Navigating Hegemonic Rivalry: The Africa Union's Role in Mediating Great Power Competition

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Abstract

This study examined the role of the African Union in managing great power competition on the African continent. As rivalry intensifies among the veto wielding nations, and other external actors, Africa has become a central arena for economic, diplomatic, and security contestation. As the continent's principal regional organization, the African Union bears the responsibility of defending collective interests, preserving policy autonomy, and advancing continental integration within an increasingly polarized international system. Grounded in Regime Theory and Constructivism, the study investigates how the African Union leverages norms, institutions, and collective identity to mediate external pressures and project continental agency. Drawing on policy documents, summit declarations, and institutional records, the analysis focuses on the AU's deployment of Agenda 2063, the African Continental Free Trade Area, and other continental frameworks as instruments for regulating the conduct of both member states and external powers. The study further assesses how the AU seeks to consolidate a shared African identity and the principle of "African solutions to African problems" to legitimize its position as the primary interlocutor in Africa's external relations. The study argued that through norm-setting, coalition-building, and institutional diplomacy, the African Union attempts to convert great power competition from a source of fragmentation into leverage for development. However, its effectiveness remains constrained by weak compliance mechanisms, divergent national interests among member states, and structural asymmetries in negotiations with external powers. The findings indicate

that the African Union's capacity to mediate hegemonic rivalry depends on strengthening regime institutions, socializing external actors into continental norms, and presenting a coherent collective position. It is therefore recommended that the African Union deepen institutionalization, enhance norm convergence, and assert strategic ownership of Africa's engagement with global powers to transition from an arena of competition to an autonomous geopolitical actor.

Keywords: African Union, Great Power Competition, Norms, Regional Institutions, Strategic Autonomy.

Introduction

The international system is currently defined by intensifying great power competition, characterized by strategic rivalry among the United States, China, the European Union, and other emerging actors (Aidoo & Osei, 2020). Africa has become a central theatre in this contest due to its demographic expansion, strategic resources, and growing market potential. External powers have deepened engagement across the continent through infrastructure financing, trade agreements, and security partnerships, often in ways that reflect broader geopolitical calculations rather than purely developmental objectives (Kornegay, 2020; Sun & Mlambo, 2019). This renewed contestation has revived historical patterns of external penetration, raising concerns about Africa's autonomy in shaping its own development trajectory. Within this context, the African Union has assumed the responsibility of coordinating a collective continental response and projecting a unified African position in global affairs. Established in 2002, the African Union was mandated to promote peace, security, integration, and to speak with one voice on matters of continental interest (African Union, 2018). Through frameworks such as Agenda 2063 and the African Continental Free Trade Area, the Union seeks to consolidate regional integration and assert strategic ownership of Africa's engagement with external actors (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 2021). However, the multiplicity and competing interests of external powers complicate the Union's efforts to harmonize member state foreign policies and prevent fragmentation (Cheru & Modi, 2021).

The challenge for the African Union is both institutional and political. While the Union pursues norm-based diplomacy and collective bargaining, member states often engage bilaterally with major powers to secure immediate economic and security benefits (Akinola, 2018). This duality creates tension between national agency and continental solidarity, and exposes limitations in the AU's capacity to enforce compliance with common positions (Alden & Schoeman, 2013). Moreover, structural asymmetries in negotiations with hegemonic powers constrain the Union's ability to translate normative frameworks into tangible influence in global governance (Farrell & Newman, 2019). This study is grounded in Regime Theory and Constructivism. Regime Theory explains how international institutions and rules are constructed to regulate state behavior and mediate competition among actors (Hettne & Söderbaum, 2000). Constructivism emphasizes the role of shared identity, norms, and ideas in shaping foreign policy and legitimizing the African Union's claim to represent continental interests (Hartzenberg, 2019). Together, these perspectives provide analytical tools for understanding how the African Union employs norm-setting, institutional diplomacy, and collective identity to navigate hegemonic rivalry and assert agency. By interrogating the dynamics of external competition and continental response, the study contributes to scholarly and policy debates on regionalism, African agency, and multipolarity. It argues that the

African Union's effectiveness in mediating great power competition will depend on its capacity to deepen institutionalization, enhance norm convergence, and present a coherent geopolitical position. Achieving this will be critical if Africa is to move from being an arena of competition to an autonomous actor capable of shaping the emerging world order (Mevel & Karingi, 2013; World Bank, 2020).

Africa has become a principal site of contemporary great power competition, with the United States, China, the European Union, and other emerging actors expanding diplomatic, economic, and security footprints across the continent (Aidoo & Osei, 2020; Kornegay, 2020). This competition is manifested through infrastructure financing, extractive investments, digital partnerships, and security cooperation that often reflect the strategic priorities of external actors more than Africa's developmental agenda (Sun & Mlambo, 2019; Cheru & Modi, 2021). The result is a renewed form of external penetration that risks reproducing historical patterns of fragmentation, as individual African states enter bilateral deals that may undercut continental policy coherence and weaken collective bargaining power (Akinola, 2018). In this context, Africa faces the challenge of managing external engagement without surrendering policy autonomy or becoming polarized along competing spheres of influence.

The African Union was created to address precisely this challenge by institutionalizing unity, coordinating foreign policy, and projecting a common African position in global affairs (African Union, 2018). Through normative frameworks such as Agenda 2063 and the African Continental Free Trade Area, the Union has sought to construct a regime that regulates both intra-African relations and Africa's engagement with external powers (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 2021; Hartzenberg, 2019). However, the AU's capacity to enforce compliance remains limited. Member states frequently pursue parallel bilateral arrangements with major powers to secure immediate fiscal and security benefits, creating a gap between continental aspirations and national practice (Alden & Schoeman, 2013). Coupled with structural asymmetries in negotiations and weak institutional resources, these dynamics constrain the Union's ability to translate normative commitments into tangible influence within the international system (Farrell & Newman, 2019; Hettne & Söderbaum, 2000).

The core problem, therefore, is that despite its mandate and institutional tools, the African Union has not yet consolidated sufficient authority to effectively mediate hegemonic rivalry or to prevent Africa from being instrumentalized in great power competition. Existing literature has documented the constraints of African regionalism but has devoted limited attention to how the AU, as a regime and as a normative actor, can shape the behavior of external powers and assert continental agency (Mevel & Karingi, 2013; World Bank, 2020). If these institutional and normative deficits persist, Africa risks remaining an arena for competition rather than an autonomous actor capable of defining the terms of its integration into the emerging multipolar order. This study therefore examines the role of the African Union in navigating great power rivalry and explores the conditions under which it can strengthen regime effectiveness and strategic autonomy.

This study is significant to the advancement of scholarship on African regionalism, great power politics, and international institutions. By situating the African Union within the

framework of Regime Theory and Constructivism, the study contributes to theoretical debates on how regional organizations exercise agency in a multipolar system. It moves beyond analyses that portray Africa primarily as an object of external competition by examining the ways in which the AU constructs norms, rules, and collective identities to regulate the behavior of both member states and external powers. In doing so, the study provides empirical insights into the conditions under which continental institutions can mediate hegemonic rivalry and translate normative commitments into diplomatic influence, thereby filling a gap in literature on Africa's role in the emerging world order.

In practical terms, the study has important implications for policy and continental governance. Its findings will be relevant to African Union policymakers, member state governments, and regional economic communities seeking to harmonize external engagements and strengthen strategic autonomy. By identifying institutional weaknesses and opportunities for norm convergence, the study offers guidance on how the AU can enhance compliance, improve collective bargaining, and leverage competition among major powers for Africa's development priorities. Furthermore, it contributes to broader discussions on multipolarity and South-South cooperation by demonstrating how a regional organization in the Global South can assert agency amid structural asymmetries, and thus provides a model for other regions confronting similar challenges of great power competition.

Research Objectives

The main objective of this study is to examine the role of the African Union in mediating great power competition in Africa. The specific objectives are:

1. To analyze the strategies employed by the African Union to navigate rivalry among major external powers in Africa.
2. To assess the influence of AU regime institutions and norms on Africa's engagement with competing powers.
3. To evaluate the challenges and opportunities facing the African Union in projecting continental unity and strategic autonomy.

Research Questions

In line with the above objectives, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What strategies has the African Union adopted to manage and mediate great power competition on the continent?
2. To what extent do AU institutions and norms shape the terms of Africa's engagement with external powers?
3. What are the key challenges and opportunities that constrain or enable the African Union in asserting continental unity and strategic autonomy?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Great power competition and Africa's strategic position

Africa has re-emerged as a central arena of geopolitical contestation in the twenty-first century, with the United States, China, the European Union, and other emerging powers expanding their diplomatic, economic, and security engagements across the continent (Aidoo & Osei, 2020; Kornegay, 2020). This renewed interest is driven by Africa's demographic profile, resource base, and growing consumer markets, which make the continent

indispensable to global supply chains and strategic rivalries (Sun & Mlambo, 2019). Contemporary engagement differs from earlier patterns in that it is increasingly structured around infrastructure financing, digital governance, and security partnerships that are tied to the long-term objectives of external actors (Cheru & Modi, 2021). While such investments offer opportunities for development, they also create dependencies and expose African states to competing demands. The proliferation of bilateral agreements has heightened the risk of fragmentation, as individual states pursue immediate gains that may undermine collective continental priorities (Akinola, 2018).

The African Union and continental responses to external rivalry

The African Union was established with the explicit mandate to promote unity, coordinate foreign policy, and project a common African position in international affairs (African Union, 2018). In response to intensifying external competition, the AU has advanced several regime-building initiatives aimed at harmonizing member state behavior and strengthening Africa's collective bargaining power. Agenda 2063 articulates a vision of an integrated, prosperous, and self-reliant continent, while the African Continental Free Trade Area provides a legal and economic framework for deepening intra-African trade and reducing dependence on external markets (Hartzenberg, 2019; United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 2021). The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (2021) argues that AfCFTA can serve as a platform for presenting unified positions in trade negotiations with major powers. However, the effectiveness of these instruments remains constrained by implementation gaps. Alden and Schoeman (2013) observe that member states continue to enter parallel bilateral deals with external actors to secure fiscal and security benefits, which limits the AU's capacity to enforce compliance and speak with one voice.

Institutional capacity, norms, and the limits of agency

Scholarship on African regionalism highlights both the normative ambitions and the structural constraints facing the African Union. Mevel and Karingi (2013) demonstrate that deeper integration can yield significant welfare gains, but only if supported by robust institutions capable of reducing non-tariff barriers and monitoring compliance. The World Bank (2020) similarly notes that the developmental impact of AfCFTA will depend on the AU's ability to coordinate policy and align national regulations with continental commitments. In practice, however, the AU faces three interrelated challenges. First, structural asymmetries in negotiations with hegemonic powers reduce Africa's leverage in trade and security agreements (Farrell & Newman, 2019). Second, divergence in national interests among member states enables external actors to pursue strategies that exploit these differences, thereby weakening continental solidarity (Alden & Schoeman, 2013; Akinola, 2018). Third, limited financial and technical resources constrain the AU's ability to operationalize its mandates and respond proactively to external initiatives (World Bank, 2020). Kornegay (2020) contends that without stronger institutionalization, Africa risks remaining an object of competition rather than an autonomous actor in global politics.

Gaps in the literature

Existing literature has extensively documented the drivers of great power competition in Africa and the institutional architecture of the African Union. What remains underexplored is the extent to which the AU has been able to translate its normative frameworks and

integration agenda into tangible influence over the behavior of external powers and member states. Most studies either treat Africa as a passive site of rivalry or focus on the constraints of regionalism without assessing the AU's agency in mediating competition (Cheru & Modi, 2021; Hettne & Söderbaum, 2000). This study addresses that gap by examining how the African Union navigates hegemonic rivalry, the mechanisms it employs to assert continental priorities, and the conditions under which it can enhance strategic autonomy in an increasingly multipolar international system.

Theoritical Framework

This study is anchored on Regime Theory and Constructivism. The integration of both perspectives provides a conceptual basis for examining how the African Union seeks to regulate great power competition and to assert continental agency in a multipolar international system.

Regime Theory emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as a response to the limitations of realist explanations of international cooperation. The foundational works of Stephen Krasner, Robert Keohane, and Joseph Nye established the core of the approach. Krasner defined a regime as a set of implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actors' expectations converge in a given issue area. Keohane and Nye further argued that institutions matter because they reduce transaction costs, provide information, and facilitate monitoring, thereby making cooperation possible even in an anarchic system. Later scholars such as Bjorn Hettne and Fredrik Soderbaum extended the framework to regional contexts by introducing the concept of regionness, which refers to the process by which a geographical area transforms into a coherent region with institutional capacity to act.

The central assumptions of Regime Theory are threefold. First, states are rational actors that create institutions to pursue common interests and to manage conflict. Second, regimes influence state behavior not only through material incentives but also by shaping expectations about appropriate conduct. Third, the effectiveness of a regime depends on its capacity to institutionalize rules and to ensure a degree of compliance among members. Applied to this study, Regime Theory provides a lens for understanding the African Union as a regional regime. Through instruments such as Agenda 2063 and the African Continental Free Trade Area, the AU seeks to institutionalize norms that govern trade, security, and diplomacy. The objective is to reduce the ability of external powers to pursue bilateral strategies that fragment the continent and to increase Africa's collective bargaining power in negotiations with major actors. In this sense, the AU functions as a mechanism for regulating competition and for coordinating a common African position, even where member states retain divergent national interests (Hettne & Soderbaum, 2000; Hartzenberg, 2019; Farrell & Newman, 2019).

Constructivism complements Regime Theory by focusing on the role of ideas, identity, and norms in international relations. The approach is most closely associated with Alexander Wendt, Martha Finnemore, and Peter Katzenstein. Wendt's seminal argument that anarchy is what states make of it challenged materialist explanations by showing that power and interest are socially constructed through interaction. Finnemore demonstrated how international organizations socialize states into new norms and redefine their interests. Katzenstein emphasized how collective identity shapes security policy and regional cooperation.

Constructivism rests on two core assumptions. The first is that the international system is constituted not only by material capabilities but also by shared ideas and understandings. The second is that state interests are not fixed but are formed through social interaction and learning. In the context of this study, Constructivism is useful for explaining the normative and ideational dimension of the African Union's engagement with great power rivalry. The AU has sought to construct a pan-African identity and to promote the principle of African solutions to African problems as organizing norms. These norms serve two purposes. Internally, they aim to socialize member states into prioritizing continental solidarity over narrow bilateral gains. Externally, they project an image of Africa as a unified actor entitled to define the terms of its engagement with the United States, China, the European Union, and other powers. Thus, the AU's authority does not derive solely from material resources but also from its ability to generate legitimacy and to shape perceptions about what constitutes appropriate behavior for both African states and external actors (Wendt, 1992; Finnemore, 1996; Mevel & Karingi, 2013; Cheru & Modi, 2021).

The relevance of integrating Regime Theory and Constructivism lies in the fact that institutions alone cannot explain the AU's efforts, nor can ideas alone account for outcomes. Regime Theory explains the structural mechanisms through which the AU attempts to regulate competition, enforce rules, and coordinate policy across fifty-five member states. Constructivism explains how the AU generates the normative foundation that makes those rules meaningful and that enables the Union to claim representation of a collective African interest. Together, they allow the study to assess both the institutional capacity and the ideational resources that the African Union mobilizes in response to hegemonic rivalry. This dual framework therefore provides a more complete explanation of the conditions under which the African Union can move from being an arena for great power competition to an autonomous actor capable of shaping the terms of Africa's integration into the emerging world order.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to examine the role of the African Union in mediating great power competition and in asserting continental agency. A qualitative design is appropriate because the study seeks to understand processes, norms, and institutional practices that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measurement alone. The approach allows for an in-depth exploration of how the African Union constructs rules, projects identity, and navigates the strategic interests of external powers.

Research Design

The study employs a descriptive and analytical research design. The descriptive component documents the institutional frameworks, policies, and diplomatic initiatives of the African Union in response to external competition. The analytical component interprets these developments within the frameworks of Regime Theory and Constructivism to explain how norms and institutions shape state behavior. This design enables the study to establish both what the African Union is doing and why such actions matter for Africa's strategic autonomy.

Area of the Study

The geographical focus of the study is the African continent, with the African Union as the central unit of analysis. The study situates the AU within the broader context of Africa's engagement with the United States, China, the European Union, and other emerging powers. While the analysis is continental, specific reference is made to AU summits, policy documents, and continental frameworks such as Agenda 2063 and the African Continental Free Trade Area, which serve as the primary expressions of the Union's regime-building efforts.

Sources of Data

The study relies on secondary sources of data. These include official African Union documents, communiqués, treaties, and policy reports. Additional data are drawn from publications of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, the World Bank, and other intergovernmental organizations. Scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and credible policy papers are also consulted to provide theoretical and empirical context. Secondary data are appropriate for this study because they provide access to authoritative records of AU decisions and to existing academic debates on Africa's position in great power rivalry.

Method of Data Collection

Data are collected through documentary analysis. This involves a systematic review and interpretation of relevant documents to identify patterns, themes, and institutional practices related to the research objectives. Policy documents are analyzed to determine the content and objectives of AU frameworks. Academic literature is reviewed to situate the study within existing scholarship and to identify gaps. Media reports and statements from AU officials are used to trace the evolution of the Union's diplomatic positions in response to competition among external powers.

Method of Data Analysis

The study employs thematic and content analysis. Thematic analysis is used to organize data into key categories that correspond with the research questions, such as AU strategies, institutional effectiveness, and challenges to continental unity. Content analysis is applied to official documents and policy statements to identify recurring norms, principles, and language that reflect the AU's identity and objectives. The findings are then interpreted within the theoretical frameworks of Regime Theory and Constructivism to explain how institutions and norms mediate the Union's response to great power competition.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure validity, the study triangulates data from multiple sources, including AU documents, academic literature, and reports from international organizations. This allows for cross-verification of information and reduces bias. Reliability is enhanced by relying on publicly available and verifiable documents and by providing clear citations in accordance with APA 7th edition. The use of established theoretical frameworks further strengthens the coherence and consistency of the analysis.

Conceptual Clarification

This section clarifies the key concepts used in the study to ensure conceptual precision and consistency.

Great power competition: This refers to rivalry among major states for influence, resources and strategic advantage in the international system. In the current context it describes the diplomatic, economic and security contestation among the United States, China, the European Union and other actors for access and influence in Africa. It involves competing development models, infrastructure financing and security partnerships that shape Africa's external relations (Cheru & Modi, 2021; Kornegay, 2020).

African Union: This refers to a continental organization of 55 member states established in 2002 to promote unity, development and a common African position in international affairs. In this study it is understood both as an institution with formal structures and as a regime that sets norms, rules and decision-making procedures to regulate member state behavior and Africa's engagement with external powers (African Union, 2018; Hettne & Soderbaum, 2000).

Strategic autonomy: This means the capacity of a state or regional organization to make independent policy choices and to negotiate with major powers without undue external pressure or dependence. For the African Union it implies the ability to define continental priorities, reduce reliance on external financing and present a unified position in trade and security matters (Aidoo & Osei, 2020).

Regime: This is defined as a set of principles, norms, rules and decision-making procedures around which actors' expectations converge in a particular issue area. Regimes are created to facilitate cooperation and reduce uncertainty. Examples in this study include Agenda 2063 and the African Continental Free Trade Area, which establish rules for integration and development (Krasner, 1983; Keohane, 1984).

Norms: These are shared expectations about appropriate behavior. Norms shape what is considered legitimate and guide state conduct. The African Union promotes norms such as pan-Africanism and African solutions to African problems to foster solidarity among member states and to project a collective identity to external actors (Finnemore, 1996; Wendt, 1992).

Multipolarity: This describes an international system in which power is distributed among several major states. The current multipolar environment creates opportunities for Africa to diversify partnerships but also risks fragmentation as external actors pursue competing agendas (Farrell & Newman, 2019).

Hegemonic rivalry: This refers to competition among dominant or aspiring dominant powers to establish primacy and to shape the rules of international relations. In Africa it manifests in competing offers of infrastructure, technology and security arrangements, which place pressure on the African Union to maintain coherence (Sun & Mlambo, 2019).

These concepts frame the analysis of how the African Union responds to great power competition and hegemonic rivalry by using regime-building and normative tools to pursue strategic autonomy in a multipolar world.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This section provides an expanded explanation of the findings in relation to the main objective of examining the role of the African Union in mediating great power competition in Africa. The discussion is organized into three thematic areas that reflect the specific objectives of the study.

AU Strategic Responses to External Power Rivalry

The data show that the African Union has responded to great power rivalry by prioritizing the construction of continental regimes. Instruments such as Agenda 2063 and the African Continental Free Trade Area are designed to establish common standards, timelines, and dispute settlement mechanisms that bind member states and present external actors with a single point of engagement (African Union, 2018). This regime-building approach follows Krasner's (1983) argument that institutions emerge to reduce uncertainty and to coordinate expectations among states operating in a competitive environment.

Diplomatic centralization constitutes a second strategic response. The African Union has strengthened its presence in Addis Ababa, New York, Brussels, and Beijing to consolidate representation and to ensure that negotiations with external powers are conducted through AU structures. The objective is to limit the practice of bilateralism, which has historically allowed major powers to extract concessions by engaging African states individually (Kornegay, 2020). This reflects Keohane's (1984) observation that institutions lower transaction costs and improve the flow of information.

A third strategy involves the use of economic integration as a counterweight to external pressure. By promoting the AfCFTA, the AU seeks to enlarge intra-African trade, develop regional value chains, and create a market of sufficient scale to alter the terms of engagement with external partners (Hartzenberg, 2019). The logic is that a more integrated African economy will be less vulnerable to the conditionalities attached to bilateral aid, loans, and investment packages offered by competing powers. In the area of peace and security, the AU has reinforced the African Peace and Security Architecture as a means of asserting ownership over conflict management. The invocation of African solutions to African problems is intended to reduce dependence on external security assistance and to position the AU as the legitimate authority for responding to crises on the continent (Finnemore, 1996). This is evident in AU-led mediation efforts in the Horn of Africa, the Sahel, and the Great Lakes region.

A fifth strategy is the institutionalization of partnership summits. Platforms such as the AU-EU Summit, FOCAC, and the US-Africa Leaders' Summit are used to harmonize external cooperation with continental priorities. Through these forums, the AU attempts to set agendas, monitor commitments, and ensure that external assistance aligns with Agenda 2063 (Cheru & Modi, 2021). The summits also serve as venues for signaling unity to external audiences.

In all, the findings indicate that the African Union employs a layered set of strategies that combine institutional design, diplomatic coordination, economic integration, and normative framing. The effectiveness of these strategies, however, remains contingent on political will at the member state level and on the AU's capacity to translate policy documents into binding and enforceable actions.

Influence of AU Institutions and Norms on Africa's External Engagements

The data reveal that AU regime institutions have created procedural mechanisms that shape how Africa engages competing powers. The AfCFTA Secretariat, for example, coordinates tariff liberalization and rules of origin, thereby reducing the space for external actors to negotiate separate trade arrangements with individual states (Hartzenberg, 2019). This centralization supports Hettne and Soderbaum's (2000) argument that increased regionness enhances the ability of a region to act as a coherent international actor.

Normatively, the African Union promotes principles of pan-Africanism, solidarity, and self-reliance. These principles are repeatedly referenced in AU declarations to frame engagement with external powers as a relationship of equals rather than as a donor-recipient dynamic (Wendt, 1992). The consistent articulation of these norms is intended to socialize member states and to project a collective identity to the international community.

A third finding is that AU norms have influenced the public discourse of external actors. Policy documents from China, the European Union, and the United States now routinely reference partnership, mutual respect, and African ownership (Sun & Mlambo, 2019). This suggests that the AU's normative framework has some socializing effect, as external powers adjust their rhetoric to align with African priorities in order to maintain legitimacy and access. Despite this, the influence of AU institutions is constrained by uneven implementation. Many member states have ratified AU protocols but have delayed domestication, which limits the ability of AU bodies to regulate behavior and to enforce compliance (Kornegay, 2020). This implementation gap weakens the regulatory power of the regime and allows external actors to continue engaging states on a bilateral basis.

The data also indicate that normative commitments are frequently contested. When material incentives from external powers are substantial, member states often prioritize national interest over continental positions. Finnemore (1996) notes that norm internalization is a gradual and contested process, and the African case reflects this tension between shared ideals and divergent material calculations.

In summary, AU institutions and norms provide an important framework for coordinating Africa's external engagements, but their influence is mediated by implementation challenges and by competing interests. Strengthening monitoring, evaluation, and enforcement mechanisms would increase the capacity of AU institutions and norms to shape state behavior.

Prospects and Constraints for Continental Unity and Strategic Autonomy

Financial dependence emerged as a significant constraint on the African Union's capacity to act autonomously. A large proportion of the AU's budget for peace operations and

institutional activities is funded by external partners, particularly the European Union (Cheru & Modi, 2021). This reliance creates vulnerabilities, as funding decisions can influence the AU's policy positions and limit its freedom of action. A second constraint is asymmetry in negotiating power. Despite the existence of the AfCFTA, most great powers continue to prefer bilateral negotiations with individual states or regional economic communities (Farrell & Newman, 2019). This practice fragments Africa's bargaining position and undermines the AU's role as the central representative of the continent in global economic diplomacy.

Internal political divergence constitutes a third constraint. Differences among member states on governance standards, human rights, and security approaches make it difficult to maintain a unified external stance. External actors exploit these differences to advance competing agendas, which further weakens the projection of continental unity (Aidoo & Osei, 2020). Despite these constraints, the multipolar international system presents opportunities. The presence of multiple major powers increases Africa's room for maneuver and allows the AU to diversify partnerships in trade, infrastructure, and technology (Kornegay, 2020). This diversification reduces the risk of overdependence and creates leverage in negotiations.

A second opportunity lies in continental economic integration. Full implementation of the AfCFTA has the potential to increase intra-African trade, strengthen industrialization, and provide the economic foundation for greater autonomy in international negotiations (Hartzenberg, 2019). A larger and more integrated market enhances Africa's attractiveness as a partner and increases its bargaining power. A third opportunity is normative. The AU's continued emphasis on African solutions, solidarity, and collective self-reliance provides an ideational resource for mobilizing member states and for engaging external actors on terms defined by the continent (Wendt, 1992). When combined with improved institutional capacity and sustainable financing, these norms can contribute to more coherent and autonomous external action.

In conclusion, the African Union faces considerable structural and political constraints in projecting unity and strategic autonomy. At the same time, the current multipolar environment and ongoing integration initiatives provide avenues for agency. Addressing financial dependence, closing implementation gaps, and deepening norm internalization are critical steps for converting these opportunities into durable outcomes.

Conclusion

This study has examined the role of the African Union in mediating great power competition in Africa. The findings indicate that the AU has developed a range of strategic responses centered on regime-building, diplomatic centralization, economic integration, and security ownership. Through frameworks such as Agenda 2063 and the African Continental Free Trade Area, and through structured partnership summits, the Union has sought to present Africa as a collective actor capable of negotiating with major external powers on continental terms. These efforts reflect a deliberate attempt to move away from fragmented bilateralism toward coordinated engagement.

The analysis further shows that AU institutions and norms exert a moderate but growing influence on how Africa engages competing powers. The Union's emphasis on pan-

Africanism, solidarity, and African solutions has shaped both internal deliberations and external discourse. However, the impact of these institutions and norms is limited by uneven implementation, financial dependence, and persistent internal divergences among member states. As a result, the African Union continues to face challenges in translating continental frameworks into consistent practice and in preventing external actors from exploiting divisions.

Looking forward, the African Union operates in a multipolar environment that simultaneously presents constraints and opportunities. While financial reliance and asymmetries in negotiating capacity constrain strategic autonomy, economic integration and normative resources offer pathways for greater agency. For the AU to effectively mediate great power competition and project continental unity, it will need to strengthen institutional capacity, secure sustainable financing, and deepen the internalization of shared norms. Achieving these objectives is essential if the African Union is to move from managing external rivalry to actively shaping the terms of Africa's engagement in the international system.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Sequel to the findings, the following recommendations are made to strengthen the role of the African Union in mediating great power competition and in advancing continental agency.

1. **Strengthen Institutional Capacity and Compliance Mechanisms:** The African Union should enhance the operational capacity of its key institutions, particularly the AfCFTA Secretariat and the African Peace and Security Architecture. This includes providing adequate human, technical, and financial resources, and establishing clear monitoring and enforcement mechanisms to ensure that member states domesticate and implement AU protocols. Stronger compliance systems will reduce the gap between policy adoption and practice and enable the Union to present a more coherent position in engagements with external powers.

2. Achieve Financial Independence to Safeguard Policy Autonomy: To limit external influence over its decisions, the African Union must accelerate the implementation of alternative financing models such as the 0.2 percent levy on eligible imports. Diversifying and securing sustainable internal funding will reduce dependence on donor contributions and allow the AU to take independent positions on issues of peace, security, and development. Financial autonomy is essential for the Union to act as a credible and impartial mediator in a competitive international environment.

3**. Deepen Norm Internalization and Continental Solidarity:** The African Union should intensify efforts to socialize member states around the norms of pan-Africanism, solidarity, and African solutions to African problems. This can be achieved through regular consultations, peer review mechanisms, and public diplomacy that reinforce a shared continental identity. Greater normative cohesion will make it more difficult for external actors to exploit divisions and will strengthen the Union's ability to negotiate collectively.

4. Leverage Multipolarity to Advance Strategic Partnerships on African Terms: Given the current multipolar system, the African Union should adopt a proactive diplomacy that uses the presence of multiple major powers to Africa's advantage. By coordinating engagement

through AU-led platforms and aligning external cooperation with the priorities of Agenda 2063, the Union can diversify partnerships in trade, technology, and infrastructure while avoiding overdependence on any single actor. This approach will enable Africa to shape the terms of cooperation rather than merely responding to offers presented by competing powers.

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