African Union's Quest for 'One Voice': A Mixed Picture

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In 1963, one of the fathers of Pan-Africanism, the late Kwame Nkrumah, argued that a single representation of the African continent at the United Nations (UN) 'would be more positive in its influence than all the separate representations of the African states put together. 'While there was unanimity on the *necessity* for unity, Nkrumah's vision of the form of unity faced opposition, notably from other fathers of Pan-Africanist thinking. While some of his contemporaries equally spoke of the need for unity in international spaces, they advocated for' one voice''. Representing King Idris I of Libya at the first session of the Assembly of the Organisation for African Union (OAU), Hasan Rida argued for the need to unite and to speak with one voice in world affairs.' Others were even more nuanced and cautious. In his opening speech at the same Assembly meeting, Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia stated,'' What we still lack,

despite the efforts of past years, is the mechanism which will enable us to speak with one voice ***when we wish to do so***'' author's emphasis). His words were perhaps prophetic in that he foresaw the possible resistance to the concept of a single representation as well as one voice'' on all issues.

The African Union (AU) was built on these unresolved differences that persist to this day. The Constitutive Act of the African Union (Art. 3) assigns to the AU the responsibility to promote and defend common African positions on issues of interest to the continent and its peoples'' The AU Commission (AUC) Statutes assigned the task of drafting AU common positions and coordinating member states'' actions in international negotiation'' to a Secretariat that had no supranational mandate. The writing was on the wall.

The architects had *perhaps* hoped that the agreement on the legal texts would provide a basis for implementation upon adoption. The hope was that the text would usher in a glorious period of a common African position on the international stage. These wishes were not entirely unrealistic. After all, several African common positions were developed and collectively defended internationally. Among them are the Common African position on post-2015 (2014), the African Union position on climate change (2009), and the Common African Position on the global compact for safe, orderly, and regulatory migration (2019).

Countries have shown willingness to adopt non-binding common positions like those listed above. This is not unique to Africa as common positions of a legal nature and at the level of the UN have been weak at best. Despite these positions, the limited application of the legal texts of the Constitutive Act in the last twenty years shows that the principle of sovereignty in foreign policy remains an exclusive competency of individual states.

Indeed, African countries missed an important opportunity in 2018 by ceding to the EuropeanUnion'ss (EU) divide-and-rule approach, as well as threat tactics, to negotiations. Here, African countries jettisoned the idea of speaking with ''one voice'' with the EU on the framework of future cooperation and rather opted for a compromise position based on a two-track approach. This encompasses a legally-binding track under the Africa, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) group; and a non-legally binding negotiation under the AU umbrella.

Thanks to the geopolitical context, individual countries'' political considerations dominated despite the leverage that a single negotiating position would have brought. These were related to the role of development aid for some and the fear by others that a single African position on international partnerships may open the door for a transfer of the foreign affairs competency to the regional level.

To understand how the provisions of the Constitutive Act are applied in practice, it is useful to look at how common positions are articulated among the three African countries holding non-permanent seats (A3) at the UN Security Council (UNSC). The African continent dominates the agenda of the UNSC, but African voices have historically been marginalised. Greater coordination among the A3 and alignment to the positions articulated by the AU Peace and Security Council (PSC) could change that. There were instances when that materialised, as was the case with the united vote on the sanctions against Sudan in 2019, that saw the A3 align to and defend the decision of the AU PSC to suspend the membership of Sudan and impose sanctions following the military coup that led to the ousting of Al Bashir. However, the A3 have largely diverged, voting differently on key issues including Somalia, Western Sahara, and South Sudan.

Reaching common positions on issues where countries seek to preserve their national interests (based on real or perceived benefits) often leads to what the current AUC Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security (PAPS), Bankole Adeoye, referred to as a ''convoluted, politically stressful and difficult process. It is also weakened by the diverging capacities within individual countries to drive foreign policy, thus creating a risk that some countries would dominate the agenda at the detriment of others, a risk that some view with suspicion.

Trust in the continental institutions also plays an important role in limiting progress. The intellectual capacity and financial resources of institutions to lead the formulation of complex negotiating positions are relatively poor compared to other regional groupings. For example, the EuropeanCommission'ss trade team (for which the EU has exclusive competency) has 2125 staff (2021) compared to the AUC's full staff complement of 1720 (2020). Furthermore, recently adopted political decisions by some regional leaders have contributed to deepening mistrust between countries and institutions. For some, there is a

perceived risk of seeing the Union, which was once built to advance African interests, become a conduit for geopolitical manoeuvring that undermines the interests of some AU members.

The points raised above should not be interpreted as a judgement on the successes or failures of the AU in its quest to articulate a common African position. They are rather an observation and a plea for a more pragmatic design of our regional integration agenda. In the last twenty years, what has become evident is that we are yet to put the cement to hold together the stones of the base on which ''House One Africa'' will one day be built. Perhaps, it is time to consider the words of Haile Selassie and identify the few issues where the necessity for coordination is clear and let the form follow function.

Two such areas are industrialisation and trade and peace and security. The ambitious trajectory that the African continent has set itself on, through the adoption of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), will require careful international coordination. Additionally, this could be one of the areas where common positions, as difficult as they may be to reach, will need to be crafted as the global context shifts in the next decade. Peace and security is another area where coordination in line with the interests of the people of Africa needs to be put back at the centre. Emerging splinter positions on conflicts, especially around the Sahel and Southern-East Africa, are areas in which difficult discussions are required and where a regional approach is needed, not least due to the nature of the conflicts and the risks they represent entire regions.

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