

THE WAR IN UKRAINE, THE AFRICAN UNION, AND AFRICAN AGENCY

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THE WAR IN UKRAINE HAS STIMULATED A DIVISIVE DEBATE ON AFRICA'S PLACE IN INTERNATIONAL POLITICS: "Africa's Ukraine Dilemma", "Russia and the West vie for influence in Africa", "Cold War echoes as African leaders resist criticising Putin's war" – much media and expert commentary has focused on whether and how Africa has taken sides in this crisis. With the return of proxy conflict between nuclear powers, ideas of global competition have become ubiquitous. Africa is no stranger to great power competition, even if Africa today aspires for a new, non-binary approach to multipolarity that cuts through great power competition between the West and the East. The African Union (AU) aspires to take a leading role in this endeavour. This briefing asks: How has the war in Ukraine affected the AU's pursuit of African agency?

The question addressed is not whether, but what kind of African agency the AU pursues in the face of a conflict with global ramifications. I propose a refined typology of *where* and *how* the AU (and other actors) pursue African agency, and apply this typology to the AU's reaction to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Specifically, this typology identifies the pursuit of African agency in two realms – through *continental integration* and through a *global role*. I contribute an argument distinguishing African agency through discourse and policy outcomes to the debate on African agency. Discourse is a precondition for policy outcomes of pursuing African agency,

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which sheds light on the neglected, discursive ways in which the AU has exerted African agency in the Ukraine crisis. The argument allows capturing the AU's discursive success short of shaping policy outcomes.

The empirical analysis in this briefing is based on 36 original interviews with diplomats and AU officials in Addis Ababa in October 2022, January–February 2023, and May 2023, and a content analysis of media reports, policy documents, and social media. These different types of sources are useful given the rapid pace of the crisis, which informalized many organizations' diplomatic communications

Somewhat surprisingly, the Russian Federation's invasion of Ukraine benefitted the AU's African agency in that, despite a highly divided array of national preferences, the AU spoke on behalf of the continent on an urgent international issue for the first time since the invasion of Iraq in 2003. In seeking such a *global role*, the AU's leadership confronted considerable disunity and extensive pressure from the West and Russia, yet attempted a policy of non-aligned and solution-focused diplomacy by placing issues such as food security and humanitarian impacts on the UN's agenda. The delivery of this diplomatic mission somewhat struggled to align with the AU's original intention, however, as the AU's diplomacy initially swayed towards Russia in the eyes of many observers, and the AU later sought to rebalance its dialogue with the two sides.

The war in Ukraine spelled less good news for the AU's African agency through *continental integration*. Long-lasting regional integration plans to enhance intra-African trade and cohesion suffered (and are likely to suffer more in the future) from the world's diverted attention. The divisive nature of the geopolitical climate and the West's attention on Ukraine are challenging the AU's ambitious goals. More than half of the AU's funding comes from Europe and North

America, and with Western attention directed towards Ukraine, there is a fear in Addis Ababa that funding might become scarcer. Europe's consideration of more 'transactional' partnerships chimes badly with Africa's goals of non-aligned, pragmatic problem-solving, and the AU has made inadequate progress on self-funding. Thus, the resource mobilization partnerships that are (at least in the medium term) necessary for *continental integration* suffer from politicization and reduced resource endowment.

The AU's pursuit of African agency in times of crisis: Where and how?

Africa faces a complex crisis arising from the war in Ukraine. The global economic shock has not spared the African continent. Africa's dependence on imports for basic commodities such as fertilizer, grain, and fossil fuels makes it particularly vulnerable.² This vulnerability led to food staple prices increasing on average 23.9% from 2020 to 2022.³ Compounded with this, African countries face significantly reconfigured and geopolitically driven interest constellations internationally, in which (non-)alignment with Russia or Ukraine has started to impact all multilateral processes and diplomatic ties. While much of the analysis of Russia's invasion is divided, there is broad agreement between observers from the West, Russia, and Africa on the severity of the challenge for Africa. I argue that in this context, the AU's pursuit of African agency is not only a matter of *where* it is pursued, but also *how*.

The AU's status as a pan-African institution has gained new interest since the Ukraine crisis began, but also encountered new limits. Recent debates have reframed the question of the AU and Africa's role in international politics through a debate on 'African agency'. This debate has made major strides in squaring Africa's materially marginal position with its (potentially)

² Eoin McGuirk and Marshall Burke, 'War in Ukraine, world food prices, and conflict in Africa', in *Global economic consequences of the war in Ukraine. Sanctions, supply chains and sustainability*, ed. Luis Garicano, Dominic Rohner, and Beatrice Weder di Mauro, vol. 26 (CEPR Press, 2022).

³ Cedric Okou, John Spray, and D. Filiz Unsal, 'Africa food prices are soaring amid high import reliance' (International Monetary Fund, 27 September 2022), <https://www.imf.org/en/Blogs/Articles/2022/09/26/africa-food-prices-are-soaring-amid-high-import-reliance>.

greater role in international affairs by carving out space for African-led, autonomous norm-making and political action.⁴ Recent contributions have identified mechanisms of African agency through ‘agency slack’ from the international structure.⁵ The study of actors in pursuit of African agency has also matured beyond regional organizations such as the AU to individual states and civil society organizations.⁶ An important advance in the study of actors in African agency is in opening the black box of international organizations and studying their secretariats. This shifts the question of African agency from ‘who?’ and ‘where?’ to the practices and strategies of pursuing agency. As Thomas Tieku argues, the AU Commission exerts African agency through unique practices rather than material attributes.⁷ By ‘performing’ African agency, actors such as the AU can attain the capacity for autonomous action beyond what structural arrangements might predispose them for.

So *how* does the AU pursue African agency? To make sense of the AU’s African agency in times of crisis, an eclectic account of practices that comprise the pursuit of such agency is required. Research has only just begun to unpack the different modes and strategies of pursuing African agency. I argue that African agency is not only about *policy outcomes*, but also about *discourse* – thereby underlining the importance of words and representation in a world that historically marginalized African voices, perspectives, and goals. This argument resonates widely with scholarship on how discourse shapes and precedes social reality.⁸ Setting the bar

⁴ Abu Bakarr Bah, ‘African Agency in New Humanitarianism and responsible governance’, in *International security and peacebuilding. Africa, the Middle East, and Europe* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2017), 148–69; Danielle Beswick and Anne Hammerstad, ‘African agency in a changing security environment: sources, opportunities and challenges’, *Conflict, Security & Development* 13, no. 5 (December 2013): 471–86, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14678802.2013.849470>.

⁵ Tshepo Gwatiwa, *The African Union and African Agency in international politics* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

⁶ G. Mohan and B. Lampert, ‘Negotiating China: Reinserting African agency into China-Africa relations’, *African Affairs* 112, no. 446 (1 January 2013): 92–110, <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/ads065>; Ronald Chipaike and Matarutse H Knowledge, ‘The question of African agency in international relations’, *Cogent Social Sciences* 4, no. 1 (1 January 2018): 1487257, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2018.1487257>.

⁷ Thomas Kwasi Tieku, ‘Punching above weight: How the African Union Commission exercises agency in politics’, *Africa Spectrum* 56, no. 3 (December 2021): 254–73, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002039721990394>.

⁸ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and socialist strategy* (London: Verso, 2001); Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, ‘The evolution of agenda-setting research: twenty-five years in the marketplace of ideas’, *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 2 (1 June 1993): 58–67, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460->

of successful African agency only as high as shaping concrete policy outcomes ignores the role of discourse as a precondition for policy outcomes. In other words, the study of African agency can still benefit from more enthusiastically embracing the constructivist insight in international relations theory that we ought to ‘study how the world is “talked into existence”’.⁹ Against the backdrop of postcolonial marginalization, African agency is therefore also about being part of global conversations and having a ‘seat at the table’.

These two types of agency also have implications for measuring the success of African agency. When focusing on *policy outcomes*, African agency needs to be measured against whether goals of shaping outcomes have been reached. The AU's Common African Position on the Post-2015 Development Agenda is widely considered an example of successfully shaping multilateral policy outcomes, namely the Sustainable Development Goals.¹⁰ African agency as *discourse* is assessed differently. Shaping African and global conversations is harder to capture and quantify.¹¹ The success of discursive agency is therefore the somewhat elusive influencing a conversation – for example as a precursor to other actors changing behaviour or to prepare more robust policy outcomes. The AU’s Common African Position on UN Security Council Reform (dubbed the Ezulwini Consensus) can be seen as an impactful example of discursive agency.¹² Namely, the AU itself claims text-based negotiations on UN Security Council reform are premature.¹³ the African narrative of a Council in need of urgent reform has today become

2466.1993.tb01262.x; Alexander Wendt, ‘Anarchy is what states make of it: the social construction of power politics’, *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (1992): 391–425, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300027764>; Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, ‘International norm dynamics and political change’, *International organization* 52, no. 04 (1998): 887–917.

⁹ Emmanuel Adler, ‘Constructivism and International Relations’, in *Handbook of International Relations*, ed. Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse, and Beth Simmons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 101.

¹⁰ African Union, ‘Common African Position on the Post-2015 Development Agenda’, 2014, https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/32848-doc-common_african_position.pdf.

¹¹ Sina Leipold and Georg Winkel, ‘Discursive agency: (Re-)conceptualizing actors and practices in the analysis of discursive policymaking’, *Policy Studies Journal* 45, no. 3 (August 2017): 510–34, <https://doi.org/10.1111/psj.12172>.

¹² African Union, ‘The Common African Position on the proposed reform of the United Nations: “The Ezulwini Consensus”’ (Addis Ababa, 7 March 2005).

¹³ African Union, ‘Decision on the report of the AU Committee Of Ten (C-10) Heads of State and Government on the reform of the UN Security Council, by H.E. Julius Maada Bio, President of the Republic of Sierra Leone’,

ubiquitous among permanent and elected Council members. For the purposes of this article, a constructivist analysis of discursive agency focuses on the degree to which actors succeed in positioning ideas and framing events in African and global policy conversations.

Where does the AU pursue African agency? Having settled the question of how African agency is practised, I argue that this scholarly debate also benefits from a more refined understanding of the actors and organizational settings among which the AU pursues African agency. I identify two distinct but complementary realms where the AU aspires to develop African agency: through *continental integration* and through a *global role*. While both approaches start from Africa's historical position as a marginal player in the international system and the imperative of strategically acting upon this structural condition of dependence, an important distinction revolves around *where* African agency should unfold concretely, namely at the African continental level in interactions with states built on postcolonial legacies, and in Africa's relationship with the wider international world. These two realms of where agency is pursued intrinsically tie into the intellectual roots of Pan-Africanism and African agency as a paradigm to understand and renegotiate Africa's place in the world, or to 'reproduce and transform structures of domination' established between Africa and external actors.¹⁴ In both cases, the Global and continental realms intersect; the two settings are part of the same overall aspiration.

African agency as *continental integration* underscores the importance of Africa emancipating itself from its colonially inherited borders, relative material scarcity, and economic underdevelopment. It is a transformational project focusing on the politics and economics within the African continent. Of the seven 'Aspirations' of the AU's Agenda 2063, six focus on internal integration, with this paradigm summarized particularly well by Aspiration 2: 'An

2023, para. 8.vi, https://au.int/sites/default/files/decisions/42725-Assembly_AU_Dec_839_-865_XXXVI_E.pdf.

¹⁴ Bah, 'African Agency in New Humanitarianism and responsible governance', 158.

integrated continent, politically united and based on the ideals of Pan-Africanism and the vision of Africa's Renaissance'.¹⁵ Development partnerships with external actors play an essential role in this frame, but only as a transitory measure to address Africa's limited access to resources. As Folashadé Soulé observed, the narrative of a 'new scramble for Africa' misconstrues Africa's leadership and intentionality in shaping this type of African agency through partnerships 'by putting the focus on [the rivalry between] traditional and emerging powers [...] on the continent' as opposed to the AU's actual goals of continental transformation.¹⁶ As I argued elsewhere, the AU is remarkably successful at receiving European funds without allowing donors to shape the agenda in agency-restricting ways.¹⁷

The second realm in which the AU pursues African agency is through its aspired *global role*. Recalling a speech by Emperor Haile Selassie I in 1963, this frame aspires to an organization 'through which Africa can speak with one voice'.¹⁸ Through this approach, the AU seeks to take an active stance and attain African agency in organizational settings outside the continent. This is captured by Aspiration 7 of Agenda 2063, which aims to 'improv[e] Africa's place in the global governance system' and 'improv[e] Africa's partnerships and refocus[] them more strategically to respond to African priorities for growth and transformation'.¹⁹ A major obstacle to this type of agency is the heterogeneity and lack of formal delegation of AU member states.²⁰ The global realm of African agency sees partnerships not as sources for mobilizing resources for continental development, but as vessels for transforming the international structure shaping Africa. A strong AU Commission is useful – but not crucial – for this framing of African agency

¹⁵ African Union, 'Agenda 2063. The Africa We Want', 2015.

¹⁶ Folashadé Soulé, "'Africa+1" summit diplomacy and the "new scramble" narrative: Recentering African agency', *African Affairs* 119, no. 477 (11 December 2020): 646, <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adaa015>.

¹⁷ Ueli Staeger, 'Resource mobilization in security partnerships: Explaining cooperation and coercion in the EU's partnership with the African Union', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00108367221147785>.

¹⁸ Haile Selassie I., *Conférence au sommet à Addis-Abéba* (Asmara: Il Poligrafico, 1963), 25, translated by the author.

¹⁹ African Union, 'Agenda 2063. The Africa We Want'.

²⁰ Gwatiwa, *The African Union and African Agency in international politics*, 4.

through a multilateral and global role. As observed by many observers of African politics, African states too pursue and exercise African agency on their own.²¹ In addition, informal formats such as the African Political Alliance allow states to exert discursive agency without AU coordination ²².

African agency, non-alignment, and equidistance from re-emerging great power politics

The Ukraine crisis has affected the African continent through a set of shared concrete challenges for Africa and a reconfigured diplomatic landscape. Many of the AU's Western and non-Western partners now see Africa as a potential ally at the UN and have attempted to influence Africa's positioning. External actors' motivations for reinforcing ties with Africa are often transactionally minded and strategically rooted in zero-sum great power competition. From this perspective, the resurgence of great power competition has made Africa a more strategic (potential) partner. However, neither side in the Ukraine crisis has moved beyond an expectation of alignment and an instinctive attempt to further align Africa with their positions. The AU's pursuit of African agency has linked into these attempts of alignment, but with the goal of renegotiating them towards a pragmatic mindset where having multiple partnerships does not automatically entail competition between poles of power.²³

For many African governments, the war in Ukraine is a result of great power contestation between the West and Russia, and they perceive a need for equidistance from these powers to hold space for the pursuit of African agency. Many African observers agree that UN charter norms have been violated, but also argue that 'without including geopolitical competition, the

²¹ Soulé, "Africa+1" summit diplomacy and the "new scramble" narrative'.

²² Personal website of Robert Dussey, 'Declaration: first conference of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the African Political Alliance', accessed 20 July 2023, <https://robertdussey.com/en/first-conference-of-the-ministers-of-foreign-affairs-of-the-african-political-alliance/>.

²³ Nora Fisher-Onar and Emilian Kavalski, 'From trans-Atlantic order to Afro-Eur-Asian worlds? Reimagining International Relations as interlocking regional worlds', *Global Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (22 September 2022): ksac080, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksac080>.

Ukraine story is incomplete'.²⁴ Africa's history of non-alignment has informed this contemporary pursuit of pragmatism that skirts the binary logic of great power competition. Africa continues to hold an important position in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), even if the membership of India and observer status of Russia and China has given the organization a certain proximity to distinctly non-Western worldviews. Most prominently, Uganda will chair NAM and the G77 group in 2024. Although the Bandung Principles on which NAM was founded include sovereignty, territorial integrity, non-aggression, and non-intervention, African states have prioritized their equidistance from the great powers involved in the Ukraine crisis above Russia's violation of these principles. Additionally, Africa's righteous frustration with access to SARS-CoV-2 vaccines and NATO-led invasion of Libya in 2011 are two recent precedents that contributed to AU members' hesitation about alignment with the West.

Equidistance also means distance from Russia, not just the West. Whether Russia offers a viable alternative to the West is a major driver of the contentious politics of African non-alignment. Russia portrays itself as an anticolonial partner for Africa and accuses the West of working to 'preserve the neo-colonial system which allows it to live off the world, to plunder it thanks to the domination of the dollar and technology, to collect an actual tribute from humanity, [and] to extract its primary source of unearned prosperity, the rent paid to the hegemon'.²⁵ This rhetoric resonates in quite a few African capitals. In South Africa, Russia's role in opposing Apartheid and its alliance through BRICS has led to strong alignment with Russian positions. In the Sahel and Horn of Africa, several countries have significant military and intelligence partnerships with Russia. Ethiopia, which is home to the AU's headquarters, also has very close ties with Russia. In addition, Russia's veto power on the UN Security Council means it holds a

²⁴ Interview, senior AU official, Addis Ababa, January 2023.

²⁵ President of Russia, 'Signing of treaties on accession of Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics and Zaporozhye and Kherson regions to Russia', President of Russia, 30 September 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69465>.

unique diplomatic bargaining chip in terms of its power to block or support African states' initiatives on the Council. At the same time, many African governments recognise Russia's comparably small economic significance – less than 1% of foreign direct investment in Africa in 2017 came from Russia.²⁶ Many governments are wary of Russia's military footprint, responsible for 49% of arms exports into the continent.²⁷ Russian disinformation campaigns have undermined democratic processes and destabilized governments in the Sahel and elsewhere.²⁸ This apprehension is widely shared among African citizens; while pro-Russian views are frequent in a handful of countries, most citizens are 'generally indifferent' or negative towards Russia.²⁹ A June 2023 IPSOS poll in five large African countries finds even higher shares of pro-Ukrainian views.³⁰

In ensuring non-alignment and space for African agency, the majority of African states have prioritized equidistance from great powers over substantive NAM norms that would call for supporting Ukraine. This is a difficult trade-off: by seeking equidistance from the great powers directly and indirectly involved in Ukraine, African states satisfy a core tenet of non-alignment, but at the cost of overlooking a violation of the norm of territorial integrity, which has become closely associated with the Western liberal order. Africa's ambitions of equidistance can also be explained by the West and Russia's attempts to co-opt African states into a specific reading of the broader significance of the Ukraine war. As Carbone argues, African states 'do not wish to be seen as swing states in the battle for the preservation, or contestation, of the Western-led

²⁶ FDI Intelligence, 'Russia's ongoing charm offensive in Africa', 15 September 2020, <https://www.fdiintelligence.com/content/feature/russias-ongoing-charm-offensive-in-africa-78348>.

²⁷ Pieter D. Wezeman et al., 'Trends in international arms transfers, 2019' (SIPRI, 2020), https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/fs_2003_at_2019_0.pdf.

²⁸ Akinlolu E. Akinola and Olusola Ogunnubi, 'Russo-African relations and electoral democracy: Assessing the implications of Russia's renewed interest for Africa', *African Security Review* 30, no. 3 (3 July 2021): 386–402, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10246029.2021.1956982>.

²⁹ SAIIA, 'African social media indicates indifference towards Russia', 11 November 2022, <https://saiaa.org.za/research/african-social-media-indicates-indifference-towards-russia/>.

³⁰ IPSOS, 'African sentiment is favouring Ukraine', Ipsos, 21 June 2023, <https://www.ipsos.com/en-za/african-sentiment-favouring-ukraine>.

liberal international order'.³¹ Western actors have focused on Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a violation of UN Charter norms, and neglected to appreciate that many African states see the war as a European conflict with little to be gained by taking a stance, be it for historical continuity of non-alignment or distinct national foreign policies.

In practice, the AU's pursuit of African agency in Africa's non-aligned diplomacy on the Ukraine crisis was restrained by the vast diversity of positions among AU member states and by the low degree of the AU's delegated powers in foreign policy. The AU as a potential continental voice also faced competition from the African Peace Initiative in June 2023, led by South Africa and comprising Egypt, the Republic of the Congo, Uganda, Zambia and Comoros.³² Other than Comoros' participation motivated by its President Azali Assoumani's chairmanship of the AU Assembly, the mission lacked AU endorsement or involvement.³³ Since the beginning of the invasion, AU Ambassadors instead deferred this issue to national capitals and their statements in the UN's 11th Emergency Special Session of the UN General Assembly on Ukraine. To explore these dynamics, the next sections illustrate the AU's successes and challenges in pursuing African agency through equidistant non-alignment in the Ukraine crisis.

Carrying African voices at the UN

With the UN Security Council unable to act due to Russia's permanent membership and veto power, the UN General Assembly has become the focus of Western and Russian efforts to condemn either side through multilateral diplomacy, and to address the global impacts of the

³¹ Maurizio Carbone, 'When elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers: the Russo-Ukrainian conflict and the decentring-recentring conundrum in EU-Africa relations'', *Journal of European Integration*, forthcoming 2023.

³² South African Presidency, 'President Ramaphosa to participate in African Peace Initiative Mission to Ukraine and the Russian Federation', 15 June 2023, <https://www.thepresidency.gov.za/press-statements/president-ramaphosa-participate-african-peace-initiative-mission-ukraine-and-russian-federation>.

³³ Hubert Kinkoh and Ueli Staeger, 'Africa's Ukraine-Russia mediation needed a clearer AU footprint' (ISS Africa, 5 July 2023), <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/africas-ukraine-russia-mediation-needed-a-clearer-au-footprint>.

war. In shoring up support for several tabled resolutions on Ukraine, Africa's 54 votes at the UN General Assembly have created an impression in Western capitals of Africa as a 'swing continent'.³⁴ In some states, the pursuit of non-alignment has translated into an unwillingness to risk alienating Russia and its key vote and veto power within the UN Security Council. Given the high stakes and pace of the UN's 11th Emergency Special Session, the African Group struggled even more than usual to agree on common positions – as Ambassador Bankole Adeoye wrote before joining the AU as Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security, the AU's system for agreeing on Common African Positions (CAPs) is 'convoluted' and 'politically stressful'.³⁵ It is also important to underscore that 'expecting the 55 states of Africa to have a common position on a matter of such consequence is unrealistic'.³⁶ Crucially, the AU's diplomatic representation at the UN is not designed for emergency consensus-finding. The AU has not been able to agree on a CAP on Ukraine due to irreconcilable positions and disagreements on the AU's mandate.³⁷ This made it challenging for the AU to exercise African agency through a joint African position on the Ukraine crisis at the UN, despite this being the leading organizational setting for exerting African agency as a *global role*.

The idea of needing to 'pick a side' on specific resolutions stands at odds with equidistant non-alignment, which has stirred discomfort in many African states. Macky Sall, the president of Senegal and chair of the AU Assembly in 2022, said on behalf of the AU at the UN General Assembly in September 2022 that Africa 'does not want to be the breeding ground of a new cold war, but rather a pole of stability and opportunity open to all its partners, on a mutually beneficial basis'.³⁸ Western leaders have sought to distinguish historical non-alignment from

³⁴ Interview, EU diplomat, Addis Ababa, October 2022.

³⁵ Bankole Adeoye, 'Common African positions on global issues', Africa Report (Institute for Security Studies, 2020), <https://issafrica.org/research/africa-report/common-african-positions-on-global-issues>.

³⁶ Interview, AU official, Addis Ababa, January 2023.

³⁷ Interview, observer of AU affairs, Addis Ababa, January 2023.

³⁸ African Union, '77th Session of the United Nations General Assembly address by H.E. Macky Sall, President of the Republic of Senegal, current Chairman of the African Union', 20 September 2022, <https://au.int/en/speeches/20220920/77th-session-united-nations-general-assembly-address-he-macky-sall>.

the current crisis. French President Emmanuel Macron argued at the same meeting that Africa's current stance was completely different from Cold War non-alignment and would 'serve the cause of a new imperialism' that is 'disintegrating our international order without which peace is not possible'.³⁹ Except for strong pro-Ukrainian speeches by Dr Martin Kimani, Kenyan Ambassador to the UN, African voices at the UN have aligned on the need 'for de-escalation and a cessation of hostilities in Ukraine, as well as for a negotiated solution, to avoid the catastrophic risk of a potentially global conflict'.⁴⁰

Overall, the suggestion that the African Group is pro-Russian is wrong – it is deeply divided, with about half of its membership aligning with the West, and the other half mostly avoiding taking a position. Out of 324 possible African votes in the 11th Emergency Special Session since February 2022, only 15 times did an African country vote 'No' in opposition to Western-sponsored resolutions condemning Russia. Eritrea makes up a third of these votes; the rest are divided among six countries (the Central African Republic, the Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Gabon, Mali, and Zimbabwe). In four of six resolutions, a little more than half the African Group membership condemned Russia. However, non-alignment dominates the other half of the membership. Rather than taking sides, an important minority of African states have sought to send a message of non-alignment to Western positions at the UN General Assembly. Indeed, in the words of an AU official, the West's 'expectation for Africa to take position only for Europe has contributed to geopoliticizing the situation'.⁴¹ For all six resolutions in the 11th Emergency Special Session of the General Assembly to date, at least 40% of countries in the African Group have abstained or not participated in the vote, which is far above the share for the rest of the UN's membership of 193 states (see Table 1).

³⁹ Emmanuel Macron, 'Discours du Président de la République à l'Assemblée générale des Nations unies', 20 September 2022, https://gadebate.un.org/sites/default/files/gastatements/77/fr_fr.pdf.

⁴⁰ African Union, '77th Session of the United Nations General Assembly address by H.E. Macky Sall, President of the Republic of Senegal, current Chairman of the African Union'.

⁴¹ Interview, AU official, Addis Ababa, October 2022.

Table 1: African Group and total membership votes in the 11th UN Emergency Special Session of the UN General Assembly on Ukraine⁴²

	Yes	No	Abstention	Non-voting
ES-11/1, 2 Mar 2022, Withdrawal of Russian troops				
African Group	28 (52%)	1 (2%)	17 (31%)	8 (15%)
Total UN membership	141 (73%)	5 (3%)	35 (18%)	12 (6%)
ES-11/2, 24 Mar 2022, Humanitarian consequences				
African Group	27 (50%)	1 (2%)	20 (37%)	6 (11%)
Total UN membership	140 (72%)	5 (3%)	38 (20%)	10 (5%)
ES-11/3, 7 Apr 2022, Russian suspension from Human Rights Council				
African Group	10 (19%)	6 (11%)	24 (44%)	14 (26%)
Total UN membership	93 (49%)	24 (13%)	58 (31%)	18 (7%)
ES-11/4, 12 Oct 2022, Illegal referenda in Eastern Ukraine				
African Group	30 (56%)	0 (0%)	19 (35%)	5 (9%)
Total UN membership	143 (74%)	5 (3%)	35 (18%)	10 (5%)
ES-11/5, 14 Nov 2022, Reparations for Ukraine				
African Group	15 (28%)	5 (9%)	27 (50%)	7 (13%)
Total UN membership	94 (49%)	14 (7%)	73 (38%)	12 (6%)
ES-11/6, 23 Feb 2023, Charter principles underlying peace in Ukraine				
African Group	30 (55%)	2 (4%)	15 (28%)	7 (13%)
Total UN membership	141 (73%)	7 (4%)	32 (16%)	13 (7%)

Note: Percentages are rounded to add up to 100%. Total UN membership includes African Group.

African Group members have generally been consistent in their positions, with the most consistent positions coming from Angola, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Sudan, and Uganda (all ‘Abstention’, the first four states are former liberation movement governments historically close to the USSR), and Côte d’Ivoire, the Seychelles, Liberia, Malawi, and Niger (all ‘Yes’). In addition to the general consistency of African Group members in their votes,

⁴² Author’s compilation, based on resolution texts and voting records found in United Nations General Assembly, ‘Aggression against Ukraine’ (UN, 2 March 2022), <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3965290>; United Nations General Assembly, ‘Humanitarian consequences of the aggression against Ukraine’: (UN, 28 March 2022), <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3966630>; United Nations General Assembly, ‘Suspension of the rights of membership of the Russian Federation in the Human Rights Council’: (UN, 7 April 2022), <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3967950>; United Nations General Assembly, ‘Territorial integrity of Ukraine: defending the principles of the Charter of the United Nations’ (UN, 12 October 2022), <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3990673>; United Nations General Assembly, ‘Furtherance of remedy and reparation for aggression against Ukraine’ (UN, 15 November 2022), <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3994481>; United Nations General Assembly, ‘Principles of the Charter of the United Nations underlying a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in Ukraine’ (UN, 22 February 2023). While ‘Abstain’ is an explicit statement about the content of the resolution, ‘Non-voting’ could also signify a protest about having a vote at all, or an absence due to various reasons (domestic political challenges, late arrival of the representative, technical issues).

there was little notable change across resolutions, except for the third and fifth resolutions. These resolutions were focused on reparations for Ukraine and on Russia's suspension on the Human Rights Council. These resolutions were perceived as particularly Western and African diplomats accused Western countries of double standards in entering a topic often avoided when it comes to Africa. Other resolutions on territorial integrity and illegal independence referenda were more amenable for support by non-Western countries, indicating African support for UN Charter principles.⁴³ These text-based position shifts indicate that African diplomacy at the UN is driven by substantive policy logic: the more Western-sponsored the resolution, which would result in an impression of African alignment, the more the mindset of equidistant non-alignment dominated. As Table 2 illustrates, the more general principles and NAM norms were in the focus, the higher the support in the African Group.

Despite most African states' desire for equidistance from great power politics at the UN, Western and Russian diplomats engaged in intense diplomatic efforts in both New York and Addis Ababa. Much of the African Group in New York and many African states' diplomatic systems struggled under the high stakes of the resolutions and the immense external pressure exerted on them. Overall, AU members lacked formally delegated powers, efficient procedures and, most importantly, political will for exercising collective African agency to shape policy outcomes at the UN. This disunity significantly shaped the scope for AU diplomacy, which I turn to in the next section.

⁴³ Interview, diplomat, Addis Ababa, October 2022.

Table 2: African Group votes in the 11th UN Emergency Session of the UN General Assembly on Ukraine

	ES-11/1, 2 Mar 2022, <i>Withdrawal of Russian troops</i>	ES-11/2, 24 Mar 2022, <i>Humanitarian consequences</i>	ES-11/3, 7 Apr 2022, <i>Russian suspension from HRC</i>	ES-11/4, 12 Oct 2022, <i>Illegal referenda</i>	ES-11/5, 14 Nov 2022, <i>Reparations</i>	ES-11/6, 23 Feb 2023, <i>Charter principles</i>
Algeria	A	A	N/V	A	A	A
Angola	A	A	A	Y	A	A
Benin	Y	Y	N/V	Y	Y	Y
Botswana	Y	A	A	Y	A	Y
Burkina Faso	N/V	N/V	N/V	N/V	N/V	N/V
Burundi	A	A	N/V	A	A	A
Cabo Verde	Y	Y	A	Y	Y	Y
Cameroon	N/V	N/V	A	N/V	N/V	N/V
Central African Republic	A	A	N	A	N	A
Chad	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Comoros	Y	N/V	Y	Y	Y	Y
Congo, Dem. Rep.	Y	Y	Y	Y	N/V	Y
Congo, Rep.	A	A	N	A	A	A
Côte d'Ivoire	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Djibouti	Y	Y	N/V	N/V	Y	Y
Egypt, Arab Rep.	Y	Y	A	Y	A	Y
Equatorial Guinea	A	A	N/V	N/V	A	N/V
Eritrea	N	N	N	A	N	N
Eswatini	N/V	A	A	A	A	N/V
Ethiopia	N/V	A	N	A	N	A
Gabon	Y	Y	N	Y	A	A
Gambia, The	Y	Y	A	Y	A	Y
Ghana	Y	Y	A	Y	Y	Y
Guinea	N/V	N/V	N/V	A	A	A
Guinea-Bissau	N/V	A	A	Y	A	N/V
Kenya	Y	Y	A	Y	Y	Y

Note: Y = Yes, N = No, A = Abstention, N/V = Non-voting.

Voting suspensions under Article 19 of the UN Charter do not apply to Emergency Special Sessions

	ES-11/1, <i>cont.</i>	ES-11/2, <i>cont.</i>	ES-11/3, <i>cont.</i>	ES-11/4, <i>cont.</i>	ES-11/5, <i>cont.</i>	ES-11/6, <i>cont.</i>
Lesotho	Y	Y	A	A	A	Y
Liberia	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Libya	Y	Y	Y	Y	A	Y
Madagascar	A	A	A	Y	A	Y
Malawi	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Mali	A	A	N	A	N	N
Mauritania	Y	Y	N/V	Y	A	Y
Mauritius	Y	Y	Y	Y	A	Y
Morocco	N/V	N/V	N/V	Y	N/V	Y
Mozambique	A	A	A	A	A	A
Namibia	A	A	A	A	A	A
Niger	Y	Y	A	Y	Y	Y
Nigeria	Y	Y	A	Y	A	Y
Rwanda	Y	Y	N/V	Y	A	Y
São Tomé and Príncipe	Y	Y	N/V	N/V	N/V	Y
Senegal	A	Y	A	Y	N/V	N/V
Seychelles	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Sierra Leone	Y	Y	Y	Y	A	Y
Somalia	Y	N/V	N/V	Y	Y	Y
South Africa	A	A	A	A	A	A
South Sudan	A	Y	A	A	A	Y
Sudan	A	A	A	A	A	A
Togo	N/V	A	A	A	Y	A
Tunisia	Y	Y	A	Y	A	Y
Uganda	A	A	A	A	A	A
Tanzania	A	A	A	A	N/V	N/V
Zambia	Y	Y	N/V	Y	Y	Y
Zimbabwe	A	A	N/V	A	N	A

AU high-level diplomacy with belligerents and their allies

Although African states pursued independent foreign policies at the UN, the war in Ukraine resulted in unexpected success for the AU's discursive agency regarding Africa's *global role*. While observers strongly disagreed on the substance of the AU's diplomatic engagement with the belligerents and allies of the Ukraine war, the actual issuance of statements and an AU leadership's international visit to President Putin in Sochi, a year before the African Peace Initiative, indicate progress in terms of the AU's African discursive agency in terms of its global role. There were no substantive policy outcomes resulting from AU diplomacy, but the AU's success in establishing narratives and demonstrating Africa's relevance has not been seen before at this level.

The war in Ukraine is the first extra-African international crisis with which the AU has engaged in almost two decades. Not since 2003 – during the invasion of Iraq – has the AU taken a position on an urgent international crisis outside of Africa.⁴⁴ Such engagement in high-level extra-African diplomacy is novel for an organization that traditionally focuses on intra-African threats, crises, and development.⁴⁵ The AU's Peace and Security Council (PSC) does not have an institutionalised practice of taking positions on non-African security issues. To wit, the AU's flagship annual report discusses the AU PSC's 'activities and the state of peace and security *in Africa*' (emphasis added), and the AU Commission's annual and end-of-term reports have traditionally focused on a *continental integration* approach to external partnerships.⁴⁶ The

⁴⁴ African Union, 'Declaration of the African Union on the Iraqi crisis - Iraq', Central Organ of the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution of the African Union, meeting at Summit level, 3 February 2003. The 2014 crisis in Ukraine and annexation of Ukraine is not referenced in specific AU Commission leadership or PSC communications.

⁴⁵ A long-standing exception is the AU Assembly's annual Declaration on the occupation of Palestine.

⁴⁶ African Union, 'Report of the Peace and Security Council on its activities and the state of peace and security in Africa, for the period February 2019 - February 2020', 2020, <https://au.int/en/documents/20200210/report-peace-and-security-council-its-activities-and-state-peace-and-security>; African Union, 'African Union Commission end of term report 2017-2021', 2021, <https://au.int/en/documents/20210203/african-union->

significance of the AU's joint leadership carrying an African voice of de-escalation and non-alignment globally on an imminent extra-African crisis therefore cannot be overstated.

The AU's relations with Ukraine have been comparably less lively than those with Russia, which traditionally enjoys excellent diplomatic ties with many African countries, including major players at the AU, and has about four times as many embassies on the continent than Ukraine. Russia obtained observer status at the AU as early as 2006,⁴⁷ and its diplomatic presence in Addis Ababa exceeds that of many Western countries.⁴⁸ In comparison, Ukraine has had minimal relations with Africa since the fall of the Soviet Union;⁴⁹ the country only obtained observer status at the AU in 2016 and its diplomatic relations with the AU only extend to a small diplomatic presence in Addis Ababa that also caters to bilateral affairs with Ethiopia.⁵⁰ The diplomatic ties between AU member states and Ukraine therefore had a considerably lower baseline strength before the war than those with Russia, even if Ukraine is attempting to gain ground through opening new embassies and high-level visits to African capitals.

In the early days of the invasion, the AU carved out space for exercising African agency, with the leadership speaking on behalf of member states about the consequences of the war for Africa. On 24 February 2022, the AU Chairperson, Senegalese President Macky Sall, and the AU Commission Chairperson, Moussa Faki Mahamat, 'called on the Russian Federation and any other regional or international actor to imperatively respect international law, the territorial

commission-end-term-report-2017-2021; African Union, 'Annual Report on the activities of the Union and its Organs', 2020, <https://au.int/en/documents/20200207/annual-report-activities-union-and-its-organs-2020>.

⁴⁷ Roscongress, 'Special issue on the outcomes of the Russia–Africa Economic Forum', Roscongress Building Trust, 24 March 2020, <https://roscongress.org/en/materials/roscongress-insayder-spetsialnyy-vypusk-po-itogam-ekonomicheskogo-foruma-rossiya-afrika/>.

⁴⁸ Interviews, diplomats, Addis Ababa, October 2022.

⁴⁹ Andrey Veselovsky, 'Ukraine's African connection', *IPS Journal*, 9 August 2021, <https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/foreign-and-security-policy/ukraines-african-connection-5348/>.

⁵⁰ Embassy of Ukraine to Ethiopia, 'Ukraine has obtained the observer status in the African Union', 22 June 2016, <https://ethiopia.mfa.gov.ua/en/news/48643-ukrajina-nabula-status-sposterigacha-v-afrikansykomu-sojuzi>.

integrity and national sovereignty of Ukraine’.⁵¹ A focus on UN Charter norms and Africa’s non-alignment dominated this initial statement. The AU’s agency was particularly successful in discursively shaping global conversations about the discrimination faced by African citizens fleeing Ukraine at external borders with the European Union (EU) – a topic on which AU members found consensus much more easily than taking a stance on the invasion. Four days into the war, the AU’s leadership criticised the ‘shockingly racist’ nature of this discrimination in ‘breach [of] international law’.⁵² This statement reverberated strongly in African and global media outlets, and led to the EU proposing a coordination mechanism with the AU Commission to solve specific cases of AU citizens’ struggles.⁵³ However, the reputational damage of this statement for the EU and the real challenges arguably eroded any significant goodwill on the part of AU member states, and illustrates the success of the AU’s discursive African agency.

In a first for the AU, a few months after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the AU’s joint leadership was mandated to travel to the belligerents of an active extra-African war. While the AU Assembly’s rules of procedure give the AU Chairperson prerogatives for external representation, the Chairperson enhanced the legitimacy of the trip by seeking authorization from the AU Bureau (consisting of the outgoing AU Chairperson as secretary and geographical representation of AU regions).⁵⁴ Diplomatic efforts to establish narratives and strengthen alliances in Africa had been intensifying from both the Ukrainian and Russian sides. The trip to both Russia and Ukraine was announced by AU Chairperson Macky Sall.⁵⁵ As little as two days ahead of the Russian leg of the trip, which took place on 3 June 2022, AU Commission

⁵¹ African Union, ‘Statement from Chair of the African Union, H.E President Macky Sall and Chairperson of the AU Commission H.E Moussa Faki Mahamat, on the situation in Ukraine’, 24 February 2022, <https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20220224/african-union-statement-situation-ukraine>.

⁵² African Union, ‘Statement of the African Union on the reported ill treatment of Africans trying to leave Ukraine’, 28 February 2022, <https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20220228/statement-ill-treatment-africans-trying-leave-ukraine>.

⁵³ Interview, EU diplomat, Addis Ababa, October 2022.

⁵⁴ Bundesregierung, ‘Pressekonferenz von Bundeskanzler Scholz mit Präsident Sall am 22. Mai 2022 in Dakar’, 22 May 2022, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/suche/pressekonferenz-von-bundeskanzler-scholz-mit-praesident-sall-am-22-mai-2022-in-dakar-2042350>; African Union, ‘African Union Handbook 2022’, 2022, 33.

⁵⁵ Bundesregierung, ‘Pressekonferenz von Bundeskanzler Scholz mit Präsident Sall am 22. Mai 2022 in Dakar’.

Chairperson Moussa Faki Mahamat referred publicly to a ‘joint mission to Russia and Ukraine’, though only the first leg of the trip eventually happened.⁵⁶

In Sochi, the AU’s leadership interpreted equidistant non-alignment as requiring a demonstration of closeness with Russia. AU leaders largely mirrored the Russian narrative, especially when blaming Western sanctions for rising food insecurity on the African continent. Macky Sall reiterated Africa’s historically strong ties with Russia and that Africa’s food insecurity was a direct result of Western sanctions. He called upon Putin to ‘work together to resolve these problems so that sanctions are lifted on food products, in particular, grain, and fertiliser’.⁵⁷ Similarly, Moussa Faki Mahamat ‘appealed for the suspension of sanctions against cereals [and] other key commodities’.⁵⁸ While there is a lively academic debate on the impact of international sanctions, and while their prices have surely been affected by secondary effects outside the control of sanctioning countries, fertilizer and grain are in fact exempt from Western sanctions.⁵⁹ The AU leadership’s factually incorrect statements about sanctions ruffled feathers in many Western capitals. Several Western powers, including the USA and EU, sought contact with the AU’s leadership and privately condemned the trip to Russia, although public summaries of the meetings following the Sochi trip referred to, for example, ‘regional issues with an emphasis on food security, particularly its effects on Africa’.⁶⁰ The non-factuality of

⁵⁶ Moussa Faki Mahamat [@AUC_MoussaFaki], Tweet, *Twitter*, 1 June 2022, https://twitter.com/AUC_MoussaFaki/status/1531873014408695809.

⁵⁷ President of Russia, ‘Meeting with African Union Chairperson, President of Senegal Macky Sall’, President of Russia, 3 June 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68564>.

⁵⁸ Moussa Faki Mahamat [@AUC_MoussaFaki], Tweet, *Twitter*, 3 June 2022, https://twitter.com/AUC_MoussaFaki/status/153274568295554816.

⁵⁹ Erica Moret, ‘Sanctions and the costs of Russia’s war in Ukraine’, *IPI Global Observatory* (blog), 12 May 2022, <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2022/05/sanctions-and-the-costs-of-russias-war-in-ukraine/>; Tim Benton et al., ‘The Ukraine war and threats to food and energy security: Cascading risks from rising prices and supply disruptions’ (Royal Institute of International Affairs, 13 April 2022), <https://doi.org/10.55317/9781784135225>; Sandeep Jagtap et al., ‘The Russia-Ukraine conflict: its implications for the global food supply chains’, *Foods* 11, no. 14 (14 July 2022): 2098, <https://doi.org/10.3390/foods11142098>.

⁶⁰ Moussa Faki Mahamat [@AUC_MoussaFaki], Tweet, *Twitter*, 7 June 2022, https://twitter.com/AUC_MoussaFaki/status/1534193323426070529; United States Department of State, ‘Secretary Blinken’s call with African Union Commission Chairperson Faki’, 7 June 2022, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-blinkens-call-with-african-union-commission-chairperson-faki-3/>.

the AU leadership's statements notwithstanding, the Sochi trip provides an important example of how the pursuit of discursive African agency through seeking a *global role* can lead to normative divergence with different partners. As Bah argues, the exercise of African agency reserves the possibility of deviating from liberal norms while advancing external relations in an equidistant approach.⁶¹

The debate on sanctions and Africa is arguably missing the more important point that Russia's invasion of Ukraine itself is a more significant cause of rising food and fertilizer prices in Africa than sanctions themselves. While sanctions can indirectly affect food security, the disruptions of war in southern Ukraine, including the military blockade of Ukrainian seaports, have had a much more direct and drastic impact on food and fertilizer exports. The AU leadership's position, however, did not focus on this principal cause but rather on the (incorrect) assumption that food and fertilizer exports were sanctioned. It is hard to distinguish intentional disinformation from honest mistakes in the AU's position. After all, this stance is in keeping with the AU's long-standing stance against sanctions, such as on Zimbabwe. In reaction to the Sochi meeting, the EU and United States increased their strategic communications to dissociate their sanctions from the more immediate effects of the war and naval blockade on Africa's food security crisis.⁶²

The AU's trip to Russia and Ukraine ultimately failed to fully match the ideal of equidistant non-alignment, not just because of an overly pro-Russian narrative on sanctions, but also because the planned leg to Ukraine was cancelled at the last minute. The official reason for its

⁶¹ Bah, 'African Agency in New Humanitarianism and responsible governance'; Olufemi Taiwo, *Against decolonisation: taking African agency seriously* (London: Hurst & Company, 2022).

⁶² OFAC, 'OFAC Food Security Fact Sheet: Russia Sanctions and Agricultural Trade', 14 July 2022, https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/126/russia_fact_sheet_20220714.pdf; European Commission, 'EU sanctions against Russia explained', 10 October 2022, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions/restrictive-measures-against-russia-over-ukraine/sanctions-against-russia-explained/>.

cancellation was attributed to the lack of a written, official invitation.⁶³ Such invitations are standard diplomatic protocol, but can potentially be skipped in times of crises. Ukraine only transmitted one almost six months later on 21 November 2022.⁶⁴ Several Western high-level visits to Ukraine occurred without a written invitation, and the failure to visit both countries meant the goal of a equidistant non-aligned AU was hard to defend.⁶⁵ In the following weeks, the AU sought to correct the impression of a one-sided diplomatic strategy by accepting a request for a virtual address by Ukraine. In line with Ukraine's extensive practice of video teleconferencing addresses to parliaments and public gatherings around the world, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky addressed AU member states on 20 June 2022, in a poorly attended ad-hoc composition of 'the Bureau of the Assembly expanded to the Heads of State and Government'.⁶⁶ The AU also adjusted its narrative on sanctions needing to 'consider the effects of sanctions on the African continent'.⁶⁷

In a demonstration of the AU's successful pursuit of agency, both Russia and Ukraine have since sought to intensify their diplomatic contact with the AU and AU member states. To that end, the AU Commission agreed talking points for diplomatic engagement that include calls for a cessation of hostilities and negotiations, to consider effects of sanctions on the African continent, and ensure accountability for crimes committed on both sides.⁶⁸ Visitors to Addis Ababa (and several other African capitals) include Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov and Ukrainian foreign minister Dmytro Kuleba. Only the latter was received officially by the AU Chairperson and AU Commission Chair, which re-established a more balanced perception of the AU's discursive agency being mobilised for equidistant non-alignment and pragmatic

⁶³ Interviews, diplomats from the EU, Turkey, and Ukraine, Addis Ababa, October 2022.

⁶⁴ Interviews, diplomats, Addis Ababa, January 2023.

⁶⁵ Interview, Ukrainian diplomat, October 2022.

⁶⁶ African Union, 'The 44th Ordinary Session of the Permanent Representatives' Committee (PRC) kicked off', 20 June 2022, <https://au.int/ar/node/41937>.

⁶⁷ Interviews, AU officials, Addis Ababa, January and February 2023.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*

solution-finding.⁶⁹ Sergey Lavrov meanwhile only held a meeting for AU member state diplomats in Addis Ababa.⁷⁰ The AU's first proactive diplomatic engagement with an urgent non-African security crisis created considerable interest in the institution, and illustrates the AU's power of discourse in aspiring African agency in pursuit of a *global role* for the AU. As it lacked a mandate for a more substantive role influencing policy outcomes, the AU's agency was limited to the discursive domain, where it significantly contributed to shaping a global conversation about the war's effects in and on Africa. As the next section shows, the AU has pursued African agency by successfully channelling this global interest away from geopolitical dividing lines and into a solution-oriented paradigm.

Solution-oriented AU agenda-setting for African food security

Given resurging great power competition and effects of the war on Africa, the AU and many of its member states shifted from abstract prioritizing non-alignment to solution-oriented diplomacy. Dealing with the nutritional and humanitarian outfall of the war has become the lowest common denominator among AU states. The AU's theme for 2022, 'Strengthening Resilience in Nutrition and Food Security on the African Continent', inadvertently became very topical and timely for these efforts to create a depoliticized space for policy outcomes beyond geopolitical alignment.⁷¹ Ghanaian President Nana Akufo-Addo captured this sentiment well when arguing at the UN General Assembly that 'every bullet, every bomb, every shell that hits a target in Ukraine, hit our pockets and our economies in Africa'.⁷²

⁶⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, 'Дмитро Кулеба: Україна започатковує системну співпрацю із Африканським Союзом', 24 May 2023, <https://mfa.gov.ua/news/dmitro-kuleba-ukrayina-zapochatkovuye-sistemnu-spiivpracyu-iz-afrikanskim-soyuzom>.

⁷⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 'Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's statement and answers to the questions during a meeting with permanent representatives of the member countries of the African Union and the diplomatic corps, Addis Ababa, July 27, 2022 - The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation', 27 July 2022, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1824184/.

⁷¹ African Union, 'Decision of the African Union theme of the year for 2022', 2022, https://au.int/sites/default/files/decisions/41583-Assembly_AU_Dec_813-838_XXXV_E.pdf.

⁷² The Presidency of Ghana, 'Address By President Akufo-Addo at the 77th session Of the United Nations' General Assembly', 21 September 2022, <https://presidency.gov.gh/index.php/briefing-room/speeches/2285-address-by-president-akufo-addo-at-the-77th-session-of-the-united-nations-general-assembly>.

The AU's leadership can also be credited a successful use of discursive agency by putting African food security and secondary effects of sanctions on the global agenda. Around Macky Sall's call to action in Sochi, many countries from around the world joined publicly called for better African food security, and a debate on the culprits of food insecurity ensued.⁷³ At the AU, a AU High-Level Food Security and Nutrition Conference was convened on 10 October 2022, which assembled over 300 delegates including African Ministers of Agriculture.⁷⁴ The conference, which was co-organized with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), and the African Development Bank (AfDB), is a key example of solution-oriented diplomacy that gives the AU voice without needing to take sides in the 'new Cold War' some see emerging. It is telling that while both Ukraine and Russia were given the floor late into the High-Level Conference, the moderator sought to ensure that both statements stuck to solution-oriented approaches.⁷⁵ The conference represented a case of AU agency that combines the *continental integration* and *global role* frames.

In finding concrete solutions, the AU's African agency was limited to a discursive role, not policy outcomes. As the Black Sea became a key theatre of operations of the war, grain exports

⁷³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 'China and Africa: Strengthening friendship, solidarity and cooperation for a new era of common development', n.d., https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjb_663304/wjbz_663308/2461_663310/202208/t20220819_10745617.html; Kate Bartlett, 'US, China Blame Each Other Over Food Insecurity', VOA, 12 June 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/us-china-blame-each-other-over-food-insecurity-/6612672.html>; Euractiv, 'In competition with Russia, Macron pledges food, security boost during West Africa trip', 27 July 2022, sec. Global Europe, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/in-competition-with-russia-macron-pledges-food-security-boost-during-west-africa-trip/>.

⁷⁴ African Union, 'Galvanizing support to build resilient and sustainable food systems for food security and nutrition in Africa', 15 October 2022, <https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20221015/galvanizing-support-build-resilient-and-sustainable-food-systems-food>.

⁷⁵ Interviews with participants of the conference, Addis Ababa, October 2022; Ukrainian Embassy to Ethiopia, 'Посольство України в Ефіопії - Спецпредставник України з питань Близького Сходу та Африки Максим Субх взяв участь у роботі міжнародної Конференції високого рівня з питань продовольчої безпеки в Аддис-Абебі', 18 October 2022, <https://ethiopia.mfa.gov.ua/news/specpredstavnik-ukrayini-z-pitan-blizkogo-shodu-ta-afriki-maksim-subh-vzyav-uchast-u-roboti-mizhnarodnoyi-konferenciyi-visokogo-rivnya-z-pitan-prodovolchoyi-bezpeki-v-addis-abebi>.

from Ukraine decreased dramatically and in turn increased global grain prices. The ‘Initiative on the Safe Transportation of Grain and Foodstuffs from Ukrainian Ports’, or more commonly the ‘Black Sea Grain Initiative’, was a major diplomatic breakthrough mediated by Türkiye and facilitated by the UN Secretary-General.⁷⁶ This agreement, which was signed by Russia and Ukraine on 22 July 2022, aimed to ensure the safe delivery of grain, food, and fertilizer to and from Ukrainian ports. However, it was not aimed at Africa alone; in fact, only about 7% of the total exported tonnage was destined for African countries, a fact that President Putin criticized publicly (while misrepresenting the UN data).⁷⁷ Russia briefly discontinued its participation in the Black Sea Grain Initiative in October 2022,⁷⁸ which, along with Russia’s successively tightened export controls on fertilizer in May and December 2022, did not help to create a lasting impression of Russia as seeking to fully participate in the solution-oriented diplomacy sought by the AU and its member states.⁷⁹ Russian preconditions for the Initiative’s renewal in July prevented a further renewal, causing fears of more direct and indirect effects on African food security.

The AU’s leadership an indirect discursive but no policy shaping role in setting up the Black Sea Grain Initiative.⁸⁰ The AU issued a congratulatory note regarding the conclusion of this agreement in July 2022.⁸¹ The statement welcomed the resumption of grain exports through the

⁷⁶ United Nations, ‘Initiative on the Safe Transportation of Grain and Foodstuffs from Ukrainian Ports’ (Istanbul, 22 July 2022), https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/black_sea_grain_initiative_full_text.pdf.

⁷⁷ OCHA Services, ‘Black Sea Grain Initiative Vessel Movements - Humanitarian Data Exchange’, 1 November 2022, <https://data.humdata.org/dataset/black-sea-grain-initiative-vessel-movements>; TASS, ‘Almost all grain from Ukraine gone to EU, not to poorest states, Putin says’, *TASS*, 7 September 2022, <https://tass.com/economy/1504267>.

⁷⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, ‘Foreign Ministry statement on the Black Sea Grain Initiative for the export of Ukrainian grain - The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation’, 29 October 2022, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1835797/.

⁷⁹ GRO Intelligence, ‘Russia extends and tightens fertilizer export quotas through May 2023’, Gro Intelligence, 23 December 2022, <https://www.gro-intelligence.com/insights/russia-extends-and-tightens-fertilizer-export-quotas-through-may-2023>.

⁸⁰ Interviews, diplomats, Addis Ababa, January and February 2023; Interview, AU official, Addis Ababa, January 2023.

⁸¹ African Union, ‘The Chairperson of the African Union Commission welcomes signing of Russia/Ukraine agreement to resume grain exports under auspices of Türkiye and United Nations’, 22 July 2022, <https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20220722/chairperson-auc-welcomes-signing-russiaukraine-agreement>.

Black Sea, and connected the initiative to the AU leadership's visit to Russia. Chairperson Faki 'warmly congratulate[s] H.E. Macky Sall [...] for having called for the urgent need for the resumption of cereals from Ukraine and Russia to global markets as made to President Vladimir Putin during a joint AU mission to Sochi on 3 June 2022, of which this welcome development is a testament'.⁸² While neither willing nor able (due to lack of resources) to be involved in the diplomatic process, the AU can nonetheless claim a success of discursive African agency in global agenda-setting. Whether the AU can translate this discursive commitment into operational policy action remains to be seen, as there is an attempt to do so through a task-force at the AU Commission to 'gather information and take action to try to limit the effects of the conflict'.⁸³ With or without tangible policy outcomes, this represents an important development in African agency in pursuing a *global role* through discursive means.

The AU's partnerships for continental integration under strain

The Ukraine crisis has brought considerable stress to AU partnerships designed in (and for) a more peaceful global context. For the AU's partnerships aimed at enhancing African agency in a *continental integration* approach, a mixed picture emerges. The AU Commission has traditionally been responsible for resource mobilization towards enhancing the AU's agency.⁸⁴ On the one hand, many of the AU's existing partnerships for substantive cooperation have proved resilient in the face of the Ukraine crisis and are delivering at their usual pace and intensity in many areas. On the other hand, the fear of diminished financial contributions from partners in the Global North and the fear of diverted funds to Ukraine has cast doubt on these established partnerships. Despite assurances that Africa 'remains a priority',⁸⁵ the longer and more devastating the war becomes, the more Western governments' attention may divert,

⁸² African Union.

⁸³ Africa Intelligence, 'African Union mobilises task force to counter effects of Ukraine war', Africa Intelligence, 10 October 2022, <https://www.africaintelligence.com/the-continent/2022/10/10/african-union-mobilises-task-force-to-counter-effects-of-ukraine-war,109832816-art>.

⁸⁴ Staeger, 'Resource mobilization in security partnerships'.

⁸⁵ Interview, European diplomat, Addis Ababa, October 2022.

especially if the economic outlook continues to suffer. Early evidence shows that in EU member states' humanitarian, migration, and development budgets, flexible emergency allocations have overwhelmingly been spent on Ukraine, and that there are questions about maintaining current contribution levels in Africa.⁸⁶

At the same time, the AU had an opportunity to revive its partners' attention by creatively exploiting great power competition to strengthen resource mobilization for *continental integration*. The AU's strategy is that 'rivalry between Russia and the West is good news for Africa, as it makes it easier for Africa to obtain things from both sides'.⁸⁷ This strategy was broadly successful; as a senior diplomat from an EU country argues, 'if a wake-up call was needed to relaunch the partnership, no-one could find a better one'.⁸⁸

The EU–AU partnership remains the most important institutional partnership for African agency through continental integration in Africa, but also the one under the most strain. Questions of geopolitical alignment have brought crisis to the long-standing cooperation between the EU and AU. The most telling example is the failure to issue the usual Joint Communiqué at two consecutive Annual Joint Consultative Meeting between the AU PSC and EU PSC in 2022 and 2023 over a reference to the war in Ukraine, with the AU claiming it could not take positions on matters beyond the African continent.⁸⁹ At the same time, Western-minded countries such as Japan succeeded in agreeing ambitious and solution-oriented language in their summits.⁹⁰ It took as long as nine months after the invasion began for the two Commissions to

⁸⁶ UN Development Program, 'Underfunded Report', September 2022, <https://reporting.unhcr.org/underfunded-report>; Sara Harcourt McNair David, 'Rerouting goodwill: The risks of diverting aid from Africa to Europe', ECFR, 14 March 2023, <https://ecfr.eu/article/rerouting-goodwill-the-risks-of-diverting-aid-from-africa-to-europe/>; Tazreena Sajjad, 'Generous aid to Ukraine is diverting resources away from other refugee crises around the world', The Conversation, 4 November 2022, <http://theconversation.com/generous-aid-to-ukraine-is-diverting-resources-away-from-other-refugee-crises-around-the-world-190961>.

⁸⁷ Interview, African diplomat, Addis Ababa, January 2023.

⁸⁸ Interview, European diplomat, Addis Ababa, February 2023.

⁸⁹ Interviews, EU diplomats and an AU official, Addis Ababa, October 2022 and May 2023; Amani Africa, '13th Annual Joint Consultative Meeting of the AUPSC and EUPSC', 2022, <https://amaniafrica-et.org/13th-annual-joint-consultative-meeting-of-the-aupsc-and-eupsc/>.

⁹⁰ TICAD, 'TICAD 8 Tunis Declaration', 28 August 2022, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100387033.pdf>.

find minimal common language on constructive disagreements about the Ukraine crisis in the Commission-to-Commission setting.⁹¹ The EU sent out several diplomatic démarches to the AU Chairperson and AU member states before and after each vote of the UN General Assembly.⁹² As a senior AU official argues, Ukraine was ‘a distraction to the partnership’, given how it was designed for anything but geopolitics, and that the EU-AU partnership lacked the ‘expression of mutual respect and of willingness to develop better mutual understanding’.⁹³

The EU grappled with its ill-informed expectation that its funding-based partnerships with the AU and its member states would translate into alignment through UN votes, and considered introducing an element of ‘transactionality’ into these relationships. In a leaked report from the EU Delegation to the AU and EU Heads of Mission, this idea was defended by the argument that ‘the willingness of Europeans (governments and taxpayers) to maintain higher levels of financial engagement in African countries will depend on working based on common values and a joint vision’.⁹⁴ Proponents of transactionality also admitted that there is a ‘political reality that the available money will shift [away from Africa]’, and that scarcer resources should be attributed more strategically.⁹⁵ Although the EU never formally adopted the idea of an explicitly transactional approach, new initiatives such as the Global Gateway initiative for infrastructure development could see elements of such transactionality. They spell trouble for the AU’s partnerships mobilizing resources for African agency through *continental integration*.

⁹¹ European Commission, ‘9 months after summit: European Union and African Union Commissions take stock of the implementation of the February summit commitments’, 28 November 2022, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_22_7247.

⁹² Interview, EU diplomat, Addis Ababa, January 2023; Interview, Ukrainian diplomat, January 2023; Moussa Faki Mahamat [@AUC_MoussaFaki], Tweet, *Twitter*, 17 March 2022, https://twitter.com/AUC_MoussaFaki/status/1504463448578662406.

⁹³ Interview, senior AU official, Addis Ababa, January 2023.

⁹⁴ Vince Chadwick, ‘Exclusive: Internal report shows EU fears losing Africa over Ukraine’, *Devex*, 22 July 2022, <https://www.devex.com/news/exclusive-internal-report-shows-eu-fears-losing-africa-over-ukraine-103694>.

⁹⁵ Interview, European diplomat, Addis Ababa, October 2022.

There is a fear of decreased EU funding in extant areas of cooperation, and above all peace and security. For now, substantive EU–AU cooperation has not been affected by the war and will likely stay stable in the short term.⁹⁶ But in peace and security, the EU has spent significant sums on military support to Ukraine, and the Ukraine crisis occurred at a moment of transition between the EU’s African Peace Facility and new instruments, in which the AU felt the EU did not commit to the AU credibly enough.⁹⁷ In particular, the new European Peace Facility (EPF) has a budget of €12 billion for the period 2021–2027, of which €5.6 billion has already been committed to military support to Ukraine,⁹⁸ leading to fears that the AU Commission could fail to access EU funds that are vital for its agency in the medium term. The two significant increases in the EPF budget to €7.98 billion in March 2023 and €12 billion in June 2023 have had little impact in assuaging AU fears over marginalization fears, short of a more formal commitment to the instrument’s global scope and support to the AU.⁹⁹ In parallel, the AU is losing its status as the EU’s entry point for pan-African issues. While the EU’s supranational institutions committed to maintaining to Africa overall (which its member states have not), the EU does not exclude lowering contributions to the AU specifically.¹⁰⁰ This tendency, already visible in some African crises, further imperils the AU’s African agency through *continental integration*.

The AU’s partnerships with the United States and China have been comparatively less affected by the war in Ukraine. The United States continues to view the AU as a forum for ‘multilateral, policy-oriented engagement’ and a ‘parallel track to bilateral issues’, which arguably did suffer

⁹⁶ Interviews, EU diplomats and diplomats, Addis Ababa, October 2022.

⁹⁷ Interview, senior AU official, Addis Ababa, January 2023.

⁹⁸ European Union, ‘The European Peace Facility. Factsheet July 2023.’ (Service for Foreign Policy Instruments, July 2023), https://fpi.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-07/EU-peace-facility_2023-07.pdf.

⁹⁹ European Council, ‘European Peace Facility: Council increases the financial ceiling to nearly €7.98 billion until 2027’, 14 March 2023, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/03/14/european-peace-facility-council-increases-the-financial-ceiling-to-nearly-7-98-billion-until-2027/>.

¹⁰⁰ Frank Mattheis, Dimpho Deleglise, and Ueli Staeger, ‘African Union: The African political integration process and its impact on EU-AU relations in the field of foreign and security policy’ (European Parliament, Report PE 702.587, May 2023), 46, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/702587/EXPO_STU\(2023\)702587_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/702587/EXPO_STU(2023)702587_EN.pdf).

more in the face of the war in Ukraine.¹⁰¹ Compared to the EU and its member states, the United States has been less engaged in issuing diplomatic démarches to the AU and its member states on UN votes or other aspects of the war in Ukraine.¹⁰² In addition, both countries' cooperation activities with the AU Commission pale in comparison to those of the EU: the United States and China each have an on-budget portfolio at the AU of about 1.5–2 million USD per year; the EU accounts of more than 523 million USD per year.¹⁰³ The AU has continued to build multiple partnerships in pursuit of African agency, but its best-endowed partnership has suffered from the AU's desire for equidistant non-alignment in the Ukraine crisis.

Conclusion

Amidst the global Ukraine crisis, the AU's pursuit of African agency faced steep obstacles. As this briefing demonstrated, success of African agency comes in different types, and happens in different organizational settings. Distinguishing discourse from policy outputs allows a differentiated conclusion about the success of African agency. In pursuing discursive agency for a *global role*, the AU leadership successfully framed the global conversation leading to the diplomatic process around the Black Sea Grain Initiative. While it did not deliver its first high-level diplomatic mission in a geopolitically balanced manner fully in line with non-alignment, its crisis diplomacy nonetheless represents a wholly new level of aspiration for the AU to play a role in shaping conversations around global challenges that shape Africa's destiny.

Despite all the discursive success, the AU was not as united, decisive, or generating impactful policy outcomes as it aspires to be. However, the AU has successfully exercised African agency in discursively shaping the global conversation around the Ukraine war's effects on Africa.

¹⁰¹ Interview, diplomat, Addis Ababa, October 2022.

¹⁰² Interviews, diplomats, Addis Ababa, October 2022 and February 2023.

¹⁰³ Interviews, diplomats, Addis Ababa, May 2019 and October 2022; EU numbers are author's calculations based on unreleased 2023 programme budget numbers and African Union, Decision on the reports of the Sub-Committees of the Permanent Representatives' Committee, *Executive Council*, 14-15 July 2022, https://au.int/sites/default/files/decisions/42197-EX_CL_DEC_1168_-_1188_XLI_E.pdf, paragraph 75.

The AU has demonstrated its growing willingness to speak with one voice globally and work towards attaining a *global role*. This global dimension of the AU's African agency has been largely dormant in the past, and its discursive mechanisms deserve more attention. By contributing to global agenda-setting, the AU has punched above its weight for the first time in an non-African security crisis, thereby exercising its African agency.

A revived interest in Africa is a blessing and curse for the AU's pursuit of African agency. As an AU official says: 'Everyone needs the AU now: Russia, the USA, the EU, which serves the AU well.'¹⁰⁴ The AU's success depends on its ability to transform great powers' logic of global competition into a world where there is space for African voice, representation, and participation. The AU is not an automatic choice for this role. As the African Peace Initiative to Ukraine, organized outside the AU framework, illustrates, the AU is facing increasing competition to speak on behalf of the continent. But a good instance of such a positive transformation of the global context was AU Chairperson Macky Sall's campaign for a permanent AU seat at the G20, which received wide diplomatic support from global powers.¹⁰⁵ The success of this proposal would arguably not have been possible without the new context of the Ukraine crisis and the AU's diplomacy.¹⁰⁶ The AU's proposed G20 membership could prove fertile ground to reinvigorate member states' trust in the AU's potential to speak and negotiate on behalf of Africa's *global role*.

¹⁰⁴ Interview, AU official, Addis Ababa, February 2023.

¹⁰⁵ African Union, 'Discours de S.E. Macky Sall, Président en exercice de l'Union Africaine à l'occasion de la quatrième Réunion de Coordination de l'Union Africaine', 17 July 2022, <https://au.int/fr/speeches/20220717/discours-de-se-macky-sall-quatrieme-reunion-de-coordination>.

¹⁰⁶ Interview, EU diplomat, January 2023; Interview, AU official, Addis Ababa, February 2023.

The AU's role in the Ukraine crisis is a wake-up call for Western observers about the normative desirability of African agency. A strong, united AU does not automatically align with the West. An AU with the capacity to act intentionally may also produce discourses and policy outcomes that the West disagrees with, just as much as it may agree with the West.¹⁰⁷ Implementing equidistant non-alignment and pursuing African agency is a stark collective challenge. Having taken African alignment for granted, Western countries have been surprised by African countries' lack of support for their position. Russia continues to rely on its historically advantageous position in Africa; however, the more Russia fails to credibly partake in multilateral efforts to overcome Africa's food insecurity caused by the war in Ukraine, the harder it is for African states to defend a course of non-alignment, or even proximity to Russia. The AU's crisis diplomacy in proximity to Russia has shown that an AU with more agency might occasionally pursue goals at odds with Western interests.

The *continental integration* and *global role* realms of African agency shed light on Africa's positionality in this conflict, and are, as argued in this briefing, fully compatible. Inly through progress towards more symbolical and effective representation in global fora and organizations will the AU and individual African states side with their partners, even if they are contributing significantly to African continental integration. Beyond a question of short-term resource allocation to either of these blueprints for the AU's future, the ability to build coalitions and interlinkages between these two compatible realms of African agency will be crucial to establish continuity with the AU's historical roots. In pursuing this goal, the success of the AU's pursuit of African agency at a global scale will be measured in terms of symbolism *and* substance, or of discourse and policy impact.

¹⁰⁷ Bah, 'African Agency in New Humanitarianism and responsible governance'; Ueli Staeger, 'Africa-EU Relations and Normative Power Europe: A Decolonial Pan-African Critique', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 54, no. 4 (July 2016): 981–98, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12350>.