



Representation and reform: Inside Africa's pursuit of a stronger global voice

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At a Glance

Adequately representing the African continent's demographic and political relevance has become a priority shared by Africa and its partners. African states and the African Union increasingly seek to join and shape multilateral forums, balancing visibility and trust-building with strategic lobbying and policy influence, in a complex context of geopolitical shifts and regional consensus-building challenges. Distinguishing between *representation* and *reform* as two distinct varieties of African agency, this study unpacks the challenges of exercising African agency at the G20 and in the effort to reform the UN Security Council. These case studies also illustrate that African agency might be a continental aspiration, but can be exercised also at national level and without collective action. Unpacking African agency is crucial for understanding Africa's evolution of foreign policy, and to adapt partners' strategies at the AU.

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Growing ambitions for a greater African voice

Whether it is at the African Union (AU), in informal groupings such as the Togo-led African Political Initiative, or in Uganda's hosting of the G77 and Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) summits in 2023 and 2024, Africa's politics has gained a strong international dimension, both as specific states seek to shape the international agenda according to their interests, but also as Africa collectively seeks stronger multilateral and international unity. Part of this ambition is also directed at non-Western organizations, with BRICS leading the charge. The conceptual driver of this emerging dynamism is the pursuit of 'African agency' – the idea that Africa should shape the international structures that have hitherto shaped it. In other words, 'African agency' is about pursuing an active, rather than passive, role in world politics on behalf of Africa. This ambition has significant implications on how International Organizations (IOs) and multilateral processes operate – Africa is still marginalized in many of them today.

African agency is a complex phenomenon in need of unpacking. The specificities of Africa pursuing a stronger global voice are very variegated – by country, multilateral context, and thematic area, to name just a few dimensions. African states coordinate climate policy, manage UN organizations, agreed on a position on UN Charter reform, travel to Ukraine and Russia for crisis diplomacy, and the AU has recently joined the G20. Given this welcome trend, what kind of varieties of African agency does Africa pursue today? This study proposes a more fine-grained distinction between African agency as striving for *reform* on the one hand and *representation* on the other hand. These mutually compatible and reinforcing facets of African agency help understand the inner workings of Africa's pursuit of a stronger voice on the global stage, but also help understand sources of challenges. If African states manage to create positive synergies between these varieties of African agency, aspirations of *reform* and *representation* can support one and the same goal of an Africa better represented and heard in global politics.

All optimism for Africa's shared voice notwithstanding, there are also several challenges in the way. Among these challenges lies the analytical and political challenge of accounting for the long-standing (and growing) diversity of what 'Africa' stands for – to reflect the diverse foreign policy interests and strategies of Africa's many countries is in and of itself important for explaining African agency today. States struggle to forge a consensus from their vastly different preferences, but also on whether the AU should be empowered to carry a shared African voice. African states have understood that the collective aspirations of 'African agency' can also enhance state-level foreign policy; the pursuit of sovereignty by African states can therefore also interact with the pursuit of African agency.

Implications for AU partners can be divided in short- and medium-term scenarios. In the short-term, supporters and observers of the AU should expect a difficult path towards finding African consensus positions, in which partners should limit their footprint on intra-African processes. In the medium-term and if African states manage to act upon their consensus positions, AU partners can expect multilateral negotiations to prove more difficult, particularly in the economic and financial domain.

Representation and reform: Varieties of African agency

African agency is a concept that captures Africa's current and potential capacity to act. In classic social theory, 'agency' is opposed to 'structure': It captures what individuals and organizations can do given the social structure in which they are constituted and operate.¹ More colloquially, agency is the *capacity to act independently*. By extension, African agency is about recognizing and boosting Africa's ability to shape the international system in which it operates. Defining African agency allows the development of a typology that illustrates the diversity of ways in which African agency can be pursued.

What drives Africa's pursuit of more agency on the world stage? Not only do African states and civil society actors request a stronger African voice, but the rest of the world is also shifting its approach to Africa. Today, Africa holds more strategic relevance, and partnership approaches towards Africa are changing. The world aspires African partnerships in geopolitical times that ideally would interlink with Africa's endogenous drivers of seeking a stronger voice. The latter include "economic growth, population growth, assertive political leadership and a young digitised population".² There are also political pay-offs of pursuing a strong African voice on the global scale. As part of this more self-assured African posture on the international scene, Pan-Africanism is definitely 'back in town' among many African leaders.

Two complementary types of African agency

The pursuit of African agency is often mentioned and seldom specified. Africa's ambition for a global voice enters a new stage of requesting both *representation* in the form of African visibility and voice, but also *reform* of existing organizations to adapt decision-making processes to allow Africa to shape policy outcomes in these organizations. This distinction has direct implications for how African diplomacy unfolds, and how its partners can position themselves towards it.

Representation and reform differ regarding their primary goals, interstate relational dynamics, involved state actors, and the role of the public sphere. Put simply, *representation* is about having a seat at the table, while *reform* is about having one's voice heard at the table. In the variety of *representation*, the symbolism of African visibility is at the centre. Against the backdrop of colonial and postcolonial marginalization, Africa's presence in major forums and organizations is by itself an achievement. Beyond symbolism, states also build trust between each other at the highest level, indirectly feeding into the achievement of Africa's overall foreign policy goals. As Kenyan President William Ruto said, the AU joining the G20 "will increase the voice of Africa visibility, and influence on the global stage and provide a platform to advance the common interest of our people"³. President Ruto's statement indicates the centrality of visibility as a goal in itself, but also as an enabler of influence.

By contrast, *reform* is about pursuing substantive policy outcomes. Not high-level trust-building, but lobbying for rule changes in IOs is at the centre. These tasks are carried out by mid-level diplomats, sherpas and technical experts, though high-level political leaders will create a framework of political appropriateness for these activities. For many African leaders, this is a matter not only of enhancing the quality of multilateral outcomes. As the Angolan President João Lourenço argued at the UN General Assembly in September 2023, lacking multilateral reform “generates anxiety and frustration among the most vulnerable populations who, by not having their expectations met, become easily permeable to negative influences that are dangerous to the order and stability of their respective countries”.⁴

Varieties of African agency		
Representation	↔	Reform
Symbolism	<i>Main goal</i>	Substantive policy outcomes
Trust-building	<i>Interstate relational dynamic</i>	Lobbying and shaping arrangements for rule change
Top diplomats, ministers, and heads of government/state	<i>Involved actors</i>	Mid-level diplomats, sherpas, technical experts
Africa's visibility as a goal in itself	<i>Role of public sphere</i>	Africa's visibility as a means for outcomes

African states are divided between these two varieties of African agency. While close to all African countries are advocates for African agency as *representation*, not all are firm advocates for multilateral *reform*. Larger African countries, including Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya and a handful of smaller countries, including Rwanda, Togo, Senegal, Cote d'Ivoire, and Angola, are particularly strong advocates of tangible reforms of the multilateral system. Few states would disagree with the pursuit of African agency altogether but underscore the importance of national sovereignty, also in multilateralism. These include particularly small AU member states, or those wary of African regional diplomatic cooperation more generally, including Eritrea.

A major dividing line is the ambition and time horizon of enhanced African participation in global governance. Unfortunately, this discussion is often presented with zero-sum logic, and policy audiences sometimes see them as mutually exclusive in the short term. However, these two ways of pursuing African agency should be mutually compatible

and mutually reinforcing. As Africa's diplomatic resources are comparably scarce, prioritizing is an understandable strategy. But short-term improvements in representation, working methods and visibility do not undermine the long-term goal of ambitious membership and decision-making reforms of organisations in a *reform* paradigm.

Disagreements on prioritizing representation or reform also feed into an already tricky consensus-building process among African states. Many African states' diplomatic system is overstretched, and the degree of detail of instructions and coordination accordingly suffers. The sheer number of 55 AU member states also complicates consensus-finding – compared to the significant challenges EU member states face when negotiating consensus positions, Africa's challenge consists of more than double as many states. The weak political will of some AU member states to delegate competencies to the continental level and the strongly varying social and economic national contexts create a highly diverse set of national preferences. As a result, so-called Common African Positions (CAPs) are a laborious process for which the continent often needs more resources, and respecting the outcome of a consensus-building process is often tricky.⁵ The AU's own capacity for supporting CAPs is also limited, notably due to funding not readily available for CAP support, and the lack of human resources at the AU Commission due to the AU's stalling administrative reforms.⁶ More crucially, a critical mass of member states also fails to fully empower the AU Commission to act on its behalf in this area. As a result, AU Member States have recently struggled to agree on CAPs, including the African leaders' Nairobi declaration on climate change and call to action and on Reparations. In summary, divergences are driven by weak political will among Member States, divergent national situations, and a lack of AU capacity to support these processes.

A further point of contention is the degree to which African states empower the AU's organs, particularly the AU Commission, to deploy its African voice through a continental organization. Many economically and politically powerful African states are wary of a strong and independent AU and would prefer for African agency to be a chiefly intergovernmental matter. For example, in the aftermath of the 2023 AU Summit, a large Member State reportedly forced a reversal of an AU position in favour of opening text-based negotiations of UN Security Council reform in 2023.⁷ Others underscore the value of the AU institutions' institutional memory, continuity, and normative leadership. As the next section discusses, this is also because African states pursue African agency of their own – at the state level.

A vicious cycle of lacking AU empowerment: African agency as a revival of state sovereignty?

While there is little disagreement on the overall need for a greater African voice in global affairs, African states are a lot more divided on who should speak on behalf of Africa. African states thrive on the choice and freedom offered by multiple development partnerships.⁸ The continent's states strongly vary in terms of socio-economic size, geopolitical alliances, domestic political system, and the role of external cooperation in the country's development. These factors create strongly variegated drivers for states to control the exercise African agency at the state level. As a result, they are also keen to reap the

state-level benefits of a stronger African role in global governance. There are, therefore, two competing levels of enhancing agency in the African continent: at the state level and the continental, collective level.

If African states wish to focus on African agency as a national prerogative, this raises questions for continental African agency. In particular, the degree of empowerment of the AU's leadership and policy organs must be clarified. This empowerment relates to the legal basis of the AU Constitutive Act and the PSC Protocol, which leave a lot of ambiguity as to the specific competencies of executive organs. Empowerment also concerns AU leadership. Namely, the current AU Commission leadership has come to be viewed critically by a growing number of AU Member States and external partners. Critiques of the Commission's leadership's supposed lack of effectiveness are, however, intimately linked to Member States' lacklustre financial and human resource contributions to the Commission. Low empowerment and low trust in leadership are therefore caught in a vicious cycle. One illustration of this challenge is how Africa manages its strategic partnerships with other world regions and major powers. A long-standing point of contention is whether all AU member states are allowed to participate in partnership summits or whether a specific sub-set with regional balance only should partake in them, which would indicate more empowerment of the AU.⁹ Most AU Member States insist on retaining a strong role in partnership management and summitry, which fails to empower the Commission from delivering autonomous results.

While this dynamic also applies to AU diplomacy, there are additional complexities. Some observers criticize the AU's discursive diplomacy on non-African issues as distracting from the AU's mandate for peace and security on the African continent. Speaking about non-African issues might indeed cost comparatively less political capital than engaging in African crises. Nonetheless, such zero-sum logic thinking about the national and continental levels of African agency establishes a false dilemma.

Overcoming zero-sum thinking in national and continental African agency would be a welcome step for aligning aspirations across levels towards a united goal of better African visibility and impact in global governance. The wealth of different initiatives means that coordination and alignment of different actors are now vital. But progress in working out responsibilities and consensus-building in one area may also spill over to other areas. For example, states agreeing on CAPs on climate change and seeing a positive change could eventually inspire stronger consensus in other areas of Africa's voice in global governance. Both AU Member States and partners should proactively seek to identify such lessons-learned that might travel to other policy areas.

The geopolitics of African agency

Western observers traditionally assumed that greater African agency would lead to Africa's alignment with the West – particularly at the AU level, where the assumed 'natural partnership' between the EU and AU was expected to deliver normative and geopolitical alignment.¹⁰ Events in Ukraine and Israel have demonstrated that this assumption was ill-informed: A stronger African voice on the global scale is above all

independent and not automatically aligned with the West. For example, African Group votes at the UN General Assembly varied strongly depending on the text of resolutions rather than simply reflecting geopolitical alignment.¹¹

Africa's pursuit of African agency extends beyond universal IOs with global membership and so-called G-system settings with strong Western representation. African states also proactively pursue African agency in other, non-Western settings. Uganda will host summits of the G77 and the Non-Aligned Movement in January 2024, two informal organizations with an essential normative role at the United Nations and a long Cold War-driven history.¹² In a similar vein, the BRICS Summit 2023 admitted Saudi Arabia, Iran, Ethiopia, Egypt, Argentina and the United Arab Emirates.¹³ With Egypt, Ethiopia, and founding member South Africa, Africa is now better represented among BRICS nations, though with poor intra-African regional balance.

One can ask whether expanding formats that are supposed to be exclusive by definition, undermine their very purpose of *exclusive* cooperation among leading economic countries. After all, if every country is a priority, no countries are a priority. A more optimistic reading would be that geopolitically testing times require a multitude of connections and forums for states to meet and build trust. In other words, African agency as better *representation* has increasing value in a world where multilateral institutions are multiplying and potentially fragmenting. A more geopolitically divided world will require more informal and formal groupings, where African voices are essential to reflect Africa's demographic and political weight in crises on and beyond the continent. AU partners should therefore welcome the proliferation of African representation in different groupings, even if it risks overstressing diplomatic and bureaucratic resources in the short-term.

There are additional geopolitical varieties of African agency outside the focus of this study. These include African high-level diplomacy on global conflicts and high-level leadership in IOs. In different crises, including Ukraine and Gaza, African states and the AU have demonstrated a willingness for diplomacy to mitigate the effects of crises on the African continent, but more importantly, also to share African visions of peace, humanitarian law and a historically driven insistence on liberation and self-determination.¹⁴ The AU's policy on leadership nominations is equally increasing its success. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus as Director-General of the World Health Organization, Winnie Byanyima as Executive Director of UNAIDS and Under-Secretary-General of the UN, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala as Director-General of the World Trade Organization, and Antoinette Sayeh as Deputy Director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) all illustrate the viability and importance of African leadership in IOs.

Our geopolitical times have a complex effect on the pursuit of African agency. On the one hand, it makes African voices more important and relevant, and geopolitical competition offers more choices to African states and the African continent. On the other hand, geopolitical division also risks coopting aspirations of African agency. The concrete delivery of African agency is crucial. The next section addresses two such concrete cases.

African agency in security and financial governance

The AU's G20 membership and African aspirations for UN Security Council reform differ on many counts. The type of decision-making at the G20 is limited to informal summits at the G20. In contrast, the Security Council is arguably the most important IO with the prerogatives to make decisions that are legally binding for all countries. The G20's communiqués, policy papers and reports indirectly influence ideas in other parts of the international financial and economic system. In contrast, the Security Council relies on a reasonably well-endowed UN peacekeeping budget, decades of peacekeeping, police and political experience, and a global logistics chain. What unites the two cases illustrates the challenges of the current stage of pursuing African agency. In both cases, African states struggle to agree on formal positions to defend in these two organizations – and more importantly, Africa has historically been marginalized in both.

Reform of the UN Security Council for more African seats – for representation purposes?

The African position on UN Security Council reform is one driven by African agency as *reform*. Rather than symbolical visibility, African states want to shape the membership composition and decision-making rules of the Council with the goal of “decolonising the composition of the Council”.¹⁵ Africa's position, agreed in 2005 as the Ezulwini Consensus, requests two additional permanent African seats with veto powers, and five non-permanent seats;¹⁶ this proposal is very ambitious. Though China and Russia support Africa's position in rhetoric, their substantive support has not been put to the test, as even the AU itself declares its group is not yet ready for text-based negotiations unless a number of conditions, first spelled out in February 2024, are met in the Intergovernmental Negotiations framework on Security Council Reform.¹⁷ Furthermore, beyond the principle of more African voice, the attribution of seats is problematic. Before agreeing on a CAP in 2005, African states were acutely aware that distributing Africa's potential seats on the Council would be challenging. The two permanent seats could be thought to go to South Africa and Nigeria, though the remaining larger AU Member States are sure to take issue with that proposal. Indeed, agreeing on a principle of rotation would, in the words of African Ambassadors in New York in the year 2000, “avoid a devastating internecine competition for the two seats”, even if the UN Charter does not currently foresee elective permanent seats.¹⁸

The reform of the UN Security Council is a contemporary mantra of multilateralism. Everyone confirms its need, but few are ready to move towards it. As such, Africa's pursuit of African agency as *reform* is unlikely to produce tangible progress any time soon, simply because the complexities of our times make consensus on UN Charter reform increasingly unlikely. As was argued a decade ago, African positions continue to be maximalist and, therefore, less realistic.¹⁹ This ultimately reduces the likelihood of seeing any African agency as *reform* at the Security Council.

Somewhat counterintuitively, Africa's pursuit of *reforms* of hard-wired membership and decision-making rules at the Security Council could be read as being driven by the goals of African agency as better *representation*, rather than an immediate intention to shape policy outcomes. The arguments made in favour of reforming the Council often revolve around visibility and fair representation, and less around shaping the Council's agenda. AU leaders are focused on "redress[ing] the historical injustice done to Africa", whereas there is no substantive consensus of the direction in which Africans want to shape the content of the Security Council's work.²⁰ The track record of African members on the Security Council indicates above-average cohesion.²¹ However it is patchy on particularly controversial questions pertaining to African issues, even if an AU-issued Common African Position would have existed. Here, it is important to stress that African agency as *representation* can be expected to yield African agency as *reform* in the longer term: If African states are offered more representative membership, the aspiration of shaping the Council's agenda will likely follow through mutual socialization, adaptation, and learning. However, for now, the two varieties of African agencies are not yet in perfect sync at the Security Council.

As a result of this lack of synchronization, less ambitious aspects of updating the UN Security Council's primary responsibility for the maintenance of peace and security in line with African agency would merit more attention without detracting from a long-term ambitious reform goal. Coordination among the three African members of the Council (A3) holds considerable potential; scholarly evidence demonstrates that there is greater policy coordination nowadays, but not necessarily greater African influence on policy outcomes.²² UN agendas on working methods, including the Accountability, Coherence, Transparency (ACT) grouping on non-Charter reform ways of improving the Council's work, enjoy low support among African countries – only three African countries are shaping the grouping as full members. ACT's Code of Conduct regarding Security Council action against genocide, crimes against humanity or war crimes, which calls upon signatories not to vote against resolution texts aiming at stopping atrocities, a prerogative regularly done particularly by permanent members, has been signed by only 24 African countries, less than half of the African Group. The African Group is more interested in reforming the Security Council's penholder system to improve its influence on policy outcomes. Finally, a *reformist* line of work that could happen even without membership reform concerns enhanced coordination and synchronization between the AU's Peace and Security Council and the Security Council.

If the AU manages to convince UN members to reform the Security Council along the lines of the Ezulwini Consensus, and if the AU strengthens its internal cohesion at the UN, other UN members will face a more united Africa in terms of decision-making processes. In terms of substance, there is a fair chance that Africa's socio-political heterogeneity will hinder an ambitious substantive dimension of a stronger African voice at the Council. There are, for the time being, a small but growing group of countries that are wary of Western-led UN action in Africa. The drawdown of the UN peacekeeping missions in Mali and the Democratic Republic of Congo suggest that UN Security Council members will need to adapt to Africa's preferences of different security provision. Broadly speaking, though, many African countries continue to support the UN Security Council's approach to peace and security, not least as it continues to prioritize a state-based and sovereignty-enhancing conception of collective security. Compared

to the AU's G20 membership, there is less consensus among African states for substantive disagreement with the Global North at the UN Security Council.

The AU's G20 membership: Representation with reformist ambitions

The AU joining the G20 in September 2023 has been a significant success in pursuing African agency. The informal grouping, which strictly speaking should now be called G21 with the AU as a full member, combines elements of symbolism with hands-on policy agenda-setting. However, the latter is focused on indirect generation of ideas for uptake in other IOs dealing with global financial governance, including the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, and the UN system. The G20's informal nature, lack of legally binding decisions, and globally diverse membership makes it an easier win for African agency as *representation*. In addition, there is also a potential to communicate African views on international financial governance, though actual such *reform* will happen elsewhere in the international financial system.²³

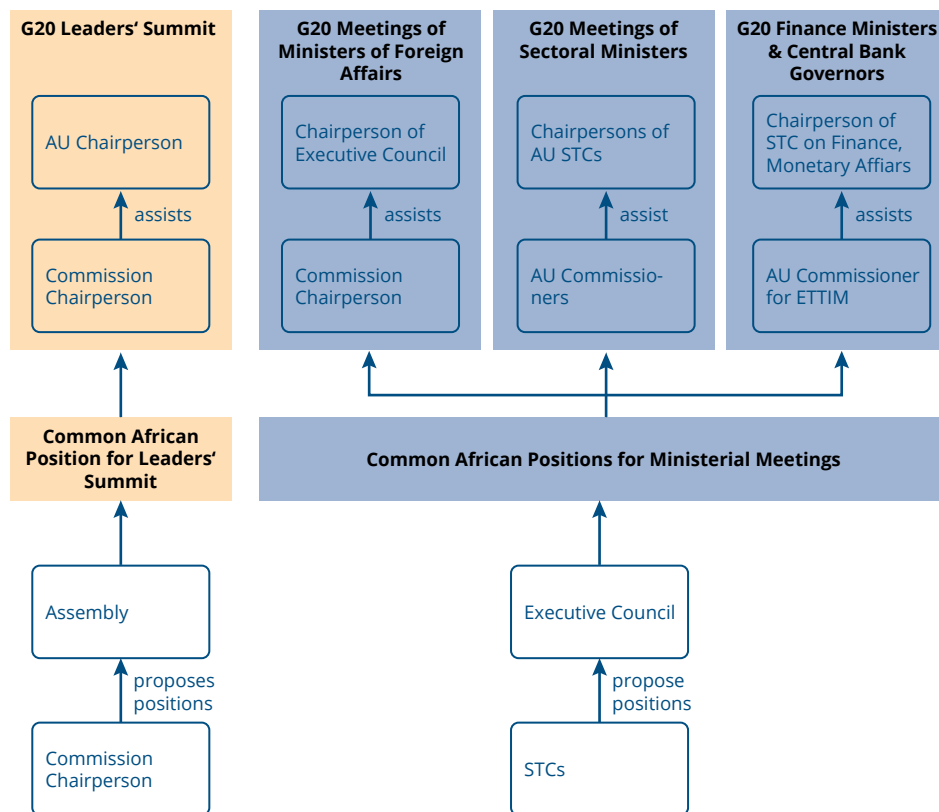
The G20's dual potential for African agency as *representation* and *reform* is attractive for an AU and its member states that still struggle to fine-tune positions and resources for their voice outside Africa. The AU Assembly has made major strides in establishing responsibilities and decision-making flows for the AU's G20 membership. In doing so, it has prioritised high-level state representation over continuity in substance. The EU and AU are the only two regional organizations that are full G20 members; whereas the EU is represented jointly in the Leaders' Summit by the President of the European Commission and the President of the European Council, the AU is represented by the annually rotating Chairperson of the AU, "assisted" by the AU Commission Chairperson.²⁴ The annually rotating AU Chair will get an attractive opportunity for visibility and can also conduct trust-building among economically leading countries that is so crucial for African agency as *representation*. They will certainly also use the G20 Leaders' Meeting as an opportunity to exercise African agency on behalf of their state.

Regarding African agency as *reform*, there are greater challenges ahead. Namely, underneath the so-called Sherpa Track's meeting of heads of states, there is a dizzying amount of thematic meetings at the ministerial level and different working groups and task forces. In the G20's second main track, the Finance Track, the AU has an opportunity to voice its Afro-capitalist ideas for the reform of the international financial system, which revolve around adapting (but importantly, not abandoning) capitalist economic principles to specific development and industrial challenges on the African continent.²⁵ Though these ideas are well-established in civil society and academia, African states have not yet been able to state their positions on international economic and financial policy clearly. Efforts have been fragmented to date and include Egypt's Sustainable Debt Coalition launched at COP27 in 2022 and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA)-created Africa High-level Working Group on Global Financial Architecture. Interestingly, African states and other stakeholders are often discussing the issue with other non-African actors and have been less focused on working towards a formal African CAP.

The AU now has a unique chance to convert the enthusiasm of joining the G20 into a high-performing consensus-building process on specific positions. Observers have

underscored that good preparation and adequate resourcing will make the difference for an impactful AU membership.²⁶ Decisions from the February 2024 AU Summit indicate that the AU Commission and several Specialised Technical Committees, consisting mostly of member states' ministers, will face the difficult task of drafting Common African Positions at the G20.²⁷ AU member states could count on the African Development Bank and the African Export-Import Bank for initial financing, and called on "other Pan-African Multilateral Financial Institutions to make similar pledges"; additional costs related to training and workshop costs will be sourced from the AU's regular budget, grants from pan-African financial institutions, and "other key development partners".²⁸ Achieving a very high degree of self-funding will be crucial for ownership and legitimacy of the AU's G20 membership.

Figure: AU decision-making processes and representation at the G20²⁹



Substantially, an African position on core G20 issues has not yet been spelled out in the February 2024 Assembly Decision. Such a position will likely revolve around the monetization of carbon quotas, Special Drawing Rights at the IMF, better mechanisms for debt mechanisms and restructuring, and long-promised IMF voting reform.³⁰ Beyond any doubt, these positions are likely to be at odds with the substantive interests of Global North, particularly around debt resolution and Special Drawing Rights. A more assertive African position would complexify consensus-finding among G20 – certainly not only at the G20 but in other global financial institutions, including Bretton Woods organizations. Areas of relatively easier cooperation could include climate finance, where recent COPs have made at least conceptual progress. A number of

informal traditions in the governance of the Bretton Woods system, including that the IMF and World Bank are headed by a European and US-American person respectively, could also be adapted to improve African *representation* in the space. Similarly, the G20's Common Framework for Debt Treatments would benefit from AU participation that would enhance Africa's buy-in into these processes.

The G-system's interplay with national and continental African agency is also illustrative. Not at the G20 but at the G7, this was demonstrated by a geopolitical dynamic. Over differences in South Africa's stance on Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine, Japan used its prerogatives as chair to disinvite South Africa, replacing South Africa with Comoros President Azali Assoumani in his role as Chairperson of the African Union 2023. South Africa's stance has been historically driven by the Soviet Union's support of the anti-Apartheid movement at a time when the West was still maintaining closer ties with the Apartheid regime. Today, South Africa sees its stance as an expression of a maturing African foreign policy with the courage of a dedicated position of its own. Such a geopolitically motivated disinvitation is hard to imagine at the G20 but demonstrates the difficulties of finding a consensus voice among 55 African countries on the substance and conduct of African agency.

Finally, the G20 is also a good case of a stronger African voice being more politically feasible if this also serves non-African interests. To wit, Africa requested to join the G20, but the G20 also stands to gain a lot from the AU's membership. The G20 can be attributed to a positive role in stabilizing the financial system after the 2008 financial crisis but otherwise faces a legitimacy crisis over its informal and untransparent format in many Western countries.³¹ Substantive policy discussions will likely be more contentious, but the trust-building effects of better African representation at the G20 are inevitable. Such positive-sum games are invaluable to square Africa's desire for a stronger voice in global affairs with the Global North's willingness to adapt the post-World War II global order to contemporary political, economic and demographic realities.

Conclusions and recommendations

An African seat at the G20 is welcome progress, and renewed momentum for UN Security Council reform is desirable. African states still need to be fully convinced to empower the AU to speak on its behalf, which will require breaking out of a vicious cycle of low empowerment and low performance. The continent is also still working out procedures and positions. However, the Global North and other partners should understand that African impatience with unfulfilled reform promises will eventually run out. One of the best cures against the fragmentation of global governance will be credible, pragmatic, and steady negotiation and actual *reform*, otherwise African agency will, in the longer term, find more unilateralist ways of improving Africa's capacity to act independently in the world. AU partners should not miss the momentum of African multilateral aspirations *reforming* rather than replacing the post-World War II multilateral system. Concretely, this will also require some concessions on the part of the Global North to keep institutions like the UN Security Council and the G20 relevant in managing contemporary challenges: Short-term, somewhat costly concessions to Africa can prevent the massive long-term cost of a fragmented global order: Western AU partners should not wait too long to walk the talk on *representation* and *reform* for African voices.

This study has argued that *representation* and *reform*, two varieties of African agency, are equally necessary for African states and the AU to progress towards a stronger African voice in global affairs. All too often, the two are presented as mutually exclusive. The two case studies illustrated how *representation* and *reform* can mutually reinforce each other. African leaders can still find better ways of bridging the gaps between them; just as much as the national and continental levels of African agency can be linked up more successfully as well. Finally, the complicated process of fine-tuning decision-making procedures and responsibilities deserves prioritization to fully avail Africa of the benefits of a stronger voice on the global stage. The next few years offer plenty of opportunities to do so: Brazil's G20 presidency in 2024 has chosen "reform of global governance institutions" as one of three priorities.³² After Brazil, South Africa will chair the G20 in 2025. The sky is the limit to make the most of this and to overcome the last bits of friction in AU-South Africa relations on G20 topics. In the long term, the AU could consider hosting a G20 summit. AU partners should hold space for the AU to find its place as a permanent G20 member, and accelerate relevant thematic discussions, including on debt servicing/restructuring.

For Africa's partners, both at national level and at the AU, the growing success of African agency presents a dilemma. Too much African autonomy and independence could lead to policy divergence in a *reform* paradigm. A 'partnership of equals' would represent just that, though: actual policy dialogue among equals. Indeed, in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Western partners have struggled to remain in a pragmatic paradigm about Africa's desire for an autonomous position and the geopolitical dimension of African agency. In the multilateral arena, expecting automatic Western alignment is anachronistic and increasingly counterproductive, also regarding Afri-

can representation and institutional reforms. As such, partners should be careful to safeguard the AU's emerging policy space, which is particularly prone to external influence and destabilization at its current early stage. This early stage also requires a lot of fine-tuning between AU Member States and AU institutions, where strongly involved partners could hurt the success of the process more than helping it. Too much hands-on involvement and engagement risks portraying the AU Commission's role in the G20 and other organizations as beholden to partner interests, which would undermine the painfully achieved progress towards more African agency. The AU's experience at the G20 with agreeing and implementing CAPs can hopefully also carry over positive momentum to Africa's readiness and unity to enter text-based negotiations of UN Security Council reform.

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