

UNDERSTANDING AFRICA GLOBAL MARGINALIZATION FROM A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This paper examines Africa engagement with global community from a historical perspective, demonstrating attempt by various states and the continent to gain a foothold in international arena. The paper seeks to address the question whether Africa has the political clout to change the dynamics of engagement in international institutions and whether that clout is sufficient in terms of influence and political outcome. The paper argues that for Africa to become relevant actor in global affairs it must strategically use it's numbers and share history of global marginalization to overcome the challenges of lack of economic and military

power which made them enter into agreement with high and mid -level power as well as multinational corporation that undermined their capacity to influence global affairs. The paper concludes that Africa's global relevance can only be achieved through push for reform of global governance institutions and integrating their approach of relation with external factors.

Key Words: International politics, International organization, cold war, post-cold war, Africa voice

Introduction

Africa as a continent has experienced a lot in her relations with the outside world. Being the largest continent after Asia, its enormous wealth and prestige became a major source of attraction to both Western and Eastern polities as early as 800 C.E¹. First the Arabs, then the Europeans established some forms of trade relationships with Africa. During this period for example, as much as the Roman Empire was on the decline, Ethiopia in East Africa was already flourished². This also coincided with the period when European states were establishing centralized monarchies, while Sub-Saharan African kingdoms were already emanating along the Niger, Congo and Zimbezi Rivers. In the 15th century, African states came into direct contacts with Europe through the coast of West Africa, first with the Portuguese followed by the British, French and Dutch.³ Even though with the

passage of time, the relationship changed form from a mutually beneficial, to an exploitative one. Up until the decolonization of African states after the Second World War (WWII), Africa had been largely nominal actor in international relations in the real sense of the term. The case is not any different in post-colonial era running up to the 21st century. This paper therefore seeks to explain how marginal African states have been in the scheme of events in world affairs, especially in the institution of formal international relations as we know it today.

Conceptual Framework

In discussing an issue that relates to the field of international relations, a subject that is guided by so many theories and conceptual frameworks, it will only be right that the topic under discussion be put in proper perspective. Even though there are several contrasting theories and concept which explain how nation states relate within the global arena, such theories have been found not to be very adequate in explaining particularly Africa's relations within Africa and Africa's relations with the outside world. While the Realist theory tries to explain how nation states relate with each other for their own selfish aggrandizement and power tussle in a world of opposing interests and of conflicts among nation states,⁴ the Liberal theory on the other hand lay emphasis on the 'utopian' nature of states and still recognized as such to some degree today. Its proponents view human beings as innately good and believe peace and harmony between nations is not only achievable, but desirable.⁵

For the sake of this study, the Rational Utilitarian Approach is used to explain Africa's international relations with a core assumption that governments have similar preferences for material concerns, such as

¹. UK Essays. (November 2018). Africa Connected To Outside World Prior To 1500 History Essay

². Ibid

³. Omolewa M. Certificate History of West Africa

⁴. Hans J. Morgenthau. Politics Among Nations

⁵. McGlinchey and Dana Gold. International Relations Theory Written by Stephen (2017)

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maintenance of territorial independence of their states, security guarantees, military power, international prestige and economic domination.⁶ The utilitarian approach to international relations attempts to reecho the communal nature of African societies. Theorists of international relations who employ the utilitarian logic also recognize that governments are aware that their states do not exist in isolation⁷. As a result, utilitarian IR analysts also assume that governments pursue their material interests by taking into consideration the environment in which their states operate.⁸ Structural properties that most utilitarian scholars find useful are international anarchy (the absence of centralized international government), global market competition and transnational economic processes. For most utilitarian theorists, the international system in which states are embedded impacts heavily on governments' actions and decisions.

A Brief History of Africa's Relation with the Outside world to the 1960s

Throughout history human beings and indeed societies have interrelated and interacted with one another either directly or indirectly, intentionally or coincidentally. Since sedentary life began, the need for these interactions became more pronounced and purposeful as communities began to emerge and expand in both territorial and population sizes. It is these relationships that transformed into modern international relations as we know it today. In the course of these relations, African countries have not been given her rightful place amongst equals in the international arena. This phenomenon can partly be attributed to the fact that African countries were late entrants into the global diplomatic game.⁹ Most countries in the African continent remained largely under colonial domination up till the 1960s, a time when all the valuable structures of the international systems have been set up and their control under the maneuver of world powers. It is also worthy of note that this period in history coincided with the bipolar global quest for control between the Western capitalist bloc and the Eastern socialist bloc – the Cold War. At this time Africa

remained largely neutral through the Non-Align Movement, a position that compelled Africa to remain docile as far as the game of international power play lasted. There is no doubt that even as late entrants, Africa has had a fair share of representation notably in organizations such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), the International Court of Justice (ICJ), and even the United Nations General Assembly. These organizations are at best policy executioners and not the determinants of global economic and political power. Oloo argues thus;

But again there are scholars who argue that this representation is not effective in the sense that the major powers of the world are really significantly not affected by the deliberations of such international entities. They portend that powerful states had an interest in either not participating in such organizations and maintaining the power that they would have foregone as a condition of participation, or controlling as much of the policymaking body of the organization as possible in order to exert influence on its outcomes.¹⁰

In organs such as the UN General Assembly where African states have had the opportunity to lead, it was due to the fact that each member state has a voting right based on the principle of one-country one-vote. Knowing that they could not fully dominate the General Assembly, big powers shifted to the UNSC as the effective and more manageable site for pushing and bargaining their competing interests in a polarized world. This left the Assembly as a mere talk-shop which at best could only muster a moral authority¹¹.

The multilateral system operates according to the whims of the big powers. This was made intentional as it offers them the opportunity to act both within and outside their rules. Most of the international institutions are operated according to the dictates of the big power interests. For example, the Bretton Woods institutions, the IMF and World Bank became tools aligned to the global strategy of the G7 countries led by the US. In the UNSC, where interests between developing and developed states are competing for relative power position, only 21.4 percent of the African population had a direct representative in the voting bloc regardless of the fact that a majority of UNSC policies affect African states directly. On the other hand, in the WHO for example, where interests are convergent and incentives exist to cooperate, the voting structure is more egalitarian with each member-state possessing one vote in the World

⁶. Thomas Kwasi Tieku *Theoretical Approaches to Africa's International Relations* (2013)

⁷. Ibid

⁸. Waltz, Kenneth (1979), *Theory of International Politics*. New York: McGraw Hill.

⁹. Oloo Adams. *The Place of Africa in the International Community: Prospects and Obstacles*. Retrieved from <https://www.scirp.org/journal/paperinformation.aspx?paperid=69185>

¹⁰. Ibid

¹¹. Ibid

Health Assembly. Both African and North American citizens are represented equally at 100 percent.

Since inception in 1945, the Security Council's five permanent members—China, France, Russian Federation, the United Kingdom and the United States were designated and have since remained unchanged. All entreaties to have more permanent members added to the council proved abortive. While ten non-permanent members have been added, including South Africa and Nigeria, these members do not have veto power and can only serve non-concurrent two-year terms. To date, both Africa and Latin America lack representation among the Security Council's powerful permanent members. This, the founders of the UN did with the purpose of using their powers to change the rules as they deem fit. A good case of the big powers reluctance to adhere to the rules of international engagement is the ICJ. Since the establishment of ICJ to date, no permanent member of the UNSC has been subject to any compulsory jurisdiction: the most obvious example being the abrogation of assent to compulsory jurisdiction by the United States in 1984 after the ICJ rendered a decision unfavorable to the US position by asserting jurisdiction over a case brought by Nicaragua.¹²

Cold War International Relations and Africa's Marginalization

Contemporary Africa finds itself within a particular international order. Whereas the cold war period provided a seemingly stable political atmosphere within the International system, the immediate post-cold war international system was characterized by turbulence. During the cold war period the international system displayed a greater degree of anarchy due to the absence of a single powerful state, up until the end of the cold war when there was realignment towards the west. Whereas the cold war period was characterized by bipolar ideological differences, the post-cold war period was polarized along economic lines where developing countries of the world including Africa are generally categorized as the global south on the one hand, and the

developed world categorized as the global north on the other hand.¹³ The effects of the cold war bipolar politics was best felt in Africa. Both cold war blocks had their own interests in Africa and it was unlikely to reach a consensus in the UNSC on matters involving African politics where each group has its own sphere of influence. This nature of relations in international politics ensured that Africa did not have a say in the running of international politics especially in affairs that affected issues dear to them.

The post-cold war global structure has produced opportunities for structured cooperation in international peace and security with economic development as one of the essential elements of stability. The African group has endeavored to build a united approach in matters of world affairs and speak with one voice. However, this approach has been confronted with a myriad of challenges especially where there is a strong national interest, such as security issues and conflict situations. In such scenarios, the African group has suffered the incapability of fronting a united position in either negotiations or voting.¹⁴

On the economic front, the West has turned Africa into a dependent and subservient state through its numerous programmes for economic development. The post-cold war records show that Africa depends more on the West for economic relations. These strings of relations instead of pulling Africa out of its economic quagmire has further plunged her into immeasurable depth of indebtedness through the system of aids and loans offered by the Breton Woods Institutions (BWI), notably the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and The World Bank. The Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP) of these institutions did not help African states as it was purported to be. In line with the policy, trade liberalization and economic diversification, these regimes devalued the continent's currencies thus leading to high inflations with the near total collapse of most economies. State owned corporations were privatized and commercialized to pave way for the dominant lead of private capital in development. This goes to say the instead of gaining from the initiatives of the West through SAP, Africa and indeed other third world countries have reaped outcomes that further compounded and complicated their economic development.¹⁵

Post-Cold War International Relations and Africa's Engagement with the outside World

By early 1990s, the bipolar political power tussle between the West and East had ended with the disintegration of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR). All

¹² Elkind, J.B. (1988) The Duty to Appear before the International Court of Justice. *International and Comparative Law Quarterly*, 37, 674-681. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/iclj/qj/37.3.674>

¹³ Joe-Ansie Van Wyk. *Africa International Relations; Agent, By-stander or Victim*. 2015

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Uji, Wilfred Terlumun & Kigbu, Paul Yakubu. *Nigeria's Relations with the Outside World Since Independence*. *Online International Journal of Arts and Humanity 2015 Research Journals* Pp 1-4. Accessed 21st January 2023. <http://www.onlineresearchjournals.org/IJAH>

attention and focus was shifted completely to the west in terms of democratic ideological principles and the capitalist economic system. It was at this point the Africa's voice begun to be felt in the international institutions as African players began to aggressively push for integration into the system. This was made possible with the massive restructuring of most international and multilateral institutions. This restructuring gave room also for the multi-dimensional approach to international security intervention, for example, under the auspices of the UN and regional organizations.¹⁶ A comprehensive approach to peace making and peace building was aggressively restructured to foster a cohesive bond between the UN and the OAU. Cooperation between the different organs of international institutions, and the African group under the auspices of the OAU began to take root. This period saw the African leadership begin to lament the perceived indifference of the international community and began calling for African solution to African problems through utilization of sub-regional arrangements to address local peace operations.

The period beginning from the year 2000 saw the transformation of the OAU into AU. This development came with it a newer dimension and approach to regenerate the vision and focus of the African continent. It is during this period that New Economic Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) was established with the sole aim of driving the economic prospects of the AU, and by extension to have a greater say in the affairs of the world as it affects Africa. This rebirth of the African voice ensured that socio-economic development of Africa became an integral part of the international initiatives, most of which revolved around peace and security. Consequently, greater cooperation between the international community and the Africa Group slowly began to evolve. It is during this period that the development and implementation of the UN ten-year plan for capacity building with AU took shape.¹⁷ This development was to impact on NEPAD which has hitherto been accepted as the blueprint of the UN cooperation and engagement in Africa, including issues of peace and security. It is also during this period that Africa intensified its initiatives to speak as one voice. In March 2005, the AU issued a declaration known as The Common African Position on the Proposed Reform of

the United Nations: The Ezulwini Consensus which was a statement in response to the Report of the High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change which was issued in December 2004. In this Common African Position the AU highlighted issues pertaining to HIV/AIDS and security, poverty, debt, environmental degradation, trade negotiations, the responsibility to protect, peace keeping and peace building. In addition, the AU called for further reforms of the UNSC to ensure that the Council was inclusive and that the African is fully represented in all the decision-making organs of the UN, particularly in the Security Council. The African Group demanded not less than two permanent seats in the UNSC with all the prerogatives and privileges of permanent membership including the right to veto and "five non-permanent seats". This decision subsequently locked the AU into trying to maintain this position in the face of tremendous pressure from other members of the international community notably by the Group of four (G4) Brazil, Germany, Japan, and India, which were aspiring for a permanent seat at the Council and the Uniting for Consensus coalition, which opposed their ambitions. This was in effect a bold move for the AU to have taken which was informed more by principle than by real politik, as indicated in the Ezulwini Consensus document which states that "even though Africa is opposed in principle to the veto, it is of the view that so long as it exists, and as a matter of common justice, it should be made available to all permanent members of the Security Council"

Through the Ezulwini consensus, the AU was able to achieve and maintain a common position. However, internal power tussle and dissension will not allow for a united stance in the pursuit of Africa's inclusion into the UNSC. Other power blocs within Africa, notably Egypt and South Africa went against the Ezulwini consensus to individually seek inclusion into the permanent membership of the Security Council. This in effect undermined efforts to demonstrate African "unity of purpose". This is further reinforced by the fact that time and again African countries have shown that they are unlikely to vote as a collective on matters before or pertaining to, the Security Council. Governments generally tend to adopt positions that best serve their interests or positions that enable them to receive certain benefits from more powerful countries that pick and choose which African countries they want to work with. Therefore, the logic of "national self-interest" and political realism still prevails among African countries, and other member states, at the UN.¹⁸

From the period 2008 to date has witnessed the African Group engaged in maneuvers geared towards the

¹⁶. Ibid

¹⁷. Ibid

¹⁸. Akokpari, J.K. (2001) Post-Cold War International Relations and Foreign Policies in Africa: New Issues and New Challenges. African Journal of International Affairs, 4, 34-55.

forming of formal links as a crucial step towards enhancing the symbiotic relationship between the UN and the AU. Slowly, the continent's voice is being integrated into the murky waters of global politics. This impact has been greatly felt in the international entities such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO). The General Agreements on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) system in place before its transformation into WTO was from its inception dominated and ordered by the dominance of the US and from the 1960 onwards by the balance of power between the US and the EU. Many African countries enjoyed very little, if any influence, in multilateral trade governance. Although most African countries were members of GATT, histories of the eight multilateral trade rounds conducted during GATT period (1948-1995) indicate that African member states were largely absent from these negotiations. On the contrary, the WTO has since its inception in 1995 been multipolar and has ensured increased African participation.¹⁹

Conclusion

The question of Africa's marginalization in the international arena is one can be approached from diverse perspective and theoretical inclinations. This paper has made an attempt at discussing Africa's engagement with the outside world in two different epochs; the pre-cold war era which also coincided with the colonial era for African state. At this stage, Africa was largely the 'property' of the various colonizing powers. This meant that the continent was exploited and brought under subjugation thereby having no say in the conduct of its own affairs, let alone global issues. During the post-colonial era, the international system witnessed the bipolarity of the global politics of ideology leading to the cold war. During this period, African states, having gained independence beginning from the late 1950s could not meddle into the power tussle between the competing powers of the West and East. The non-align position taken by Africa and other third world countries kept the continent away from full participation in the international arena. However, the post-cold war period has witnessed increased international intervention in Africa, especially in peace operations. This period has also witnessed an upsurge in Africa's say in these interventions especially in the area of capacity building to tackle emerging challenges. Various initiatives have undertaken to formalize engagement between the

international community and African actors to ensure that Africa's development priorities are integrated into UN architecture for peace and security in Africa since it has established that development is an "indispensable foundation" of collective security.

Right from the start, the African group and other alienated groups were obsessed with the reform of the world order already in place because that is the only way that their interests could find a place on the agenda of international politics. The main agenda of their proposals has always been the:

- 1) Reform of the UN system in general, and the UNSC in particular, with a view to broadening representation at the highest levels of global decision making, and to disciplining the use of the veto by the big powers in order to prevent the routine subversion of the will of the international community;
- 2) Recalibration of the voting rights and decision-making processes of the IMF and the World Bank, to ensure a greater voice for the countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America;
- 3) Generalized reform of the international trading system, to make it fairer, remunerative and development-oriented;
- 4) Creation of a global integrated programme for commodities (agricultural and mineral) that would assure more stable and fairer prices;
- 5) Creation of a new global currency, based on the special drawing rights, that could safeguard the development interests of all members of the international community;
- 6) Adoption of rules that would govern the conduct and practices of Western transnational companies in the economic and political spheres, as well as in matters of technology transfer, patents, and copyrights;
- 7) Adoption of a global tax on the brain drain, to ensure that less developed countries would receive some form of compensation for losing skills to more advanced countries; and
- 8) Reform of the global information and communications order, to allow for greater North-South balance.

To date these proposals still form the aspirations of the African group in their quest for a greater say in world affairs. To date, African countries form the largest regional grouping at the UN, with over a quarter of all UN member states. Yet group size per se does not automatically translate into pro-active, unified decision-making. On the contrary, speaking with one voice at the UN and synchronizing their position has become an ongoing challenge for African Member States to the UN.

¹⁹. Zondi, S. (2011) Africa in International Negotiations: A Critique of African Common Positions. CHATHAM House Seminars.

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