

Reflections on the African Union's Dilemma and Prospects

TAN Ying^[a]; CHEN Jian^{[b],*}

^[a] Beijing Normal University, Zhuhai, China.

^[b] School of International Relations, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, China.

*Corresponding author.

Supported by the 2023 Guangdong Province Joint Cultivation of Postgraduate Students Demonstration Base Project (Foreign Affairs Office of Guangzhou Municipal People's Government).

Received 12 May 2023; accepted 7 July 2023

Published online 26 August 2023

Abstract

In order to grasp the development opportunities brought about by the wave of globalization, the African Union(AU) came into being in 2002. The African Union has made remarkable achievements in economy, security and institution building since its establishment. However, in the face of the current situation of Africa's marginalization, the AU is still facing many historical legacy problems and is still constrained by many realistic dilemmas. It is the goal and prospect of AU's construction, as well as the key for Africa to break through its marginalized status in the world, to continuously unite the synergy of internal development in Africa, to continuously promote international exchanges and cooperation, and to seize the opportunity of the development of new digitalised and networked industries.

Key words: Realistic dilemma; Institutional response; International exchange and cooperation; Autonomy

Tan, Y., & Chen, J. (2023). Reflections on the African Union's Dilemma and Prospects. *Canadian Social Science*, 19(4), 91-95. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/css/article/view/13101>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/13101>

1. ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE AU

As the highest-ranking international organisation in Africa,

the AU has made a lot of efforts to solve the dilemma. Through measures such as institutional design, economic integration construction and security governance, and conflict mediation, the AU has been able to unite Africa's synergies, make many positive explorations and achieve certain results in order to solve the problems faced by Africa and sustainably promote Africa's development.

1.1 Achievements in Institutional Design

In terms of institutional design, the AU has put forward 16 new provisions of the African Union Charter based on the principles of respect for the sovereign independence and territorial integrity of States, respect for existing borders, and non-interference in the internal affairs of Member States during the period of African integration. These 16 provisions fully reflect the AU's determination to attach importance to security governance in Africa, and are the institutional guarantee of the AU's security in Africa. The Charter provides that the AU, in the Assembly of the Union, has the right to intervene in member States in exceptional circumstances as provided for in the Constitution, and that member States also have the right to request the Union to intervene. This is an important breakthrough for the AU in integrated security governance and an institutional guarantee of security in Africa.

1.2 Achievements in Economic Development

On the economic front, the AU has changed its non-interference policy during the AU era and pushed forward the development of regional economic integration. The AU put forward the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), on the basis of which the AU established the African Central Bank (ACB) and the African Monetary Fund (AMF). Drawing on the experience of the European Union, the African Central Bank put forward the idea of issuing a unified African currency. In African regional integration, regional integration organisation such as the Arab Maghreb Union (UMA), the East African Community (EAC), the International Economic

Community of the West African States (ECOWAS), and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) were established. On January 1, 2021, the Continental FTA was officially launched. The Continental FTA aims to create a mega-trade market covering 1.3 billion people with a total economic volume of \$2.3 trillion. The World Bank has released a report predicting that the Continental FTA is expected to create 18 million new jobs by 2035 and help lift 50 million people out of extreme poverty. As we enter the second decade of the 21st century, the AU has become more united and continues to promote economic integration, demonstrating strong confidence in dealing with economic globalisation.

1.3 Results of Security Management

In terms of regional security, the AU has made use of its conflict prevention management, post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding intervention mechanisms to achieve certain results.²⁰ In November 2022, the AU led the Ethiopian government and the anti-government group Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) to reach a peace agreement in South Africa, which announced that the AU would coordinate the efforts of all parties to achieve peace. The agreement signalled the AU's determination to bring together all parties to end two years of armed conflict in Ethiopia. Since its establishment, the AU has been involved in mediating conflicts in Burundi, Congo, Liberia, Somalia and Sudan. Through the mediation of the Union, the organisation of inter-state dialogue on an equal footing and so on, the further deterioration of the security situation in the above countries has been averted.

1.4 Results of the Institutional Design of National Dialogues

In terms of national dialogue, the AU has been actively organizing dialogue and consultation. Since 2005, the AU has held biannual summit dialogues. Through the biannual summit dialogues and the rotational chairmanship system, the AU has ensured a mode of dialogue that is characterized by friendship, mutual trust and smooth exchanges among countries at the highest level. The establishment of the AU organisational structure, such as the Executive Council, the AU Commission and the Peace and Security Council, has provided a modern institutional system to guarantee Africa's autonomous governance. The smooth dialogue among heads of State has played a positive coordinating role in Africa's path towards integration and internationalization.

2. REALISTIC PROBLEMS FACED BY THE AU

Africa, with its vast territory and large population, has been marginalised on the world stage for a long time.

By 2022, Africa will have a population of about 1.4 billion, accounting for about 15 per cent of the world's population. In contrast to its large population, Africa's total GDP is only about 3 per cent of the world's total. Africa's economic potential is far from being realised in the current state of marginalisation.

In the 21st century, the slogan of the African Union (AU) has changed from "independence and liberation" during the period of African integration to "peace and development". In the process of African integration, since the AU has completed the national independence and liberation of Africa, the birth of the AU is to build a stable and reliable platform to unite the development efforts of African countries, promote economic development and enhance Africa's international status on the basis of the original political cooperation only.

However, despite the AU's enthusiasm for development and its ambitious blueprint, the realities of Africa have slowed down the AU's progress. Pan-Africanism believes that Africa should be united as an organic whole, with the ultimate goal of unifying the whole of Africa. Under the influence of Pan-Africanism, the AU has made great efforts to improve the centripetal force and cohesion of Africa. However, practical problems have made the process of integration difficult.

2.1 Linguistic and Cultural Constraints

Language constraints are an important factor hindering people's exchanges. Although the native African language family is divided into four major categories, under the tribal division, the subdivided categories reach between 1,250 and 3,000. The number of complex and widely different languages makes it difficult for ordinary Africans to communicate with each other. And the influence of foreign languages mixed with it, so that the African ruling class who can use English, French, and Arabic have been linguistically disconnected from the lower class. The complex background of multilingualism, coupled with the backwardness of education, made it difficult for the African people to have an effective and smooth two-way communication in the exchange of ideas. Cultural differences between tribes also make it difficult to understand each other when communicating. If the people's identity cannot be reached, there is no way to talk about a unified economic development and political pattern.

2.2 The Plague of War and Disease

War and disease are the realities of African unity that are hard to get rid of. At present, more than two-thirds of the world's AIDS patients are concentrated in Africa. Dozens of African countries, including South Africa, Botswana and Zimbabwe, have an infection rate of more than 20 per cent. However, Africa's medical system is not yet perfect, and the generally poor sanitation environment makes the prevention and treatment of AIDS difficult.

Successive years of war are likewise a persistent problem in Africa. So far, more than 10 countries in Africa are still embroiled in wars, with more than 10 million casualties, a large number of people destroyed, and even infiltrated by the forces of the Islamic State terrorist organisation. Because of its adherence to the principles of non-interference in internal affairs and non-alignment, it is difficult for the AU to unite its views in resolving common crises. In turn, the fragility of the economy and the low political influence of a single country in the face of its own complex problems constrain the resolution of the dilemma. After the establishment of the AU, although it has actively strengthened the building of the collective security system, it has not played a practical role in the vicious circle of incessant civil wars and conflicts. The AU has actively sought economic assistance from the United Nations, which has also yielded little results so far.

2.3 Lack of Core Leadership

The lack of core leadership in the AU countries also contributes to the uncertainty of Africa's development status. Unlike the highly united European Union, AU member states have widely varying levels of development, making it difficult to coordinate. South Africa is one of the most developed countries in Africa and has a relatively large say in the AU. But although South Africa is economically developed, the gap between the rich and the poor is large, the crime rate is high, and the brain drain and other problems are prominent. South Africa is too divided to play its role as a strong leader in the AU. Nigeria, as another powerful country in Africa, has the intention of contributing to the AU and has invested a lot in peacekeeping operations in Africa, but the turbulent political situation constrains Nigeria's leading role in the AU. There is no core leadership in the AU, and the difficulties of 54 countries with very different national conditions on the way to harmonisation are far greater than those of the EU, whose member states have similar histories, similar national conditions, close exchanges and are highly developed.

2.4 Difficulty of Coherence

Africa is a war-torn continent. In the long and humiliating colonial history, African countries have struggled hard with blood and tears in the process of getting rid of colonial rule and establishing independent sovereign states. Now that African countries have finally achieved sovereignty, they are particularly sensitive to the issue of the transfer of sovereignty. The AU still has a long way to go in coordinating among the various sovereign states in order to maximise the development of common interests while allowing their respective rights and interests to be fully safeguarded.

2.5 Inversion of Influence

Although the AU is the largest and most populous regional organisation in Africa. However, as mentioned above,

there are still many divisions and conflicts among various African countries. In coordinating so many countries with uneven development, the influence of the AU is upside down. That is, the AU's influence has not been as active in Africa as it should have been, with the collective active participation of member states. In fact, the influence and dominance of the EAC, led by South Africa, in East Africa is in many cases greater than that of the AU. EAC countries prefer to seek legal support or conference coordination in the EAC on many international matters. This situation has considerably affected the authority of the AU in Africa.

3. PROSPECTS FOR AU EXTERNAL COOPERATION

In the process of globalisation, the AU has actively sought external cooperation to enhance Africa's influence in the world through multilateral talks and international cooperation. Whether it is cooperation with international organisation or countries such as the United Nations, the European Union, etc., it highlights the AU's active entry into the WTO and its seizing of the opportunity to integrate into globalisation. The prospect of the AU seeking external cooperation is one of the original purposes of the AU's establishment, which is a way for Africa to ensure its own development while at the same time making use of international cooperation and exchanges to enhance its own development.

3.1 Traceability and Prospects of Cooperation between the AU and the United Nations

The cooperation between the United Nations and Africa has a long history, which can be traced back to the AU period in the last century. In terms of peace and security in Africa, the UN has carried out seven peacekeeping efforts in Africa and invested about \$5 billion. Africa has also made significant contributions in United Nations peacekeeping efforts. Africa currently sends about 50,000 peacekeepers to the United Nations, accounting for as much as half of the number of United Nations peacekeepers. With regard to the situation of prolonged war in Africa, it is obvious that it is not enough to rely solely on Africa's current economic strength and political mobilisation and organisational capacity.

The United Nations, as the world's largest intergovernmental organisation, has a considerable degree of voice and power of action in African affairs. However, it should be noted that the AU also has certain differences in its co-operation with the UN. In the regional co-operation between the UN and Africa, the AU stresses its own dominance, while the UN insists on its supreme authority. In specific matters of cooperation between the UN and Africa, such as the AMISOM, the AU and the UN are in conflict over the ownership of the leadership. Peacekeeping in Africa involves a wide range

of complex factors such as religion, culture and history. As the largest African alliance with the best knowledge of Africa's internal situation, how the AU can convey its own demands and actual situation to the UN and reach an effective communication is a problem that the AU needs to overcome in its future cooperation with the UN. While ensuring its own authority, the United Nations should listen to the voices of Africa and understand the actual situation, which is a necessary attitude for respecting African affairs and participating in them. Strengthening the partnership between the UN and the AU and improving the co-operation mechanism is the basis for the two sides to reach effective co-operation, help Africa's development, actively integrate Africa into the world's development wave, and contribute Africa's strength to the world.

3.2 Prospects and Future of the AU and the EU

The cooperation between the AU and the EU is a model of North-South exchange and cooperation. A number of EU member states were once sovereign states of African countries. The EU and the AU are inextricably linked to each other historically and culturally. While African countries are now seeking independence and making their African voices heard more and more strongly in the international arena, the EU is also constantly adjusting its relations with the AU and seeking to establish a new type of friendly partnership.

In 2005, the EU developed the EU Strategy for Africa. This programme is an important initiative of the EU in joint aid to Africa. In terms of assistance to Africa, the EU adopts an "unbundled" programme-type assistance, aiming to complete its assistance to Africa in a planned and targeted manner. The EU's assistance to Africa in terms of infrastructure and education has achieved good results in Africa, especially in poor countries such as Madagascar and Burundi. The member states of the European Union have also spread the ideas of freedom and democracy to Africa in terms of culture and political systems. Nowadays, Africa is basically a capitalist type of country which has learnt from the European experience. The influence of European culture and thought in Africa has penetrated deeply into every aspect, which has provided a profound ideological basis for the co-operation between the EU and the AU. At the same time, the EU's aid to Africa has also led to corruption at the head and top levels of certain African countries. And in some areas or fields of assistance, the production capacity has never been improved, relying on aid or foreign capital to live in a bad situation, "pie in the sky" assistance is not the way to Africa's wealth and strength. While deepening co-operation with the EU, Africa should get rid of its aid dependence, insist on the development of its own industries, and focus on the enhancement of local productivity in order to get rid of its dependence on the EU in a more than reasonable way.

3.3 The Past and Future of the AU and China

China is one of the major countries with which the AU has cooperated. As the world's second largest economy and a permanent member of the United Nations, China is an important part of the AU's international relations. Likewise the AU is an integral part of China's multilateral partnership. The two sides have established a wide range of cooperation mechanisms for dialogue, and the 8th Ministerial Conference of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) was successfully held on 29-30 November 2021 in the Senegalese capital city of Calle. The two sides discussed "deepening China-Africa partnership" and promoting the FOCAC. The forum signalled that China and the AU will continue to deepen their partnership on the basis of the existing friendly relations and discuss and build together. Successive sessions of the FOCAC have been an important platform for China and the AU to engage in peaceful dialogue and strengthen interaction.

China's cooperation with the AU has a bright future. The AU put forward the Africa Agenda 2063 in 2015, aiming to build a new Africa of regional integration and peace and prosperity within fifty years. This is a common goal with China's Belt and Road Initiative. "The Belt and Road Initiative, with its objectives of market integration, connectivity and harmonious interaction between countries for common development, coincides with the vision of Africa Agenda 2063 of inclusive growth and sustainable development, and the building of an integrated and prosperous Africa. Through the Belt and Road Initiative, China has provided Africa with financial and technical support for infrastructure, which has greatly supported Africa's connectivity infrastructure across several countries.

Strengthening co-operation with China is crucial for the AU to move forward with Agenda 2063. The vision of Agenda 2063 is ambitious and extremely challenging. Africa still faces many real problems. In terms of infrastructure, Africa is far behind the blueprint laid out in Agenda 2063. And there are huge imbalances in economic development. In advancing the agenda, it is not enough to rely solely on Africa itself. China, as the world's largest developing country, has explored an efficient and quality construction model for infrastructure development. For China to help Africa build, on the one hand, it has rich experience in building in developing countries, and compared with other developed countries, it understands Africa's situation better and knows better how to carry out construction precisely and effectively. Africa's lack of talents and shortage of technology in infrastructure can be made up for in cooperation with China. It can also train its own technical talents and develop its own industries with China's help. This is of great significance to Africa's path towards increasingly strong autonomy.

In its future development, the AU should deepen its cooperation with China, not only in the field of

infrastructure, but also in agricultural development, public health, financial cooperation and other areas, and actively participate in joint development. With China's help and inspiration from its experience, the AU will have a broader future.

4. SUMMARY

The AU is the largest organisation for Africa to break through its marginalised status and to make a unified African voice. Under the complicated status quo, how to cope with its own realistic predicaments and historical legacy problems, and how to make use of the AU as a platform with great potential for upward mobility, so that Africa can play a more important role in globalisation while pursuing its own development, is a question that Africa needs to face up to. Strengthening Africa's sense of ownership, enhancing the effectiveness of governance in Africa, and uniting the synergy for Africa's development are the major directions for the development of the AU. Only through enhanced exchanges, mutual political trust, solidarity and co-operation among member states can we achieve the goal of genuine integration in Africa. By promoting security management, ensuring the authority of the AU, and resolving territorial disputes and regional conflicts through scientific intervention, Africa's future can be free from war and disease on the premise of peace and development. By maintaining communication with international organisation such as the United Nations and the European Union, strengthening cooperation with the United States, China, France and other powers friendly to Africa, and achieving mutual benefits in international exchanges, the AU will be able to continue to enhance its influence in the world, develop Africa's own industries amidst the emergence of digitally-networked global industries, and realise Africa's revitalisation in the 21st century. Africa's prospects should not only be portrayed in

the AU's vision of breakthrough, but should also grasp the opportunities of the unprecedented changes of the century.

REFERENCES

- ARMELU(KAS) K. (2019). *Comparative study of China and the European Union's aid policy towards Africa since the 21st century*. Xiamen University. DOI:10.27424/d.cnki.gxmd.2019.001213.
- Hu, E. (2021). Peacekeeping co-operation between the United Nations and the African Union: History, experience and problems. *African Studies*, 17(1), 20-39+296.
- Ikawan (Ekaouel Hakilou). (2010). *Research on African Economic Integration Issues*.
- Li, Z. B. (2010). Analysis of AU influence and China-AU relations. *West Asia Africa*, 2010(3), 11-19+79.
- Luo, J. B. (2005). Study on the Development of Collective Security Mechanisms in Africa. *West Asia Africa*, (5), 35-40+80.
- Qian, H. H. (2011). *On the Establishment and Impact of the African Union*. Nanjing University.
- Shu, Y. (2014). Pan-Africanism and African Integration. *World History*, (225), 20-37+157-158.
- Wang, G. L., Ye, Y. Y., & Li, M. Y. et al. (2021). Opportunities and Challenges of China-African Union Peacekeeping Cooperation. *Journal of Armed Police Academy*, 37(3), 29-33.
- Wang, X. B. (2022). China-Africa Co-operation Has Great Prospects--An Interview with Ambassador Rahman Talla Othman, Representative of the AU in China. *China Investment (in Chinese and English)*, 2022(Z9), 100-103.
- Yang, L. H. (2001). African Union: Ideal and Reality. *West Asia Africa*, 2(5), 9-14+78.
- Zhao, Y. T. (2023). The new characteristics and effectiveness of western powers' participation in African governance in the context of Africa's autonomous development. *West Asia Africa*, (4), 88-109+158-159[2023-07-20].