



Reimagining Realpolitik: Africa's Diplomacy of Principle and Pragmatism at the UN

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Executive summary

This policy insight examines how African states are redefining realpolitik through a form of diplomacy that balances principle and pragmatism within an increasingly fragmented global order. Drawing on voting behaviour and diplomatic strategies at the UN, it argues that Africa's approach, rooted in sovereignty, solidarity and anti-colonial justice, embodies a form of principled pragmatism that balances the competing demands of commitments and strategic autonomy. Rather than abandoning ideals, African states use moral and legal narratives to legitimise flexible diplomacy, leveraging opportunities such as the AU's G20 seat, UN financing for AU-led operations and cross-regional coalitions. Yet coherence, capacity and credibility remain persistent challenges. Africa's evolving realpolitik reflects a politics of navigation, a deliberate recalibration of conviction and calculation aimed at transforming, rather than merely adapting to, the international system.

Introduction

Africa's recent voting behaviour and diplomatic strategies at the UN have attracted much scrutiny. African voting patterns on the conflicts in Gaza and Ukraine vividly illustrate shifting global dynamics. While several Western governments anticipated significant alignment with their positions, African states often abstained or adopted non-aligned positions. In Global North capitals, these choices were frequently portrayed as expressions of hypocrisy, opportunism or fence-sitting on a fundamental question of international order.¹ For African diplomats, however, abstention or selective engagement was neither accidental nor indecisive. Instead, it reflected an attempt to balance long-standing principles such as sovereignty, non-intervention and solidarity with pragmatic considerations of pursuing national interests, partnerships and strategic autonomy in a world marked by intensifying power rivalries.

Africa's recent voting behaviour and diplomatic strategies at the UN have attracted much scrutiny

This intersection of principles and pragmatism is not new to African diplomacy, but it has become more visible and contested over the past decade. During the post-independence period, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, African states frequently asserted moral

¹ Ebenezer Obadare, "Russia's Invasion of Ukraine May Drive a Wedge Between the West and Africa", Council on Foreign Relations, March 22, 2022; Benita van Eyssen, "Russia Looms Large over Macron's Africa Trip", DW, July 29, 2022.

authority in multilateral forums, drawing on anti-colonial sentiments and solidarity to advocate for justice within an international system that broadly acknowledged the force of these normative claims. These ideals remain central to African diplomacy, yet the utility of moral authority as a diplomatic lever has declined.

A crumbling normative consensus characterises the contemporary global order; as the efficacy of appealing to shared values diminishes – evidenced by the erosion of international legal norms – African states are compelled to pivot. This environment has pushed states to temper their moral and value-based commitments with more complex calculations of political, economic and security costs. The key question is whether Africa is developing a distinct form of realpolitik at the UN, one that blends enduring values with strategic calculation rather than discarding principles in favour of power politics.

Realpolitik is typically understood in international relations as diplomacy grounded in interests and power, where flexibility and pragmatism are prioritised over ideology or ethical considerations in pursuit of national interests and state preservation.² Originating in mid-19th-century Germany in response to the failures of liberal idealism, it became embedded in late-19th-century European statecraft. Yet history shows that realpolitik has never been a purely material calculation. Appeals to law and morality often served to legitimise strategic interests.³ Otto von Bismarck's orchestration of the 1878 Congress of Berlin exemplified this duality: presented as a defence of European order and minority protection, it also reinforced hierarchies of power that, a few years later, would shape the so-called 'civilising mission' underlying the Berlin Conference on Africa.⁴

The tension between principles and pragmatism remains a central concern in contemporary African diplomacy

While the historical context differs, the tension between principles and pragmatism remains a central concern in contemporary African diplomacy. Africa's engagement in multilateral forums reflects not an imitation of 19th-century realpolitik, but an adaptation of it. It is a form of principled pragmatism shaped by the experiences of colonial subjugation and post-colonial dependence. In contrast to European realpolitik, which cloaked domination in moral rhetoric, Africa's contemporary balancing act seeks to

2 Adam R.C. Humphreys, "Realpolitik", in *Encyclopedia of Political Thought*, eds. M.T. Gibbons et al. (Wiley-Blackwell, 2014).

3 Deepak Mawar, "Realpolitik in Global Governance: Understanding the Competing Realist and Cosmopolitan Narratives of the Nineteenth Century Era of International Law", *The International History Review* 47, no. 2 (2025): 211–29.

4 Joanne Yao, "The Power of Geographical Imaginaries in the European International Order: Colonialism, the 1884–85 Berlin Conference, and Model International Organizations", *International Organization* 76, no. 4 (2022): 901–28.

balance normative commitments such as sovereignty, anti-imperialism and solidarity |with strategic imperatives of autonomy, influence and survival within a fragmenting global order.

This policy insight examines how African countries offset pragmatism against principle in multilateral forums. Rather than simply engaging in fence-sitting, their behaviour can be understood as a strategic approach shaped by historical experience, structural constraints and a desire to protect policy autonomy. This analysis draws on policy analysis, academic scholarship and insights from the workshop ‘Between Principles and Pragmatism: Africa’s Realpolitik at the 2025 United Nations General Assembly’ held in Pretoria in September 2025 and convened by the South African Institute for International Affairs (SAIIA), the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) and Stellenbosch University. It highlights how African states are recalibrating their diplomatic strategies at the UN and considers the implications of these choices for Africa’s collective influence in global governance.

The evolution of Africa’s multilateral identity

African diplomacy has long intertwined ideals with interests. During the Cold War, the doctrine of non-alignment allowed many states to navigate the US–USSR rivalry without being absorbed into either bloc. Far from passive neutrality, it was a pragmatic strategy that enabled African governments to secure development aid, investment and military support from both East and West, while asserting collective sovereignty through the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). This approach blended principles with flexibility, reflecting a deliberate effort to strike a balance between moral commitment and strategic autonomy. Among its leading advocates was Ghana’s first president, Kwame Nkrumah, who declared, ‘We face neither East nor West; we face forward!’⁵

African diplomacy was frequently viewed as adhering to externally set rules rather than shaping or steering international strategy

The end of the Cold War altered this balance. With the collapse of the bipolar rivalry between the US and the Soviet Union, a significant number of African states faced conditionalities imposed by the Bretton Woods institutions, including the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, as well as Western governments. These

5 Kwame Nkrumah, conference speech delivered in Accra, 1960, quoted in “10 quotes from Kwame Nkrumah”, *This is Africa*, September 20, 2015.

conditionalities were tied to governance reforms, structural adjustment and human rights. International financial institutions and donor states often demanded alignment with market-oriented norms as a condition for aid, debt relief and legitimacy. In this environment, African diplomacy was frequently viewed as adhering to externally set rules rather than shaping or steering international strategy.⁶

The 21st century has sparked renewed interest in continental alignment and pan-African solidarity in foreign policy. The transformation of the OAU into the AU in 2002 reflected a determination to claim greater agency, embedding peace and security mechanisms within AU structures and signalling a more assertive continental role in multilateral governance. Still, power asymmetries, especially with Western countries, meant that Africa, at a national, regional and continental level, often struggled to define international norms on its own terms.⁷

Global structural shifts have now compelled Africa to reassess its role in the world and its approach to engaging with other regions and countries. The continent's increased trade with Asia is indicative of a shift in economic power and influence from the West to the East. Amid a notable decline in trade with Western states, Eastern countries, notably China and India, have become indispensable in filling the void. Security partnerships have followed a similar trajectory. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute reports that while traditional Western and Russian weapon suppliers remain influential, their dominance has waned as emerging players gain prominence on the continent. African states have diversified arms imports, increasingly engaging new suppliers such as China, the Gulf states and Türkiye.⁸

In multilateral forums, this shift to the East and other Global South partners is evident in both African discourse and voting behaviour. Abstention is often used as a signal to preserve flexibility and maintain options. A 'no' vote risks alienating key partners, while a 'yes' can close off diplomatic space. Deliberately not being present in the room when a vote is taken can serve a similar purpose, allowing governments to avoid a public record of their stance while still signalling unease or ambivalence to different audiences. Each of these choices – voting 'yes', 'no', abstaining or being absent – can be deployed strategically to manage external pressure, signal priorities to different audiences and preserve room for manoeuvre. Weaker states frequently leverage abstention as a deliberate tactic in the UN General Assembly to navigate competing pressures and maintain or create room for political manoeuvrability.⁹

6 Gustavo de Carvalho, "From Norm-Takers to Norm-Makers: Making African Voices More Effective at the United Nations", Council on Foreign Relations, July 2020.

7 Gustavo de Carvalho, Steven Gruzd and Chido Mutangadura, *At the Table or on the Menu? Africa's Agency and the Global Order, Africa Report 18* (Institute for Security Studies and South African Institute of International Affairs, October 2019).

8 M. George et al., "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2024" (SIPRI Fact Sheet, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, March 2025).

9 Julia C. Morse and Bridget Coggins, "Your Silence Speaks Volumes: Weak States and Strategic Absence in the UN General Assembly", *The Review of International Organizations* 19, no. 3 (2024): 515–44.

Over the past decade, African diplomacy at the UN has been characterised by a constant effort to reconcile national interests with ideals

Over the past decade, African diplomacy at the UN has been characterised by a constant effort to reconcile national interests with ideals. This tension continues to shape the continent's multilateral identity. The legacy of anti-colonial solidarity and the pursuit of justice remain deeply ingrained in African perspectives on global issues. This is most evident in the long campaign for reform of the UN Security Council (UNSC), a demand rooted in the continent's exclusion from key decisions and its call for fairer representation. Today, this stance is filtered through the practical realities of diversifying partnerships, adjusting economic relations and managing renewed great-power competition. The outcome is neither passivity nor opportunism, but rather a layered diplomatic posture that seeks space for agency where conviction and calculation meet in Africa's pursuit of strategic autonomy.

The practice of pragmatism

Pragmatism in African diplomacy is visible not only in UN-related voting tallies but also in the bargains struck during negotiations and campaigns for institutional reforms. These illustrate how African states prioritise their interests within the structural constraints of global governance.

A striking example is UNSC Resolution 2719, adopted in December 2023, which created a framework for predictable UN financing of AU-led peace operations.¹⁰ African states had long called for such an arrangement, arguing that ad hoc and voluntary contributions threatened the sustainability of operations in challenging contexts such as Somalia and the Sahel. The resolution marked a breakthrough by affirming the AU's central role and adopting the principle of UN-assessed contributions, yet also reflected the pragmatic realities of UNSC politics. Financing remains subject to case-by-case approval by the council, compliance with international law and robust financial oversight.¹¹ While advancing African priorities, the resolution ultimately struck a balance between enhanced support and continued external oversight.

10 UN Security Council, "Resolution 2719 (2023): Cooperation between the United Nations and Regional and Subregional Organizations in Maintaining International Peace and Security, Adopted December 21, 2023", accessed February 18, 2026, [https://docs.un.org/en/S/RES/2719\(2023\)](https://docs.un.org/en/S/RES/2719(2023)).

11 Bitania Tadesse and Jenna Russo, "UN Support to African Union–Led Peace Support Operations: What Next for Resolution 2719?", International Peace Institute, September 9, 2024.

A similar pattern is visible in Africa's approach to global economic governance. The admission of the AU as a permanent member of the G20 in September 2023, in part due to India's proactive role and South Africa's tireless campaigning, was widely celebrated as recognition of Africa's growing prominence as a global actor. For the first time, the continent gained a collective seat at a central forum shaping international financial and economic policy. This platform empowers African leaders to directly address key issues, including debt restructuring, climate finance and reform of multilateral finance institutions and development banks.

However, influence within the G20 is not evenly distributed. Unlike the G7 or the EU, which command large shares of global GDP and coordinate their positions closely, the AU represents 55 diverse states with varying economic interests and limited resources for policy coordination. The AU's ability to shape G20 agendas will depend on how effectively member states use the AU framework to build intra-continental coalitions and leverage insights gained during South Africa's 2025 G20 presidency. In addition, the AU will need to engage more deliberately and focus on African think tanks working on issues and themes featured at the G20, drawing on the extensive policy analysis being conducted across the continent.

The 15th BRICS Summit in Johannesburg in 2023 set a milestone for Africa's role in shaping a changing global order. For years, African countries called for a fairer, more inclusive multilateral system that reflects 21st-century realities. With Egypt and Ethiopia joining the group in 2024, Africa now holds three seats in BRICS, giving the continent a stronger voice in one of the world's key political and economic platforms. Through the New Development Bank, BRICS can also channel new sources of finance to African nations and others in the Global South seeking alternatives to traditional lenders. In practice, however, access to this financing is strongly geared towards member states, with lending to non-members possible but politically and procedurally more exceptional.

Reaching and maintaining consensus is complex, as individual priorities and structural constraints frequently intervene

Africa's approach to forming common positions at the multilateral level is marked by pragmatism, seeking to maximise influence despite diverse interests and persistent external pressures. Unified stances have demonstrated their potential to elevate the continent's voice and impact in global negotiations. This is apparent in Africa's long-standing opposition to nuclear weapons through the Pelindaba Treaty and support for the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. Other examples are its Common African Position, which significantly shaped the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals, and its coordinated continental response to COVID-19 through the

AU and Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention. Yet reaching and maintaining consensus is complex, as individual priorities and structural constraints frequently intervene.¹² Even when agreement is achieved, translating continental positions into effective, sustained action among all African states requires ongoing coordination and strategic compromise. This process highlights Africa's evolution from accepting external rules to actively shaping global norms, while underlining the ongoing challenges of building and sustaining collective agency in a competitive international environment.¹³

What emerges is a pattern of adaptive diplomacy. While African states still invoke long-standing principles, they increasingly focus on advancing these norms amid tighter constraints and shifting power dynamics. Progress often comes through compromise, incrementalism and creativity rather than outright victories. This pragmatic turn reflects a broader recognition that influence in multilateral politics depends on both the force of principle and the art of strategic bargaining. This remains the case even as powerful states use economic and security leverage to pressure African governments to mute, reinterpret or override their stated principles in multilateral settings.

The role of principle

If pragmatism shapes how African states act, principles frame why they act. National sovereignty remains an overarching principle, particularly owing to a lack of economic independence, which was undermined in the 1980s and 1990s by the coercive, overbearing Bretton Woods institutions.

For African countries, the continuing, if incomplete, journey towards genuine and functional sovereignty is both a product of historical memory, rooted in the colonial experience of imposed rule, and a strategic necessity in a world where external intervention remains a reality. The defence of territorial integrity and sovereign equality consistently features in African positions at the UN, not only as rhetoric but also as a means of constraining external encroachment on their continent's decision-making authority. At the same time, the AU's doctrine of non-indifference affirms that sovereignty cannot serve as a shield for mass atrocities or grave violations of continental norms. The principle of international legality and the rule of law is a second pillar for African states in engaging with global governance issues. They regularly invoke international legal frameworks both to claim legitimacy and to contest selective applications of global rules. South Africa's case against Israel's military intervention in Gaza at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) is a notable example. While Pretoria relied on the Genocide Convention, it also tapped into a rapidly consolidating global stance of solidarity with Palestine that resonated across the Global South and beyond. In December 2023, Pretoria filed proceedings alleging violations of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment

¹² De Carvalho, Grudz and Mutangadura, *At the Table or on the Menu?*.

¹³ De Carvalho, "From Norm-Takers to Norm-Makers".

of the Crime of Genocide in Gaza, positioning itself as a champion and defender of international law and global justice. In January 2024, the ICJ ordered provisional measures requiring Israel to prevent genocidal acts. While this was not a final judgement on whether the Gaza war was genocidal, it lent weight to South Africa's claims and appealed to the principle of international legality.¹⁴ The ICJ had not ruled on the merits of the case at the time of writing.

Paradoxically, Western governments, including those in Washington, London, Paris, Berlin and Brussels, reacted in a knee-jerk manner, criticising South Africa's application to the ICJ. John Kirby, the former White House National Security Council spokesperson, claimed the application was 'baseless, counter-productive and without any merit whatsoever'.¹⁵ Rather than reflecting a purely adversarial strategy, South Africa's move stemmed from a complex interplay of domestic political support, the country's longstanding commitment to international human rights and its frustration with the perceived limitations of traditional diplomacy.¹⁶

Pragmatism is an enduring feature not only of African foreign policy but also of global geopolitics

The case also illustrated broader tensions in the selective application of international legal principles by Western countries, demonstrating that pragmatism is an enduring feature not only of African foreign policy but also of global geopolitics.¹⁷ For African diplomats, the ICJ proceedings represented more than a legal challenge; they highlighted how international legal avenues can serve as mechanisms to assert normative positions, ensure accountability and amplify Africa's global voice, even as such strategies entail diplomatic and economic risks.

However, critics have drawn attention to what appear to be inconsistencies in African positions, contrasting the diplomatic assertiveness on Palestine with more reserved responses to Ukraine. This difference is best understood as the result of historically grounded solidarity, domestic pressures and the principle of self-determination in the case of Palestine, while relations with Russia and concerns about diplomatic flexibility influenced reactions to the Ukraine conflict.¹⁸ The South African experience highlights

14 International Court of Justice, *Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip (South Africa v. Israel)*, Provisional Measures Order, January 26, 2024.

15 Human Rights Watch, "World Court to Hear Genocide Case Against Israel", January 10, 2024.

16 Gustavo de Carvalho, "Middle Power Lawfare: South Africa, International Justice, and the Gaza Crisis" (Ifri Memos, French Institute for International Relations, 2025).

17 De Carvalho, "Middle Power Lawfare".

18 De Carvalho, "Middle Power Lawfare".

the complex and dynamic balance between principle and pragmatism in foreign policy, particularly in addressing diverse international issues.

In February 2022, during the early stages of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Kenya's ambassador to the UN Security Council made a notable statement, condemning the violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity and warning against the dangers of expansionism and the redrawing of borders.¹⁹ Ambassador Martin Kimani's remarks invoked Africa's experience with colonial borders, urging members to reject expansionism and respect internationally recognised boundaries. Kenya's clear stance against the violation of Ukraine's sovereignty was characterised by an emphasis on principles rooted in its historical context. However, many African states, including South Africa, responded more cautiously. Their decisions were shaped by concerns over food and energy security, political and military ties with Russia, and the need to maintain relationships with influential global partners. These pragmatic considerations often led to abstentions or nuanced positions in the UN General Assembly, reflecting Africa's complex diplomatic landscape.

South Africa's explanation for its abstention on this UN General Assembly resolution condemning Russia highlighted its preference for peace through negotiation and dialogue.²⁰ Pretoria argued that the resolution would not necessarily advance efforts to end the conflict, emphasising the need to keep diplomatic channels open and warning that further polarisation could undermine the prospects for peace.

The selective application of principle is not unique to Africa

Despite voting differently, Kenya and South Africa both anchored their positions in respect for sovereignty and the importance of international law. Each government emphasised that peaceful resolution and dialogue were essential to addressing the crisis in Ukraine. The divergence arose not from fundamentally different values but from their chosen strategies: Kenya supported the resolution to signal a clear stand against aggression. At the same time, South Africa abstained out of concern for maintaining diplomatic channels and promoting negotiation. Both responses demonstrate how African states, faced with complex international challenges, pursue common principles through distinct but complementary diplomatic approaches.

19 UN Security Council, "Statement by Amb. Martin Kimani, During the Security Council Urgent Meeting on the Situation in Ukraine, 21 February 2022", Permanent Mission of Kenya to the United Nations, accessed February 18, 2026, https://www.un.int/kenya/sites/www.un.int/files/Kenya/kenya_statement_during_urgent_meeting_on_on_ukraine_21_february_2022_at_2100.pdf.

20 Permanent Mission of South Africa to the UN, "South Africa's Statement in Explanation of Vote on Ukraine in the UN General Assembly Emergency Special Session", Department of International Relations and Cooperation, March 2, 2022.

Essentially, these two contentious issues highlight what many have labelled an inconsistent adherence to principles, but which should instead be read as strategic prioritisation: principles are not abandoned; they are selectively activated in line with context and a cost–benefit analysis.²¹ The West’s own double standards, notably when it came to condemning the war in Gaza, demonstrated that the selective application of principle is not unique to Africa.

Pan-African solidarity reinforces the core diplomatic dynamics of African foreign policy, including collective action to defend sovereignty, support for international law and a commitment to multilateral negotiation. The African Group at the UN and the three African members of the UNSC (A3) are essential mechanisms for forging strategic collective positions. Nevertheless, national interests and external pressures often make full coherence difficult. For example, support for Palestine frequently draws on a shared anti-colonial history and the principle of self-determination; however, this solidarity has not always resulted in coordinated action across the continent. This demonstrates that African solidarity necessitates ongoing re-evaluation, compelling narratives and active coalition building to translate shared principles into tangible influence.

Principles are therefore not rhetorical patterns; they provide moral authority and legitimacy, as well as a language within which pragmatism is made intelligible. By framing choices in terms of law, sovereignty or solidarity, African states justify calibrated diplomacy as consistent with enduring commitments, even when those commitments are expressed unevenly across different crises. In this sense, what is often described as ‘principled diplomacy’ is also a form of normative power that is most effective when it draws on norms with real traction in the international arena, such as anti-colonial and pro-Palestinian solidarities, which allow actions like South Africa’s ICJ case to resonate more broadly. Where such shared norms are weaker, more contested or fragmented, as in responses to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, African governments have less to gain from invoking them. Instead, they lean more heavily on strategic autonomy, material interests or regional security concerns as alternative bases of authority. In these contexts, ‘pragmatism’ often reflects the search for alternative sources of legitimacy when the rhetorical authority of widely accepted norms is absent. African states tend to appear most ‘principled’ on issues that fit clear anti-colonial or self-determination narratives and more flexibly pragmatic where no apparent normative consensus exists.

Trends, opportunities and challenges in balancing pragmatism and principle

Fragmentation, contested norms and the resurgence of power rivalries have made the practice of diplomacy more fluid and uncertain. In this shifting context, African states are redefining their engagement at the UN in ways that resemble a new form of realpolitik.

21 De Carvalho, “Middle Power Lawfare”.

Rather than abandoning principles, they are learning to navigate between conviction and calculation, seeking to protect national and collective interests while remaining anchored in values such as sovereignty, equity and solidarity. This approach is not a return to 19th-century power politics but a pragmatic recalibration of African diplomacy within a fracturing global order.

African states are redefining their engagement at the UN in ways that resemble a new form of realpolitik

Trends

A key trend in Africa's multilateral behaviour is the gradual shift from reactive participation to more deliberate coordination. The A3 on the UNSC illustrate how structured cooperation can give African states collective weight. Recent years have seen them speak increasingly with one voice, sponsor joint products and serve as recognised spokespeople for African positions. When united, they have influenced debates on peace operations, sanctions and the role of regional actors. The AU Peace and Security Council (PSC) and the AU Permanent Observer Mission in New York play an increasingly important role in transmitting common positions and supporting coordinated action.

Yet this coordination remains uneven, often reliant on overstretched missions, variable capacities in New York and imperfect links between Addis Ababa and national capitals. This reflects a broader dilemma within Africa's realpolitik: how to balance flexible, interest-driven diplomacy with the need for predictable and sustained coherence, even as institutional mechanisms such as regular consultations between the AU's PSC and the A3 and joint AU–UN briefings slowly consolidate more routine habits of coordination. Strategic diversity is another defining feature. Fragmentation is not necessarily a weakness; it enables African states to adapt to changing circumstances, establish bilateral ties and pursue targeted objectives without rigid alignment. This flexible, coalition-based diplomacy mirrors a pragmatic form of realpolitik that values agility over uniformity. However, flexibility also risks diluting collective leverage if not channelled through structured consultation.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations' (ASEAN) experience shows that diversity can coexist with unity when anchored in agreed-upon procedures. For example, despite differing threat perceptions and external alignments, ASEAN members have repeatedly issued joint communiqués and principles-based statements on the South China Sea,

using consensus rules and intensive consultations to maintain a common front while allowing considerable room for national flexibility.²² Narrative framing has become an essential instrument in this new realpolitik.

African diplomats increasingly justify their decisions in terms of justice, equity and dialogue, presenting abstentions or cautious engagement as efforts to preserve space for mediation and to balance competing relationships. This use of moral language sustains Africa's long-standing normative legitimacy while legitimising pragmatic choices. Yet if African states invoke moral authority selectively, by remaining silent on crises closer to home, such as those in Sudan or the Sahel, their credibility is weakened. The challenge lies in aligning rhetorical power with consistent action.

Cross-regional partnerships further demonstrate this emerging pragmatism. Beyond the G77 and the L.69 Group of reform-minded countries advocating for a more representative and expanded UNSC, African states are forging coalitions with small island and Latin American countries on issues such as climate justice, reparations and international law. These alliances show that influence can be established through targeted cooperation rather than continental unanimity. Such partnerships represent an operationalisation of Africa's realpolitik: pragmatic 'minilateralism' guided by principles but sensitive to opportunity and context.

Opportunities and dilemmas

These trends open meaningful opportunities for African diplomacy but also reveal the tensions inherent in a realist yet principled approach. Africa's ability to connect pragmatic actions to moral narratives gives it a distinctive kind of normative authority, grounded in claims about justice, anti-colonialism and fairness in the international system. By situating strategic decisions within historical experiences of colonialism and exclusion, African diplomats can challenge entrenched hierarchies in global governance and frame their positions as defending global, rather than just regional, principles. Yet, the more this moral framing is used instrumentally to justify highly interest-driven choices, the greater the risk that it will be seen as empty rhetoric rather than genuine conviction, thereby eroding the very legitimacy on which such diplomacy relies.

Africa's ability to connect pragmatic actions to moral narratives gives it a distinctive kind of normative authority

²² Bilahari Kausikan, "[ASEAN's Commitment to Consensus](#)", Australian Institute of International Affairs, September 24, 2020.

Flexible coalition building provides another avenue for influence. Partnerships with the Caribbean Community and small island states have amplified African priorities on reparations, representation and climate finance. However, these arrangements demand sustained coordination and technical capacity, which many missions lack. Realpolitik requires both strategic intent and institutional capability to follow through.

Institutional reform is an opportunity and a test. The AU's permanent seat in the G20, progress toward UN financing for AU-led peace operations and recognition of Africa's mediation roles create new platforms to assert agency. Yet, converting numerical strength into policy influence remains a challenge. Without a coherent strategy and adequate expertise, Africa risks reproducing the same structural dependence it seeks to overcome.

In essence, Africa's evolving realpolitik at the UN lies in its attempts to reconcile principle and pragmatism within an international system that often rewards neither. The challenge is to sustain moral authority while acting strategically, to maintain flexibility without compromising unity and to leverage presence into influence. The success of this balancing act will determine whether Africa's new diplomatic posture becomes a model of adaptive leadership or another missed opportunity in global governance.

Conclusion

Africa's diplomacy at the UN represents a reimagining of realpolitik for the 21st century. The continent's abstentions, selective activism and strategic coalition building do not signal a moral retreat or indecision, but rather a deliberate recalibration of principle and pragmatism within a fractured global order. This new realpolitik is neither an imitation of Bismarck's power politics nor a rejection of moral reasoning. Instead, it reflects a different historical consciousness: one forged through the experience of colonisation and the struggle for self-determination.

This new realpolitik is neither an imitation of Bismarck's power politics nor a rejection of moral reasoning

Where Bismarck's realpolitik used moral rhetoric to legitimise domination, Africa's version deploys moral language to resist it. Its appeal to sovereignty, equity and solidarity is not a cloak for power but a strategy to negotiate it. In this sense, Africa's realpolitik is defensive and restorative rather than imperial. It seeks to secure influence and preserve room for manoeuvre in a system still marked by asymmetry and selective application of rules.

The trends identified in this policy insight illustrate how this recalibration operates in practice. The shift from reactive to coordinated diplomacy, the acceptance of strategic diversity and the use of narrative framing all demonstrate an evolving realism rooted in moral purpose. The expansion of cross-regional partnerships and institutional openings, such as the G20 seat and UN financing mechanisms, offers new arenas for agency. Yet these same developments expose dilemmas of coherence, consistency and capacity. Africa's diplomacy must continually negotiate the tension between flexibility and unity, conviction and calculation, autonomy and dependence.

This balancing act is what defines Africa's contemporary realpolitik. It is a politics of navigation, not domination; of persuasion, not coercion. It accepts the constraints of power without conceding the primacy of values. To sustain it, African states must strengthen coordination, invest in analytical and diplomatic capacity and align moral authority with credible action, particularly in addressing crises on the continent.

Ultimately, Africa's realpolitik at the UN demonstrates that moral vision and strategic reasoning need not be opposites. If 19th-century realpolitik sought order through hierarchy, Africa's emerging variant seeks influence through principle. Its success will depend on whether it can turn the language of justice and sovereignty into sustained collective power. In doing so, the continent may offer the world not a return to the past but a redefinition of realpolitik itself: a diplomacy of agency anchored in principle, exercised with pragmatism and aimed at transforming, rather than simply surviving, the international order.

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Cover image

Officials and delegates from African countries during the meeting of foreign ministers at the 3rd India–Africa Forum Summit, 2015 (Sonu Mehta/Hindustan Times via Getty Images)

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