

Africa in the contemporary international scenario

The contemporary international system is undergoing a period of profound transformations, realignments and divisions that are (re)shaping an increasingly fragmented and uncertain landscape. Against this backdrop of change in the global order, traditional analyses based on Eurocentric perspectives prove insufficient for interpreting the power dynamics of the third decade of the 21st century. Faced with the diffusion of global power and the erosion of traditional hegemonic structures, we are witnessing a reconfiguration in which the African continent is emerging, not merely as a theatre of conflict between great powers, but as an actor with renewed agency and greater institutional dynamism.

This Dossier in Issue 143 of CUPEA, dedicated to “Africa in the contemporary international scenario”, aims to reflect, from a pluralistic perspective, on the phenomenon of the continent’s re-signification within global power dynamics and the proactive role that African states are playing on the international stage. The call for papers attracted prominent authors whose contributions offer a multifaceted perspective that enriches critical discourse, drawing on knowledge generated in Africa (Kenya, Democratic Republic of the Congo and South Africa), Latin America (Argentina, Brazil and Chile), Asia (India), Europe (Spain, Czech Republic and Sweden) and the Middle East (Dubai and Qatar).

On the basis of the ten academic articles and one bibliographic review submitted by specialists in the field, it is evident that, far from the narratives that dominated the 20th century, African nations are establishing themselves as key players in the most significant debates on the global agenda. Their active participation in multilateral forums and in the redefinition of international norms reflects a slow but progressive shift from the periphery towards the center, in a process in which the articulation of collective interests and the search for autonomy are redefining the very notion of Africa’s place in the international system.

Within this framework, there is a clear re-evaluation of ties with traditional Western powers – both former colonial metropolises and the United States– as well as engagement with new actors from the Global South, notably the BRICS nations and countries in the Middle East, where African agency is clearly evident alongside its challenges and opportunities. Furthermore, the contributions highlight the complex processes unfolding across the continent linked to decolonisation and its consequences for democracy, security, development and regional integration, which are currently being addressed from fresh perspectives in order to understand the changes and continuities in these issues.

The article by **María Ángeles Alaminos Hervás** and **Miranda Díaz Rømmesmo**, entitled “A New Cold War in Africa? Structural rivalry and African agency in the China –US competition”, offers a critical and much-needed analysis of the prevailing narrative that seeks to frame the power dynamics on the African continent within the context of a new bipolar confrontation. The authors argue that, whilst the strategic competition

between Beijing and Washington is undeniable and manifests itself in critical sectors such as security, digitalisation and development finance, this label is conceptually problematic and empirically insufficient. Unlike the rigidity and compartmentalised nature of the 20th century Cold War, contemporary rivalry in Africa unfolds against a backdrop of profound economic interdependence and institutional overlap, where there are no automatic alignments or monolithic blocs. In this regard, the authors emphasize that this competition must be understood as a “structural sectoral rivalry”, in which African states do not act as passive recipients, but as strategic actors.

Samir Bhattacharya’s article, “From Observer to Player: Evaluating Africa’s Preparedness for Effective G20 Participation”, explores the strategic opportunities, challenges and progress made by the African Union (AU) in global governance following its admission as a full member of the G20. An examination of the multilateral agenda and the interests and positions set out suggests that, since joining the forum, the AU has moved from having a symbolic representation to becoming a more active player in the political arena, although it has yet to establish itself as the region’s unified voice.

Drawing on an analysis of three central conceptual strands in the trajectory of the Global South, **Germain Ngoie Tshibambe**, in his paper entitled “From Non-Alignment to Autonomy in the Global South: A Comparative Essay on Fragmintegration in Africa and Latin America”, proposes the concept of “fragmintegration” —borrowed from James Rosenau— to explain how the forces of integration and fragmentation coexist and mutually neutralise one another in postcolonial dynamics. On this basis, he argues that the Global South’s loss of autonomy stems both from the domination of hegemonic centres and from a breakdown of internal solidarity that undermines the capacity for collective action.

In their work, entitled “Postcolonial Security Studies: In Search of Ancestrality”, **Igor Castellano da Silva** and **Peter Vale** propose the development of approaches grounded in ancestral and community knowledge and practices with a territorial basis, with a view to enriching the theoretical framework surrounding security issues. To highlight the forms of knowledge that have been sidelined by Eurocentric perspectives, they examine the cases of the revitalisation of the Tambor de Sopapo in Brazil and the rediscovery of the history of the amaXhosa anti-colonial leader, Makhanda, in South Africa.

From the perspective of regionalism under pressure, and with an emphasis on security issues, **Hamdy Hassan**’s article, “The withdrawal of the Alliance of Sahel States from ECOWAS: What Implications for West African Integration?”, analyses the process of structural change currently taking place in the Sahel as a disruptive factor for the integration process based on the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). It points out that the so-called “Sahelxit” and the formation of the new Alliance of Sahel States (AES) pose a fundamental challenge to the post-colonial framework of African regionalism.

Drawing also on the turbulent situation in the Sahel, **Eduardo Carreño** presents, in his essay “Pretorianism in Africa in the 21st Century: the case of Burkina Faso”, reflections that shed light on the contemporary phenomenon of post-colonial governments. Drawing on the Burkinabe experience under Ibrahim Traoré’s rule, he highlights the new dimensions of military governments that promote decolonial and pan-Africanist rhetoric

to nationalise resources and mobilise support against foreign interference. However, the emerging contradictions are profound, and the risks they face are by no means insignificant, particularly in the face of existential threats such as jihadist violence and systemic poverty.

From a decolonial perspective, **Jo-Ansie van Wyk**, in her article “Ending Nuclear Colonialism in Africa”, analyses the African Nuclear Renaissance, arguing that the development of nuclear energy on the continent – even if presented as a path towards energy sovereignty– is shaped by the enduring legacy of nuclear colonialism. The author argues that despite efforts towards nuclear decolonisation, the continent faces the emergence of nuclear neocolonialism led by powers such as Russia and China, which operate through cooperation agreements that often perpetuate dynamics of dependency and extractivism. In this regard, she maintains that genuine nuclear decolonisation in Africa requires not only the peaceful use of the technology, but also concrete actions towards reparation, environmental remediation and a break with global hierarchical structures that favour nuclear powers at the expense of African autonomy.

Jan Záhořík’s paper, “Ethiopia under Abiy Ahmed: State Transformation, Structural Crisis and Geopolitical Reconfiguration in the Horn of Africa”, contributes to our understanding of an emerging African power whose international influence has expanded since its rise to BRICS. The article analyses the political, social, economic and energy transformations that have taken place since 2018 and highlights the constraints faced as a result of structural tensions stemming from the productive matrix, ethnic federalism, institutional weakness and the reconfiguration of the regional order in the Horn of Africa.

Delving into a domestic issue in Kenya, **Alfred Wandera Sanday**, **George Ngugi King’ara** and **Tommy Kibera Kiilu**, in their article entitled “From Spectatorship to Citizenship: Televised Supreme Court Presidential Election Petitions and Public Perceptions of Judicial Legitimacy in Nairobi, Kenya”, examine how the televising of presidential election petitions before the Kenyan Supreme Court between 2013 and 2022 influenced public perceptions of judicial legitimacy. The article demonstrates that the civic effects of judicial transparency are conditional and non-linear. It further argues that whilst judicial transparency fosters democratic engagement, this process operates through interpretative filters that can either stabilise or erode institutional trust.

In “Iran in Africa and Its Influence Portfolio: South Africa, Zimbabwe and Uganda”, **Luciano Zaccara** analyses Iranian foreign policy towards Africa (2018–2026) as a “portfolio of influence” designed to maintain a presence and legitimacy in the face of external pressures. Against the backdrop of the war that broke out in early 2026, the author uses the cases of South Africa, Zimbabwe and Uganda to demonstrate that Iranian influence is uneven and is managed through ‘segmentation’: African partners maintain functional, diplomatic and civil cooperation ties, whilst limiting visible strategic cooperation to avoid political costs.

Ornela Fabani’s article, “Objectives and characteristics of the Gulf monarchies’ involvement in the Horn of Africa: the case of Qatar (2010–2026)”, examines links that have been little studied in Latin America. The text examines the significance of African countries in the foreign policies of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar, and outlines the main lines of action developed in the areas of trade and investment,

security and international cooperation. It thus concludes that over the last five years, the Gulf monarchies—and Qatar in particular—have demonstrated a growing presence and influence in the Horn of Africa in line with their strategic interests.

Finally, **Santiago Molfino**'s review of Táíwò, Olúfẹ́mi, "Against Decolonisation: Taking African Agency Seriously", provides the essential elements for a critical examination of two central themes in contemporary African studies that are closely interlinked —namely, decolonisation and agency—and which feature prominently in this issue of CUPEA.

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