

Exploring Africa's Agency in International Politics

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Abstract

A protracted conventional knowledge within mainstream International Relations (IR) has been that African agents (states, organizations, and diplomats) are consumers of international norms and practices designed in the affluent countries of the Global North. Papers in this special issue present a challenge to this view; they discuss the active role and the influence of African actors in international politics and renew a call for the development of IR theories, concepts, and methods that reflect Global Southern and African experiences, ideas, institutions, actors and processes.

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Africa, agency, global south, international politics

The articles in this special issue contribute to the discourse on Africa's agency in global politics and are an outcome of the first international conference of the International

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Studies Association (ISA) in Africa. The editors (Coffie and Tiky) were the programme chairpersons of the conference, held at the University of Ghana, Accra, in 2019. The conference generated meaningful scholarly conversations on the multiple and significant ways in which actors from the Global South, including Africans, influence international politics. In addition, the ISA meetings provided an opportunity to renew a call for the development of International Relations theories, concepts, and methods that reflect Global South and African experiences, ideas, institutions, actors, and processes.

In this collection, we want to share the optimism expressed by many conference participants in Accra that the proliferation of publications analysing African agency in international politics will ultimately debunk the old perspective of Africans as peripheral agents of the international system and lead to a reassessment of the role and conception of African agency in international politics.

Indeed, one of the most intriguing developments in IR scholarship over the last two decades has been the steady growth of works criticising, rejecting, or scorning the notion of centre and periphery – a deliberate attempt to end the marginalisation of Africa and the Global South in the study and practice of international affairs. In a special issue of *International Studies Review*, Acharya (2016) introduced a series of essays that “highlight the place and agency of non-Western societies in the global order.” Aning and Edu-Afull (2016), for example, contend that the active agency of the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West Africa (ECOWAS) in Mali, Côte d’Ivoire, and Libya, through the implementation of responsibility to protect (R2P), contribute to global peace. Similarly, Bilgin et al. (2016) discuss analytical lenses aimed at ending the marginalisation of the Global South from Western mainstream IR perspectives. The collection of articles in this special issue advances the discourse that demands IR no longer focus solely on the agency of great powers in world politics: IR must also analyse the behaviour of African and other Global South agents in international politics.

Significantly, we acknowledge that the discourse on locating African agency is situated in the broader debate of de-centring the discipline of IR as a whole and calling for a “Global IR” (Acharya, 2016; Wiener, 2018). Thus, many scholars have critically untangled the various traditional approaches for the study and practice of international politics. They have noted that the fundamental problem of the discipline and the practice of IR pertains to its lack of inclusivity of Southern voices (Abrahamsen, 2017; Dunn and Shaw, 2001; Shahi and Ascione, 2016) and the dominance of Western-Eurocentric voices (Beswick and Hammerstad, 2013; Harman and Brown, 2013; Jones, 2006; Medie, 2020; Tieku, 2013, 2021).

The contributors to this special issue are united in principle and build upon this debate while offering further evidence of the influence of African actors and ideas on international politics. They test both ideas and African empirical cases where Africa is not just a test tube but also organically developing ideas. Tieku’s article discusses the influence of the African Union Commission (AUC) on continental issues and on the international system. Jänsch’s article shows how Tanzania resisted pressure from powerful players to implement a particular foreign policy strategy and, instead, chose a course of action maximising its own security and stability. Balogun’s article shows how the

constitution of the West African Health Organization (WAHO), a subregional organisation, was driven by African agents and discusses the process of acquisition of the capacity to influence the international system. In his article, Chan reflects on some of the internal constraints of African agency in international politics. Together, we deliberate over African actions, preferences, and strategies to disrupt the narrative of Africa as a passive actor or object of study and practice in global politics.

The introduction and articles in this special issue depart from the theoretical and analytical discourse that marginalises African agency and focuses on how external actors determine African realities. Instead, the articles focus on how African states, leaders, and diplomats/bureaucrats have been progressively influential in world negotiations over climate change, world trade, global security, and intervention norms. To be clear, agency is defined here as the ability of states, intergovernmental organisations, civil society, and individual actors to exert influence in their interactions with foreign entities to maximise their utilities and achieve a set of goals. We note that African (state and non-state) actors have made strategic choices in the reshaping of existing relations with Western partners and in the development of new alliances with rising powers. African actors have been critical to the definition and implementation of policies in fields as diverse as regionalism/regional integration, governance, security, health, environment, and migration. These are the areas that have dominated our attention, both in Accra at the conference and in the writing of this introduction and the various articles assembled in this special issue.

In the following, we provide an overview of the theoretical and empirical reasons for the historical marginalisation of Africa in the study and practice of international politics. This overview mainly focuses on various scholars' accounts of the constraints on African agency in global politics. That section is then followed by a discussion of the nature of African agency, where we elaborate the special issue's conceptualisation of African agency. We also highlight some arenas/spaces for the manifestation of African agency in international politics. Last, we present an overview of the various authors' contributions in this issue and their unpacking of African agency in their respective articles.

Sources of Constraints on Africa's Agency in Global Politics

According to *metrocentrism* (Go, 2016),¹ Africa's modern history of being exploited, marginalised, victimised, and silenced places it on the margins/peripheries of international (global) politics. The continent's colonial past has led to its portrayal as a passive actor and minor player vis-à-vis the main forces of change in international politics (Mabera, 2019) and to its characterisation as lacking agency. Simultaneously, the limited agency of Africa in IR has warranted phrases such as "representational deficiency" and "epistemic repression." The silencing and absence of Africa and non-Western societies are noted in their references as subaltern entities with no political relevance (Abrahamsen, 2017, p. 125; Capan, 2016, p. 2; Jones, 2006, p. 2; Odoom and Andrews, 2017, p. 43; Waever, 1998). This idea is emboldened by the development of the exotic "other" who is the object of both scholarly investigation and "civilising efforts." As Miller (1998) puts it, "Since the dawn of 'Western' literature in Homer,

the act of imagining Africa has helped [...] Western cultures to define themselves.” Accordingly, Dunn and Shaw (2001, p. 3) note that “the West suffers an identity crisis in the absence of Africa as the ‘other,’ yet the Western ‘self’ is the author and authority of IR.”

In typical Western IR style, Hans Morgenthau disregarded Africa as a politically empty space that did not have any history before the First World War (Morgenthau, 1985, p. 369). Similarly, Kenneth Waltz noted that “it would be as ridiculous to construct a theory of international politics on Malaysia and Costa Rica as it would be to construct an economic theory of oligopolistic competition based on the minor forms in a sector of an economy” (Waltz, 1979, pp. 72–73). In other words, a general theory of international politics is necessarily based on the great powers. Subsequently, Huntington (1993, p. 25), in his listing of the world’s major civilisations, offered Africa a token gesture of a “possible African civilization.” Such framing has cast Africa to the fringes and margins of the practice of global politics, where the continent’s consideration in IR scholarship appears only as a case of delinquency with no meaningful politics (Cornelissen et al., 2012, p. 2; Dunn and Shaw, 2001, p. 3). Some practitioners of IR have also shared the perception of Africa as a passive or supplicant actor in international politics. While envisioning the post-Cold War new world order, Henry Kissinger (1994, p. 23) totally ignored the continent: not a single African actor (state, non-state, or regional grouping) was included in his listing of the major powers that he believed would dominate international politics in the twenty-first century.

Furthermore, the perception of IR as a social science discipline in general means that the positivists’ universal truth ontology and an objective epistemology have largely influenced the major canons of IR (Cartwright and Montuschi, 2014; Hoffmann, 2001; Smith et al., 2010). According to such a paradigm, African worldviews and insights – which are considered to be ontologically relativist and to possess a subjective epistemology – are marginalised, and their potential to contribute to the analytical tools of IR thus go unseen (Tieku, 2012, 2013). From the perspective of Southern epistemological scholars, including Africans, IR’s prioritisation of objectivist epistemologies in teaching, researching, and learning privileges Western knowledge and marginalises non-positivist insights and experiences, resulting in ontological disparity (Ayoob, 2002; Connell, 2007; de Sousa Santos, 2015; Tieku, 2021). This disparity in IR reproduces a cyclical process of hegemony in both the theory and practice of global politics.

Nature and Manifestation of African Agency in International Politics

Acknowledging Africa’s privileged position at the centre of global discourses on crucial issues such as migration flows, environment, biodiversity, ecology, gender, human security, development, non-governmental organisations, and international financial institutions would reveal insights and experience that can provide a more accurate reflection of an international (global) study (Cornelissen et al., 2012; Dunn and Shaw, 2001, p. 3; Odoom and Andrews, 2017).

Agency, according to Brown (2012, p. 7), represents “the faculty of acting or exerting power.” African agency in this context in IR is therefore understood as African actors’ ability to negotiate and bargain with external actors in a manner that benefits Africans themselves. Furthermore, African agency entails fostering home-grown African initiatives to improve socio-economic well-being and to project a posture of power and self-help in international engagement (Chipaike and Knowledge, 2018, p. 1). It is self-reflective and self-benefitting socially.

Furthermore, we note that African agency in international politics should be understood as multifaceted, incorporating both state and non-state actors (*ibid.*, p. 9). Africa’s agency is, therefore, relational rather than static (Beswick and Hammerstad, 2013, pp. 472 & 477). Accordingly, Brown (2012, p. 4) has categorised African agency into four broad variations: collective intergovernmental organisations (e.g. the African Union), subregional intergovernmental organisations (RECs), agency exercised by national states, and state-based actors acting on behalf of national states (leaders and their representatives). Chipaike and Knowledge (2018, p. 7) augment this list by adding civil society organisations, whose influence manifests in the work of international NGOs.

The existence of “new regionalism” helps to illuminate African agency through the continuously growing terminology of interregionalism, or, the “institutionalized relations between world regions” (Hänggi et al., 2006: 3). The multidimensional collaborative efforts of the EU and AU reveal a relationship of both pure interregionalism and hybrid or quasi-interregional cooperation. The agency of Africa in this partnership has been conspicuous and has contributed empirical contestations to the narrative of the continent’s place of marginality and victimhood. While, for example, the EU’s funding of operations with the AU gives the EU leverage, the AU and subregional institutions such as ECOWAS have demonstrated their capacity to become first responders to crisis management needs (Haastrup, 2013; Mumford, 2021). Additionally, in these institutional arrangements, the set objectives and agendas are mostly driven by Africans themselves (Piccolino and Minou, 2014; Pirozzi and Litsegård, 2017, p. 19).

Finally, our view on agency is not a quantitatively related issue where we seek to answer how much agency African political actors are able to enact (Brown, 2012, p. 7). Instead, we build on existing empirical and theoretical analyses of what kind of agency is enacted by the multiple actors representing Africa in global politics. Thus, the contributions in this issue show how the notion of agency involves acting or active participation and exerting influence in various forms and arenas. For example, Tiekü’s article shows that the work of the AUC, through eight pathways, significantly influences issues that affect not just AU member states but the broader international system. Instead of addressing the common question of the institutional autonomy of African regional organisations, Balogun’s contribution discusses their constitution as autonomously driven by African agents and the process through which they acquire the capacity to be active agents in the international system.

Jänsch’s article delineates how Tanzania resisted pressure from more powerful actors – the AU and the United States of America – to passively implement policies designed abroad to fight terrorists in neighbouring Somalia. Instead, Tanzania

implemented its own foreign policy designed to prioritise its national security. For his part, Chan analyses the internal constraints and difficulties vis-à-vis the exercise of agency that African actors encounter within international politics. Discussing the participation of African states in climate negotiations, Chan observes that a major limitation of African agency is inadequate information on the dynamics of case presentation to either claim or solicit their share of resources in the international system.

On a more general level, we analyse African agency within three arenas: First, we do not speak of Africa as a singular unit but acknowledge the substantial impact of African states and non-state actors acting collectively, along with the nature of that collective action in international politics. Second, we note the multifaceted features of African agency through our analyses of the range of different actors from various places on the continent and outside who are united as African. Finally, we note that the arenas over which African actors exert their influence or must engage are broad and overlapping. These include but are not limited to bilateral relations, multilateral intergovernmental relations, and regionalism or interregional cooperation.

Contributors' Unpacking of African Agency in International Politics

Tieku's search for African agency begins with a narration of the conventional IR narratives that the AUC – housed, like most public administrations or bureaucracies of international organisations (IOs), in the less materially endowed regions of the world – exercises no meaningful agency on international issues. He seeks to show that the AUC exercises significant agency on issues that affect not just the African continent but the broader international system. The paper demonstrates that the AUC exercises agency through at least eight pathways and is not just an implementer of decisions by governments.

The deployment of the AUC as an expression of African agency in international politics is part of a collective act described as soft balancing. Soft balancing usually calls for the establishment of limited or ad hoc diplomatic alliances to sometimes curb the great powers in a Lilliputian way (*ibid.*). The concept has been instrumental, for instance, in the opposition of African countries to the permanent establishment of US military presence on the continent through the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM).

Jänsch's article discusses Tanzania's response to the request to join the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) in 2007. Because the country is a minor player in African and world politics, the expectation was that it would respond positively to pressure by the African Union and the United States to contribute troops to fight terrorist groups in Somalia. Fighting terrorism in Somalia was an integral part of the US "War on Terror," a priority item on the Global North agenda. Jänsch shows that this perspective conflicted with Tanzania's national security and national identity. Tanzania's president at the time, Jakaya Kikwete, a Christian, understood that sending troops to fight alleged Muslim terrorists in Somalia would result in internal conflict in his country, almost equally comprised of Christians and Muslims. Instead of contributing troops, Tanzania chose to get involved in the resolution of the Somali crisis through diplomatic means.

The article ultimately demonstrates the rational agential behaviour of Tanzania in relation to AMISOM and the United States. When the norms and practices, defined by international organisations and great powers in the context of the global counterterrorism regime, conflict with the interests of an individual African state, exercising agency then becomes a question of survival.

Jänsch and many other scholars have focused on security as a burgeoning site of inter-regionalism to demonstrate Africa's agency. However, emerging research notes that other areas (such as health, climate change, migration, and food security) are yielding similar partnerships, and Africans are demonstrating agential capacities to identify solutions for both Africa and the world at large. Thus, in this special issue, Balogun focuses on health and specifically on the institutional arrangement of the West African Health Organization (WAHO), a subregional organisation. The article departs from the common question of the institutional autonomy of regional organisations. Instead, it discusses their constitution as organically driven by African actors and the processes through which they acquire the capacity to be agents in the international system.

Balogun's paper demonstrates the agential capacities of WAHO that are acquired and enacted through its reliance on three institutional strategies – namely, WAHO's strategic choice of networking with extraregional partners, the inclusion of civil society into regional social policy, and the development of intraregional linkages to create insulation from political control. Following from the above strategies, Balogun concludes that agency is an incremental development of an organisational culture that relies on a constant process of argumentation and negotiation. The paper also reveals that intraregional cooperation is a strategic means of reducing susceptibility to political control from within and outside the organisation.

Finally, some of this issue's authors reflect on certain aspects of the internal constraints on the agency of African actors within international politics. Writing on African states' participation in climate change negotiation, Chan notes that a major limitation of African agency is the lack of knowledge on the dynamics of case presentation to either claim or solicit their share of resources in the international system. To this effect, African states and actors have not benefited from the funds accrued to countries with climate vulnerabilities under the Paris Agreement, although the continent qualifies as an eligible beneficiary. Chan concludes that agency will not be offered on a silver platter for African states and actors. Thus, it is incumbent upon individual states to secure the advantages presented in the international system even if a particular country has the most obvious need for it. According to Balogun, the generally weak health systems across West Africa and a lack of political will on the part of elected and appointed officials from member states are the major internal constraints on the WAHO's quest to accomplish wide-ranging health goals for ECOWAS states. However, WAHO officials actively engage with these constraining factors and use this to their advantage in how they engage in resource allocation for WAHO. Thus, Balogun concludes that WAHO officials have become strategic agents within ECOWAS rather than passive actors constrained by political will and competing interests.

Conclusion

The introduction and articles in this special issue on African agency in international politics present a challenge to the conventional wisdom that African actors are passive or supplicant agents in international politics. Empirically, African states lack military and economic powers, and sometimes their individual geographical sizes constrain their agency in international politics and make them consumers of norms and practices defined by the great powers of the Global North. We note that this narrative is obsolete, given the role that African actors, including states and non-states, have been playing in IR since their independence, and more notably since the beginning of the twenty-first century. The aim is not to create another provincial IR (African IR), but rather to extricate IR from the binaries and dualities upon which its knowledge is built (Capan, 2016, p. 8) and to promote more inclusivity in Global IR scholarship and practice.

The agency of African actors in international politics is multifaceted and growing given the changes in the strategic environment on the continent with the AU's creation of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA), the largest free trade area in the world. Together, the articles in this special issue outline the contemporary context within which African agency has come to the fore. Tieku's, Jänsch's, Chan's, and Balogun's articles shed light on the rationality African agents exhibit in selecting the courses of action that improve their utilities as collective and individual actors. They demonstrate the various ranges of actors and agency at work within multilateral, bilateral, and regional relations. To differing extents, these articles contribute to raising the prominence of Africa within the broader field of international politics and seek to further the call for more inclusive IR.

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Note

1. Go (2016) coined this term “to refer to the transposition of narratives, concepts, categories, or theories derived from the standpoint of one location onto the rest of the world, under the assumption that those narratives, concepts, and categories are universal.”

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Afrika als Akteur in der internationalen Politik

Zusammenfassung

In den Internationalen Beziehungen herrscht seit Langem die Auffassung vor, dass afrikanische Akteure (Staaten, Organisationen und Diplomaten) „Konsumenten“ internationaler Normen und Praktiken sind, die in den wohlhabenden Ländern des Globalen Nordens entwickelt wurden. Die Artikel in diesem Special Issue stellen diese Sichtweise infrage; sie behandeln die aktive Rolle und den Einfluss afrikanischer Akteure in der internationalen Politik und erneuern die Forderung nach der Entwicklung von Theorien der Internationalen Beziehungen, von Konzepten und Methoden, die die Erfahrungen, Ideen, Institutionen, Akteure und Prozesse des Globalen Südens und Afrikas beinhalten.

Schlagwörter

Afrika, Akteursqualität, Globaler Süden, internationale Politik