CHAPTER 5

Theorising African Agency from the Perspective of the Non-Aligned Movement and the Group of 77

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Introduction and marginality of Africa

Due to Africa's marginality in international relations, the question of its agency among its bilateral and multilateral partners has dominated studies, especially in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. From a historical perspective, the epistemology of IR theories often privileged the agency of the Global North while relegating the agency of the Global South, including Africa, and thus relegating the Global South to the periphery of theory and practice of IR. Morgenthau (1948) has been quoted as stating that Africa was 'an empty space' before the First World War. The sentiments by Morgenthau were also echoed by Kenneth Waltz (1979), considered a structural realist, who was quoted in his book *Theory of International Politics* as saying it would be ridiculous to try to construct a theory of international relations based on Malaysia and Costa Rica. This perspective denigrates regions in the Global South, including Africa. The exclusion of Africa from the epistemic core of IR was not accidental.

As cited by Danso and Aning (2022), American political scientist Samuel Huntington once questioned the presence of civilisation in Africa, arguing that the powers that shape world politics are seven or eight, and Africa is absent. This Eurocentric argument seems to connote that there is no historical basis for the establishment of a theory of IR in Africa. However, as will be discussed in this chapter, the NAM and G77 provided an epistemic correction to address this misconception and reconstruct an African epistemic ideology. According to Sidiropoulos (2009), Africa has

been quoted as a passive actor in crucial international affairs, including during the Cold War. During this tense period between the United States and the Soviet Union, Africa, in line with its NAM policy, remained neutral in a significant crisis pitting the two superpowers against each other. The relevance of conventional IR theories as dispassionate solutions to Africa's challenges has been assessed – and often points to the need for alternative voices. Frequently, Eurocentric voices have obfuscated the voices and experiences of African voices, necessitating the broadening of IR theories for the Global South, void of Western-centric theories and voices. Croft (1997) suggests that the marginalisation of Africa is perhaps due to the continent's lack of participation in matters of military security and international political economy. Yet, Africa's trajectory through the G77 and NAM contradict this narrative.

The continent has established a comprehensive peace and security architecture that is guiding it to address security challenges that form part of the international discourse. The continent, with half of the world's internally displaced persons (IDPs) (Norwegian Refugee Council 2023), established the African Union (AU) Convention for the Protection of IDPs, the first legally binding treaty globally to address issues of internal displacement, demonstrating Africa's rise to challenge the view that it is absent in significant matters of international relations. This demonstrates that Africa's theoretical contribution to IR is alive and is contributing to core issues of concern. Based on this, arguments around Africa's epistemological exclusion are becoming increasingly untenable in the twenty-first century. The insecurity on the continent, in part, shapes how the complexities of the binaries are reflected in how other actors perceived the location of Africa vis-à-vis how Africa desires to, or actually does, locate itself in the power shifts and fixes within the Global South. However, as studies have demonstrated, it has been a major mistake to marginalise Africa due to its perceived lack of political power and contribution to IR theories. For instance, regarding the use of technology in the fight against criminal activities and insecurity, Ouma and Mawia (2023) argue that Africa has demonstrated that technology can be used in the fight against insurgency in the Sahel region, where different groups have wreaked havoc, displacing thousands in Mali and

neighbouring countries. Croft's argument that Africa does not have a role in military security is becoming increasingly irrelevant. After the Cold War, Africa has, yet again, become the centre of a proxy war between the United States and Russia, following the setting up of a military base in Djibouti by the United States. At the same time, Russia has continued to make inroads in the Sahel through the deployment of private military companies such as the Wagner Group across several African states. With the US controlling the Suez Canal, the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf via Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti, Russia is attempting to access the Atlantic Ocean via the Sahel, demonstrating how significant the continent is to matters of military security, as argued by Ezenwa and Ojo (2024). The NAM and G77 are seen as an attempt to theorise Africa within a distinct southern epistemology built around African voices and experiences. Africa's engagement in the NAM and G77 demonstrate an alternative voice grounded in the pursuit of a just international order. It is a demonstration that Africa can contribute through norm- and agenda-setting and not just as a peripheral participant.

Immediately after independence, Africa became the centre of attention at the height of the Cold War, a period characterised by acute geopolitical tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union. With the capitalist West led by the United States and the communist East led by the Soviet Union, newly independent states in the Global South were caught in another subjugation in a bipolar world. Unequal trade and conditional aid dominated the world at the height of the Cold War. In response, the NAM and G77 emerged in the early 1960s, representing a significant shift from colonial dependency to non-alignment. The NAM, formally established at the First Summit, held between 1 and 6 September 1961 in Belgrade, and drawing upon the principles agreed upon during the Bandung Conference held between 18 and 24 April 1955, was seen as instrumental in championing international peace and security. However, even before it could be adequately established, Eurocentric critics believed the NAM was a pro-Soviet institution established to counter the West.

Waters (2001) argues that the questions of decolonisation and the enduring effects of the Cold War were sharply highlighted during the Bandung Conference. These very issues would later define the NAM.

As was the case with the Pan-Africanist movement that championed the ending of colonialism, the NAM was primarily driven by the need to end colonialism due to the prospect of an enduring legacy of perpetual colonialism. With the end of the Cold War in 1991, there were questions about the validity of the NAM. As Handley (1998) notes, a significant question arose following the end of the Cold War: 'Aligned against what?' Terms such as 'irrelevant, substantially redundant, or anachronistic' were used to describe the NAM, to dissuade its conveners from pursuing the ideals that had founded the movement (Keethaponcalan 2016). With political and intellectual capital from leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, Abdel Nasser of Egypt and Sekou Touré of Guinea, the NAM became a vehicle to express its agency beyond individual states. In 2012, an article published on *Al Jazeera* titled 'The Non-Aligned Movement realigns in Tehran?' sparked debate as to the direction of the NAM, as noted by Khan (2012).

The Group of 77 at the United Nations was established in New York on 11 November 1963 by the G77 countries during the creation of the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). These countries were agitating for, as highlighted by Ahmia (2014), among other things, the articulation and promotion of common economic issues at the United Nations (UN). The postcolonial economic world, which provided privileges for industrialised nations at the expense of newly independent states through unfair financial systems and terms of international trade, propelled the establishment of the G77. Conditional lending and macroeconomic perceptions from Bretton Woods Institutions – the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) – perpetuated and reinforced dependency among these African states. Most African countries, by the 1960s, were dealing with the baggage of postcolonialism and hence were working with weak economies. They were thus unable to fully leverage the platforms offered by both the NAM and G77. The continued economic dependency exhibited by these African countries continued the marginalisation, as these countries were limited in their assertion of fair and balanced trade. Across Africa, while countries signed up to the NAM and G77, their economic focus has also played a key role in the overall marginalisation, as the countries are all engaged in various

agreements with both the West and the East (the United States, European Union, Russia and China).

Access to technology has been skewed, with the West faring more favourably than Africa, thus denying the region an opportunity to compete more fairly. According to Lee et al. (2022), the digital divide in Africa continues to stifle universal access and the use of emerging technologies, thus denying the continent much-needed development. It also continues to contribute to the region's marginalisation, as the world is now being propelled forward by technology. Other factors demonstrating the need for the NAM and the G77 include concerns around neocolonialism, particularly regarding debt distress in developing and low-income countries. Drezner (2007) argues that global institutions have conferred significant benefits upon the United States in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, again demonstrating the need for continued vigilance and the relevance of a reformed NAM. When it was founded, the G77 called for the establishment of the UN-adopted New International Economic Order to advocate for fair trade, technology transfer and greater control of natural resources in the Global South.

The intellectual engagement of African leaders in both the G77 and NAM helped to frame African agency as the capacity to create consensus, offering an alternative voice and theory in IR. This view, bolstered by Nyerere's *Ujamaa,* Senghor's *Negritude* and Nkrumah's *Consciencism*, portrays Africa's approach to IR through the lens of equality and international cooperation. Despite Africa being viewed through a peripheral lens by the West, China has advanced and made inroads since the Cold War. These inroads have resulted in the growth of Africa–China trade in both exports and imports, improving the continent's bargaining power internationally. Oyintarelado et al. (2024) highlight that, between 2000 and 2022, trade between the two regions grew from US$11.67 billion at the turn of the millennium to US$257.67 billion in 2022. Another entrant into Africa is India, whose trade with Africa grew significantly, reaching US$103 billion by 2023, as noted by Nantulya (2023), who highlights the significant jump from US$40 billion in 2009. As Ampiah and Naidu (2008) note, China's involvement in Africa has been debatable. Despite this debate around the role of China in the African continent, it

has also shifted Africa's bargaining power on the global scene, allowing the continent to address the perceived invincibility.

One of China's models of operations has been the heavy funding of infrastructure in Africa. In Africa, debt-stricken countries have made strategic moves to waive their loans from international financial institutions for more conditional free funds from China. Ross and Reid (2021) highlight how China is funding significant infrastructure projects among beleaguered regimes in Africa through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative. The role played by the World Bank and the IMF in denying sovereign power to African countries due to inflexible terms of development financing is perhaps what has emboldened countries like China to make forays into the continent. Africa's theoretical invincibility in IR could have become a blessing in disguise. In addition to opening the space for other players such as China and India to make inroads into the continent, Arieff et al. (2010) note that Africa fared better and was more resilient than the Global North during the global financial crisis. Despite this cushioning, certain aspects of the economies, including fuel, food and financials, were concomitantly affected during the crisis, according to Kasekende et al. (2009). As noted by Engel and Olsen (2004), the marginalisation of Africa, propelled by Africa's history, is also characterised by African participation in international trade due to globalisation. Africa has not been alone on the marginalisation agenda.

The Pacific islands have also been marginalised, despite their ability to produce knowledge. For instance, knowledge from the islands is seen as being less prolific than that from the West, despite the region having developed its form of philosophy, called *Whakapapa* (the Māori way of knowing and being in the world and the interconnectedness of the world) and *Kaitiakitanga* (the Māori view of environmental ethics, natural resource management and sustainability). Additionally, countries like China have also developed philosophies of their own, one that has seen China teach Mandarin through the Confucius Institute to spread the philosophy of China. In South America, another emerging philosophy, the *buen vivir* (originating from indigenous cultures in South America), is emphasising harmony with nature to enhance well-being within communities, in response to years of relentless exploitation of natural resources.

Onuf (2002), while discussing the homogeneity of IR, argues that major issues of IR theories are historically and socially constructed. The exclusion of Africa is also depicted in the words of Mo Ibrahim, who questions why negative reportage around the crisis in Sudan's Darfur region, Somalia, or the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo should be generalised to represent a continent of 53 countries (Bedell 2009). While reflecting on the enduring legacy of the Rwanda Genocide, Gourevitch (1998) notes that there has been a major misconception that Africa is only able to produce sensationalised stories of death and poverty, and nothing more. It is this misconception that has resulted in the continued marginalisation of Africa.

Ontology and epistemology of African agency

The existing debate around Africa's agency in international relations cannot be divorced from the region's complex ontology and epistemological reality. This is because, for far too long, the region's identity internationally has been constructed by voices outside of the region, and from a lens that is too often biased. To understand African agency in IR, one therefore needs to reflect deeper on the philosophical foundations that define African knowledge systems. According to Crotty (2003), ontology is the 'study of the being'. It is focused on the structure of reality and the kind of world under investigation. This position is complemented by Guba and Lincoln (1989), who opine that ontological assumptions concern what can be known, and the nature of reality. Ontologically, theorising African agency from the perspective of the NAM and G77 highlights a very complex and profoundly multifaceted relationship, defined by the collective voice of African nations seeking to get autonomy from the North. It also defines African voices as rooted in collective unity. Rising from a past characterised by the dehumanising reality of the slave trade and colonialism, Africa continues to shape its 'being' in the international space through contemporary African diplomacy. From the 2005 Ezulwini Consensus on the United Nations Security Council's (UNSC's) reforms (advocating for two permanent seats at the UNSC) to the 2024 common positions on climate change (to address complex intersection of climate

change, peace and security), Africa has demonstrated a spirit of collective bargaining. Epistemology, conversely, is concerned with understanding what we know, and provides a philosophical ground for what kinds of knowledge are possible and adequate at any given time. The G77 and NAM have epistemologically enabled African agency to assert itself from the basis of solidarity as opposed to nationalism. Despite Africa being visible, including endorsement of a South–South cooperation in which African states can negotiate with other regions on a more equal footing – including in forums such as the China–Africa Cooperation Forum (FOCAC) – arguments continue to connotate that big powers are the ones that can construct a theory of IR. However, caution remains that overstretching these engagements can hurt Africa's agency and reduce its bargaining power.

Tickner and Blaney (2013) argue that Western scholarship continues to dominate the ontology and epistemology of IR theories. It is thus seen as a deliberate move to delegitimise knowledge from other parts of the world. As noted by Smith (2018), the issues from Africa are essential to understanding how the region has contributed to theoretical development. Indeed, the continent has long been viewed through the lenses of civil wars, the slave trade, globalised diseases and hunger, among others (Sharman 2024). Economic structural approaches such as the World Systems Theory and the Dependency Theory tend to focus on the exploitative nature of the global economies concerning Africa, with a view that Africa is on the periphery of global influence, as noted by Dunn (2001), who argued that Africa can only act to the extent that it is acted upon. These descriptions have served to exclude Africa and, therefore, the rise of the NAM and G77 has been important to address this exclusion and absence. Traditional IR concepts, such as the state and sovereignty, are often problematic when applied to the lens of Africa. Progressively, it's been noted that for one to build a Western-centric theory, scholars have frequently denigrated Africa and relegated it to the margins. Despite being viewed as marginal in IR issues, Africa is at the core of the conversation around the climate emergency, as it bears the brunt of a warming globe, alongside small and developing island nations.

The question of colonialism and its role in marginalising Africa must

be seen not just from the lens of occupation but also in relation to the colonisation of minds and establishment of Western-centric knowledge as the legitimate source of knowledge. The 'collapsing' of thousands of different African cultures to an 'African civilisation', as argued by Huntington (1996), must be challenged as it does not *Africanise* the continent, nor does it portray a complete picture of what constitutes the true Africa. This move to continually denigrate Africa and relegate it to the periphery is a deliberate path to ensure the African voice is stifled. The process of decolonising Africa should go beyond political independence to dismantling deeper powers at a cognitive level that continues to perpetuate Eurocentric knowledge as superior to African knowledge. The G77 and NAM have continued to theorise African agency as an independent voice. At the height of the Cold War, the NAM allowed space for Africa to navigate global politics without being caught in the polarising ideals of the face-off between the two superpowers, thus giving African countries the diplomatic flexibility to engage in development without being beholden to either power. Scholars from the African region, therefore, must continue to reimagine an Africa whose voice is heard. While most theorists have often used Western-centric views as the starting point for IR, in the words of Kaplan (2000), the oncoming anarchy will see people fall into nightmares due to their inability to adjust to the Western way of thinking. Again, this argument continues to perpetuate the denigration of Africa as a region that has no voice. While the African continent may have been freed from the colonial grip and gained independence as a region, with states becoming sovereign, Mignolo (2023) argues that the *people* are yet to be sovereign. He questions the lack of connection for the younger generation to understand the enduring impact of the slave trade, racism, colonialism and capitalism. As Tamale (2020) opines, decolonising the twenty-first century is a sure pathway to help connect the dots and find the missing links to bring to the fore the epistemic challenges that are missing for Africans to be able to speak their voices.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the World Bank and the IMF instituted Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) to integrate austerity measures focused on, among other things, the higher education sector. One of the most enduring legacies of the calls to decolonise higher education is the

Rhodes Must Fall campaign in 2015 at South Africa's University of Cape Town (Gopal 2021). The calls to decolonise universities is not an abstract idea but one grounded in the NAM's normative principle of highlighting the intellectual infrastructure within Africa's agency. Following the murder of George Floyd in the United States, the Black Lives Matter movement raised fundamental questions about people of colour's calls for equality. Among the African voices that have continually called for decolonisation of the mind and intellect is Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986). Mamdani (2019) adds calls for universities to be true to the classical vision as a home of scholarship, driven by a desire to ensure that African universities are producing knowledge that could challenge Western-centric ideas and produce African-based knowledge. Despite the voices calling for decolonisation of knowledge in Africa and amplifying its voice, various voices have been used to portray the continent negatively. In the 2000s, *The Economist* described Africa as 'the hopeless continent', adding that despite the turn of the millennium, there was nothing to celebrate in the region, only more disasters. However, while the continent has suffered its fair share of challenges, such as the disproportionate burden of HIV and tuberculosis, as well as civil strife, it has also witnessed tremendous growth. With a predominantly young population, the region is set to record a population of around two billion people by 2050, with the majority being young and thus of a productive age.

The marginality of Africa is seen in the way it has been neglected in terms of knowledge production. According to Garwe et al. (2021), despite Africa being considered the cradle of humanity and home to ancient empires and kingdoms that pride themselves on being the bastion of knowledge and innovation, Africa only contributes 2 per cent of global knowledge. In response, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015) argues that the theft and plunder of precious African artefacts have contributed to the loss of immense knowledge, resulting in the often-misplaced argument that Africa has no history. No wonder scholars such as Samuel Huntington could dare ask about Africa's lack of history. Additionally, as highlighted by Motsaathebe (2020), the failure of African leaders to deliberately change historical injustices that were meted out to Africans has led to a failure to address the more fundamental question of changing the Western

pedagogy, deeply rooted in African institutions of higher education. As previously mentioned, Mazrui (2002) and Ngũgĩ (1986) have called for the decolonisation of higher education institutions as an avenue to bring change. Ngũgĩ calls for a return to indigenous epistemologies, while Mazrui calls for indigenising curriculums to reflect African realities. For Africa to be genuinely non-aligned, it must endeavour to correct all historical injustices and work to contribute to knowledge at a global scale, but, more importantly, to begin to speak to itself. The quest to decolonise knowledge could be summed up with the African proverb by Chinua Achebe: 'Until the lion learns how to tell his story, the hunter will always be the hero.'

Simply put, Africa (the lion in Achebe's proverb) has always fallen victim to the hunter and has never been able to tell its side of the story. The decolonisation agenda seeks to tell that story. In the case of the NAM and G77, this presents an opportunity to transform African voices in the global IR arena as part of the core arguments. Despite African values such as *ubuntu* being developed to reconceptualise the view of Africa, structuralist theories such as the Classical Theory of Modernisation, popularised by Rostow (1971), proposed the stages of development, relegating Africa to the most basic (traditional stage). World Systems' Theory, proposed by Immanuel Wallerstein, who classified the world into 'the core' and 'the periphery', has often propagated Western-based views that Africa is in the periphery. The concept of *ubuntu,* which seeks to explain African solidarity, has spread across the region. According to Ghanaian academic Tieku (2012), from an ontological perspective, Western-centric IR scholars often apply an individualistic ontology that regularly negates and fails to factor in the African spirit of *ubuntu,* expressed in different words across the continent. According to Ngũgĩ (2012), coloniality, as it was designed, has continued to perpetuate two worlds, demonstrating a global power structure that has seen people from the West enjoy privileges while those from the African region essentially do not enjoy such privileges, as they come from the 'dark side' of the world.

The continued segregation and suppression of the African voice needs to be addressed. Coloniality has defined intersubjectivity relations and

knowledge production so much that journals from the West are referred to as 'reputable'. At the same time, those from the Global South are not acknowledged. Due to this subjective view, it is often argued that only knowledge published in these 'reputable' journals can be consumed authentically. Post the colonial era, few African scholars continue to qualify to publish in so-called 'high-impact' journals. A significant question that continues to linger is whether knowledge shared by African scholars can be verifiable in IR systems and whether that knowledge can help to address problems faced in the Global South. According to Hedt-Gauthier et al. (2019), a systematic review of over 7 000 articles indexed in the medical journal *PubMed* and published between 2014 and 2016 revealed that 13,5 per cent of the sampled papers did not include African authors, 68,3 per cent were from collaborating authors based in the West (US, Canada, Europe or Africa), and African authors had a lower likelihood of being a first author, at 23 per cent. This demonstrates a continued attempt to marginalise African knowledge, and an awakening that Africa can and is challenging this power dynamic.

It is therefore important, in advocating for African knowledge, to champion meaningful involvement from the conceptualisation stage to challenge power dynamics. Western languages have been viewed as carrying a more profound ideology. These ideological concerns were raised by Mazrui and Ngũgĩ when they argued for the 'Africanization' of education and the use of indigenous languages while teaching at Makerere University and the University of Nairobi, respectively, so much so that Ngũgĩ was ostracised and exiled by the then-Moi regime for calling for the scrapping of English in the University of Nairobi's Department of Literature. Across Africa, language has been used to define diplomatic alignments and policy orientations, with the Francophone, Lusophone and Anglophone identities defining the region, resulting in intra-African diplomatic fragmentation, with alignment to former colonial powers. Using language as a tool for soft diplomacy is a strategy emerging as a pathway for Africa to assert its influence globally, as language transfers culture. However, in a region of over 2 000 languages, which language would best represent the more than 1,3 billion people? At the UN, language, a tool and symbol of power, identity and inclusion, reflects the

continued colonial inheritance of languages from the Global North to the South. From the African perspective, the clamour for the inclusion of Swahili as an official UN language is an important tool for soft power for Africa.

As noted by Edoho (2011), cultural hegemony has played a significant role in the slow decolonisation of the mind beyond colonialism. Knowledge and the colonial ideology are so deep that Africa and the Global South have not attempted to actively fight this ideology. After independence, newly independent states continued to create universities modelled around Western institutions. The result is that, while education was touted as the equaliser of all, the modelling of education on Western universities resulted in the stifling and silencing of African knowledge. This continued the perpetuation of the understanding that Africa is not a producer of knowledge but a consumer of Western-centric knowledge. According to Ayeni and Aborisade (2022), one of the biggest challenges African knowledge faces is that it is passed from one person to another through oral tradition. This simple 'flaw' in African knowledge has been overlooked, since many things passed from one person to another without proper records could be lost to translation. This explains why aspects such as African traditional worship was ostracised as witchcraft and, in its place, the Christian faith was introduced. The adoption of the 'African solutions to African problems' mantra by the Organisation of African Unity could be credited with being a major attempt to position Africa as a producer of alternative knowledge.

This mantra formed the foundation of later movements such as the NAM, under which Africans sought to remain neutral in the global struggle for power between the Soviet Union and the United States, while struggling to address pressing matters related to ending colonialism among remaining African states.

In addition to African knowledge being passed on from one generation to another by word of mouth, Bickton et al. (2019) opine that African research has become invisible because of limited financing to publish research findings, as well as the unwillingness by commercial indexing companies domiciled in the West to profile African-based research. To address these concerns, institutions such as the African Population and

Health Research Center (APHRC) and the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) have been established to house African researchers and become a hub for knowledge and research. However, much more must be done to replicate research across the continent, propel African knowledge, and map it in the world. This lack of profiling of African knowledge could be explained by what Andrews (2020) describes as epistemic imperialism, manifested by the tendency to theorise knowledge based on the superiority of race. This imperialism has seen many Africans theorise the region based on a skewed view perpetuated by the West. The lack of political will has also hampered knowledge production in Africa. When researchers spend countless hours generating data that gets censored under the guise of national security interests, this stifles any meaningful progress that could be made to contribute to knowledge production. Regarding research funding across the continent, Midega et al. (2021) note that, up until 2021, the continent had missed the funding commitment made in 2006 of at least 1 per cent of GDP going to research and development (R&D) initiatives. In 2021, R&D investment stood at 0,42 per cent of GDP, compared to the global average of 1,7 per cent. Other factors that have led to the relegation of African knowledge include the continued individualistic approach to African IR that neglects the group approach, thus continuing to perpetuate the marginalisation of Africa in IR. However, these assertions explain why Africa is leveraging both the G77 and NAM as platforms for collective advocacy. As highlighted by Muriithi (2007), while the collective spirit of *ubuntu* has been applied in peacebuilding and conflict resolution, as well as in the promotion of fundamental human rights, it remains on the fringes of mainstream IR theories on Africa. This marginalisation continues, despite a demonstration that Africa has charted its own path in addressing its most pressing issues.

From the G77 perspective, African states have caucused around issues of UN budgetary and reform debates to ensure fairness around decisions that could otherwise hurt developing states. Africa has applied this diplomacy to engage in the Cotton-4 initiative, which ensured fair prices for cotton farmers in Africa, particularly in Chad, Burkina Faso, Mali and Benin. Using the NAM and G77, African countries have also invoked

the principle of 'common but differentiated responsibilities', particularly on matters of climate justice and global inequalities. This demonstrates Africa's participation in global diplomacy at both ontological and normative levels. This also demonstrates Africa's desire to reframe global discussions about climate justice and international responsibility. As Ouma (2025) argues, for Africa to reclaim its intellectual sovereignty, it must transcend colonial categories within the global sphere. This is because Africa's agency is not just reactive but should be seen as part of the global production of knowledge that shapes global governance frameworks.

The great debates and Africa's marginalisation

The three great debates (the first, second and third debates) reflects how the mainstream theories of IR marginalised Africa. The first great debate – based on the 'WHAT of IR', as noted by Schmidt (2012) – pitted the idealists against the realists in the 1930s and 1940s. However, the realists triumphed when the Second World War broke out. While the idealists envisioned a world of everlasting peace, free from war, pain and suffering, the Second World War was painted as a severe anomaly in the idealist paradigm. According to Knight and Keating (2010), after the Second World War and during the height of the Cold War, realism became the dominant paradigm, with realists pointing out that the League of Nations, established following the Fourteen Points speech by President Woodrow Wilson, failed to cement the ideals of peace. With idealisms rooted in the prominent role of international organisations such as the League of Nations and later the United Nations, and the role such institutions play in peace and security, idealists argued that for there to be sustainable peace, all principles of democratic governance must be congregated together.

The impact of realism on IR was such that, at the height of the debate, Africa was constantly marginalised as being inconsequential. With scholars relying on realism to predict the world's future, Africa would continue to be neglected in action and through scholarship. However, realism did not anticipate the end of the Cold War and the beginning of a new order. In the literature that followed the end of the Second World

War, Africa's importance to the world was reflected in the limited attention given to the continent in IR theories. Despite the lack of focus on Africa, a few scholars began to focus on the continent, specifically the Pan-African movement. Ajala (1973) notes that the group of scholars focused on the Pan-Africanism movement wanted to present to the world a true image of Africa, thereby contributing to the progress of civilisation. They also wanted to instil a spirit of pride among all Africans at a period when the continent had just emerged from colonialism. According to Handel (1990), these studies formed the basis for studies around 'weak states' in IR. In what is now a semantic problem, countries in Africa and other Global South regions are often described as 'weak states', 'developing states' and 'third-world countries', among other phrases. In contrast, those in the Global North are referred to as the 'developed world', 'first-class world' and 'superpowers', among other phrases, demonstrating how a semantic problem has resulted in a marginalisation problem.

According to Mazrui (1977), there was an attempt to explain the economic dependence of newly independent African states using various theories in the 1970s, including Wallerstein's world systems theory (Wallerstein 2011), which categorised Africa as being in the periphery, and the dependency theory that viewed resources as flowing from the periphery to the core, thus assuming a relationship between the core and the periphery, but one of oppression. This oppression prompted Rodney (1972) to focus on the exploitative nature of the relationship between Europe and Africa. This exploitative relationship has seen Africa's resources, especially mineral wealth, being used to develop other parts of the world. At the same time, people in Africa continue to wallow in extreme poverty. The relationship between the North and the South was seen as one that relegated African ideals as peripheral and analytically irrelevant. The second great debate, which focused on the 'HOW of IR', was launched by the behavioural revolutionists, who sought to predict the future after witnessing the devastating impacts of war. Focused on areas such as how to measure trends in politics, the economy and military development, the second debate led to the strengthening of research institutions, especially in the United States.

Often referred to as the Bull (traditionalist) versus Kaplan (behavioural-

ist) debate due to the role played by the two scholars (Neumann 1997), this debate saw Bull defend the classical approach to theory derived from law and philosophy, arguing that once one is restricted to the strictest standards of validation, there is little of importance that can be achieved. Kaplan, on the other hand, argued that such arguments would do nothing much to help in the development of a theory. This debate focused on adopting and applying scientific methods that used data, which served to marginalise Africa further, primarily due to the limited data available in Africa at the time. Additionally, the focus on state behaviour disadvantaged Africa, as many states on the continent were newly independent. The strengthening of research institutions such as the Rockefeller Foundation, among others, in the West focused on scientific research, leaving Africa out. The third great debate, also referred to as the 'inter-paradigm debate' (Wæver 1996) pitted realist, liberalist and Marxist theorists together. The debate in the 1970s and 1980s sought to assess whether Marxist and liberalist approaches could fit into a realist approach focused on state centrism. While the first two debates sought to entrench Western-centric theories of IR while neglecting the unique context of African states, this debate sought to address the question of the marginalisation of alternative epistemologies and methodologies, especially those that could capture the African experience better. One of the consequences of the third debate is the emergence of constructivism post-1990. According to Fierke (2010), constructivism developed as a reaction to the discussion and sought to break the barriers. The rise of various subfields of IR was because of an attempt to address the gaps and circumvent the gate-keeping that had been established by Western-focused journals, thus allowing African-based authors to publish in alternative journals. According to George (2007), ontological and epistemological issues featured heavily in the first two debates. From an epistemological view, the first debate was concerned with the ethical principles of idealism vs the protection of state interests. In contrast, in the second debate, the epistemological focus was on the model of approach to be used to gain knowledge. The question of values in a theory has been a central concern and continues to be so. For realists, state interests matter most in an anarchical world, while for idealists the role of institutions is key to maintaining international peace and security to enhance sustainable development.

The first two debates raised significant questions: who has the authority to define what is knowledge, and what is the basis for such a definition? These two debates served to marginalise Africa, as it was newly independent and lacked sufficient data. However, lessons from this exclusion have helped Africa determine its voice. They were not just mere academic debates; they reflected how intellectualism can be used to exclude a region where data was qualitative and often passed through oral means. The NAM and G77 therefore sought to address this gap by articulating an alternative voice that should become mainstream.

Challenging Western-centric knowledge in relation to the NAM and G77

For Pan-Africanism, one of the greatest challenges remains the tensions between the philosophy of the AU's call for unity and regional integration vis-à-vis national sovereignty. Despite these challenges, the region has kept the spirit of Pan-Africanism up, albeit symbolically. Africa has some of the best norms, including the Constitutive Act of the African Union, a peace and security architecture, and a solid foundation upon which regional integration has been established, among other norms. Despite the successes noted from the NAM and G77, the emergence of other partnerships such as FOCAC, the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) and others is likely to overstretch institutional capacity and will weaken the collective coherence of the region.

Perhaps Africa has appeared to be marginalised because of how much focus has been placed on the political crises that have occurred on the continent, as well as the conflicts and the globalisation and Africanisation of diseases such as HIV, tuberculosis and Ebola. However, the twenty-first century has seen Africa playing a critical role in the context of shaping the post-2015 agenda on sustainable development. The nexus between the NAM and G77 has enhanced the collective bargaining power of these countries to address issues such as the 'triple planetary threat' of climate change (United Nations 2021), biodiversity loss and pollution. Additionally, the NAM and G77, which hosted a meeting in 2024 in Kampala, Uganda, have been increasingly vocal in addressing an unequal

global governance system, the crisis of multilateralism and economic inequalities, which disproportionately affect African states. The NAM and G77 have a bigger role to play in addressing Africa's marginal contribution to global trade, estimated to be around 3 per cent, as noted by Pittet (2021), with a majority being raw materials, highlighting Africa's inability to add value to its raw products. Africa is also presenting common positions in major issues of international concern, including climate change funding for adaptation around the just transition, as was witnessed during the Climate Change Conference held in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt. Other common positions include Africa's external debt, specifically on interest rates. African leaders have also championed reforms in the UN, with a specific focus on getting a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, as well as universal access to medicines, especially around HIV and, lately, on equitable access to vaccines during the COVID-19 pandemic, in line with the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS). These common positions demonstrate an emerging policy shift in Africa, which sees competing intra-African interests shelved into a common position for the continent. Some of the common positions articulated by the AU on behalf of the African continent include the Ezulwini Consensus on UN Reforms of 2005, as underscored by the AU (2005), the common position on climate change (2023), the common African position on the post-2015 development agenda (2014), the common African position on the review of UN peace operations (2015), and the common African position on humanitarian effectiveness (2016).

These positions have all been established to bolster Africa's position in relation to IR in a fast-changing, globalised world. This shift demonstrates a reorientation of African agency from dependency to self-determination. Africa's success in rebuilding its agency from a non-aligned perspective and through the G77 is contingent upon a realignment of the global systems of governance that recognise Africa as a meaningful and key player in IR and not a fringe player only useful to legitimise the positions and needs of the rest of the world. Where IR theories have relegated the continent to the periphery, engagement through the NAM and G77 has demonstrated Africa's agency and reshaped IR.

Conclusion

Both the NAM and G77 have offered African scholars a platform to engage in solutions for the region based on a deep understanding of the challenges. Additionally, South–South cooperation continues to foster opportunities for countries to share experiences and promote alternative models of development based on a nuanced understanding of the geopolitical context. In the twenty-first century, Africa is no longer being viewed as a supplicant actor worldwide. It has emerged from that pessimism to exploit its position in the use of soft diplomacy in place of military might. The AU's diplomacy of solidarity has seen the continent stand up to the West, thus averting cases of economic sanctions and coercion, as was the case when African leaders refused to cooperate with the International Criminal Court to have Omar al-Bashir, then President of Sudan and subject to ICC arrest warrants for alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity in Darfur, arrested. These complexities of the binaries shape how other actors locate Africa in relation to how Africa desires to, or actually does, locate itself in the power shifts and fixes within the Global South.

The deployment of the AU Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), the agreement to deploy the East African Community Regional Force (EACRF) in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, and the deployment of Southern African Development Community (SADC) forces in eastern DRC are some of the efforts that the AU has made to address peace and security. As noted by Brown (2012), Africa's move to appoint a high-level panel to negotiate peace in Libya, led by Mauritania, whilst criticising the UN for sanctioning the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) mission, demonstrates the AU's stance on solidarity and African agency. Since the turn of the millennium, Africa has gained more importance as a key player in IR. According to Lingying (2013), an emerging multipolar system has thrust Africa into the centre of an emerging dynamism in IR, as regions such as China and the BRICS axis – Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa (the original members, with new members Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Iran, Ethiopia and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia incorporated in 2024) – joined mainstream

IR, thus opening the space for other regions to exert their presence. The emergence of more partners means that African agency can be better exploited without undue pressure from one partner. In addition to state-led agencies, individuals such as Nelson Mandela and Mo Ibrahim have been forceful in articulating African agency.

From raising significant points around poverty to issues of justice and good and democratic governance, these actors have helped complement African agency while maintaining a non-aligned stance. In Kenya, celebrated environmentalist and Nobel Prize winner Wangari Maathai is remembered for linking environmental conservation to human rights and justice, raising the profile of a matter of global concern. African agency, constructed around the NAM and G77, defines Africa as a major player in IR. Whilst Africa has been seen as an absent player and one that is only describable from a perspective of civil wars, poverty, illicit capital flow and globalised diseases, Africa is emerging as an alternative player in key issues of global concern in the twenty-first century. Indeed, theorising African agency through the NAM and G77 indicates that it is nearly impossible to address emergent matters of international concern without meaningfully involving Africa as an equal partner in IR.

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