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Africa in the Changing Global Order: Does African
Agency Matter in Global Politics?

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Abstract

The multipolarization of the international system and the rise of nations from the global South opened new avenues for Africa and increased its role in global politics. Power dynamics in a multipolar world put forward the concept of agency in the international relations discourse, yet, bounded in the African context. This paper analyses Africa's position in contemporary geopolitical and economic affairs, focusing on African agency and its role played in multilateral negotiations. It demonstrates an emergence of African agency in the multilateral fora in the domains of peace, security, climate change, and in shaping the global normative framework. The paper examines the questions on how African agency interacts, cooperates and competes with superpowers in the multipolar global system from an intergovernmental and individual state level. It delves into the cases of the African Union and South Africa, as two main continental actors on exercising agency regionally and globally. In the examined cases, the agency is evaluated as the ability to act in order to change the outcomes or rules. The paper concludes that African agency is an incontrovertible fact and its significance is increasing gradually. It has begun to assert its voice at different levels, from individual states to intergovernmental organizations but the structural organization of the relevant institutions is crucial to the process of exercising agency.

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Introduction

The discourse concerning Africa's position in the international system has experienced a significant shift in the last two decades, from *The Hopeless Continent*¹ to *The Rising Star*². In 2001, Tony Blair, Britain's Prime Minister at that time, during his speech to the annual Labor party conference called on the international community to back a partnership for Africa through joint forces and initiatives around the New African Initiative:

The state of Africa is a scar on the conscience of the world. But if the world as a community focused on it, we could heal it. And if we don't, it will become deeper and angrier.

(Tony Blair, 2001)

Almost two decades later, the African continent is ranked among the emerging regions that are challenging the orthodoxy of the global governance architecture.

The post-Cold War era of multipolarity and shifts in global governance has opened doors for emerging economies and created space for intergovernmental organizations. Wyck (2016), describes a recent shift from ideological differences to economic differences between developed and developing countries. This has spurred a departure from the previous East-West global division towards a new North-South one. Acharya (2017) describes the twenty-first-century world as being "politically and culturally diverse, but economically and institutionally interlinked" as *multiplex world*. The term 'multiplex world' is defined as a world of interconnectedness and interdependence, offering a variety of systems and institutions (Acharya, 2017). The author illustrates such multiplexity by looking at the case examples of Trump and Brexit, which have shown that there are different variations of the world order even within the West not just between the West and East as it is generally assumed.

The denouement of the global power asymmetry and the rise of nations from the global South, especially China, opened new avenues for the African continent and increased its role in global politics. Political reforms coupled with rapid economic growth - fueled by South-

¹ See, The Economist: Hopeless Africa at: <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2000/05/11/hopeless-africa>

² See, The Economist: Hopeful Africa at: <https://www.economist.com/special-report/2013/03/02/a-hopeful-continent>

South Cooperation (SSC) - have strengthened tremendously Africa's position as a global player. Cooperative initiatives, such as BRICS and IBSA, have been central in this re-conceptualization and reinterpretation of the changing global order. Besides boosting its economic growth and amplifying its political weight, such incidents of SSC offered greater opportunities for equal partnerships by strengthening the principle of sovereignty and discouraging the interference into African domestic affairs. Sovereignty remains a key global value which, in the case of Africa, had long been undermined by the intrusion of external powers. The 'African Renaissance'³ led by Thabo Mbeki pursued ownership of the continent's development agenda, policy autonomy and challenged the Western hegemony. Driven by the ideology of '*African solutions for African problems*', leading African politicians at the time aimed to end the long-term humiliation and colonial domination they had endured, instead seeking a relationship with their former colonizers and outside powers, not of paternalism, arrogance, and neo-colonialism, but of equal partnership (Landsberg, 2011). Unlike traditional Western donors, emerging powers construe their ties to Africa in terms of South-South solidarity, shared identities and historical past, inequality and inherently incommensurate structures of international order.

The new multilateral global order has shifted the focus of the international order onto the world's regional groups and regional organizations. The rise of Africa is manifested with the birth of the African Union (AU), the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and many other pivotal regional organizations which offered Africa a platform to participate internationally, coordinate its development programs and assure solidarity among African nations in global negotiations. This stronger form of multilateralism enabled Africa to pursue higher goals. Africa is gradually taking its seat at the table and is re-negotiating its place in the global system by successfully contributing in international negotiations.

Being home to some of the poorest regions in the world⁴, Africa has long pushed for reorienting development strategies and has been the frontrunner in shaping the global

³ The concept dates back to Cheikh Anta Diop's book *Towards the African Renaissance: Essays in Culture and Development*, 1946-1960. The concept has been further popularised by former South African President Thabo Mbeki meaning the right of African people to determine their own future.

⁴ See, 2015's research from the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative at: <http://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2015-01-07-world%E2%80%99s-poorest-regions-countries-you-wouldn%E2%80%99t-expect>

normative framework on this. African nations harshly criticized the Bretton Woods twins, The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and The World Bank (WB) regarding the impact of their structural adjustment programs on developing countries, especially in Africa. The institutions are critiqued for representing the interests of the wealthy western economies. Their programs and financial orthodoxies are claimed to be inappropriately developed and applied on the continent, considering Africa's development needs. In this regard, the BRICS countries established The New Development Bank as an alternative for developing countries. Moreover, Africa has been insisting on the reform of the United Nations system and pushing for a UN focus towards development issues, as well as demanding the greater representation of African countries on the UN Security Council (UNSC). Out of the five UN Regional Groups, The African Group is the largest one with 54 members and 28% of the votes in the UN General Assembly.

This paper analyses Africa's position in contemporary geopolitical and economic affairs, focusing on African agency and its role played in multilateral negotiations. It demonstrates an emergence of African agency in the multilateral fora in the domains of peace, security, climate change, and in shaping the global normative framework. The paper starts by looking at African agency in international relations (IR) discourse, with a focus on the birth and rise of the AU as the continent's prime intergovernmental institution. It illustrates how the AU has come to be a voice for Africa, and its ability to exercise agency internationally in such cases as the UN system reform, African Common Position on Climate Change, AU-EU partnership and Doha Development Agenda. It also looks at the rise of the South Africa (SA) as the regional hegemon and continental giant.

1. African Agency

Traditional international relations (IR) theories have come under severe criticism for its narrow Eurocentric view of the African continent. They are seen to misapprehend the continent's reality and history (Brown, 2006; Faleye, 2014; Chipaike and Knowledge, 2014). For many pundits, Africa has been ignored and marginalized within the IR discipline as well as subjectively studied by being an object of generalization. As a non-Western actor, Africa

is placed as the region at the periphery by mainstream IR studies (Brown, 2006; Cornelissen, Cheru, and Shaw, 2012; Acharya and Buzan, 2007; Dunn and Shaw, 2011; Warner and Shaw, 2018; Chipaike and Knowledge, 2018). According to Blaauw (2014), this is a result of the theory's focus on the power of states. Therefore, IR theory has tended to concentrate on great powers, portraying Africa as less institutionally functional in the traditional sense (Blaauw, 2014). However, Brown (2006) argues that what is under attack is neorealism and not, by and large, IR theory as a whole. There are other elements of Westernized IR theory that, in the era of growing multilateralism, new powers and non-state actors, have discerned the need for a more global approach IR scholarship.

New power dynamics in a multipolar world gave rise to the concept of agency in the IR discourse. Andreasson (2013: 144), defines agency as the "ability of states as the primary actors in the international system, to generate and deploy a range of capabilities (hard and soft) in the pursuit of their national interest". Cargill (2013: 65) defines agency as "the capacity, as a matter of deliberate policy, to exert political influence externally". As shown by these two examples agency is variously delineated among authors and the lack of a common definition presents difficulties in evaluating the significance of agency in international politics. Regardless of its multifarious definitions, economic sanctions and military power are often seen to be the most pivotal instruments to exercise real power in foreign policy. Yet, smaller countries lacking one or two of the abovementioned instruments can still have an impact through the formation of coalitions and effective multilateralism.

Most of the existing literature on African agency is state-centric and focuses on extroversion, the role of external agencies in the continent. Nevertheless, questions on how African agency interacts, cooperates and competes with superpowers in the multipolar global system have been predominant issues in IR discussions. Brown (2012: 1891), defines African agency in four spheres: "that exercised by collective, intergovernmental organizations including the African Union and sub-regional intergovernmental bodies; that exercised by national states; the agency of state-based actors acting on behalf of national states; particularly state leaders and their representatives; and non-state actors". The period 1998 – 2008 saw the burgeoning of African diplomacy. Emerging African nations organized themselves in order to build a continental order. The birth of the AU, NEPAD and a few other successful African

initiatives represent the pinnacle of this victorious decade for African diplomacy. While both articulating a continental outlook, most importantly, there was a demand for an equal partnership with world powers. Landsberg (2011), describes it as a relationship based on “the principles of mutual respect, equality, responsibility and accountability, responsiveness and an equitable world order” (p.7). According to the author, Africa wanted a partnership with its former colonizers and great powers, not paternalism or neo-colonialism. Moving away from a relationship of dependency, where African nations could have their own agendas and identify their own needs and priorities rather than having them imposed by outsiders (Landsberg, 2011).

Over the last two decades, Africa’s participation and engagement in global diplomacy has grown tremendously. The continent has played a pivotal role in the fields of climate change, world trade, migration, security, and terrorism. It has been successful in creating new allies and ties with emerging powers, as well as prevailing and strengthening its old relations with western partners. The following section provides an overview of the AU, as the most significant regional body in Africa and its role in coordinating common African interests in multilateral organizations. It introduces you to the cases of the UN reform system, African Common Position on Climate Change, AU-EU partnership and Doha Development Agenda. In these cases, the agency is evaluated as is the ability to act in order to change outcomes or rules. The African choice of being more than just a passive receiver.

2. African Union

Contemporary geopolitical and economic dynamics have shifted the focus of the international order onto regional groups. In this context, Africa’s newfound influence is centered upon the African Union (AU), which is the continent's prime intergovernmental institution. The AU has emerged as Africa’s preeminent platform to participate internationally, promoting unity among African nations in global negotiations. As the continent’s foremost multilateral institution the AU is the main organizer, promoter, protector and defender of the continent’s political, socio-economic and environmental interests.

In 2018, the AU marked 17 years since its establishment on May 26, 2001. Building on the Pan-African legacies of its predecessor, the Organization of African Unity (OAU), the AU shifted and expanded its focus and mission towards new foundations, based on strong normative commitments such as constitutional democracy and the rejection of mass atrocity. The AU is the most significant instrument of African international agency, comprising 55-member states. The aims of the organization are for a peaceful, prosperous and integrated Africa and it plays a pivotal role in the key areas of justice, migration, security & peace, and international affairs. The current chair, Paul Kagame, recently announced extensive structural and financial reforms. Kagame has emphasized the focus on political affairs and Africa's global representation (AU, 2018).

In March 2018, the AU enacted the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), the world's largest free trade zone in terms of member countries, which was ratified by nearly all its member states⁵. According to African leaders, the AfCFTA will strengthen Africa's position in global trade. The Chairperson of the African Union Commission, H.E. Moussa Faki said: "AfCFTA will make Africa one of the largest economies in the world and enhance its capacity to interact on equal terms with other international economic blocs." For the Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta "The African CFTA means an end to poverty." For the AU, the AfCFTA is a flagship project of its Agenda 2063. Comprised of seven aspirations⁶, Agenda 2063 is a roadmap for continental development, setting a number of achievable ambitions. It is a strategic framework for the socio-economic transformation of the continent, pledging a path to growth and sustainable development. Agenda 2063 was adopted on the occasion of the golden jubilee of the OAU, in 2015. It builds on the Pan African vision of "An integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens, representing a dynamic force in the international arena" (Agenda 2063, 2015).

Since its foundation in 2001, the AU has played a crucial part in the domestic and foreign policy affairs of the continent. The Union is the central coordinating mechanism promoting peace and security, integration, and economic development within the continent. Several new institutions have been established by AU playing a key role in African politics in areas

⁵ Nigeria, the largest economy in the continent did not join the agreement

⁶ See, Agenda 2063 at: <http://www.un.org/en/africa/osaa/pdf/au/agenda2063.pdf>

of representation, accountability, governance etc. In a synchronous manner, the AU has been the main advocate of African interests at the international level. The AU has gained more legitimacy through its vital strategic partnerships, such as its relationship with the United Nations. The AU has been pushing for the reform of the UN system and insisting that the UN focus on development problems. Additionally, the AU has played a vibrant role in demanding African representation not only in the UN but also in the WB, IMF, and World Trade Organization (WTO). The Common African Position (CAP) on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, launched in 2014, is another fruitful initiative steered by the AU, which brought together the African Union Commission, UN Economic Commission, UNDP, and Regional Bureau for Africa and African Development Bank. This is an opportunity for Africa to effectively address development issues and participate in the global community's efforts to achieve the SDGs. The CAP prioritizes structural transformation for inclusive and people-centered development in Africa (UNECA, 2014). In terms of peace and security, the AU is the main mechanism used to steer conflict prevention negotiations, including intervening in cases of an unconstitutional change of government that could threaten armed conflict (de Waal, 2017).

2.1 AU, The Voice of Africa

Murithi (2012) identifies the AU as 'a voice of Africa'. Further, the author claims that the world is also waking up to this fact. This was reflected in President Obama's decision to give a speech at the African Union in Addis Ababa in 2015; the first time in history, an American President had addressed the Union. According to the UN Office of the Special Adviser on Africa, the AU has been effective as a leader and coordinator, ensuring that African nations increasingly speak with one voice on global matters. Agenda 2063 adopted by the AU affirms the importance of speaking with one voice and maintaining collective action when it comes to promoting common African interests globally. The AU also uses NEPAD, an umbrella framework, to help coordinate its continent-wide programs (UN-OSSA, 2018). NEPAD is an example of the AU's persistence in trying to regain control of continental economic development policies, especially from the WB and IMF (Murithi, 2012). Furthermore, Anthony Mothae Maruping, an AU Ex-Commissioner for Economic Affairs, stated that the continent played an important part in drawing up the post-2015 development goals, all due

to the AU's success in organizing African voices in international issues. Murithi (2012), asserts that the AU is the continent's leading norm entrepreneur and has established "norms to guide the behavior of its member states" (pp.664).

2.2 Ezulwini Consensus

Being unrepresented in the Security Council, Africa has been leading the calls for reform of the UN system. In this regard, the AU member nations agreed on a common position known as 'Ezulwini Consensus'⁷. The common position stressed the need for third world representation in the UN system. A proposal to expand the Security Council to 26 seats was submitted by the AU during the 2005 debate on UN reform. Five of the extra seats were foreseen to be permanent and 6 nonpermanent (Zondi, 2013). However, the key demand of the AU was a veto right for all permanent members (Welz, 2013). Following strong resistance from other UN member states, the AU launched negotiations with the G4 and successfully reached an agreement. The two groups came up with a joint proposal, which included two African countries having a permanent seat. However, the new G6 (G4 and two African countries) would not have a veto right, as was initially requested by the AU. Unfortunately, there arose a stalemate among the African nations as to who should represent them in the UNSC (Welz, 2013). The two permanent seats foreseen for the African countries therefore remained empty as the nations could not reach a consensus in delegating two representatives. However, Zondi (2013) highlights the importance of the African Common Position in this process and the African courageousness in demanding greater representation in UN decision-making. According to the author, the process showed that if given permanent seats, the African nations represented would expect the same privileges as the five other permanent members.

2.3 Africa in Global Climate Governance - The Common Position on Climate Change

Climate change is one of the main talking points in contemporary global governance strategy. Having appreciated the gravity of the climate change challenge unfolding across the African continent, the AU adopted its own Declaration on Climate Change and

⁷ See, http://www.un.org/en/africa/osaa/pdf/au/cap_screform_2005.pdf

Development in 2007. Two years later, AU member countries reached a consensus and agreed upon a common stand ahead of the Copenhagen Conference on Climate Change in 2009. The '*African Common Position on Climate Change*' was a result of the AU's belief that the lack of a coordinated stance on global warming by African governments had previously placed serious limitations on Africa's ability to negotiate on this topic. Making the point that although Africa accounts for a very small proportion of global greenhouse gas emissions it is being impacted disproportionately by its negative effects. The common position therefore demanded compensation from more developed nations for the damages caused by climate change across the continent. Apropos to the African Common Position, Zondi (2013) highlighted the crucial role of SA during the Copenhagen conference, as the negotiations over climate change stagnated because of the different positions of the US and China. Thanks largely to SA's facilitating efforts through the BASIC discussion group the 'Copenhagen Accord' was eventually successfully ratified (Zondi, 2013). The Copenhagen Conference further demonstrated the capability of African nations to act as one, pursue common policy, and shape global negotiations.

Africa continues to be actively involved in global climate governance in various forms. The continent demonstrates an ongoing commitment and engagement to deal effectively and efficiently with the risks posed by climate change through the AU, and other associated institutions and mechanisms. For instance, the African Ministerial Conference on the Environment (AMCEN), a permanent forum where African ministers of the environment discuss matters of relevance to the environment of the continent, has been a central platform for presenting the African Common Position in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

2.4 AU – EU Strategic Partnership

According to the International Crisis Group, the EU strengthened its long-term partnership with the AU starting from renaming their summit from Africa - EU to AU - EU. Through a strategic partnership with EU, such as aligned agendas on peace and security, migration, and terrorism, the AU is clearly gaining international power. In 2017, the 5th AU – EU Summit

took place in Abidjan. The two sides agreed on a set of global priorities and discussed the progress of the Roadmap 2014 – 2017, which was launched during the previous Summit held in 2014. Among different priorities, priority number five states to “achieve common positions in global fora and international negotiations and jointly address global challenges”. In May 2018, Brussels hosted the 9th high-level meeting between the Commissions of the two unions. According to the European Commission, both sides have adopted concrete measures to address global issues in key areas such as peace and security, migration, job creation, and agriculture. European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker said: “The future of the world depends on the good cooperation between Europe and Africa”, while his counterpart, African Union Chairperson H.E. Moussa Faki added: “Multilateralism is the only response to today's global challenges in an increasingly polarized world”. These two sentences gave unequivocal and succinct indication regarding the importance of multilateralism as a platform for exercising agency for Africa, and its role in the future globalized world.

2.5 WTO – Doha Development Agenda

The WTO offers another key example of how African nations have exercised agency in multilateral negotiations. The continent has been proactive and engaged in the Doha Development Agenda (DDA) discussions, negotiating and proposing trade rules. During the DDA negotiations, African nations demanded accountability from advanced countries, urging them to live up to their commitments to global development (Lee, 2013). By taking advantage of DDA’s consensus decision-making process, African leaders insisted on the fulfilment of development promises made by major countries. Sharman (2007) argues that weak countries develop their resistance strategies by using the same rhetoric of the superpowers and WTO development discourse is an opportunity’s dispenser for developing countries to raise their voice. Lee (2013) reasons the African capability in WTO due to the opportunity of exercising discursive power. As the international economic governance shifted its discourse towards development, African countries had the chance to refuse any agreements that did not foresee development outcomes. By using these DDA institutional and structural advantages and by establishing strategic partnerships with other members within WTO, African agency pushed forward their agenda and influenced WTO’s processes.

Besides negotiating processes, some African countries also participate in various WTO bodies. According to Apecu (2013), the General Council, Committee on Trade and Development and the TRIPS Council are the ones where the African members are highly represented.

3. South Africa (SA)

The scholarly discourse on regional powers and regional hegemons has increased vis-à-vis the endless debate on emerging powers. Regional powers are considered an essential link of today's global governance chain. The tremendous progress of the post-apartheid SA has positioned the nation as a regional hegemonic power. The political and institutional reforms of SA's iconic president Mandela, who became the nation's first black president, laid the foundations for this new regional leadership. A change of regime, from segregationist and supremacist to a democratic system which valued and promoted human rights and equality, came with the great support of the international community. From an economic perspective, the 1994 democratic transition boosted the nation's economic performance, especially when compared to the previous decade (1984 - 1993) which was "the poorest ten-year growth performance since the Second World War" (Plessis and Smit, 2006; 3). During the period 1996 - 2011, SA's dollarized GDP skyrocketed from around \$140 billion to over \$400 billion (Carrol, 2017). SA beats developing nations in terms of fast industrialization and has the most sophisticated economy on the continent (Kingah and Uberti, 2016). Furthermore, SA is also a major source of FDI in Africa. According to UNCTAD (2013), South Africa was the second-most important investor in Africa (from developing nations) in 2012 after Malaysia. SA is also ranked as the most technologically advanced nation in Africa. According to the Global Innovation Index, SA continues to maintain the top spot among all economies in the region (GII, 2018).

In the political realm, SA has been a pioneer of African politics and diplomacy. The nation championed the African Agenda, promoting good governance, political stability, and economic prosperity on the continent. SA's determined efforts were paramount in erecting the current continental order as well as maintaining peace and security. During the presidency of Thabo Mbeki, SA was at the vanguard of the African Renaissance. Mbeki's

vision was to embrace African identity and empower African people. He insisted on the right of African people to determine their own future, pushing a development agenda and challenging the Western hegemony. With Mbeki acting as the chief architect of NEPAD, the Pan-African Parliament (PAP), the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) and the birth of the AU, SA paved the way for its regional leadership. The launch of such institutions, masterminded by Mbeki, represented a milestone in African history. SA became the first African nation to chair the AU, setting the tone of its hegemonic power. The nation's focus and proactive engagement in the continent helped Africa to grease the wheels in global politics. Moreover, SA emerged as a middle power in the international order, characterized by its soft power (Soko and Balchin, 2016).

In June 2018, SA was elected to serve as a non-permanent member on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) for the term 2019-2020, which will be nation's third term, having previously served in 2007 – 2008 and 2011 – 2012. SA received an overwhelming level of support from other UN member states and its African counterparts. Its candidature was nominated by the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and endorsed by the AU, being the only African nation backed by the regional body, according to Human Rights Watch.⁸ Its membership in elite clubs such as the G20 and BRICS, strengthens the nation's prestige and enhances its regional and global influence. Multilateral bodies and strategic partnerships have given SA the opportunity to raise the African voice at the international level. Its engagements and efforts are building blocks in the processes of regional economic integration, peace, and security in the continent. Many pundits identify SA as the African spokesman.

When it comes to bilateral relations with the continent, SA has been a longstanding strategic partner for both, western and eastern powers. According to the European Commission's data, the European Union remains committed as SA's most important development partner, providing for 70% of all external assistance funds, including Foreign Direct Investments⁹. All trade programs are under EU – SADC EPA (Southern African Development Community,

⁸ See the post at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/06/11/south-africa-secures-seat-un-security-council-third-time>

⁹ See, EU Commission 2018 at: <http://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/south-africa/>

Economic Partnership Agreement). Among SADC EPA nations, SA is the EU's largest trading partner as it is recognized as being the strongest of sub-Saharan Africa's economies.¹⁰ The basis of EU - SA relations is underpinned by the Trade, Development and Cooperation Agreement (TDCA)¹¹ of 1999, which is affirmed by the Multiannual Indicative Programme between SA and EU for the period of 2014 – 2020.¹² Politically, there is a range of dialogues, regular Presidential summits and Ministerial meetings and regular SA-EU Political and Security Committee meetings. The EU's partnership abets SA to push its agenda forward in aligned areas of common interest including; peace and security, energy and innovation, migration, human rights etc., as well as to increase its influence in the global fora.

Similarly, SA is India's largest trading partner on the continent due to SA's developed markets (Taylor, 2014). According to the UN Economic Commission for Africa, SA was India's top exporter for the period of 2014 – 2015. Their long history of partnership dating back to the 1960's is built upon South-South cooperation. In April 2018, the first ever India - South Africa Business Summit took place in Johannesburg. The High Commission of India in Pretoria announced that this summit sought to maximize the potential of the economic and commercial partnership between the two nations. SA has been successful in establishing beneficial bilateralism with other BRICS nations as well. In September 2018, Chinese President Xi Jinping agreed to pump \$14 billion into SA¹³. Russian President Vladimir Putin expressed his idea on organizing the very first Russian-African summit during 2018 BRICS Summit in Johannesburg. SA's strategic partnership with Russia lies in the area of foreign politics, in particular within the UN and BRICS.

Throughout the years, Pretoria has also developed a solid partnership with Washington. Carrol (2017) ranks SA as the US' main African trading partner. The two nations also share common areas of interest when it comes to regional security, trade and investment, and public health. John Kerry, a former US Secretary of State, in his speech during the meeting with South African Foreign Minister Maite Nkoana-Mashabane stated:

¹⁰ See, EU Commission 2018 at: <http://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/regions/sadc/>

¹¹ See TDCA at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=LEGISSUM:r12201>

¹² See MIP at: <https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/node/96850>

¹³ See <https://www.thesouthafrican.com/three-major-agreements-just-signed-by-china-and-south-africa/>

South Africa is playing an increasingly important global role, a very important leadership role on the continent of Africa, and, we are pleased to say, an important cooperative role together with the United States. (John Kerry, 2015)

However, under the Trump administration, the US – SA relationship has somewhat faltered. President Trump has been apathetic in maintaining partnerships with the African continent and has lacked a clear foreign policy towards Africa. He has been criticized for the delays in filling key diplomatic positions such as the Assistant Secretary for African Affairs, who has just been appointed in July 2018, and the position of the US Ambassador to South Africa. The post of US ambassador to SA has been vacant since 2016. Recently, Lana Marks, a handbag designer has reportedly been chosen by Donald Trump as the next US ambassador to SA.¹⁴

Despite all the above-mentioned points, SA's assumed regional leadership has not gone uncontested by its neighbors. Scholvin (2018) suggests that examples of such contestation can be both intentional and unintentional and can be variously interpreted as arising from processes of hard balancing, soft balancing, rejection of followership, and a disregard of leadership (p. 3). But, does SA have the material capabilities to fulfil the criteria of a regional hegemon and to exert influence and leadership? Leadership can be exercised through hard and soft power, as well as a combination of the two, which is known as smart power (See *Chapters 1, 2 and 3*). Let us then evaluate SA's leadership ambitions through the prism of these leadership determinants. In terms of hard power i.e. assessing the nation's military capabilities, SA has one of the strongest and largest militaries on the continent. SA is ranked 33rd on Global Firepower's (GFP) 2018 World Military Strength Rankings, notably above European nations such as Switzerland, Norway, and the Netherlands. In economic terms, SA has been considered as one of the biggest African economies. SA's stock exchange is Africa's largest and among the top 20 in the world. The nation is also steadily recovering from the low economic growth rates of 2015/16. GDP growth increased from 1.3 percent in 2017 to 1.4 percent in 2018, and economic forecasts predict growth rates of up to 2 percent

¹⁴ See, The Guardian: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/oct/02/lana-marks-trump-us-ambassador-south-africa>

by 2020. According to the WB, this would contribute to a wider economic rebound for emerging markets and developing economies, and to overall global growth (WB, 2018). Soft power is determined by a nation's political value, culture and foreign policy. SA has been revered for its ideal of Ubuntuism which it has adopted in its approach to foreign policy and is built around the core values of freedom, human rights, equality, and justice. SA was also one of the forerunners in implementing the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) and was the first nation on the continent to enact the Statute into domestic law (Kingah and Quilicioni, 2016). SA further showed its cultural leadership by organizing successfully one of the biggest events worldwide, The FIFA World Cup 2010. SA also remains the most technologically advanced nation in Africa, an indicator of the nation's smart power. However, SA's 'golden decade' came to an end after Mbeki's resignation¹⁵. The African giant and spokesman declined in global standing and lost its pole position in the continent. Its preeminent regional position has subsequently waned and been challenged by other sub-Saharan nations such as Nigeria, Angola, Kenya and Ethiopia. According to Scholvin (2018), from the perspective of IR realism this is to be expected as secondary powers are likely to pursue competitive or even confrontational policies vis-à-vis regional hegemons.

From the economic perspective, Nigeria overtook SA as the largest sub-Saharan African economy in terms of overall GDP since 2014. IMF affirms Nigeria as Africa's largest economy with estimated GDP of \$376.3 billion in 2017. The list of top African economies looks different when wealth is measured by GDP per capita. From this perspective, Nigeria is ranked 15 in the continent (IMF, 2017). Country's size, economic upswing and military capabilities are main indicators of Nigeria's influence in the region. Nigeria is ranked 4 in terms of military strength in Africa by GFP 2018. Also, the nation was one of the largest contributors to UN peacekeeping missions in past years. However, the number declined greatly, from 2968 people in 2015 to 455 in 2018 (UN, 2018). Nigeria's economic potential has earned her consideration for inclusion in the N-11 or Next 11¹⁶ emerging countries

¹⁵ See, The New York Times : <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/14/world/africa/zuma-south-africa-legacy.html>; The Telegraph: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/southafrica/11684492/South-Africas-long-walk-to-decline.html>; fin24: <https://www.fin24.com/BizNews/numbers-dont-lie-sa-moving-backwards-under-zumas-leadership-20160902-3>

¹⁶ Next Eleven is a term coined by Jim O'Neill of Goldman Sachs including countries that have the potential for attaining global competitiveness based on their economic and demographic settings.

(Adetula, 2014). Considering all the factors, Nigeria's continental and international influence is rising gradually and the nation is long contesting SA's hegemonic power in the region. Undoubtedly, part of the continent's rise discourse and the tectonic shift of its position in global politics is attributed to Nigeria's recent rise.

Other contributing factors to SA's decline include; some misguided foreign policy decisions taken by Jakob Zuma's administration, the rise of xenophobia in the country, economic stagnation, growing inequality, and rising unemployment. Soko and Balchin (2016), add to this list SA's mismanagement of the crisis in Zimbabwe, which represented one of its most glaring failures according to the authors. SA has been also criticized for its inability to integrate its global aspirations into a concrete set of foreign policies. According to Kingah and Uberti (2016), SA lacks a clear and coherent strategy or commonly defined goal in order to operationalize a leadership role in the international system. There are no attempts in public diplomacy to pursue a harmonious agenda that the nation should follow at the global level. "...coherent national, regional and global vision for itself remains to be reliably confronted" (Kingah and Uberti, 2016; 221).

Yet, SA has recorded significant achievements and has been the African frontrunner in global politics and multilateral fora for a long time. The country led Africa through some of its crucial periods and transformations, carrying successfully the mantle of the leadership. Through its strategic partnerships and its membership in clubs such as the G20, BRICS, and IBSA, SA has been the leading African voice in the global arena and has constantly pushed and contributed to the reconfiguration of the international architecture. In 2018, under the theme 'BRICS in Africa', SA hosted the tenth annual BRICS summit. The BRICS leaders declared that they will join efforts to strengthen multilateralism and push for a fairer, more equal, more democratic and more representative world order. Furthermore, SA has reawakened under the new presidency of Cyril Ramaphosa, beginning with fighting corruption which has been one of his top priorities. Regarding the question of regional hegemony, the rise of secondary powers and hegemonic contestations may in fact turn out to be a positive step towards the reinforcement of the African voice beyond the borders of the continent.

4. Conclusion

Gauging African agency and answering squarely whether it matters or not is an uphill struggle. Two main obstacles that one encounters in the evaluation of African agency are the lack of a common definition and its multifaceted role. As demonstrated in this paper, the AU, the main institutional agent on the continent, plays a dual role. On the one hand, the Union builds unity among its nations and coordinates domestic policies, on the other the organization has been advocating globally for African interests since its foundation. However, African agency is an incontrovertible fact and its significance is increasing gradually. Various African actors exercise agency at different levels, from individual states, like SA through its bilateral agreements and strategic partnerships, to intergovernmental organizations. In all cases, the structural organization of the relevant institutions is crucial to the process of exercising agency.

The continent has long pushed for realigning development strategies and has been the frontrunner in shaping the global normative framework in this regard. Africa has rightly earned its laurels from international studies pundits for advancing the concepts of fairness and equality in the new global order through pro-active participation in global negotiations. Furthermore, Africa has been the leader among developing nations in representing their interests in the international fora. Africa has been championing the reconfiguration of the international architecture, aiming for an equilibrium between growth and development and calling for an open and participatory global community. Africa has also been revered for its role in refashioning today's multilateralism. Allying with emerging powers, the continent is known for its contribution in shaping modern multilateralism whilst promoting the development agenda. Through regional mechanisms, such as the AU, which successfully emerged as the continent's prime intergovernmental institution, Africa has been at the forefront of the processes of UN system reform, global climate governance, peace, security, and trade negotiations. Again, since signing the world's largest free trade zone (CFTA), Africa is progressively securing its seat at the top table. Likewise, Africa plays a crucial role in global governance systems that seek to reduce inequalities and bring about global stability.

We expect the billion Africans who in the past decade have already experienced the fastest growth the continent has ever seen to become the fastest two billion, and Africa's GDP to increase from \$2 trillion today to \$29 trillion in today's money by 2050...The process will not be complete by 2050, but Africa is set to be the final beneficiary of this revolution. (Charles Robertson, 2012)

In other words, in the book *The Fastest Billion: The Story Behind Africa's Economic Revolution*, Charles Robertson believes that by 2050, the continent will produce more GDP than the US and Eurozone combined do today.

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