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Beyond the ‘Race to the Bottom’ Africa on the Global Chessboard and the Call for Renewed Pan-African Agency

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Abstract

The geostrategic significance of Africa is becoming increasingly evident as major and regional powers compete for influence in the region. However, this competition may lead to damaging outcomes for Africa that outweigh any potential gains. Currently, there is a metaphorical 'race to the bottom' underway, where external powers prioritize their interests over the welfare and stability of African nations. Such a dynamic risks exacerbating local conflicts, undermining governance, and impeding sustainable development on the continent. This paper evaluates the impact of this competition on Africa's governance, peace, security, accountability, and governance legitimacy. The geopolitical landscape in the Middle East and Africa is undergoing significant changes, with traditional powers being challenged and new alliances emerging. Key factors influencing this shift include the Gaza war, the Abraham Accord, and the Saudi-Iran rapprochement under Chinese auspices. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) increasingly occupy pivotal positions, impacting the peace and security of African nations amid a perceived decrease in the United States' (US) influence and reputation. The growing roles of Russia and China add complexity, with regional powers such as the UAE and KSA extending their influence into Africa, competing for resources, influence, and markets. These developments are part of a broader multipolar dynamic, with shifting focuses from traditional conflicts such as the Gaza war towards broader geopolitical strategies. The rivalry between the Saudi-led and the UAE-led blocs is reshaping regional dynamics, with both blocs actively engaging in proxy wars and power politics across the Horn of Africa and North Africa. The involvement of Russia and Turkey in various regional contexts further complicates the situation.

Internationally, the US' diminishing role, attributed to policies initiated during Barack Obama's presidency and internal governance challenges, has led to the delegation of regional responsibilities to Middle Eastern countries. This shift is mirrored by the European Union's (EU) decreased engagement owing to economic and migration challenges.

Two decades after its establishment, the African Union (AU), facing its own internal existential struggles, has limited efficacy in mediating conflicts and resisting external interference, highlighting the reduced agency of African nations in their own affairs. These changes signify a reconfiguration of global power dynamics, influenced by the strategic manoeuvres of regional powers and the changing roles of traditional global leaders.

In contrast, Africa will experience escalating pressure from both great and middle powers to align with specific sides. Owing to the ineffectiveness of the multilateral system and the dispersed power polarity, the continent is poised to encounter numerous strategic policy dilemmas and challenging questions regarding partnerships. Consequently, Africa will need to make tough decisions on various global issues. A crucial question arises: On what basis should Africa make these decisions? What principles should guide the decision-making process in this context?

This paper also examines the effects of these dynamics on multilateral organisations such as the AU and it argues that as Africa grows in geopolitical importance, pan-African strategies that amplify its voice in the global system are needed to counter fragmentation and foster unilateral external action by African nations. The paper concludes by emphasising the need for African agency, pragmatism, dynamism, and collective action.

Keywords

Africa, geopolitical significance, race to the bottom, Wagner Group, Sahel, Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, fragile states, multilateral organizations, authoritarian regimes, historical connections, geopolitics

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1. Great Powers, Regional Players, and the ‘Race to the Bottom’

CIA Director William J. Burns in his compelling speech titled ‘A World Transformed and the Role of Intelligence’ incisively pointed the pivotal strategic dilemma Africa, and the Global South are confronting due to increasing geopolitical competition.

“In a more volatile and uncertain world, in which power is more diffuse, the weight of the hedging middle is growing -- economically, politically and militarily. Democracies and autocracies, developed and developing economies, and countries from the Global South and other parts of the globe, are intent on diversifying their relationships in order to expand their strategic autonomy and maximize their options. These countries see little benefit and lots of risk in monogamous geopolitical relationships. Instead, we’re likely to see more countries pursue more open relationships than we were accustomed to over several post-Cold War decades of unipolarity. And if past is precedent, we ought to be attentive to rivalries between so-called middle powers -- which have often been the match that ignited collisions between major powers.” (Burns, 2023)

This paper examines the growing geopolitical significance of the African continent amid intensifying competition for influence from global and regional powers. Currently, a metaphorical ‘race to the bottom’ is unfolding that lacks competitive principles and holds potentially damaging effects at the continental, regional, and national level.

This dynamic has serious implications. Firstly, by obstructing collective action, such geopolitical contestation undermines the influence of multilateral organisations such as the United Nations (UN) Security Council, the African Union (AU), and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Secondly, it highlights concerns that current weaknesses in Africa’s poorly managed political transition processes and the erosion of pan-African institutions – such as the AU and ECOWAS – may worsen owing to interference from outside global and regional interests. Both the AU and ECOWAS have interventionist mandates that have been on the decline for almost a decade, primarily because of a lack of decisive pan-African leadership and robust institutional structures that are fit and stay true to their foundational purposes. Thirdly, it may lead to heightened peace and security risks, arising from increased militarization and the presence of foreign military presences in Africa. Finally, an unprincipled pursuit of national interests by major powers risks a race to the bottom that places excessive demands on African states.

There is a clear need for dynamism, pragmatism, agency, and collective action to counter potential fragmentation among African states and develop pan-African strategies that amplify the continent’s voice and interests. Africa is a complex geopolitical landscape. It is becoming ever more crucial to ensure that pan-African institutions are equipped to play their proper part in the new geopolitical dynamic, as well as to bolster multilateralism and address any damaging effects arising from major power competition.

2. The Middle East and Africa: The Geopolitical Connection

In the rapidly evolving geopolitical landscape of the Middle East and Africa, traditional powers are being challenged and new alliances formed. Nowhere is this more evident than in relations between the Middle East and North and East Africa, including the Horn of Africa. In the current situation in the Middle East, numerous factors are at play, including the Gaza war, the Abraham Accord, the Saudi-Iran rapprochement under Chinese auspices, and the possibility of Iran’s involvement in formal institutional negotiations. States such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Kingdom of Saudi-Arabia (KSA) are becoming pivotal players, affecting the peace and security of several African nations. Unfortunately, there is not enough space for domestic politics to constrain these powers during their turbulent transitions. This change coincides with a widespread perception of diminishing US engagement and influence in the Middle East and Africa, which is accompanied by a noticeable decline in its reputation in the Middle East. Additionally, Russia’s increasing influence in regional affairs in the Sahel and North Africa, as well as China’s rising role in the Middle East, complicates the situation. The decision of the League of Arab States’ Gaza Peace Committee to approach China for assistance signifies a new era in regional relations that have been deeply ingrained in multipolar dynamics.

Amid the intense great power competition, regional powers such as the UAE and KSA are forming new alliances, carving out their own geopolitical spheres of influence. In Africa, these reach beyond the Red Sea and the Mediterranean Sea, connecting the Middle East with North Africa, the Horn of Africa, and the Sahel. The ongoing war in Gaza has caused disruptions in maritime safety and shipping routes in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden revealing the interdependent nature of security in the Middle East

and Africa (Bubalo, 2023). Amid escalating maritime threats in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, partly due to the Gaza war, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin announced, “Operation Prosperity Guardian” (Chase 2023). This US-led initiative, involving Western and Arab allies, aims to address increasing security concerns in these waters, especially targeting Houthi attacks. States with a military presence in Djibouti, including the UK, Bahrain, Canada, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Seychelles, and Spain, are expected to join this effort. This is crucial as over 15% of global shipping, passing through the strategic Suez Canal, has been disrupted by these threats, particularly in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait (Chase 2023). As a result, shipping companies are delaying entry into this key maritime corridor, leading to heightened shipping costs and increased war-risk premiums.

In this context, the UAE and KSA are rising powers in the Middle East and parts of Africa, competing for influence, resources, and markets: both seek arable land, ports, and markets for their projected manufacturing and port development and management projects. The KSA is actively pursuing land-grab in competition with the UAE, which has recently secured carbon credits for 5% of Zimbabwe’s landmass and 10% of Liberia’s (Marawanyika & Sguazzin, 2023). The emerging coalitions and relations between the Gulf countries and the countries of the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa highlight this shift, which has far-reaching consequences for both the Middle East and Africa. With less focus on the Gaza war, Gulf countries are concentrating on their power projection and consolidation in the Horn and North Africa. This has led to the emergence of new power alliances between Middle Eastern countries and regimes in Africa, primarily driven by security concerns, resource access, and power politics. Their involvement in the Horn of Africa is driven by a combination of personal relationships, military strength, and financial influence, transitioning from state-centric to personality-driven and corporate-like powers. A key factor in this competition between the two blocs is the rivalry between their leaders and their desire to consolidate their personal power.

On the one hand, there is the Saudi-led bloc, which includes Egypt, Eritrea, and the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and is increasingly coordinating with Somalia, Turkey, and Qatar. On the other hand, there is a UAE-led bloc, with active participation from Ethiopia and Sudan’s Rapid Support Forces (RSF). The paradoxical roles of Russia and Turkey as both allies and adversaries in different contexts, such as in Syria, Libya, Ethiopia, and Sudan, further complicate the situation. As Gulf countries increasingly vie for control in Africa, proxy wars between the UAE and KSA for regional dominance are being fought. Exploiting existing fault lines, Gulf countries have already disrupted state integrity in Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Libya, and Yemen. Recently Sudan, Chad, and the UAE, were involved in a diplomatic tiff, resulting in the reciprocal expulsion of each other’s diplomats (Sudan Tribune 2023). In Port Sudan, the de facto seat of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), as Khartoum, the official capital, increasingly falls under the control of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), (Debanga Sudan, 2023) a protest was held against the United Arab Emirates, labeling it a “mafia state” (Debanga Sudan, 2023). The row escalated following accusations by Sudan that the UAE and Chad had provided support to the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) as response to UAE’s earlier expulsion of three Sudanese diplomats, which prompted Sudan to retaliate by expelling 15 Emirati diplomats and four Chadian diplomats.

Meanwhile, Lt Gen Yasir El Atta, the Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the SAF, praised Isaias Afewerki, the President of Eritrea (Ethio Forum, 2023). This announcement from the SAF has faced severe backlash for supporting Isaias Afewerki, particularly from neighboring communities and populations in Ethiopia and beyond. Despite public proclamations of neutrality and opposition to external interference in Sudan, Eritrea’s leader has continuously meddled in Sudanese affairs. He has also been involved in launching genocidal military campaigns in Tigray, Ethiopia, has previously attacked Djibouti, deployed troops to Yemen, and supported Al Shabaab in Somalia.

Tensions and the possibility of war between Ethiopia and Eritrea are on the horizon and could easily become another proxy conflict between the two blocs. In the Horn of Africa, the Jeddah and Pretoria agreements (two separate peace deals to end wars involving Ethiopia and Eritrea) illustrate the complex geopolitical dynamics involving the Gulf, the Horn of Africa, and the US, and highlight the reduced agency of African nations in shaping domestic politics. Notably, the UAE’s growing military investments in Africa, particularly in Ethiopia and the Sudanese RSF, give it an advantage over the KSA which, owing to internal constraints, avoids controversies in Middle Eastern crises. Generally, however, the leaders in these two blocs face few domestic constraints on their power. Where there is popular discontent and resistance, including armed resistance, these authoritarian leaders rarely hesitate to use weapons and money to quell dissent. The only other power with significant leverage is the US, although the EU and China can also exert influence, to some extent.

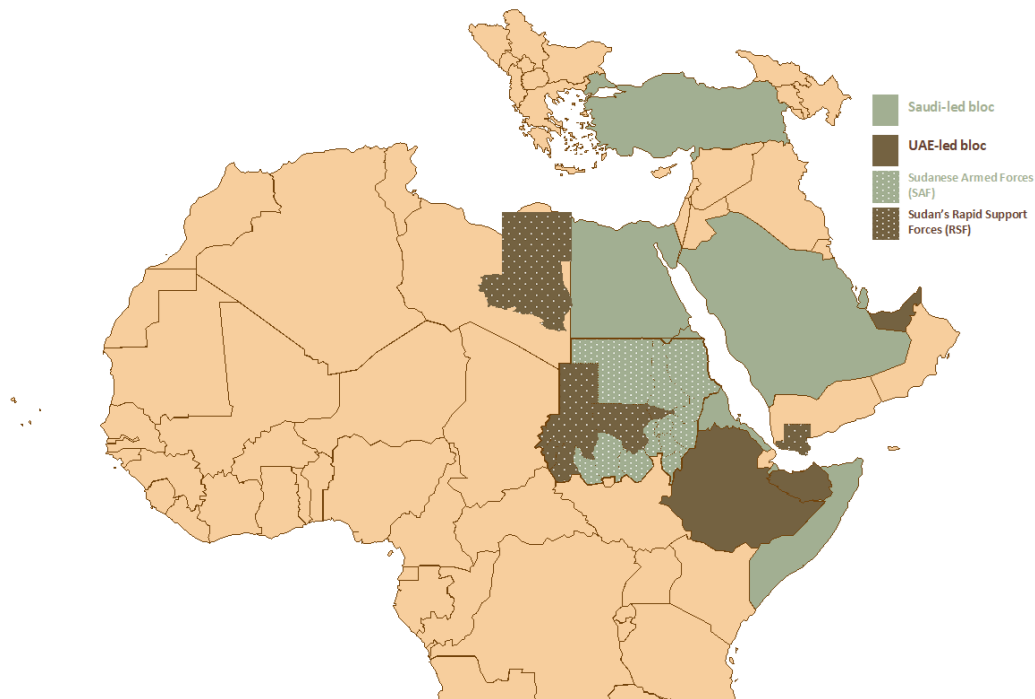


Figure 1. Author, 2023, Two UAE and KSA led blocs

Despite its significant capabilities, the US has seen its role in maintaining global order diminish, particularly in the Middle East and Africa. This can be traced back to former US president Barack Obama's policy of 'leading from behind', aimed at withdrawing from protracted US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. As a result, responsibilities were delegated to the KSA, the UAE, and Israel. For instance, in the wars in Yemen, Tigray in Ethiopia, and the Jeddah mediation in Sudan, the Western world, particularly the US, seemed to have outsourced its responsibilities to the KSA. Internal governance issues continue to weaken the US' role in maintaining global order, especially considering the upcoming elections that reflect global politics of identity. In the case of the Gulf states, their special relationship with the military-industrial complex gives them sufficient clout to influence politics in the West and East. These leaders understand and use the internal political dynamics in the US to their advantage.

The Gaza war and rising tension in the Horn of Africa may lead the US to re-engage more robustly with these regions, albeit not during the upcoming electoral campaign (Telling, Al-Atrush, & Rogers, 2023). The US has all the necessary power and capabilities – economic, demographic, military, and technological – but its internal governance challenges have weakened its position in ensuring world order.

Simultaneously, the EU, grappling with economic challenges and migration issues, is less inclined to engage in Middle Eastern and African crises. Its economic challenges and migration issues have revealed intricate relationships within the Middle East. The AU faces its own challenges, including leadership crises and a lack of unity among member states. This impacts the effectiveness of pan-African governance institutions, which have failed to act in line with the AU's interventionist normative peace and security architectures and have struggled to resist external interference. Its role in mediating the ongoing conflicts in Sudan and Ethiopia is limited, as is that of the UN.

While some may argue about the growing agency of African states, including their inclusion in the BRICS, it seems likely that they will be unable to fend off external intervention, owing to divided political constituencies, economic challenges from climate change-induced drought and flooding, the lingering impact of COVID-19 and, most importantly, the lack of leadership in the pan-African and international community.

3. Africa's Geopolitical Significance

The second Russia–Africa Summit, convened by President Vladimir Putin in St Petersburg in July 2023, underlined Africa's growing geopolitical importance within the global matrix of major and regional powers. Despite its diplomatic façade, the summit came at a critical moment – shortly after Russia had exited the UN Black Sea Agreement. That pact had enabled safe transportation of Ukrainian grain to world markets, including those in Africa. Moscow's exit from it took place only one month after the Wagner Group, a Russian government-supported private paramilitary organisation, had mounted a rebellion that exposed weaknesses in Russia's internal security system. While the summit was intended to fortify Moscow's diplomatic image and garner support for its war on Ukraine, it revealed a weakening of Russian influence in Africa. There was a drop in attendance, to just 17 heads of state from 43 in 2019 (Melly, 2023). This decline stands in stark contrast to other international summits involving Africa, such as the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in Beijing in 2018 and the December 2022 US–Africa Leaders' Summit in Washington DC, which were attended by 51 and 45¹ heads of government and state respectively (Dahir, 2018). The absence of some prominent leaders at the Russia–Africa meeting, including Bola Tinubu of Nigeria, William Ruto of Kenya, Félix Tshisekedi of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Paul Kagame of Rwanda, emphasised this trend. Yevgeny Prigozhin, however, then head of the Wagner Group and a close associate of Putin, did attend, highlighting Russia's commitment to security cooperation with Africa despite diplomatic struggles. The involvement of the Wagner Group, particularly in the wake of its unsuccessful rebellion and the Russian government's subsequent decision to assume control of the group's activities in Africa, could foreshadow a significant escalation in geopolitical competition between the West and Russia on the continent.

Despite the drop in summit participants, Russia continues its strategic engagement in Africa, using humanitarian aid and security cooperation as tools to sustain its influence and promote its interests. Although urged by Chad's Faki Mahamat, chair of the AU Commission, to renew the Black Sea grain deal, Putin chose instead to offer free grain to a select group of African countries. In the wake of the July 2023 coup d'état in Niger, he has thrust 'food diplomacy' to the forefront of his strategy, in part to counter Ukraine's stated intention to continue its grain supplies to African nations and establish grain hubs (Summit Africa, 2021).

The continuation of grain supplies, while addressing urgent needs in recipient countries, also positions Russia as a generous actor, despite the Ukraine crisis. In addition, Russia has turned to humanitarian aid as a strategy, providing free food to African countries such as Burkina Faso, Mali, Eritrea, the CAR, and Zimbabwe, all of which have close relations with Moscow and are led by authoritarian leaders. Intriguingly, those leaders without exception huddle in the basement of the Ibrahim Index of African Governance (IIAG), which measures and monitors governance performance in African countries.

More importantly, difficulties emerging in the complex political landscape of the Sahel region – aptly dubbed the 'coup belt' – are now accentuated by the Niger coup and could bring about new alliances with Russia, thereby attracting wider global attention. There is, for example, concern that the emergence of a coalition of coup leaders from Burkina Faso, Mali, Guinea, and Niger, bolstered by Russian support, could present a grave threat to the authority of the 15-member Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS, an AU regional group), and the AU itself. As the lead organisation in handling the Niger crisis, ECOWAS held a summit in Nigeria in July 2023, after which it demanded that the authors of the coup reinstate Mohamed Bazoum, Niger's democratically elected president, within the week. It vowed to take 'all necessary measures', including the use of force, to restore democratic rule in Niger.

In addition to diplomatic pressure, ECOWAS took retributive measures that included a trade blockade and financial sanctions. Its stance was supported by the UN, the US, the EU, and France. Until recently, the latter was a major mining, security, and migration containment ally for Niger in the Sahel. France and Niger had previously exchanged warnings that included potential aid cut-offs and the severance of military ties. US security ties with Niger, worth about \$500 million since 2012, were noted by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken as potentially being at risk (Schmitt, Walsh, & Peltier, 2023). France and the EU suspended some aid to Niger, and the French president issued a strong warning against mob attacks following a congregation of coup supporters outside

¹ In the US–Africa Leaders' Summit, six heads of state were excluded – Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali, and Sudan, suspended by the AU for unconstitutional change of government; Eritrea, owing to limited diplomatic relations with the US; and the Sharawi Arab Democratic Republic, which is not recognised by the US. For more, see <http://bitly.ws/PKj3>.

the French embassy in the capital Niamey. President Emmanuel Macron stated that any attack on French citizens or interests in Niger would elicit a swift response.

As coups have become more frequent in the Sahel region, so France and Russia (the latter mainly through the Wagner Group) have been steady presences in the narrative. In a bid to remain in power and rally domestic and wider African support, the Niger coup leaders may seek to involve Russia more directly, adding to the escalating competition between France and the Wagner Group in Francophone West Africa. The instigators of the coups frequently justify their actions as a necessary means to end exploitative relationships between France and their respective countries, in essence rejecting the ‘Françafrique’ dynamics that have driven much regional policy since decolonisation. The Niger coup mirrors similar scenes in Burkina Faso and Mali, following coups in 2021 and 2022 respectively, drawing powerful extra-regional actors into play. France has been clear in its denunciation of the coups in the Sahel region, while Russia, through the Wagner Group, has emerged as a key security ally of these Francophone countries.

As a matter of policy, both the AU and ECOWAS explicitly reject unconstitutional regime changes and have been known to impose sanctions and diplomatic penalties in such instances, albeit with some inconsistencies in their implementation. The two bodies consistently denounce unauthorised governmental changes, with ECOWAS frequently adopting a stricter stance. Both the AU and ECOWAS maintain mandates centred on intervention and integration. Although both entities have enhanced integration efforts through initiatives such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), the emphasis on intervention has waned over the past decade. The AU is also mandated:

to intervene in a Member State pursuant to a decision of the Assembly in respect of grave circumstances, namely: war crimes, genocide, and crimes against humanity as well as a serious threat to legitimate order [and] to restore peace and stability to the Member State of the Union upon the recommendation of the Peace and Security Council.²

A corollary is that AU member states are obliged to exercise restraint and to refrain from entering into any treaty or alliance that contradicts the principles and objectives of the AU.³ Furthermore, they are prohibited from allowing their territory to be used as a base for subversion against another AU member state.⁴ ECOWAS has similar mandates.⁵ The series of coups in the Sahel, unconstitutional extensions of term of office, the world’s deadliest war in Ethiopia’s Tigray involving Eritrea, and upheavals in Sudan underscore the decline in the AU’s interventionist stance. This can largely be attributed to the absence of resolute pan-African leadership and strong institutional frameworks aligned with and upholding its foundational objectives.

The so-called ‘Sahel coup belt’ is expanding, with the most recent coup occurring in Niger (the previous ones were in Burkina Faso, Mali, Guinea, Sudan, and Chad). This surge highlights the growing political instability in the region and the frequency of military takeovers in what is arguably Africa’s most significant theatre for international actors, including those from the colonial era. The enduring crises afflicting many African nations, especially in the Sahel region, are deeply rooted in the historical imprints of European colonialism and the emerging competition between great and middle powers. France’s pursuit of continued dominance, in particular, faces significant resistance in these nations, even as Russia and China position themselves in opposition to the US and other Western powers.

This wave of coups in the Sahel not only destabilises national dynamics but also has ramifications for peace and governance in Africa and global stability. Currently, an alliance of some of these coup governments – namely Burkina Faso, Mali, Guinea, and Niger – in a sort of ‘Sahel coup bloc’ poses a significant challenge to the normative and institutional architectures of peace and governance of the AU and ECOWAS.

² See sub articles (p) and (h) of Article 4 of the Constitutive Act of the African Union: <http://bitly.ws/PKsw>

³ See Article 3(q) of the Protocol on Amendments to the Constitutive Act of the African Union: <http://bitly.ws/PKsl>

⁴ See Article 3(r) of the Protocol on Amendments to the Constitutive Act of the African Union: <http://bitly.ws/PKsl>

⁵ ECOWAS. 2001. ‘Protocol A/SP.1/12/01 on Democracy and Good Governance Supplementary to the Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security.’

Any overt move by either the Wagner Group or the Russian government to support the Niger coup leaders could cause further friction between Russia, on the one side, and the AU and ECOWAS on the other, propelling Africa deeper into great power geopolitics. It would undermine the principles of constitutional democratic governance, promote regional instability in Africa as a whole, and potentially lead to increased political unrest and conflict. It is therefore vital that ECOWAS and the AU address this threat promptly and act collectively to safeguard the integrity of their institutions and the interests of their member states.

Any Russian support for the Niger coup (as elsewhere in Africa) would be viewed as a direct violation of AU and ECOWAS core principles and an affront to the primacy of African views on African matters, potentially escalating tensions with and within these organisations. For these reasons, ECOWAS has expressed concerns regarding potential interference by the Wagner Group. It has cautioned Russia against involvement in the Niger crisis and has made it clear that Russia will be held diplomatically accountable should it interfere. If this coup alliance receives the backing of Russia, it could risk thrusting Africa further into the overarching geopolitical competition between Russia and other major powers. Following ECOWAS announcement of possible military intervention in Niger, Russia has issued a warning against military intervention in Niger, cautioning that such actions would lead to a ‘protracted confrontation’ (Seddon, 2023). Such a confrontation could risk Russia’s diplomatic and commercial isolation from a significant number of African nations and from the UN, the EU, and the West generally. It might also jeopardise Russia’s relationships with African nations that value regional norms and are committed to democratic governance. While support for the coup might advance Moscow’s immediate interests by establishing another Russia-friendly military regime, it might also compromise Russia’s longer-term interests in Africa. The precise nature of these events and their ramifications, however, are not yet fully apparent.

4. Great Powers Competition Over Africa

Over the past few years Africa has witnessed a flurry of high-level official visits from great and middle powers. These include recent trips by US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen and the foreign ministers of China and Russia, Qin Gang and Sergei Lavrov, following visits by Lavrov and Blinken to several African countries in August 2022 (Signé, 2022). Since 2006, Russia has been striving to re-establish its influence in Africa after such relations had fallen away with the collapse of the Soviet Union (Ramani, 2023). Its renewed focus is on military collaboration with select African countries and the deployment of non-state entities backed by the state. The Wagner Group and another Russian private military and security company, the Internet Research Agency (IRA), have been at the forefront of this revival strategy, manipulating political situations and involving themselves in counter-insurgency activities, political campaigning, and resource extraction in several African countries (Reynolds, 2019).

Simultaneously, the US and its Western allies are reinforcing their relations with various African governments, even with authoritarian regimes accused of ethnic cleansing, crimes against humanity, and war crimes, as in Tigray, Ethiopia, and the eastern DRC. The US-Africa Leaders’ Summit revived the engagement with African leaders that began during Obama’s administration in 2014 (Maru, 2022). Critics expressed concerns that the US-Africa Leaders’ Summit, similarly, fell short of promoting systemic changes to encourage good governance, human rights, and accountability in Africa (Maru, 2022).

The sixth AU-EU Summit in February 2022 declared a joint vision for a renewed and deeper AU-EU partnership. Under the presidency of Ursula von der Leyen, the EU branded itself as a ‘Geopolitical Commission’. It had already identified the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa as a major focus of its attention. In June 2018 the EU Council promulgated some conclusions regarding, among others, ‘renewed geopolitical competition on both shores of the Red Sea’. It stressed that:

at stake are the preservation of the security of the Bab el Mandeb/Gulf of Aden maritime route through which a significant proportion of trade to and from Europe passes – the harnessing of irregular migration flows, the containment of terrorist threats and the prevention of instability in the EU’s wider neighbourhood (Council of the European Union, 2018)

Similarly, Germany’s new Africa strategy asserts that Africa’s progress is under threat from geopolitical, demographic, and economic upheavals (GIZ, 2023).

These international tensions offer a perspective on the current, complex global power dynamics in which Africa could emerge as an important player that will face more strategic dilemma. Although these external actors purport to be honest partners trying to establish strong cooperation for the benefit of all, the situation can easily slip from a competition of suitors into one of duelling rivals treating Africa as a battleground for advancing their interests. There are signs that this is already happening, and it is not hard to see why. The stakes are high, particularly for human security in Africa in terms of peace, governance, and food.

The Wagner Group's withdrawal From Ukraine and Its Implications for Africa

Lavrov's confirmation that the Wagner Group will continue its training and combat operations in Mali and the CAR, under the auspices of the Russian Ministry of Defence, underscores the group's central role in these nations (Africa News, 2023). Russia primarily targets states undergoing political transitions, civil upheavals, coups d'état, and wars, such as Sudan, Libya, Mali, the CAR, South Sudan, Uganda, and Zimbabwe (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2023). There have been instances of Russia allying with authoritarian regimes and forces involved in horrific crimes. According to the Global Peace Index (GPI) 2022 report, Russian troops have been involved in operations in Côte d'Ivoire, the DRC, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Liberia, Sudan, South Sudan and the Western Sahara (GPI, 2022). At the same time, the US and its allies are shoring up their relations with many other governments. The impact of such moves on multilateral organisations and on the principle of multilateralism has been such that the decisive interventions that are both necessary and legally permissible under the UN Charter and other such instruments have been sorely lacking. The ineffectiveness of action taken – or not taken – by the UN Security Council indicates the way in which the challenge to multilateral decision-making is playing out. Moreover, Russia has consistently impeded UN and Security Council resolutions aimed at conflict prevention or resolution.

Long-standing connections with countries such as Ethiopia, South Africa, Egypt, Angola, and Zimbabwe significantly inform Moscow's role in Africa, suggesting substantial Russian government control over the Wagner Group's operations. African regimes cooperating with the group may insist on military cooperation agreements with the Russian government rather than Wagner directly. Since the group acts as a tool for Russian foreign policy in Africa, its activities are perceived as a manifestation of Russia's hard power, offering plausible deniability while fortifying Russia's regional influence (Event Data Project, 2022). Without Moscow's backing, the Wagner Group's capacity would be severely curtailed. Lavrov's remarks clarify the level of control Russia intends to exert over the Wagner Group's operations in Africa (Armstrong, 2023). The diplomatic complexities that might arise from the group's revolt, and the possible consequences of Russia's intention to maintain control over its activities, are still somewhat murky. Moscow's announcement suggests that it is determined to limit the group's African activities, shedding light on the Russian government's role in these operations.

The rebellion by the Wagner Group has threatened Russia's reputation for political cohesion, subsequently endangering Moscow's ability to project power in Africa and potentially compromising public perceptions of Russia's military presence abroad (Barabanov, 2023). If resources currently allocated to international operations must be diverted towards addressing internal security issues, Moscow's capacity to maintain its activities in Africa might be jeopardised. The revolt may also give rise to power struggles within the Wagner Group itself, impacting its operational effectiveness and relationship with the Russian government.

The prospective integration of the Wagner Group into the Russian military represents a significant shift in Russia's military posture in Africa. The move may alter Moscow's formal relations with African nations as its military activities attract greater scrutiny. If the Wagner Group were to formally integrate with the Russian military, host nations might need to reassess their relations with Russia. This could have significant implications for Russian politics and possibly affect public perceptions of Russia's overseas military presence and foreign policy stance. The Wagner Group has been implicated in several atrocities, notably the Moura Massacre in Mali (2022) and the Bongboto and Aigbado massacres in the CAR (2021). These cases highlight the Wagner Group's alleged involvement in human rights abuses and have raised major concerns among international bodies and individual countries. They have sparked increased scrutiny and criticism, particularly from the US and the EU, and could lead to diplomatic pressure on African governments and their military forces to sever ties with Russia and the Wagner Group.

The intensification of the US–Russia rivalry in Africa adds another layer of complexity to the multitude of crises already plaguing the continent. The formal integration of the Wagner Group into the Russian armed forces, taken with its involvement in African conflicts, will widely be viewed as a part of this geopolitical competition. Should this happen, Russia-dependent regimes

may encounter internal discord; conversely, its abrupt withdrawal could reshape these regimes' power structures or conflict dynamics, creating a vacuum for others to fill. Consequently, these regimes might begin to distance themselves from Russia and instead seek support from other global powers. What seems clear is that the Wagner Group and the IRA, together or separately, threaten democracy in Africa and are evidence of the deep-seated Russian influence over some of Africa's ruling regimes.

5. The Ukraine War and African Food and Energy Security

In Africa, the direct impact of the war in Ukraine is felt in food security, marked by increased costs and disruption to the grain and fertiliser supply chain, as well as in energy security, with rising prices and new market opportunities for gas and carbon fuels. Given that Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia together account for more than one-third of global grain production, the war has also had a severe impact on the provision of humanitarian aid to African regions affected by conflict or disasters. According to the German online platform Statista, wheat, fertiliser, and oil supplies have been disrupted and prices have increased by more than 60%, 230%, and 29%, respectively (Statista, 2022). These elevated prices place livelihoods in many countries under great strain. However, the 127.6% gas price increase in Europe, coupled with Europe's plans to diversify its sources of gas, may offer new opportunities for African gas producers (Kilic & Morrow, 2022).

The ongoing Gaza war, and the Russia's invasion of Ukraine has deflected the international community's attention away from Africa's equally if not more devastating crises. The war has also delayed the delivery of humanitarian aid and assistance in the Horn of Africa and the Sahel, where drought has destroyed livelihoods, further exacerbating the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the invasion has reinforced the complex and mutually reinforcing four-way interplay between supply and transportation chains and food, energy, and water security on the African continent.

6. Mismanaged Transitions: Implications for African Governance

Despite the impact of the competition among great powers on the political economy of African states, it is governance challenges that underlie Africa's persistent peace and security crises, manifested at both the national and the pan-African level. Several African countries are now facing acute constitutional crises arising from misgoverned transitions.

The continent continues to deal with the impact of complex and mutually reinforcing disasters, including drought, flooding, the COVID-19 pandemic, and food insecurity. The convergence of intensifying geopolitical competition with these man-made and natural crises occurs within a broader context of widespread and longstanding misgovernance on the continent, which renders states incapable of formulating and implementing appropriate threat responses.

There are additional concerns. While unconstitutional seizures of power in African states gradually decreased after independence, recently, there have been more successful than unsuccessful coups (BBC, 2022).⁶ Moreover, the average African score on governance standards declined in 2019, for the first time in more than 10 years. The IIAG considers a wide spectrum of governance elements, from security to justice to economic opportunity to health – issues important to younger Africans, as indicated by the pan-African research organisation Afrobarometer (Gyimah-Boadi & Asunka, 2021). According to the IIAG, Africa is now witnessing the slowing – or, in some cases, reversal – of earlier gains in constitutional governance (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2022). Within this broader trend, the rate of progress in overall governance has halved since 2015.

According to Afrobarometer, 69% of Africans say that 'democracy is preferable to any other kind of government' while strongly rejecting military (75%), one-party (77%), and one-person rule (82%) (Gyimah-Boadi, et al., 2021). Afrobarometer's findings ('Africans Want More Democracy but Leaders Aren't Listening') underscore a profound demand for democracy, with strong and stable indicators of support for democratic institutions, despite a slight decrease in support for elections over the past decade (Afrobarometer, 2023). These findings confirm that security and the rule of law, participation, rights, inclusion, and public perception (i.e., constitutional democracy), together with economic opportunities and human development (referred to as 'delivery'), are in high demand.

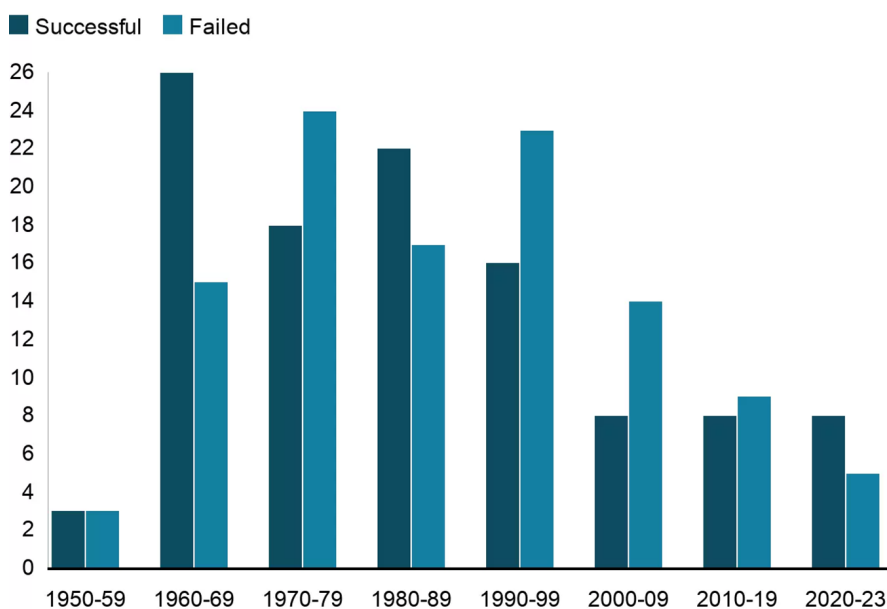
6 See more on military coups in Africa over the decades: <http://bitly.ws/PKrc>

Furthermore, the findings point to an increasing dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy and democratic elections, as well as with the quality and integrity of institutions and their ability to exercise constitutional checks and balances. Corruption, economic stagnation, inflation, misgovernance of transitions, and continued disadvantageous relationships with former colonial powers have eroded public trust in democracy's capacity to deliver goods and services. Some of the most negative trends are observed in countries traditionally regarded as leading democracies. The most recent Afrobarometer survey data, for example, presents a significant challenge to traditional fears about China's potential deleterious effects on democracy, suggesting as they do that China's considerable economic presence does not of itself undermine African democracy (Afrobarometer, 2020). The survey rather shows that Africans who approve of the Chinese development model are as likely to endorse democracy as those preferring the US model. Remarkably, the results also indicate that respondents with a positive view of China's influence tend to express even stronger pro-democracy attitudes.

At the same time the findings suggest that most Africans still favor the US as a development model over China. While China's influence is generally viewed positively, awareness of Chinese loans raises concerns about excessive borrowing. The same Afrobarometer survey reveals that less than half (48%) of African citizens is aware of Chinese loans or aid. Among those aware, over 77% worry about loan repayment, and a majority (58%) believe their governments have borrowed too much from China. Russia is favorably perceived by 38% of respondents, likely due to recent increased engagement and the impact of Russian media like Russia Today and Sputnik. A study on digital media content in francophone West Africa highlights the swift dissemination of content from these outlets.

Over the same period, there has been a substantial increase in support for accountability, the rule of law, and term limits on officeholders. The 'supply of democracy', on the other hand, has been disappointing, with fewer citizens perceiving their countries as democracies and showing a lower satisfaction with democracy overall (Afrobarometer, 2023). These falling supply indicators lag behind the demand for democracy, revealing a consistent deficit in supply. Support for coups is frequently associated, in part, with aspirations for a more legitimate and efficient government. It is also a critique of the underperformance of local and national institutions, as well as continental and global organisations such as the AU and the UN (Afrobarometer,

Military coups in Africa over the decades



Source: Research by Central Florida and Kentucky Universities

BBC

Figure 2. Military coups in Africa over the decades (BBC, 2022)

2023). Other recent studies echo findings about public support for democracy in Africa (UNDP, 2023). These studies suggest that when coups receive some fleeting public backing, this typically is coupled with the hope of putting a stop to unconstitutional term extensions and corruption and mismanagement of the economy by current officeholders, or with a perception of unwarranted extra-regional involvement, such as that of France in West Africa. Changes of government by extra-constitutional means are often tied to the desire to establish more legitimate governance that promises immediate improvements in peace and security, governance, and economic performance.

Moreover, several countries continue to face challenges in managing the move toward constitutional democracy. Exacerbated by competition for political power and resources, lingering, deep-seated identity politics leading to exclusions based on ethnicity, religion, and geography will likely persist in the immediate future. Much of this reflects misgovernance of elections and political transitions in countries that have faced coups or internal wars.

7. Peace and Security Implications

The peace and security implications arising from the Ukraine war and, more broadly, the geopolitical competition between great powers have led to an escalation in extra-regional forces' military presence and activities in Africa.

Russia and its private military and security companies have increased military, diplomatic, and other engagements with African governments, including those of Eritrea, Sudan, Mali, Chad, the CAR, and other Sahel countries (Africa Confidential, 2023). Russia is exploring the use of Eritrean air and maritime ports in the Red Sea and plans to conduct joint military drills with South Africa and China (Miriri, 2023). The colonial legacy of Western countries makes it impossible for Africa to place all its partners on the same footing (Maru, 2014). Indeed, some countries facing severe transitional governance problems, such as Mali and Burkina Faso, are not only expressing their unhappiness with their former colonial powers but also abandoning traditional relationships with them and, instead, welcoming Russian interests.

The United States has noted with concern Eritrea's increasing alignment with Russia and China. In its 2022 Integrated Country Strategy (ICS), the USA stated, "the government of Eritrea is moving further into China's sphere of influence (Eritrea signed a Belt and Road Initiative Memorandum of Understanding with China in November 2021) would greatly reduce our ability to influence the region as a whole." (USA Department of State, 2022)

The Biden Administration's policy towards the Government of Eritrea (GSE) seems to have taken a radical turn since November 2023. The new US Integrated Country Strategy (ICS) for Eritrea, reviewed and updated on November 17, 2023, indicates the urgency of this policy shift, stating (US Department of State, 2023, p 3):

As a priority, the [US] Embassy will continue to encourage Eritrea to become a proactive and constructive member of the international community, including the continued pursuit of improved relations with neighboring countries and within the region. While sanctions remain in place, the embassy will endeavor to open communication lines to establish commonalities that serve the interests of the people of both countries.

As justification, the 2023 ICS states (US Department of State, 2023, p 4):

The November 2022 Cessation of Hostilities Agreement brought an end to a two-year conflict in northern Ethiopia and precipitated the withdrawal of Eritrean troops from the Tigray region. The peace process and Eritrea's de-escalation of military presence provide an opportunity to reshape bilateral relations with Eritrea to a more productive end, including peace and development in the Horn of Africa. The U.S. Embassy in Asmara, Eritrea, strives to build on this positive change and increase the understanding between the people of the United States and the people of Eritrea.

This shift, according to the U.S. government, also aims to support Eritrea's outreach to regional leaders, particularly to Kenya, and its rejoining of the IGAD, signaling a renewed interest in regional cooperation. Notably, the December 2022 visit by the

Kenyan President to Eritrea, the first of its kind in four years, has been recognized as a crucial event in the advancement of diplomatic relations between Kenya and Eritrea. Moreover, in late 2022, Eritrea signed a five-year Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework with the UN. The GSE's call for peace in Sudan and its role in hosting peace dialogues is cited as demonstration of its constructive regional involvement.

Despite the importance of the Pretoria Agreement and other developments, the justification for this radical rapprochement seems precarious. Contrary to the "Eritrea's de-escalation of military presence" that the 2023 ICS bases for the shift of policy, the total military mobilization of the Eritrean population in response to Ethiopian government provocations has reportedly reached unprecedented levels this year. The Eritrean regime remains heavily mobilized along the Tigray border and other neighboring areas of Ethiopia. Moreover, Eritrea has not officially declared an end to the war in Tigray and has only partially withdrawn its forces. There are no clear indications that Eritrea will expand human rights protection and civic space, nor is there evidence of moves towards constitutional democratic governance, regular elections, or reforms to the National Service program, on which the 2023 ICS justifies the change of course.

The arrival of 2023 ICS signifies a sharp departure from the strategy established on May 5, 2022. Just a year prior, the 2022 ICS stated that "An Eritrea strategically aligned with China will see no reason to reform its human rights issues and could deny the United States access to a large part of the most valuable shipping route in the world and increases China's foothold in the Horn of Africa. Eritrea was also condemned for having "one of the lowest human rights standards in Africa," with President Isaias Afwerki's government being labeled as repressive and totalitarian. In addition, it was pointed out that a China-backed Eritrea may be less inclined to address its human rights problems. While the 2023 ICS is exploring new avenues of engagement with Eritrea, it also underscored the significant challenges and concerns remain, particularly regarding China's involvement and the human rights and regional stability.

The militarisation of the Red Sea, commercialisation of Africa's seaports, proliferation of military and security services, and establishment of military bases are all part of the intensification of geopolitical competition. The Red Sea, one of the most important maritime routes, has become an arena for competition between the US, China, and Russia. In 2017, China's first overseas military base opened in Djibouti (Melvin, 2019). Djibouti is now seen by the US not only as an economic stronghold for Beijing but also as a military springboard that will enable China to exercise considerable influence in the Red Sea.

More than 20 countries or political organisations have dispatched warships and ground and air forces to Africa. They include NATO, the EU (through the European Mission Atlanta), the US, China, France, Italy, Japan, Iran, Pakistan, South Korea, and Thailand. Significant international powers such as India and Japan also have a presence. Several Middle Eastern countries – mainly members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), namely UAE and the Saudi Arabia, along with Egypt, Turkey, Iran, and Qatar – are also entangled in competition in the region (Melvin, 2019). Turkey, Israel, and the Gulf states are among many other countries with long-standing and intense geostrategic interests in certain regions of Africa- mainly Horn and North Africa.

Geopolitical competition among major powers extending into the maritime domain has led to the proliferation of militarised ports with a foreign navy presence, the militarisation of coastal areas and shipping, and a prominent role for private military and security companies (PMCs) such as the Wagner Group. While the fight against terrorism and piracy first led to the increased presence of PMCs in Africa, intensifying geopolitical competition is driving an upsurge in their operations.

Amid the escalating competition between the Western bloc and Russia and China, global multilateral institutions, with the UN Security Council at their apex, are likely to remain paralysed in terms of the decisions required to resolve problems such as the conflicts in Ethiopia's Tigray region, the eastern DRC, and Anglophone Cameroon. China and Russia's negative impact on constitutional governance and accountability in Africa thus extends into the diplomatic arena. By using their veto powers in the UN Security Council, both countries have undermined initiatives to protect human rights and impeded enquiries into accountability for collaboration with authoritarian regimes in Africa at the expense of democratic dispensations.

On 2 March 2022, in the UN General Assembly vote on resolutions condemning Russia's invasion and urging its withdrawal from Ukraine, a majority of African countries (28 out of 54) voted in favor of the resolutions. While 17 abstained, 8 were absent. Eritrea openly supported Russia invasion of Ukraine by voting against the Resolution. Voting behavior of African countries on the five UN

resolutions⁷ since March 2, 2022, which condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine, provides insight into Africa’s future strategic and policy dilemmas in the face of competition among great and middle powers. On average, 6% of African countries voted ‘No,’ while 42% voted ‘Yes’ on the resolutions. Meanwhile, 38% abstained from voting, and 14.1% were absent, resulting in over 52% either abstaining or not voting. Viewed from the perspective of upholding the core principles of the UN Charter, a total of 58% of African countries either failed to support the resolutions, demonstrating a lack of commitment to supporting and upholding the UN Charter and other UN instruments. In this context, abstention could practically mean abandonment of the UN Charter’s core principles and implicitly opting to undermine the multilateral, rule-based international order – which, ironically, would benefit Africa more than most other regions.

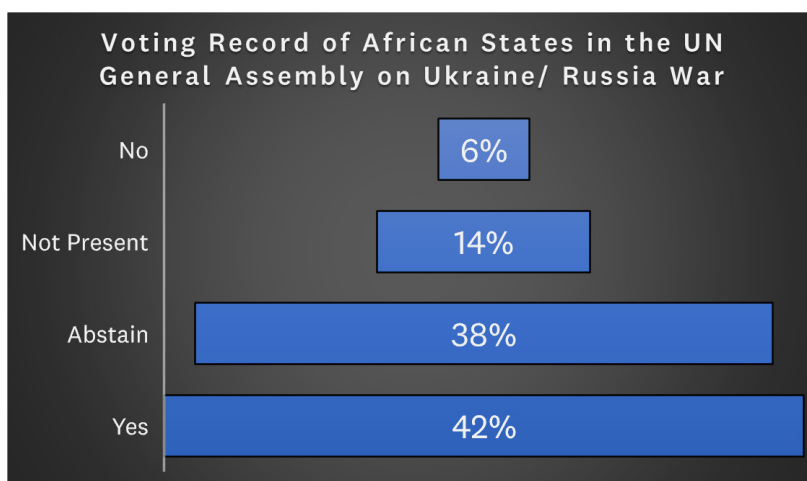


Figure 3. Author, 2023, Average Voting Record of African States in the UN Resolutions (Data from Gopaladas, 2023)

These voting record in the United Nations, particularly regarding Russia, has become increasingly concerning to Western nations. In this regard, US government note this behavior by stating “Eritrea votes against the United States on most contested United Nations votes” (USA Department of State, 2022 p14) Notably, democracies like Namibia, South Africa, and Senegal, despite their Western leanings, chose to abstain, citing reasons such as a commitment to non-alignment or historical associations with the Soviet Union. This voting pattern may reflect the growing influence of identity politics in the global contest among major and middle powers, shaping alliances in support of regimes irrespective of their democratic legitimacy. It also underscores the complexities of African nations exerting their own diplomatic and political will. Analysts suggest that, based on previous voting behaviors, the African countries are likely to be divided some siding with the western world and others continue abstaining, being absent, or voting against some Western proposals, favoring Russian and Chinese positions.

Furthermore, intensifying geopolitical competition has eroded Africa’s interventionist and integrationist mandate, as outlined in the constitutive charters of the AU and its regional economic communities (RECs). This is not necessarily a recent phenomenon. For instance, the doctrine of ‘African solutions to African problems’ emerged in response to the international community’s failure to stop the 1994 genocide of Tutsis in Rwanda. Consequently, the Organization of African Unity (OAU), adhering to the ‘non-interference’ rulebook, was replaced by the AU with its interventionist and integrationist mandate (OAU, 2000). However, since the early 2000s, the AU’s interventionist capabilities have diminished steadily, as demonstrated by its less-than-successful peace support operations in Sudan, Darfur, and Mali. Rife with problems, including funding, the AU mission to Somalia is useful but ineffective; and the African Standby Force, designed for crisis intervention, is yet to be deployed. The AU and RECs have neither rejected nor dealt consistently with coups and unconstitutional impositions of power. Indeed, in some cases the AU has supported replacement regimes by either commission or omission (Belay, 2019).

⁷ The other resolutions include: April 2022’s resolution to suspend Russia from the Human Rights Council (UNHRC), October 2022’s resolution rejecting the country’s annexation of Ukrainian territories, November 2022’s resolution calling for Russian reparations to Ukraine, and February 2023’s resolution calling for peace on the one-year anniversary of the war.

Geopolitical competition among great and middle powers has also undermined the AU's mandates (OAU, 2000). In October 2022, Russia and China for the first time blocked the A3 (African Three at the UN Security Council) proposal that the council should issue a statement on the war on Tigray (Security Council Report, 2022). Except for countries such as Ireland, the US, and Norway, other members (including the A3) failed to acknowledge the presence of Eritrean forces in Tigray, let alone call for their withdrawal, and blocked effective deliberations and action. Russia went so far as to defend Ethiopia's alliance with Eritrea in the Tigray war.

For non-African members of the UN Security Council, the 'African solutions to African problems' slogan has now become the exact opposite of what the UN Charter was intended to achieve: it can be seen as an abdication of the Charter's obligation on the international community to act when intervention is needed in Africa. For the A3, the motto has become Newspeak for the principle of non-interference, this time in African affairs; in essence barring non-African mandated bodies from performing their global duties.

8. Race to the Bottom

The unbridled pursuit of national interests, untampered by a rule-based multilateral international order, could lead to the tolerance of ruthless race-to-the-bottom partnership models. In such a scenario, in which Africa becomes an arena in which all participants attempt to displace their rivals, excessive pressure and demands could be placed on African states. For instance, Chinese actions with and within Africa could easily lead to the disintegration of bilateral partnerships. Dealings in Africa by China, and to a lesser extent Russia, mirror the character of the partnering African government. Chinese companies quickly adapt to the model of the 'partner state'. Faced with a corrupt system, they may deal with it in a correspondingly corrupt way. Chinese and other companies are known to take advantage of the weak legislative, regulatory, and enforcement systems of African countries and their corrupt officialdom.

When host governments lack transparency and accountability, their legislative, regulatory, and enforcement mechanisms cannot effectively supervise external investments, including those from China and Russia. Such weaknesses in African states validate the Chinese propensity to do business irrespective of concerns related to sustainability, corruption, human rights, and the national interests of the host country. Such practices reinforce China's role in undermining African democratisation and hamper the formation of a strong state. While Africans bear the lion's share of responsibility for these weaknesses, China and Russia share the blame, albeit to varying degrees and scales. Russia openly supports mercenaries involved in coups and mobilises state and non-state actors bent on placing themselves in power, among other methods by condoning atrocities and through massive misinformation campaigns. Ultimately, however, the responsibility for implementing adequate legislative and regulatory policies and building effective African enforcement mechanisms must lie with African governments.

At the same time, to expand their foothold in Africa and counter each other's hold on the continent, Western countries, led by the US, are pursuing national interests that override the values written into international agreements and multilateral mechanisms. Western powers have prioritised stability over governance and accountability, thereby bolstering authoritarian regimes. To compete with the Chinese partnership model, these powers are increasingly focusing on trade and economic delivery partnerships, paying less attention to values-based diplomacy and partnership. Hence geopolitical competition between great and middle-level powers may well trigger an endless race to the bottom.

9. Conclusion

The great and middle powers are flexing their geopolitical muscle in Africa and, unless guided by a refined pan-African strategy, the continent's newfound geopolitical importance could prove both blessing and curse.

The current global competition seems to follow the pattern of previous strategic interventions in Africa. For instance, in the maritime domain, for some time the Red Sea Strait and the Gulf of Aden have been areas of global strategic competition. This regional rivalry is not limited to great powers – middle powers are also involved. The contestation comes at a time when global

power is becoming more dispersed. Competition between these rivals for cooperation with African countries is an opportunity for African states to leverage better terms from their various suitors. Such geopolitical initiatives could bring about military and diplomatic changes, with policymakers facing pressure regarding some of the more contentious items on the global agenda, such as the Gaza and Ukraine wars and the numerous regional wars in Africa. The US and its Western allies are so tightly locked into a strategic competition with China and Russia that it is difficult to imagine how those outside the great power orbit could expand their influence. Nonetheless, depending on their readiness to resist unwarranted interference in their domestic affairs, African states could put themselves in a position to take advantage of the competition.

One such initiative is the decision by the Council of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD, the eight-country African trade bloc) to establish an IGAD Task Force in the Red Sea, operational since February 2019. In a communiqué dated 19 June 2019, the Council reiterated its commitment to joint efforts in the Red Sea maritime arena (IGAD, 2019). The purpose of the IGAD Task Force is to:

chart out a regional plan of action with clear timelines; develop a multi-disciplinary policy-oriented research and analysis geared towards a better understanding of actors and issues in the Red Sea and the wider region, their implications on peace and security and economic development; and develop a common position to protect the security and economic interests of the region.⁸

The Council also mandated the force to develop a regional plan of action. Nonetheless, many the AU and IGAD member states are themselves driven by unresolved factionalism, which suggests that the AU is not necessarily equipped to wield much authority over a situation in which the great world powers, and others, have vested interests.

Five key findings emerge. Firstly, although direct military confrontation is a possibility in such a dynamic environment, should they fail to get the kind of favourable partnership they seek, external powers may resort to other measures and simply elbow their way into Africa. The continent could quickly find itself forced to choose sides. The most probable outcome of such competition is unilateral action by one power on matters of international and regional concern, disregarding the interests of Africa and others in the global South. Such an approach would deepen mistrust between external actors within and outside Africa. More seriously, cunning and unscrupulous rivalry may result in a race to the bottom that would only lead to greater suffering for the people of Africa. And, just as previous competitions and proxy wars have devastated Africa, fuelling conflict and forcing governments to make choices against their best interests, so these present-day rivalries may be detrimental to regional peace, governance, and development.

Secondly, geopolitical competition among great powers and their extreme interventions in Africa will substantially undermine peace, governance, and development on the continent and dent the effectiveness of continental and regional institutions such as the AU and RECs. To harness the competition between powers, legitimate constitutional governance and strong pan-African leadership are imperative. This leadership must ensure that the aspirations of the people are clearly articulated, their concerns properly addressed, and their interests assertively pursued and protected.

Thirdly, African countries remain fragmented limiting its agency in the face of the emerging challenges posed by geopolitical competition. It is worth recalling that Africa has 55 states: a blessing in terms of voter numbers but a curse in that it fragments the continent's unified power projection and agency. There is no common position on partnerships to guide member states on balancing national and continental interests. This is uniquely detrimental to Africa, where the power of member states individually is weak, open, and dependent on international supply chains. It will remain a challenge.

Fourthly, in the current multipolar world, multilateralism is the antidote to fragmentation and military confrontations. Africa should remain committed to multilateralism as a mechanism for compromise, curbing the pursuit of national interests at the cost of a rules-based international order. While multilateralism is sorely needed currently, commitment to it is diminishing in many parts of the world, including among the traditional champions and founders of multilateral organisations. A multipolar world makes multilateralism both more difficult and increasingly necessary. Multilateralism facilitates consensus and action on

⁸ See Terms of reference for the IGAD Taskforce.

commonly shared concerns and aspirations but, for it to work, solidarity and the political will to compromise are critical.

Finally, it might be necessary to overhaul some institutional frameworks. This could involve strengthening regional bodies, promoting inclusive governance, addressing social and economic inequality, enhancing election credibility and political transparency, and fostering respect for the rule of law. Additionally, cultivating strong civil societies and encouraging international partners to promote good governance and democratic norms could be part of a comprehensive, strategic effort to build more resilient political systems and prevent future instability. Existing international multilateral organisations may be neither adequately equipped nor sufficiently resilient to address African concerns. In such a multifarious, globalised, competitive and complicated geopolitical environment, Africa ideally should evolve an innovative, neutral approach to managing its relations with extra-regional powers.

The AU and its member states are yet to come to a common position that sets out Africa's concerns and aspirations regarding developments in the international world order. A starting point would be to articulate those aspirations and concerns in a Common African Position. The AU already has a mandate to 'develop and promote common policies on trade, defence, and foreign relations to ensure the defence of the Continent and the strengthening of its negotiating positions'. At the continental level, unity in voice and action is the optimal choice for maintaining Africa's interests. UN reforms, proposed in many cases when Africa has been equitably represented in the UN Security Council, constitute part of such a pan-African strategy and may help mitigate the paralysis in the UN Security Council decision-making process.

10. Policy Pillars for Pan-African Policy in Geopolitical Relations

To ensure that Africa's voice is heard and heeded by the great and regional powers, and that its concerns and aspirations are taken seriously by the international community, Africa's partnerships need to be structured around the following three core principles:

1. **Pragmatism:** The AU and its member states should avoid any dogmatic or idealistic positions in response to pressures for an alliance with specific geopolitical powers. Instead, it should adopt a pragmatic approach, prioritising the practical improvement of the human condition in Africa.
2. **Dynamism:** The AU and its member states should be prepared to undertake quick policy changes when situations on the ground, regionally or globally, demand it. This includes the revision of current foreign or maritime policies and the capabilities of African countries.
3. **A collective unified voice:** The AU and its 55 member states have a diverse and fragmented approach to partnerships with extra-continental actors. To augment their agency and insulate the Pan African and regional decision-making process from interference, they need to act as a collective entity in arriving at partnerships with such actors, particularly the great and middle powers. The AU has long been issuing common African positions on various issues. It now needs to formulate similar common positions on partnerships with extra-continental actors by defining commonly shared interests, forging overlapping consensus, and guiding the common rule-based effort. Such a unified voice would serve as a mechanism for amplifying Africa's agency and international influence and would help counterbalance power asymmetries in international relations. This might mean that the AU would have to insist on sovereignty over foreign affairs: while member states may conclude agreements with third parties as sovereign entities, they need to commit to speaking in a unified voice and acting in unity to ensure that such agreements are aligned to a common agreed position. These would be broader continental issues that demand a pan-African transformation and would require a degree of national soul-searching, as well as a reboot of the interventionist and integrationist mandate of the AU.

11. Towards an AU Fit for the New Geopolitical World Order: Coordinating Pan-African Foreign Policy

The current state of world geopolitics, threat to multilateralism and race to the bottom discussed in above poses significant threats to Africa's long-term interest. The rise of new powers in Asia and the Middle East, alongside the relative decline of

traditional Western powers, has led to a more multipolar or apolar world order. In this evolving landscape, there is no central decision-making body for global affairs, requiring Africa to carefully navigate global trade tensions and military rivalries, particularly between the United States and China. These shifts impact Africa’s strategic partnerships and alliances as the continent engages with an increasingly diverse range of global actors.

The erosion of the post-World War II multilateral system, driven by factors such as right-wing populist nationalism, trade protectionism, terrorism, and violent extremism, hampers Africa’s ability to utilize these institutions for its development and security goals. The rapid pace of technological change and the digital divide are crucial in integrating Africa into the global economy, underscoring the importance of keeping up with the digital revolution. Furthermore, Africa’s vulnerability to global identity and power politics, as well as climate change, intensifies challenges like drought, food insecurity, and population displacement. These trends significantly impact the human rights and welfare of African migrants worldwide, prompting the question: How should Africa contribute to promoting a form of multilateralism that is both effective and beneficial for the continent? How should Africa contribute to promoting multilateralism that is effective and beneficial to the continent? How should Africa position itself with and try to influence this shifting global power dynamic and world with no order?

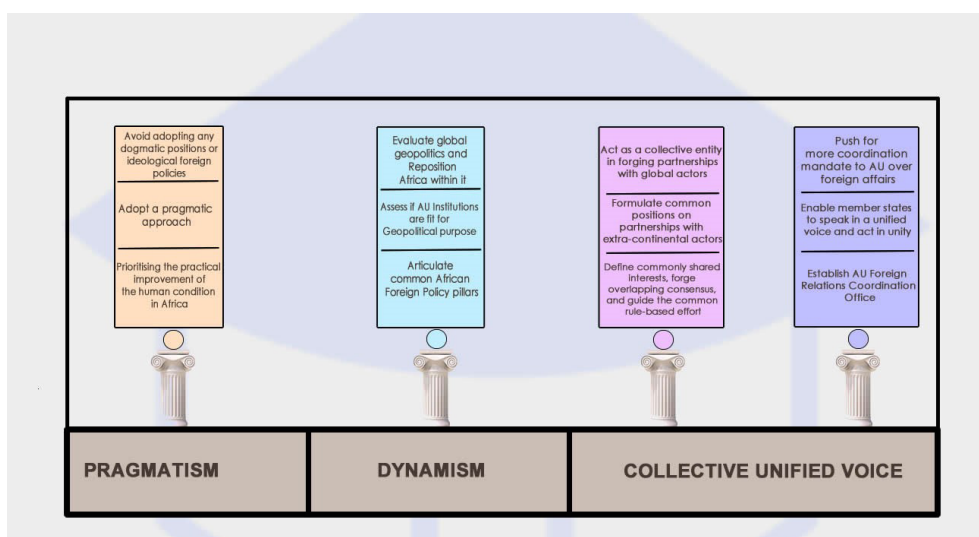


Figure 4. Author, 2023

In response to these strategic challenges, Africa’s vision and coordination of global actions need to be strengthened. African countries are diversifying their international partnerships, engaging with a variety of global actors beyond traditional Western allies, including those in Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America.

Africa’s relationship with both existing and emerging geopolitical powers presents a mix of opportunities and challenges in safeguarding and advancing its interests amid intensified global competition. Africa has been actively advocating for more equitable representation and voice in key international institutions such as the United Nations Security Council and the G20. The African Union (AU) is increasingly asserting itself in global affairs, promoting African interests in international forums. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) has enhanced the AU’s role as a significant global economic player. Additionally, the AU maintains special diplomatic representation with the United States, the European Union, and has plans for a mission to the People’s Republic of China as of 2022. The AU’s admission to the G20 and the U.S. support for a permanent African seat in the UN Security Council are significant developments, yet the ultimate goals Africa aims to achieve with membership in these global institutions necessitate further strategic thinking and articulation. Consequently, Africa requires robust, visionary leadership adept at navigating the multilateral and global arena. However, Africa faces divisions related to geopolitical dynamics and global issues, including the conflicts in Gaza and Ukraine. The diverse voting records of African states reflect the range of perspectives within the continent. The AU’s use of common African positions promotes collective interests but may not

be sufficient to address the threats and opportunities presented by the global system (Adeoye 2020). The existing Common African Positions (CAPs) are unfit to effectively address these emerging geopolitical challenges faced by Africa and AU. As Africa strengthens its global voice through common positions, it needs supportive partners globally and continentally to shape its African agenda. The current global dynamics call for envisioning, aggregating policy cooperation and preferences of member states on global matters, coherent articulation, and assertive promotion of Common Pan African Foreign Relations Positions, which necessitates stronger institutional mechanisms and an office with robust mandate.

In this context, the appointment of a High Representative on Foreign Relations and Global Partnerships, modeled after the EU system, could help envision, aggregate, articulate, and coordinate the Common African Positions as they relate to the global system. This role would ensure consistent articulation of these positions by AU leaders to the international community, thus strengthening Africa's collective voice. The mandate of this new office could include leading the development and implementation of a unified foreign policy in response to geopolitical competition, representing the AU in international arenas, and ensuring uniform implementation.

Establishing this position and integrating it into the AU framework would enable a more coordinated and strategic approach to handling the complex geopolitical landscape, ensuring that African nations collectively shape their destiny in the global arena.

The AU's various constitutive instruments provide guidance in this regard. The AU's vision, driven by Pan-Africanism and the African Renaissance, aims to speak with one voice on the global stage and overhaul Africa's global partnerships through the adoption of NEPAD and Agenda 2063. This commitment is a testament to Africa's aspiration to be a strong, united, and influential global player and partner. The adoption of NEPAD served as a continental blueprint for Africa's renewal, positioning the continent as a full participant in world affairs.

Agenda 2063 reaffirms the vision of an integrated, prosperous, and peaceful Africa, driven by its citizens and acting as a dynamic force in the international arena. Aspiration 7 of Agenda 2063 affirms Africa's ambition to be a strong, united, resilient, and influential global player and partner. This strategy reinforces the AU's Constitutive Act's goal of promoting and defending African common positions on issues of interest to the continent and its people. It emphasizes the need to enhance the continent's united voice and collective action in global negotiations through pooled sovereignty, integration, and the development of common African positions.

The proposed office would also examine the fundamental determinants of the new global order and the strategic global actors and their interests in Africa and globally. It would analyze how Africa relates to these existing and emerging interests and powers and how it repositions itself in light of these global developments. Furthermore, it would assess the geopolitical competition and global landscape, contextualizing these for Africa, and study the determinants of Africa's place in the international system, devising strategies to enhance Africa's standing in the new global order.

In summary, the mandate of this new office would incorporate leading African foreign policy, coordinating with AU member states, and representing the AU in international arenas. This strategic approach would strengthen Africa's ability to navigate and influence international politics and economic trends, ensuring that African nations collectively shape their destiny in the global arena. Such an office will also examine the fundamental determinants of the new global order and the strategic global actors and their interests in Africa and globally. It will analyze how Africa relates to these existing and emerging interests and powers and how it repositions itself vis-à-vis these global developments. Additionally, it will study the determinants of Africa's place in the international system and devise strategies to enhance Africa's standing in the new global order.

The mandate of such a new office could be incorporated:

1. **African Foreign Policy Leadership:** The High Representative would lead the development and implementation of a unified foreign policy for the AU, representing the Union in global affairs. This role would ensure that Africa has a strong, coherent voice on the international stage. The Representative would specifically deal with Africa's reposition in the increasing geopolitical competition in Africa from both internal and external actors. This role is crucial given the strategic importance of Africa in global geopolitics.

2. **Coordination with AU Member States:** The Representative would work to ensure that the external actions and policies of individual AU member states align with the overarching goals and principles of the AU, promoting unity and coherence in the Union's external relations.
3. **Representation in International Arenas:** This role involves representing the AU in international organizations, forums, and negotiations, particularly in areas affected by geopolitical competition. This would help to safeguard African interests globally.

By establishing this position and integrating it into the existing framework of the AU, the Union can take a more coordinated and strategic approach to handling the complex geopolitical landscape in Africa. This role would strengthen the AU's ability to navigate and influence international politics and economic trends, ensuring that African nations collectively shape their destiny in the global arena.

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