

“African Agency” Revisited

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Abstract: This paper examines the evolving and contested concept of “African agency” in international relations, challenging traditional power-based theories. It explores how African agency manifests through collective continental action, converging state behaviours, and sovereign national strategies. Through case studies – including AU diplomacy, multilateral negotiations, foreign policy trends, and individual state actions – it unpacks how African actors influence global affairs despite material constraints. Arguing for a plural understanding of “African agencies,” the paper highlights the continent’s strategic engagement, growing assertiveness, and resistance to being framed solely as passive or peripheral. It calls for contextual sensitivity in assessing African agency’s diverse expressions and impacts.

Key words: Africa, Agency, Cooperation, African Union, foreign policy, diplomacy, multilateral organisations, bilateral negotiations, collective agency, power.

1. Introduction

In recent years, a growing body of both academic and public literature started to revolve around the concept of “African agency” (Brown, 2021; Brown & Harman, 2013; Chipaike & Knowledge, 2018; Warner & Shaw, 2018; Coffie & Tiky, 2021; Bischoff, 2020). Yet, its meaning and the object to which it refers are still difficult to define.

“Agency” is a theoretically contested concept. At its core, it refers to the capacity to act – understood as purposeful, meaningful, and self-reflective action— or more broadly as the ability to exert influence or power (Buzan, Jones & Little, 1993; Hill, 2003; Chabal, 2009; Bischoff, 2020). In international relations,

however, the link between agency and power is somehow problematic. In particular when applied to African states. How can countries with relatively limited economic and military capabilities – key indicators of power in conventional IR theory – exercise meaningful agency on the global stage? This raises the broader question of whether agency necessarily requires material power, or whether it can take alternative forms.¹

According to Bischoff (2020), African agency can be seen in the actions of leaders, institutions, and decision-makers who respond – individually or collectively – to shifting domestic, regional, and international contexts. The concept is, therefore, adaptable, varying

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according to the arena in which it is applied. The volume edited by William Brown and Sophie Harman (2013) showcases a range of perspectives on how African actors exercise agency in different policy fields and institutional settings.

Without delving into the complex question of the ontology of Africa as a unified actor, this paper examines how African agency manifests across different domains: multilateral negotiations, bilateral relations with external partners, intra-African cooperation, and transnational or sub-state political action. A key question is: who exactly exercises agency in each of these settings?² In this article, African agency is interpreted in three complementary ways:

1. As the collective agency of a group of African states, which – legitimately or not – claim to speak for the continent as a whole, or act through institutions like the African Union,³ where all 55 member states are represented.
2. As convergent actions by individual African countries, which may not be coordinated in advance, but nonetheless reflect shared positions or interests—creating a perception of bloc-like behaviour.
3. As the agency of individual African states, understood as sovereign actors pursuing national interests – thus suggesting the need to speak of African agencies in the plural.

These understandings are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they overlap and interact, depending on context. In the following sections, we explore these dimensions through concrete examples,

in order to unpack the multifaceted nature of African agency.

2. African Collective Agency

African collective agency is commonly associated to the agency exercised by a Pan-African body such as the African Union and/or by a group of African states – as the Africa Group or a more restrictive one – acting as representatives of the rest of the continent. In this sense, “agency” can be mostly understood as “the ability to exert influence in international relations and global affairs” (Zondi, 2013). One of the most significant examples of successful African diplomacy in recent years is the African Union becoming the twenty-first member of the G20.

In major global multilateral arenas such as the United Nations, Africa accounts for over a quarter of the total membership. This gives the Africa Group significant numerical weight, making it the largest of the five regional groupings through which UN negotiations are structured (Zondi, 2013). Beyond the General Assembly, African countries also hold three rotating non-permanent seats on the UN Security Council (the so-called “A3”), as well as 13 seats on the Human Rights Council and 14 on the Economic and Social Council.

Scholars have paid close attention to Africa’s efforts to coordinate common positions and voting patterns, particularly within the UN General Assembly and the Security Council. Among the most prominent examples of a coordinated African position is the Ezulwini Consensus, adopted in 2005, which

calls for reform of the Security Council to include two permanent and three additional non-permanent seats for African states. This demand reflects a broader critique of the current global governance architecture, which many view as outdated and rooted in post-colonial hierarchies (Zondi, 2013).⁴ Another notable example is the strong support expressed by African countries for the Responsibility to Protect principle at the 2005 UN World Summit (Cilliers, Gumede&Mbadlanyana, 2009).

With regard to the A3, Malte Brosig and Markus Lecki (2022) find evidence of increasing coordination among the three African countries temporarily sitting on the Security Council. However, this coordination has only partially translated into measurable influence. Efforts to build African agency at the Security Council are closely linked to the development of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) and the establishment of the AU Peace and Security Council in 2004. In many cases, issues raised at the UN Security Council are first discussed within AU frameworks, and the AU's Permanent Observer Mission to the UN has played a growing role in articulating and advancing African positions – sometimes overlapping with, or even surpassing, the work of the Africa Group itself.

Common African Positions (CAPs) are, in principle, a prerogative of the African Union. The AU Constitutive Act explicitly mandates the promotion and articulation of common African positions on issues of continental interest. Key examples include the creation of AUDA-

NEPAD and the drafting of Agenda 2063. Beyond the Ezulwini Consensus, other CAPs relevant to the UN include:

- the African Consensus on Development Effectiveness (2011);
- the CAP on the Post-2015 Development Agenda (2014), which guided Africa's contribution to the SDG negotiations;
- the CAPs on Humanitarian Effectiveness and on the World Drug Problem (2016);
- the CAP on the Global Compact for Migration (2017); and
- the CAP on Asset Recovery (2020) (Bankole, 2020).

African CAPs are also present in other multilateral forums, such as the UNFCCC COPs, where African states have consistently called for a just energy transition, equitable climate finance, and compensation for climate-related loss and damage. These demands often align with broader Global South coalitions, but they are rooted in Africa's distinct vulnerabilities and development priorities.

Nevertheless, the proliferation of African positions and growing institutional participation does not automatically translate into influence. As UeliStaeger (2024) notes, it is important to distinguish between the aspiration for representation – having a seat at the table – and the aspiration for reform – effectively shaping outcomes at that table. Alternatively, drawing on the terminology of SiphamandlaZondi,

African agency at the collective level should be further disaggregated into two dimensions: the “posture” – that is, the unified stance adopted by the collective entity, which relates directly to the question of African continental integration—and the actions, i.e. the concrete policy proposals and initiatives that are actually put on the table.⁵ However, many African demands, including the Ezulwini Consensus, have yet to be meaningfully addressed by global institutions.

In parallel to formal CAPs, African states and regional groupings have also put forward a variety of claims in multilateral forums that, although not officially sanctioned by the AU, reflect shared interests and recurring themes. These include calls to shift relations with the Global North from a donor-recipient model to one of strategic economic partnership (“from aid to trade”); demands for the reform of international credit rating systems and investment risk assessments; the push for more equitable representation within international financial institutions (IFIs); and advocacy for global debt restructuring mechanisms (Scialoja&Strazzari, 2024). While not always articulated within a unified continental framework, such positions may nonetheless be considered expressions of African agency—depending on the actor promoting them and the context in which they emerge. As will be further explored below, several of these claims have featured prominently in the agenda of South Africa’s G20 presidency in 2025, underscoring how national leadership can act as a vector for broader continental aspirations.

3. Common Trends in African Foreign Policy Behaviour

Beyond formal collective action, several observable trends in the international behaviour of African states – though often uncoordinated – can be interpreted as expressions of African agency. Among these are the diversification of diplomatic and economic partnerships, and a growing tendency toward non-alignment or multi-alignment in response to major global issues. These patterns reflect a broader repositioning within an increasingly multipolar and tense geopolitical landscape (Scialoja&Strazzari, 2024), particularly since the return of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency.

One salient example of this diversification is the proliferation of Africa+1 Summits,⁶ which signal the rising diplomatic engagement of African states with a wide array of external partners (Soulé-Kohndou, 2020). As Soulé-Kohndou argues, the renewed international interest in Africa should not be understood through the lens of a “new scramble for Africa” – a narrative that frames the continent as a passive arena for great power competition. Instead, such a view should be replaced with one that recognizes the strategic agency of African states, which have demonstrated increasing ability to leverage a diversified menu of partnerships to their advantage (Scialoja&Strazzari, 2024).

This shift – from privileged bilateral relationships to a more fluid and competitive diplomatic landscape – has been referred to as participation in a “geopolitical marketplace” or even as the “art of summitry” (Faleg, 2024; Ragazzi, 2022). African governments

use these summits to advance a range of objectives: attracting foreign investment through forum shopping, pitting old and new partners against one another in order to secure better deals (often for infrastructure projects); diversifying their economies to reduce dependency on any single actor; and gaining symbolic capital – status, visibility, and insurance against diplomatic isolation. These efforts often serve domestic political ends as well, helping leaders consolidate support through promises of development and modernization (Soulé-Kohndou, 2020).

A second, closely related trend concerns African countries' political positioning on major global issues, most notably the war in Ukraine. Voting behaviour at the UN General Assembly reveals a clear tendency toward "strategic non-alignment". During the 2 March 2022, resolution condemning Russia's invasion, 28 African states voted in favour, 25 either abstained or were absent, and only one (Eritrea) voted against. Despite pressure from both Western and Russian diplomats, many African states opted for a middle path – prompting debate among scholars about whether such behaviour constitutes "non-alignment," "active non-alignment," or "multi-alignment".⁷ In the same vein, the resolutions were also seen as a Western issue and criticized for reflecting double standards.⁸

The notion of non-alignment draws on the legacy of the Non-Aligned Movement (established in 1961), but in today's multipolar context, its meaning has evolved. South African officials and scholars, for instance, often prefer terms such as "strategic non-alignment",

reflecting a posture that seeks to maintain dialogue between opposing blocs while avoiding direct condemnation or the imposition of sanctions – no African country, to date, has adopted unilateral sanctions against Russia.

The concept of multi-alignment, on the other hand, is inspired by India's foreign policy approach, which balances relations with multiple global powers. While appealing, this strategy may be less feasible for smaller or more vulnerable states. In any case, these positions must be clearly distinguished from neutrality in the legal sense, which remains a fixed and formal status under international law (e.g. Switzerland). African strategic non-alignment is better understood as a pragmatic and flexible approach, consistent with the logic behind diversified partnerships (Scialoja & Strazzari, 2024).

Subsequent UNGA votes highlighted further nuance. On 7 April 2022, when the Assembly voted to suspend Russia from the UN Human Rights Council, several African countries changed their positions. Again, on 12 October 2022, many voted in favour of condemning Russia's "referenda" in occupied Ukrainian regions. Importantly, these shifts were not necessarily indicative of alignment with the West, but rather a concern with upholding the principle of territorial integrity – a particularly sensitive issue for African states, many of which face internal conflicts and secessionist movements.⁹

As of early 2025, voting patterns in the UNGA show even greater divergence between African states and Western countries.¹⁰ This trend, however, may

reflect confusion or disillusionment with shifting U.S. foreign policy rather than any deeper alignment with Russia.

It is also important to underscore that almost half of African countries have consistently voted in support of Western-backed resolutions – underscoring the heterogeneity of African responses, which are often driven by strategic calculations, historical ties, or domestic political considerations. Nevertheless, whether aligned or not, a common denominator emerges: a shared reluctance to enter into binding alliances in a world where flexibility and autonomy are seen as strategic assets (Faleg, 2024; Scialoja&Strazzari, 2024). The 2022 UNGA votes served as a catalyst for renewed engagement from external powers – most notably the United States (under President Biden), the European Union, and Russia – marked by a surge in high-level visits to African capitals.

4. African State Agency

The third and final dimension of African agency addressed in this article concerns the agency of individual African states—that is, their capacity to act as sovereign actors in the international system. This form of agency can be defined 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” (Andreasson, 2013). While clearly grounded in the national realm, the actions of certain African states can – at times and under specific conditions – be interpreted, rightly or wrongly, as expressions of African agency writ

large. This ambiguity raises important conceptual and political questions.

A relevant case is the recent accession of Ethiopia and Egypt to the BRICS group, joining South Africa, which has been a member since 2010. Although the enlargement involved two African countries, the move reflects primarily national diplomatic strategies, rooted in distinct geopolitical calculations. Framing this development as a manifestation of collective African agency would be misleading, as there is no coordinated continental stance behind their BRICS membership. This example points to the need for greater conceptual precision and suggests that, in such cases, it may be more appropriate to speak of “African agencies” in the plural.

South Africa, in particular, provides several high-profile examples of state-level agency with global resonance. A notable instance is its decision to bring a case before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on 29 December 2023, accusing Israel of violating the Genocide Convention in Gaza. This move placed South Africa at the forefront of international legal and moral discourse, positioning it as a defender of global justice and a vocal critic of Western “double standards.” Given the country’s historical legacy as a symbol of anti-apartheid struggle, this action has been widely interpreted as a continuation of its tradition of principled foreign policy (Scialoja&Strazzari, 2024). However, it also reflects the specific orientation of South African state agency, rather than a broader continental consensus.

South Africa’s current presidency of the G20 in 2025 offers another

window into its international posture. The country has used this platform to promote issues such as debt sustainability, the cost of capital, and the creation of African credit rating agencies—priorities that resonate with many developing countries, including several across Africa. Nonetheless, these positions are largely articulated through a national lens, even when they align with broader continental or Southern concerns. Moreover, tensions with the U.S. administration under President Trump have complicated Pretoria's efforts to play a bridging role between global North and South.

This raises a critical question: to what extent is South Africa pursuing its own national agenda, and to what extent is it acting as a representative of African interests? While many of its initiatives may be welcomed or shared by other African states—and sometimes even coordinated with the African Union—South Africa is (increasingly?)¹¹ seen as pursuing autonomous leadership, rather than collective representation. This perception is reinforced by the growing reluctance of other African states to endorse South Africa's self-ascribed role as a continental leader. The idea of a hierarchical “big brother” no longer resonates with a generation of African leaders intent on asserting their own agency.¹²

In this sense, the category of African state agency highlights both the diversity and the fragmentation of African international engagement. It underscores the importance of recognizing national interests and trajectories, even when they intersect with broader continental

narratives. While individual African states may advance proposals that echo collective concerns, the attribution of “African agency” to these actions must be assessed with caution and contextual sensitivity.

5. Conclusion

The meanings that can be attributed to the concept of “African agency” are multiple and depend first and foremost on the ontological sense attributed to it, and, as a consequence, on the actors exercising it and the relationships between them. Given the questionable nature – from a political perspective – of “Africa” as a single entity acting in a coordinated and homogeneous manner in international relations, the concept of “African agency” could – or should – often be declined in the plural, as “African agencies”. In all cases, the current African behaviour(s) in IR continues to contradict the (Western) image of a colonised, impotent continent (Hegel, 1837; Morgenthau, 1985; Waltz, 1979). Despite its peripheral position in the world economic system (Wallerstein, 1974; Arrighi, 1994), African countries seem to exercise their agency, relevance and proactive role in today's global scene – something not new, but with roots in the global history (Bayart, 1999; Dunn & Shaw, 2001; Engel & Olsen, 2005).

Endnotes

- ¹ The reflection on the difference between “agency” and “power” entails significant developments, which cannot be addressed in this article. For example, “power” can be defined as “the ability to control others, to get others to do what they otherwise would not do” (Dahl, 1957; Nye, 1990); something almost impossible for most of

the African countries. As argued by Brown and Harman (2013): “African agency is different from other forms of agency, because of the nature of its structural constraints”.

² This paper’s analysis focuses specifically on the distinction between collective agency and state agency, with the state considered as the minimal unit of analysis. While this approach is analytically useful, it is important to acknowledge that the concept of agency can be further disaggregated to examine the internal actors within the state apparatus – such as political leaders, government ministries, and associated institutions including elements of civil society. Moreover, it is essential to recognise the presence of other forms of “African agency” that differ fundamentally from state-based actors. These include civil society organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), individual actors, and the private sector.

³ In his work on African agency seen as stemming from the African Union, Ueli Staeger (2023) states that “African agency is about recognizing and boosting Africa’s ability to shape the international system in which it operates”.

⁴ In fact, only four of the UN’s 50 founding members were African: Egypt, Ethiopia, Liberia, and (then white-ruled) South Africa.

⁵ Insights come from a discussion between the author and S. Zondi in Pretoria, April 2025.

⁶ Among them: the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), with nine editions (first in 2000 and last in 2024); the U.S.-Africa Summit, with two editions (2014 and 2022); the Russia-Africa Summit, with two editions (2019 and 2023); the longest-running, the Sommet Afrique-France, with twenty-eight editions (first in 1973 and last in 2021); the European Union – African Union (UE-UA) Summit, with seven editions, (first in 2000; last in 2022; the next in 2025); the Tokyo International Conference on African Development – TICAD, with eight editions, (first in 1993 and last in 2022; the next in 2025);

the German Compact with Africa, a series of several events launched in 2017; the UK-Africa Investment Summit, with a first edition in 2020 (the second edition in 2024 has been postponed); the Turkey-Africa Summit, with three editions (first in 2008, last in 2021; next in 2026); the Italy-Africa Ministerial Conference, with two editions (2016 and 2018), that became the high level Italy - Africa Summit in 2024; the India-Africa Partnership Summit, with three editions (first in 2008 and last in 2015 (the forth should follow); the Budapest Africa Forum, with three editions (first in 2013 and last in 2018); and the Africa-Ireland Economic Forum, with seven editions (first in 2010 and last in 2022)....

⁷ This draft reflection on the distinction between “neutral”, “(active) non-alignment,” and “multi-alignment” draws on the author’s discussions with various South Africa’s based scholars and researchers in Johannesburg and Pretoria, March/April 2025 – in particular, Gustavo de Carvalho (South African Institute of International Affairs - SAIIA), Priyal Singh (Institute for Security Studies - ISS), and Professor Malte Brosig (Witwatersrand University). See also Sidiropoulos & de Carvalho (2023).

⁸ Compared to other conflicts, in Africans’ eyes the war in Ukraine received disproportionate attention from Western governments, with extensive media coverage. The incidents of racial discrimination against African refugees fleeing Ukraine through the Polish border at the beginning of the conflict should also be taken into consideration (Scialoja & Strazzari).

⁹ See: Scialoja, S. (2022). Positioning “Africa”: extraverted agency amidst global (dis)order, Security Praxis. Available: <https://www.securitypraxis.eu/positioning-africa-extraverted-agency-amidst-global-dis-order/>

¹⁰ In the February 24, 2025, resolution 11/7, primarily proposed by European countries and rejected by the US, only 13 African countries voted in favor. Meanwhile, 33 abstained or were absent,

and 8 voted against. The 8 countries that opposed the resolution included Burkina Faso, Burundi, Central African Republic, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Mali, Niger and Sudan.

- 11 Analyses of South Africa's role as a continental leader in Africa are often marked by divergence among scholars and experts. Some interpret South Africa continental foreign policy since the Mandela era, with the partial exception of the Mbeki administration as pursuing a strategy of "quiet diplomacy". This approach has been notably evident in South Africa's involvement in mediation and negotiation efforts in various African conflicts, such as those in Burundi, Somalia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo during the 2000s, where South Africa played a significant role as mediator (insights from various conversations with former South African ambassadors, Pretoria, April 2025).
- 12 Insights on South Africa and the G20 arose from conversations with the South African Institute for International Affairs' researchers (SAIIA). SAIIA is one of the main South African think tanks organizing the T20.

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