands and smiling, without much follow-through in terms of pledges made.

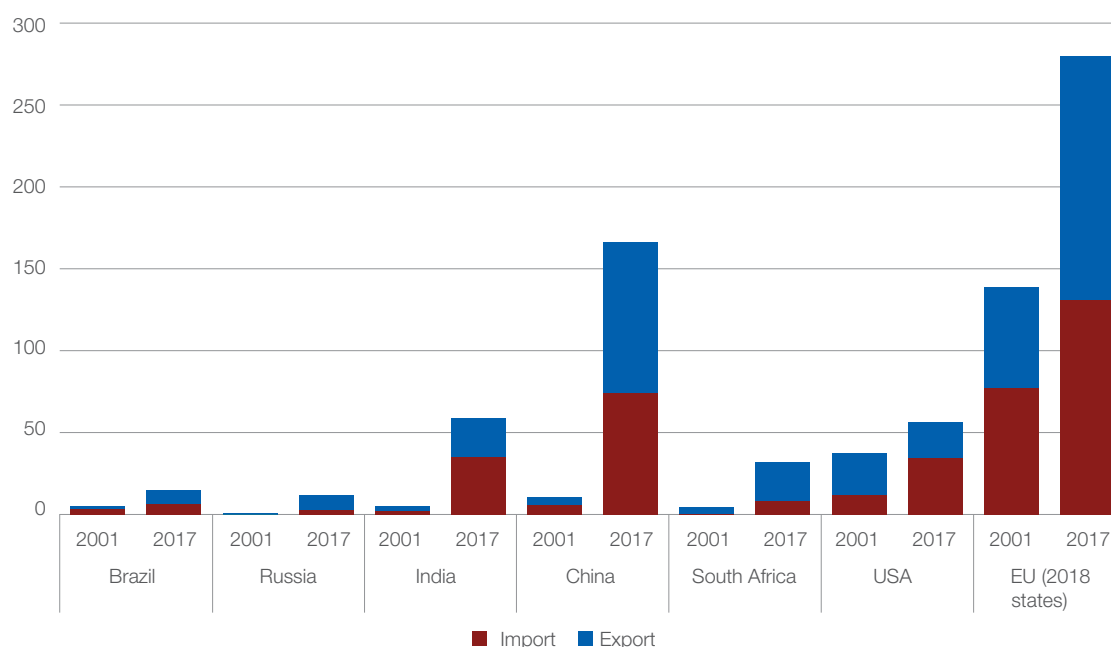
Former colonial powers – especially France and the UK – retain significant commercial, diplomatic and geostrategic interests in Africa. European countries have been the largest providers of development cooperation and among the largest investors for many

**Table 1: Trade with Africa, 2001 vs 2017 (US\$ billion)**

	2001 (US\$ billion)			2017 (US\$ billion)		
	Imports from Africa	Exports to Africa	Total trade with Africa	Imports from Africa	Exports to Africa	Total trade with Africa
<b>Brazil</b>	3.3	1.9	5.2	6.6	8.1	14.7
<b>Russia</b>	0.4	1.1	1.5	2.6	9.1	11.7
<b>India</b>	2.4	2.8	5.2	35.3	23.5	58.8
<b>China</b>	6.0	4.8	10.8	74.1	92.2	166.3
<b>South Africa</b>	0.7	4.0	4.7	8.5	23.3	32.0
<b>US</b>	12.1	25.4	37.5	34.6	21.7	88.3
<b>EU (28 states)</b>	77.0	61.5	138.5	130.7	149.4	280.1

Source: Adapted from [www.TradeMap.org](http://www.TradeMap.org)

**Figure 3: Trade with Africa, 2001 vs 2017 (US\$ billion)**



Source: [www.TradeMap.org](http://www.TradeMap.org)

years. In addition, on the trade front China in 2009 became the continent's largest trading partner.

The figures above show changes in total imports and exports between Africa and the five BRICS countries, the US and the EU, according to TradeMap.org, which uses UN Comtrade statistics.

While external partners increasingly take a strategic approach to their relations with Africa, African states seldom do the same. As a result, relations between individual African states and their partners often result in uncoordinated responses, with limited strategic reach or benefit to African interests.

Where possible for such a diverse continent, African countries should strive to find common ground when facing external partners. They should seek to develop clear patterns of engagement with external partners, which acknowledge power limitations while seeking to identify the means to overcome such limitations.

This could lead to a situation where agency is developed and exercised through a balance of realistic assessments, patience, effort, compromise and seeing the bigger picture. It could help the continent realise that African agency is both more complex and potentially more significant than is often assumed.<sup>22</sup>

## African agency in relations with China

China has played an immensely important role in developing African infrastructure and opening up new funding for development in Africa, especially in the past two decades. It is the continent's largest trading partner.

China's role in Africa is sometimes exaggerated or over-simplified. The debate is not apolitical, with two opposing camps in academia divided roughly into 'Sinophiles' and 'Sinophobes'. China is seen by turns as benevolent or neo-colonialist.

There is a narrative of Africa being an object that is acted upon and exploited by China, as opposed to doing what is good for Africa itself. This diminishes the notion of any meaningful agency, given the power disparities between China and the 55 separate African states.

The characterisation of a 'Chinese debt trap' or 'debt book diplomacy' in Africa is alarmist. Countries are indebted to China, but a lot is also owed to private and multilateral institutions, and other countries.<sup>23</sup>

Overall, though, there have been more benefits than drawbacks for Africa from this critical relationship, which China has skilfully tailored to the dynamics of each individual country.

For greater African agency – encompassing the ability of the continent to boost its bargaining power and take decisions independently – deeper understanding is needed of how decisions are made in Africa's complex and multifaceted relations with China.

In an SAILA Occasional Paper titled 'In the driver's seat? African agency and Chinese power', by Cobus van Staden, Chris Alden and Yu-Shan Wu, the authors explore the complexities of the ties between African and Chinese actors.<sup>24</sup> The relationship is often cast as an example of mutually beneficial South-South cooperation. In 2018, the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), the AU and the BRI promised US\$60 billion to Africa, broken down into investments, concessional or interest-free loans,

export credits, buyers' credits and so forth. The paper demonstrates that despite power disparities, African states are at times able to bargain effectively and use their leverage with the Chinese.

An example the authors give is in relation to the AU, which has steadily strengthened its ties with China. The gleaming new AU headquarters were built by the Chinese at an estimated cost of US\$217 million, and opened in 2011–2012. At the 2012 FOCAC meeting, the AU participated as a full member, having previously held observer status.

China has designated an ambassador to the AU, separate from its ambassador to Ethiopia, though the AU has been slow to reciprocate to appoint its own emissary to China. But as the authors note, 'stronger African member countries will not defer all decision-making power to the AU, in order to protect their own interests, weakening the AU's proposed leadership positions.'<sup>25</sup>

African priorities – such as industrialisation, Agenda 2063 and elevating FOCAC to summit level – have all made their way into FOCAC and its discourse: 'while China holds most of the structural power in FOCAC, it's actually subject to an ongoing socialization process, where its own behaviour is shaped.'<sup>26</sup>

Africa is indeed changing China's behaviour. It has become much more involved in peace and security, exemplified by the opening of its first military base outside Asia, in Djibouti. Protection of wildlife – in particular curbing the ivory trade – was forced onto the 2015 FOCAC agenda, mainly through pressure from African civil society.<sup>27</sup>

The second case study example shows how Africa has become progressively more involved in China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The infrastructure scheme has moved from being just a few states with coastlines on the Indian Ocean, to encompassing virtually the whole continent, with earlier infrastructure projects retroactively incorporated into the initiative. This, too, demonstrates Chinese flexibility in relation to the



exercise of African agency. For example, Ethiopia is heavily involved in the initiative, despite being landlocked. And China needs to be wary of financial and reputational risks if African states default on BRI-related debt.

As the SAIIA paper concludes:

African agency can be found in the broad frameworks of discussions at FOCAC events. It is clear these are not simply set by

China, but that African perspectives are also incorporated in the process in significant ways. The explicit integration of the AU's Agenda 2063 into the FOCAC VI Action Plan underscores this aspect.<sup>29</sup>

Africa, therefore, has more room for manoeuvre with China than it is often given credit for, and has at times been able to play off Western interests in Africa with those of China.

## Final reflections

In an environment where the international system faces pressure – from increasing protectionism, military tension and growing inequality – Africa will need to strengthen its position to navigate this reality.

Africa must seek opportunities in this changing world. African countries have long been advocates of reforming the international system – including the UN and its Security Council and the Bretton Woods institutions – demanding more representation for Africans. Dynamic countries on the continent should put African concerns firmly on the international agenda. This will require solidarity, good governance, leadership and unity of purpose.

In a context where Africa has often been marginalised from international decision-making, a key starting point for the continent is promoting its own values-based leadership. The AU, through the AGA, has been promoting a 'shared values' discourse since 2011. The ability of the continental leadership to ensure it promotes African positions, while still acknowledging – sometimes diverging – national interests, is essential in promoting greater African agency in the international system.

Moreover, current global shifts might be an opportunity to drive reform of global structures, even if it means ending up with a mixed bag of the elements of multilateralism that benefit the continent. This could mean multilateral platforms such as the UN, AU and RECs increasingly develop a complex regime for the continent. Division of labour could be further enhanced, promoting the continent's goal of achieving a more central role in global governance.

Despite being an active member of the international community, Africa still struggles to have its agency recognised and voice heard. Certainly, one of the key challenges in ensuring increased African agency in the international system relates to the continent's own capacity to strengthen processes and present a coherent and unified message. Most of the continent is made up of small states. The idea of Africa, collectively, being an active player in multilateral processes, through strengthened coordination mechanisms, should not be seen as a luxury, but rather a pre-requisite for a strong African voice.

## Notes

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### Acknowledgements



Federal Foreign Office

This report is funded by the German Foreign Office. The ISS is also grateful for support from the members of the ISS Partnership Forum: the Hanns Seidel Foundation, the European Union and the governments of Canada, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the USA.

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ISSN 2617-7749 Print  
ISSN 2617-7757 Digital

