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Africa in the International System: Theoretical Perspectives, Challenges, and Strategic Pathways

The study of Africa's position in the global international system presents an interplay of historical legacies, structural constraints, and emerging opportunities. Since the decolonization era of the 1950s and 1960s, African states have struggled to assert meaningful sovereignty in a world system that often marginalizes the continent's agency while simultaneously extracting its resources. While traditional theoretical frameworks offer important approaches into Africa's international relations, they must be complemented by perspectives that center African experiences and strategies for navigating an often-hostile global environment. The continent's relationships with external actors, approaches to development, security challenges, and regional integration efforts all reveal the tension between structural constraints and African agency, a dynamic that continues to shape the continent's position in global politics today.

Theoretical Frameworks: Multiple Lenses on Africa's International Relations

Realism and the Persistence of Power Politics

Realism provides a compelling, if partial, explanation for Africa's subordinate position in the international system. According to realist theory, international relations are characterized by anarchy and power competition, with states as the primary actors pursuing their security and national interests (Snyder 2004). From this perspective, Africa's marginal position stems from the relative weakness of its states in terms of military and economic power. The continent's vulnerability to external intervention, resource exploitation, and great power competition reflects

these power asymmetries in the international system.

The Congo Wars (1996-2003) present a stark example of realist dynamics at play in Africa. Often called "Africa's World War," this conflict involved nine African nations and illustrated how power vacuums and resource competition can drive devastating regional conflicts. As described by Jeffrey Herbst, African states often struggle with "the creation and maintenance of national boundaries" (1989, 675), a challenge compounded by weak state institutions and porous borders. These conditions allowed powerful regional actors like Rwanda and Uganda to intervene in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to pursue their security interests and gain access to valuable mineral resources, while other states like Angola and Zimbabwe intervened to counter this influence and protect their own interests.

Yet realism's state-centric focus and emphasis on material power fail to fully account for the complex dynamics that shape Africa's international relations, particularly the legacies of colonialism and the role of non-state actors. The realist framework also tends to overlook how supposedly "weak" African states have sometimes exercised surprising agency in navigating great power politics, as evidenced by the Non-Aligned Movement during the Cold War.

Liberalism and the Promise of Cooperation

Liberal theory offers a contrasting perspective, emphasizing how international institutions, economic interdependence, and shared norms can facilitate cooperation and development. According to liberalism, African states can advance their interests through participation in global governance institutions and by deepening economic ties with the rest of the world (Snyder 2004). The creation of the African Union (AU), regional economic communities like ECOWAS, and participation in global frameworks like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) all reflect liberal assumptions about the value of institutionalized

cooperation.

The development of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), which aims to create a single market for goods and services across the continent, exemplifies liberal principles in action. By reducing trade barriers and fostering economic integration, AfCFTA proponents argue that African states can generate mutual benefits, reduce conflict, and strengthen their collective bargaining power in the global economy.

However, liberalism's optimistic view of international cooperation often underestimates the deeply unequal power relations that characterize Africa's engagement with global institutions. As Abrahamsen argues, liberal frameworks tend to portray Africa as "either absent from or the passive recipient of international relations, simply the object of great power politics" (2017, cited in Week 2 Course Material). This perspective fails to recognize how ostensibly neutral international institutions often reflect and reinforce the interests of powerful states at the expense of African agency.

World-Systems Theory and Dependency

World-systems theory provides a more structural critique of Africa's position, arguing that the international system is hierarchically organized into core (developed), semi-periphery, and periphery (underdeveloped) regions. According to this framework, Africa's underdevelopment is not an accident but a direct consequence of its exploitation by core nations through colonialism and neo-colonial economic relations. The continent remains locked in a peripheral position, primarily exporting raw materials while importing manufactured goods at unfavorable terms of trade.

The case of Françafrique, the system of political, economic, and military ties that binds France to its former African colonies illustrates these dependency dynamics. As Maja Bovcon

argues, "The main principle or norm guiding the creation of this regime was General de Gaulle's overarching political ideology of preserving France's grandeur" (2011, 8-9). The CFA Franc currency system exemplifies this relationship, requiring member countries to deposit 50% of their foreign exchange reserves in the French Treasury and limiting their monetary sovereignty. This arrangement benefits France by providing it with a captive market for its exports and preferential access to African resources while constraining the economic development options of African states.

Similarly, dependency theory explains how international aid can actually reinforce rather than alleviate Africa's subordinate position. As Dambisa Moyo argues in Dead Aid, "Greater opacity and fewer investments reduce economic growth, which leads to fewer job opportunities and increasing poverty levels. In response to growing poverty, donors give more aid, which continues the downward spiral of poverty" (2009, cited in course readings). This "vicious cycle of aid" perpetuates dependency relationships that serve external interests while failing to generate sustainable development.

Constructivism and the Role of Ideas

Constructivism offers yet another lens, focusing on how identities, norms, and ideas shape international relations. From this perspective, Africa's position in the international system is not solely determined by material factors but also by socially constructed understandings of sovereignty, development, and security. The continent's persistent characterization as "underdeveloped" or "conflict-prone" reflects not just objective conditions but also powerful narratives that shape how African states are perceived and treated in global politics.

The colonial legacy of arbitrary borders, as described by Jeffrey Herbst, demonstrates constructivism's insights. These borders were not natural divisions but social constructions

imposed by European powers: "The European colonialists and the leaders of independent Africa latched on to the same solutions... The first aspect of the OAU's solution to the boundary problems faced by the African countries was to effectively quash the right of self-determination" (Herbst 1989, 685-686). The decision to maintain these colonial boundaries enshrined in the Organization of African Unity's (OAU) 1964 resolution reflects how shared ideas about sovereignty and territorial integrity came to shape Africa's political geography, despite their arbitrary nature.

Integrating Theoretical Perspectives

Each theoretical framework offers valuable insights, but none alone fully captures the complexity of Africa's international relations. A more comprehensive understanding requires integrating these perspectives while also recognizing their limitations in explaining the unique historical context and agency of African states.

World-systems theory and dependency perspectives highlight the structural constraints that limit Africa's options, while realism explains the persistent power politics that shape the continent's security environment. Liberal approaches illuminate the potential benefits of cooperation through regional integration, and constructivism reveals how colonial legacies and contested norms continue to influence Africa's global position. Together, these frameworks provide a multifaceted lens for analyzing Africa's contemporary challenges and opportunities in the international system.

Development Aid and Economic Structures: Promises and Pitfalls

The relationship between international aid and African development remains deeply contested. Liberal perspectives emphasize aid's potential to foster economic growth, strengthen institutions, and address humanitarian crises. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs),

adopted in 2015, exemplify this approach by establishing a comprehensive framework for addressing poverty, inequality, and environmental sustainability. According to liberalism, such cooperative frameworks can help African states overcome development challenges through targeted assistance and policy coordination.

However, critical perspectives, particularly those from dependency theory, challenge this optimistic view. Dambisa Moyo's critique in Dead Aid offers a powerful indictment of traditional aid models: "Aid supports rent-seeking - that is, the use of governmental authority to take and make money without trade or production of wealth" (2009, cited in course readings). Moyo argues that aid undermines governance, fosters corruption, and creates dependency while failing to generate sustainable economic growth.

The experience of Rwanda illustrates both the potential benefits and limitations of aid. Rwanda has effectively used international assistance to rebuild after the 1994 genocide, investing in healthcare, education, and technology. The government's emphasis on accountability and local ownership has been credited with making aid more effective than in many other African contexts. However, critics argue that Rwanda's reliance on external financing undermines its long-term economic independence and that aid has bolstered an authoritarian political system.

Beyond aid, Africa's position in the global economic structure presents significant challenges. The continent remains primarily an exporter of raw materials, making it vulnerable to commodity price fluctuations and preventing the development of higher-value industries. As world-systems theory explains, this economic structure is not accidental but a direct legacy of colonialism and ongoing extractive relationships. The case of Côte d'Ivoire's cocoa industry illustrates this dynamic, the country produces approximately 40% of the world's cocoa but captures only a tiny fraction of the chocolate industry's value chain, with most profits accruing to

foreign companies.

The liberalization of African economies under Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) in the 1980s and 1990s further entrenched these dependencies. As Tarrósy observes in relation to Ethiopia, massive infrastructure loans have created concerning levels of debt: "Such a dependency is beyond indebtedness, for it includes knowledge and technology, e.g., spare parts and maintenance in general, as part of the infrastructure projects" (cited in Introduction to China-Africa Relations). These economic dependencies limit policy autonomy and constrain development options.

However, some African states have begun to challenge these structural constraints. Rwanda's focus on technology and services represents an attempt to leapfrog traditional development pathways, while Ethiopia's state-led development model seeks to balance infrastructure investment with industrial policy. These examples suggest that despite significant structural limitations, strategic economic policies can create space for greater agency.

Conflict, Security, and Regional Stability

Africa's security landscape presents complex challenges that both reflect and reinforce the continent's position in the international system. Realist and security studies perspectives help explain persistent conflict dynamics, while also highlighting the limits of conventional security approaches.

The Congo Wars (1996-2003) epitomize the intersection of domestic, regional, and international security dynamics that characterize many African conflicts. As described in course materials, "Regional hegemony and power politics in Africa...serve to perpetuate the continent's problems; the very politics that many African countries have been trying to escape continue to be the principal obstacle to achieving that goal." The conflict involved multiple state actors

pursuing their security interests and access to resources, resulting in over five million deaths, the deadliest conflict since World War II.

Similarly, terrorism in the Sahel reflects how domestic grievances, regional instability, and global dynamics interact to create persistent security challenges. The rise of groups like Boko Haram demonstrates how "local needs and grievances interact with global ideologies to produce complex security threats" (Odobo 2017). These groups exploit governance vacuums, socioeconomic marginalization, and porous borders while connecting to transnational terrorist networks.

Regional organizations have emerged as important actors in addressing these security challenges. ECOWAS has played a significant role in conflict resolution through its interventions in Liberia (1990-1997), Sierra Leone (1997-1999), and The Gambia (2016-2017). As Afolabi argues, these interventions demonstrate the potential for African-led solutions to security challenges. However, ECOWAS has faced criticism for inconsistent responses and reliance on external funding, highlighting the limitations of regional security frameworks.

The African Union's Peace and Security Architecture represents another attempt to build African capacity for conflict prevention and resolution. The organization's principle of "non-indifference" marks an evolution from the OAU's strict non-intervention approach, allowing for intervention in cases of war crimes, genocide, and crimes against humanity. However, as Young notes, the AU's effectiveness is constrained by capacity limitations, funding challenges, and the influence of powerful member states.

These security dynamics both reflect and reinforce Africa's subordinate position in the international system. Conflicts drain resources, undermine development, and create opportunities for external intervention, while also hampering efforts at regional integration. Yet they also

create spaces for African agency through regional security mechanisms, though these remain limited by resource constraints and external dependencies.

External Engagements: China, Russia, and Shifting Global Dynamics

In recent decades, China's growing engagement with Africa has significantly impacted the continent's international relations and development prospects. From a neorealist perspective, China's approach represents a strategic effort to secure resources, expand markets, and gain diplomatic support while challenging Western influence in Africa (van Staden et al. 2020). The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) exemplifies this strategy, offering African states infrastructure financing as part of China's broader geopolitical ambition.

The impact of Chinese engagement remains deeply contested. On one hand, China's "no strings attached" approach to investment and aid offers African states an alternative to Western conditionality, potentially expanding their policy space. China's infrastructure investments, like Kenya's Standard Gauge Railway, address critical development needs that Western donors have often neglected. As Abdoulkadre Ado argues, "China's interest in Africa overrides any of the risks for the long-term project of being able to secure political superpower status" (cited in Introduction to China-Africa Relations).

However, critics argue that Chinese engagement creates new dependencies while reinforcing Africa's position as a raw materials exporter. Ian Taylor's analysis of Kenya's Standard Gauge Railway highlights concerns about debt sustainability, with the project facing "significant challenges of operating" and creating potential "heavy debt" that "threatens Kenya's economic future" (cited in Introduction to China-Africa Relations). The case of Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port, which the country was forced to lease to China after failing to service its debts, raises concerns about "debt trap diplomacy" that could compromise African sovereignty.

Russia's re-engagement with Africa, while less extensive than China's, follows similar neorealist patterns. As Theo Neethling argues, "There is little doubt that much of Moscow's involvement on the African continent relates to Putin's desire to revive his country's great-power status" (2020, 15). Russia has expanded its influence through arms sales, military cooperation, and strategic resource investments, particularly in countries like the Central African Republic, Sudan, and Mali. This engagement offers African states an alternative security partner but also raises concerns about governance and human rights.

These shifting external engagements create both opportunities and challenges for African agency. Multiple external partners potentially allow African states to play powers against each other, securing better terms for cooperation. As Oscar Meywa Otele observes, the BRI has contributed to "regional realignment" that allows landlocked countries like Uganda and Rwanda to "choose whether to align themselves with Kenya or Tanzania according to their national interests" (cited in Introduction to China-Africa Relations). However, without coordinated regional strategies, competition among external actors could also undermine African interests and perpetuate extractive relationships.

The Potential of Regionalism and Strategic Partnerships

Despite significant structural constraints, regional integration and strategic partnerships offer African states potential pathways to enhance their position in the international system. Regionalism theory suggests that by pooling sovereignty and resources, African states can strengthen their collective bargaining power, address shared challenges, and reduce external dependencies.

The African Union represents the continent's most comprehensive effort at regional integration. Its Agenda 2063 outlines an ambitious vision for a "peaceful, integrated and

prosperous Africa," driven by its own citizens and representing a dynamic force in the international arena. The AU's Peace and Security Council, African Governance Architecture, and economic integration initiatives reflect an attempt to build institutional capacity for addressing Africa's challenges.

ECOWAS provides a more developed example of regional integration at the sub-regional level. Its interventions in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and The Gambia demonstrate the potential for collective action to address security challenges, while its economic integration initiatives aim to foster development through regional trade and cooperation. As Afolabi argues, these efforts represent important examples of African-led solutions to regional problems.

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) marks another significant step toward regional integration. By creating a single market for goods and services across the continent, AfCFTA aims to boost intra-African trade, foster industrialization, and strengthen Africa's position in global trade negotiations. This initiative has the potential to address one of Africa's key structural weaknesses, its fragmented markets and low levels of intra-regional trade.

However, regionalism faces significant challenges. As van Staden et al. observe, "Regional institutions often reflect rather than transform power asymmetries among member states" (cited in Introduction to China-Africa Relations). Powerful states like Nigeria in ECOWAS or South Africa in the Southern African Development Community can dominate regional agendas, while capacity and funding limitations constrain institutional effectiveness. The tension between sovereignty and integration also remains a persistent challenge, with states often reluctant to cede authority to regional bodies.

Beyond regionalism, strategic partnerships with external actors offer another pathway for enhancing Africa's global position. South-South cooperation, exemplified by forums like the

India-Africa Summit and the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), provides opportunities for more equal partnerships based on mutual interests. African engagement with emerging powers like China, India, and Brazil also potentially increases the continent's bargaining power vis-à-vis traditional Western partners.

However, realizing the potential of these strategies requires overcoming significant coordination challenges. Without coherent regional positions, individual African states remain vulnerable to divide-and-rule tactics by external powers. As Ayodele argues in "The Famished Road: Africa's International Relations and the Legend of 'Common Positions'," the difficulty of developing unified African positions limits the continent's influence in global governance (cited in Week 9 Course Material).

Toward Greater African Agency

Africa's position in the international system reflects both significant structural constraints and emerging opportunities for greater agency. Theoretical frameworks offer important insights into these dynamics, though each has limitations in fully explaining Africa's unique historical context and contemporary challenges.

Development aid and economic structures continue to reinforce dependencies, though some African states have begun to chart alternative development pathways. Conflict and security challenges both reflect and reinforce Africa's subordinate position, while also creating opportunities for regional security cooperation. China's growing engagement offers both new opportunities and potential dependencies, while regionalism presents promising but challenging pathways for enhancing Africa's collective influence.

Moving forward, several strategies could strengthen Africa's position in the international system:

1. **Deepening regional integration:** Building effective regional institutions that can address shared challenges and strengthen Africa's collective bargaining power.

2. **Diversifying external partnerships:** Engaging strategically with multiple external actors to expand policy space and avoid over-dependence on any single partner.

3. **Prioritizing domestic resource mobilization:** Reducing aid dependence through improved tax systems, combating illicit financial flows, and developing local capital markets.

4. **Investing in human capital:** Building the education, health, and technological capacity necessary for economic transformation and reduced external dependence.

5. **Strengthening African voices in global governance:** Advocating for reformed international institutions that better reflect African interests and perspectives.

The path toward greater African agency in the international system is neither straightforward nor guaranteed. Structural constraints remain powerful, and external actors continue to pursue their interests in ways that often undermine African development. However, African states can begin to reshape their engagement with the global system by leveraging regional cooperation, strategic partnerships, and domestic resources. The continent's future in international relations will ultimately depend on navigating the tension between structural constraints and strategic agency, finding pathways to assert African interests and perspectives in a system that too often marginalizes them.

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