Introduction: The African Union, Pan-Africanism, and the Liberal World (Dis)Order

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Long considered peripheral to both international affairs and the discipline of international relations (IR), Africa is increasingly at the center of global politics and academic debates. Global powers are competing for economic, political, and strategic influence on the continent, while Africa itself has emerged as an increasingly powerful and confident actor on the world stage. In large part, this is due to the leadership of the African Union (AU), which since its founding twenty years ago has embarked on an ambitious agenda inspired by Pan-Africanism, seeking to create an Africa that is a "Strong, United, and Influential Global Player." Following the AU's twentieth anniversary, this article and Special Forum situate the AU within recent debates in IR about non-Western agency and the contributions of the global South to world politics. Focusing on the role of the AU and Pan-African ideology in shaping Africa and its international engagements, we argue that an analysis of the AU and the influence of Pan-Africanism is crucial to an understanding of Africa's actions and positions in contemporary world affairs. We conclude that the heightened geopolitical rivalry following Russia's invasion of Ukraine threatens to undermine two key aspects of the AU's Pan-Africanism, namely its commitment to democracy and human rights and its ambition to speak with a united voice on the world stage.

Longtemps considérée secondaire dans les affaires internationales et par la discipline des relations internationales, l'Afrique occupe une place de plus en plus centrale dans la politique mondiale et les débats académiques. Les puissances mondiales se disputent l'influence économique, politique et stratégique sur le continent, quand l'Afrique réaffirme sa puissance et sa confiance en tant qu'acteur sur la scène mondiale. Cette situation s'explique en grande partie par le leadership de l'Union africaine (UA) qui, depuis son avènement il y a 20 ans, entreprend un programme ambitieux, inspiré du panafricanisme, dans le but de créer une Afrique qui serait un ≪ acteur international fort, uni et influent ≫. À la suite du 20e anniversaire de l'UA, cet article et le forum spécial resituent l'Union africaine au sein des débats récents en RI concernant le rôle des non-Occidentaux et des contributions de l'hémisphère sud en politique mondiale. En nous concentrant sur le rôle de l'UA et de l'idéologie panafricaine dans le façonnement de l'Afrique et de ses accords internationaux, nous affirmons qu'il est essentiel de mener une analyse de l'UA et de l'influence du panafricanisme pour comprendre les agissements et positions de l'Afrique dans les affaires mondiales contemporaines. Nous concluons que le renforcement de la rivalité géopolitique à la suite de l'invasion de l'Ukraine par la Russie risque de compromettre deux aspects clés du panafricanisme de l'UA: son engagement en faveur de la démocratie et des droits de l'Homme et son ambition de faire front commun sur la scène mondiale.

África ha estado considerada durante mucho tiempo como un actor secundario en lo que se refiere tanto a los asuntos internacionales como a la disciplina de las relaciones internacionales. Sin embargo, en la actualidad, África se encuentra cada vez más en el centro de la política global y de los debates académicos. Mientras las potencias mundiales compiten por la influencia económica, política y estratégica dentro del continente, la propia África se ha ido convirtiendo en un actor cada vez más poderoso y seguro en el escenario mundial. Esto se debe, en gran medida, al liderazgo de la Unión Africana, que desde su fundación hace 20 años se ha embarcado en una ambiciosa agenda inspirada en el panafricanismo, buscando crear una África que sea un ≪Actor Global Fuerte, Unido e Influyente≫. Con motivo del 20.° aniversario de la UA, este artículo y el Foro Especial sitúan a la Unión Africana en los recientes debates en materia de RRII sobre la agencia no occidental y sobre las contribuciones del Sur global a la política mundial. Argumentamos, poniendo el foco en el papel de la UA y en la ideología panafricana en la configuración de África y sus compromisos internacionales, que es crucial realizar un análisis de la UA y de la influencia del panafricanismo para poder comprender las acciones y posiciones de África en los asuntos mundiales contemporáneos. Concluimos que la intensificación de la rivalidad geopolítica que ha tenido lugar tras la invasión rusa de Ucrania amenaza con socavar dos aspectos clave del panafricanismo de la UA: su compromiso con la democracia y los derechos humanos y su ambición de hablar con una solo voz, unida, dentro del escenario mundial.

Long considered peripheral to both international affairs and the discipline of international relations (IR), Africa is increasingly at the center of global politics and academic debates. The continent's abundant resources have led to talk of a "new scramble" as global players compete for access to its agricultural lands, oil, minerals, and rare metals, as well as expanding consumer markets. Politically, world powers are also vying for friends and influence, acutely aware of the bloc's fifty-four votes in the United Nations General Assembly. In the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the continent increasingly appears as the new frontline of the geopolitical rivalry between Russia, China, and the West.

Scrambling to demonstrate their enduring friendships and build new alliances, the United States, Russia, China, and numerous other countries have sent a steady stream of high-level visitors to Africa, while Africa Summits have proliferated.

The "scramble" metaphor, however, only goes so far; it illustrates external actors' interest and strategies, but it fails to capture Africa's own agency and agendas. Africa is neither a passive recipient of economic investments nor a bystander to major events in global affairs. On the contrary, Africa has emerged as an increasingly powerful and confident actor on the world stage. In large part, this is due to the leadership of the African Union (AU). Since its founding twenty years ago, the AU has embarked on an ambitious agenda inspired by Pan-Africanism, seeking to create an Africa that is a "Strong, United, and Influential Global Player" (African Union 2013). As such, the AU is central to understanding Africa's interests, agency, and influence in global politics—in the past, present, and future. By implication, in the context of the current challenges to the liberal international order and the rise of multipolarity, understanding the politics, practices, and ideologies that inform the AU is of paramount importance for the discipline of IR and for global politics.

Following the AU's twentieth anniversary in 2022, this Special Forum situates the AU within recent debates in IR about non-Western agency and the contributions of the global South to international affairs. The literature on Africa's peripheral status in IR has criticized the discipline's preoccupation with Great Power politics, and the tendency to theorize about the international system, the behavior of states, and global transformations from the Western experience alone (Jones 2006; Cornelissen, Cheru, and Shaw 2012; Brown and Harman 2013; Abrahamsen 2017). Against this Western dominance, the literature has emphasized the importance of African agency, understood broadly as the power and influence that various actors on the continent have brought to bear on global politics. Rather than a silent observer or victim of great power competition, both African state and nonstate actors have been centrally involved in shaping past and present global orders, as well as the values and norms that underpin them (Du Bois 2015; Getachew 2019).

As the world's largest regional organization with fifty-five member states, the AU deserves careful study and attention, and its absence from mainstream IR debates underlines the urgent need to decenter Western experiences in order to make IR a more global discipline. Focusing on the role of the AU and Pan-Africanism in shaping Africa and its international engagements, this Special Forum is an effort to take the AU seriously as an actor in world politics. It is not, however, an uncritical embrace or a romantic promotion of Southern voices. While some suggest that the AU offers an alternative model of global political agency, acting to critique and reshape global order (Edozie and Khisa 2022), we aim to take full account of the multiple weaknesses and rifts plaguing the organization, as well as the numerous challenges ahead. Warts and all, the AU will remain central to African and international politics for decades to come, and an analysis of its political dynamics and ideological visions is therefore of crucial importance not only for those interested in Africa's future but also for those dedicated to the study of international affairs. In the context of the current challenges to the liberal international world (dis)order and the rise of multipolarity, we argue that it is imperative for the discipline of IR to understand the AU as an expression of African agency grounded in Pan-African ideology.

In this introduction, we set the scene for the six articles that make up the Special Forum. To do so, we begin by reviewing the history of the AU, tracing its successes, failures, and challenges since its emergence from the moribund Organization of African Unity (OAU) two decades ago. We then turn to the ideology of Pan-Africanism, showing its historically evolving nature, diverse articulations, and interactions with world events. Pan-African ideology, we argue, both informs and restrains the politics and practices of the AU, and its continued influence is crucial to an understanding of Africa's actions and positions in world affairs. We show this through a brief analysis of the AU and the liberal world (dis)order, emphasizing how the war in Ukraine and the current challenges to the rules-based international order are changing the global conditions within which the organization operates. More specifically, we argue that the current geopolitical environment threatens to undermine two key tenets of the AU's Pan-Africanism; its commitment to democracy and human rights and its ambition to speak with a united voice on the world stage.

The final section is devoted to introducing the articles in the Special Forum. The six articles focus on three closely connected, overlapping themes; the ways that the AU and Africa have influenced global politics since the organization's founding in 2002; the manner in which Pan-Africanism influences, conditions, and constrains African political practice; and finally, the importance of and productiveness of theoretical debates about African and Pan-African identity for the continent and for global politics.

The AU: Growing Pains and Gains

When the AU was launched in Durban in 2002, it replaced the OAU, which by then had come to be seen by many as an outdated talking shop for dictators, or slightly more benevolently, an exclusive presidents' club. Inspired by Pan-Africanism, the AU embarked on an ambitious new agenda for continental integration. Thabo Mbeki, the former South African president and one of the architects of the AU, promised "a continent of democracy" in which the "people participate and the rule of law is upheld." "Time has come," Mbeki said, "that Africa must take up her rightful place in global affairs. The time has come to end the marginalization of Africa" (Mbeki 2002).

Ambitious, optimistic, and hopeful words! Twenty years later, the mood is a little more subdued, but there is no doubt that much has been achieved, and as such, there are good reasons to celebrate the AU's twentieth anniversary. The African continent has experienced massive economic growth and development in the last two decades and is home to some of the fastest-growing economies in the world. After years of preparation by the AU, the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) came into effect in January 2021, creating the largest free trade area in the world. Ratified by forty-six states, AfCFTA creates a continent-wide market with 1.3 billion people and a GDP of US$3.4 trillion (World Bank 2022). If fully implemented, it could raise incomes by 9 percent by 2035 and pull fifty million people out of extreme poverty (World Bank 2022). For the AU, it is a significant step toward the long-standing dream of a common African market, with the potential to broaden and deepen economic integration (Leshoele 2020). The continuing move toward continental integration by the AU also illustrates one of the ways that Africa is moving against the current trend of deglobalization, providing important global leadership.

The AU's endorsement of democracy and human rights is another cause for celebration. In contrast to its predecessor, the AU has taken an active role in the promotion of democracy, human rights, and good governance. The African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance, adopted in 2007, sets out the organization's commitment to liberal democracy as well as other associated principles like peace, accountability, the rule of law, and a vibrant civil society. It unambiguously confirms the commitment to "promote the universal values and principles of democracy, good governance, human rights and the right to development," and seeks to entrench "a political culture of change of power based on the holding of regular, free, fair and transparent elections conducted by competent, independent, and impartial national electoral bodies" (African Union 2007). To this effect, the AU has provided a significant number of electoral observation missions to elections across the continent, further entrenching electoral and democratic practices and oversight of African governments. While these missions have not always overseen successful elections, they help to institutionalize and support norms on the importance of democracy and free and fair elections.

Significant achievements have also been made in the areas of peace and security. The AU has spearheaded the principle of "non-indifference" toward war crimes, genocide, and crimes against humanity, and Article 4(h) of the Union's Constitutive Act permits the AU's Peace and Security Council (PSC) to authorize legal interventions in sovereign states in cases of gross human rights violations (African Union 2000). The principle of "African solutions to African problems" led to the development of a strong African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), the establishment of the PSC in 2004, and a commitment to a common African security policy (Engel and Porto 2010). This in turn has enabled Africa to play an increasingly central role in the management of peace and security, and since its inception, the fifteen-member-strong PSC has been actively involved in nearly all African conflicts (Brosig and Lecki 2022). Importantly, the relationship between the AU and the United Nations (UN) has improved, leading to new forms of partnership in peacekeeping. In its first decade, the AU contributed to nine peacekeeping missions across the continent, including in Somalia, Darfur, Burundi, and Mali (Williams and Boutellis 2014). Often, this peacekeeping work has been undertaken in collaboration with other international actors, including the UN, the European Union (EU), and the G-8. In several instances, financial backing has been provided by global actors, while AU member states have supplied the troops. The African contribution, however, goes far beyond mere "boots on the ground" and has helped shape the norms and practices of peacekeeping. Thus, the AU has been an important force in shaping and implementing the global field of peacekeeping over the twenty years of its existence. Importantly, the missions have also helped solidify the norm of "African solutions to African problems" (Glas 2018), strengthening the Pan-African inspired inclination toward continental autonomy and agency.

Recently, the AU has received praise for its leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic. In contrast to the vaccine nationalism adopted in many parts of the world, the AU's approach has been described as a "rare case of internationalism" (Witt 2020). As the global health emergency unfolded, the AU played an important role in providing coordination, expertise, and technical support to its member states. It also engaged in high-level advocacy on behalf of Africa, arguing against the vaccine hoarding practiced by many rich countries, and helped to mobilize resources, including vaccines

and medical equipment. The AU's Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) was central to these efforts, developing quickly from a specialized technical institution to a public health agency with regional collaboration centers (Olorontuba 2021; Nash this issue). In many ways, the AU's coordinated response to the pandemic demonstrates its ability to act decisively and effectively in defense of the continent's interests.

Nevertheless, challenges abound. *The Economist* magazine commented on the AU's twentieth anniversary under the headline "Older and Less Wise" (*The Economist* 2022). That judgment may be too harsh, but there are reasons to question the AU's achievements and directions. For almost every measure of success, there is a corresponding caveat. Democracy is on the decline in many parts of the continent, and the military coup seems to have made a comeback as civilian governments have been deposed in a succession of coups in Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali, Sudan, Gabon, and Niger. What is more, the AU seems to be back-tracking on its previously strong anticoup norm and opposition to unconstitutional changes of power, as articulated in the African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance. In particular, the AU's failure to expel Chad after the son of President Idriss Déby seized power following his father's death is widely perceived as setting a dangerous precedent and indicating a retreat from the anticoup norm mandating the suspension of a member state after a coup. At the Malabo Summit on humanitarian crises and unconstitutional change of government in 2022, the Chairperson of the Commission, Moussa Faki Mahamat, admitted as much by stating that "We are not honouring our own commitments" (African Union 2022c).

Conflicts also continue, and the AU's ambition to "silence the guns" has rarely seemed more daunting. Despite peacekeeping operations and mediation efforts, violent extremism in the Sahel endures, while other conflict zones like Somalia, Mali, and the DRC are struggling with continuing violence, economic crises, food insecurity, and the withdrawal or faltering of peacekeeping missions. New conflicts have also erupted. Since 2017, a jihadist insurgency in Mozambique has killed over 4,000 people and displaced 800,000. The vicious war that broke out in Sudan in April 2023 uprooted some three million people in three months and has created fears of ethnic cleansing in the Darfur region. As many as half a million people died of war and starvation in the Tigray region of Ethiopia after civil war started in November 2020. Given that the AU is headquartered in Ethiopia's capital Addis Ababa, its failure to address—effectively and swiftly—the outbreak of civil war on its doorstep stands as a sad testimony of the organization's feebleness in the face of conflict and violence. At this time, even the new target of "silencing the guns" by 2030 appears unrealistic.

The AU has also been criticized for being aloof and disconnected from ordinary people. The organization enjoys little support or legitimacy among African citizens, and many view it as ineffective and as having failed to solve the continent's most pressing issues (Tieku 2019; Murithi 2020; Witt this issue). In more critical opinions, the AU constitutes a political elite focused on its own survival; the heads of state and government summits merely being ineffective talk shops (see Soudan 2022). As such, it may have grown to resemble its predecessor, the OAU.

The biggest challenge in the years ahead, however, is to overcome what can be described as a crisis of implementation—a surfeit of grand plans and an absence of actions. There are two main explanations for this crisis: a lack of financial resources and a lack of political power.

Economically, the AU is far from self-sufficient, despite an internal reform program spearheaded by President Paul Kagame of Rwanda. Of a total budget of US$650 million—260 times smaller than that of the EU—approximately 60 percent comes from foreign donors, particularly the EU and individual European states. This over-reliance on external partners in the funding of projects and initiatives ultimately undermines the Union's decision-making and implementation capacity (see Sungu 2015). As a remedy, the AU has since 2016 insisted on a 0.2 percent tax on all eligible goods imported into the continent, but only seventeen states have implemented the levy, and only about 40 percent of member states pay their union dues (African Union 2022a, 2022b). External financial dependency is ultimately an obstacle to the AU's independence and power to act.

Politically, the AU is hamstrung by a lack of authority to enforce its decisions. The AU Commission (AUC), whose functions include implementing decisions taken by AU organs, has no meaningful power to do that or to formulate regulations. As Thomas Tieku observes, "it is AU members who often decide not to integrate the most progressive ideas into national legislations or empower domestic actors to implement AU decisions" (Tieku 2019). This points to the troubling contradiction that many within the AU Assembly of Heads of State ultimately do not want a functional supranational body that empowers citizens, that has the potential to hold leaders to account, and that may intervene to protect their citizens. Thus, the AU has been a passive observer of numerous abuses of power and unconstitutional changes of government and even allowed leaders with highly questionable democratic credentials and legitimacy to occupy prominent positions within the organization.

Whether these deficiencies and weaknesses are simply the growing pains of a complex international organization, or deeper, more troubling signs of institutional decay and a permanent retreat from the commitments of the Charter on Democracy, is at this point unclear. What is clear, however, is that the AU will continue to play an increasingly prominent role on the international stage, and as such, it needs to be engaged as a serious actor within the study of global politics. The AU and its predecessor, the OAU, have always known that the key to navigating the turbulent waters of geopolitics is unity. As individual states, most African states are weak. As a unified bloc of 55 countries, Africa is potentially strong. Thus, at the inaugural summit of the OAU in 1963, Haile Selassie of Ethiopia declared that "We have come together to assert our role in the direction of world affairs. . ." (Selassie 1963). The AU's Agenda 2063 repeats the ambition to create an Africa that is a "Strong, United, Resilient, Peaceful and Influential Global Player" (African Union 2013).

The AU has recorded significant progress in this regard, and the continent increasingly speaks with a united voice in international politics. The organization has formalized a number of strategic partnerships with other regional bodies, regions, and countries, including the EU, the League of Arab States, as well as with China, the United States, India, and Turkey. Through these partnerships, the AU seeks to ensure that the continent's multilateral engagements support its own priorities rather than the agendas of external actors. At the UN, there are also signs of a more coordinated, continental approach. The AU's PSC has actively encouraged Africa's three elected members of the UN Security Council, the so-called A3, to assume co-penholder roles on issues related to Africa. In 2021, it formalized this by requesting regular reports from the A3, including details of how they "promote, defend and champion the decisions of the AU Assembly and the PSC, as well as the positions of the AU" within

the Security Council (Brosig and Lecke 2022, 4). The development of so-called Common African Position (CAPs) on issues of crucial relevance to the region is another indication of the AU's efforts to define a unified African voice. Since its inception, the AU has negotiated CAPs on more than twenty major issues, the most well-known being the Ezulwini Consensus calling for reform of the UN Security Council (Adeoye 2020; Shiferaw 2021). Recognizing that most African countries were not yet independent when the UN was founded in 1945, the consensus recommends reforming the UN to better reflect the post-colonial world. This includes expanding the UN Security Council from 15 to 26 members. Of these, Africa wants two permanent seats and five nonpermanent seats, one for each of the five regions—north, east, west, central, and south. In principle, the AU opposes the veto power of the existing five permanent members (the P5s) and demands its abolition or its extension to all new permanent members (African Union 2005). This, the consensus argues, would give the continent a voice commensurate with its size and importance.

Needless to say, reforming of the UN is a long, uphill struggle and serves as a sobering reminder that Africa's more active agency or presence on the international stage will not automatically translate into more decisive influence. This too is a long-term struggle, made difficult by the structural position of Africa and the entrenched power dynamics of the international system. Nevertheless, the AU is poised to play an increasingly important and central role in world affairs, and in seeking to do so, its policies and actions are likely to be informed and legitimized by references to Pan-Africanism, the guiding ideology of the AU.

The AU and the Evolving Nature of Pan-Africanism

The founding of the AU is often seen as a recommitment to Pan-Africanism and the idea of a united African continent. The statue of a forward-looking Kwame Nkrumah at the AU's headquarters in Addis Ababa is highly symbolic in this regard. As one of Pan-Africanism's intellectual leaders, Ghana's first president was a fervent supporter of African unity and the idea of a United States of Africa (Nkrumah 1963). The OAU failed to realize Nkrumah's dream, and the birth of the AU represents a return to a more ambitious integrationist Pan-African agenda: "A united and integrated Africa; an Africa imbued with the ideals of justice and peace; an inter-dependent and virile Africa determined to map for itself an ambitious strategy; an Africa underpinned by political, economic, social, and cultural integration which would restore to Pan-Africanism its full meaning" (African Union 2004).

Pan-Africanism has arguably always been central to African politics, but its precise influence and meaning have waxed and waned throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Thus, the creation of the AU needs to be understood as an important event in the evolution of Pan-African thought, marking a revival of the vision of a united African approach to continental challenges and international politics. In seeking to capture this fluid and evolving nature of Pan-Africanism, we draw on contemporary morphological approaches to the study of ideology (Freeden 2015; Abrahamsen 2020). In this view, ideologies are neither monolithic, grand narratives nor mystifying, obfuscating ideas designed to deceive or conceal political realities. They are instead "the actual modes of political thinking" (Freeden 2015, 1), or political thinking in practice. As such, Pan-Africanism, like any ideology, "is far from monolithic or unified, but contains internal tensions and fissures,

multiple variations, and inflections, all adapting and mutating in interaction with global events" (Abrahamsen 2020, 57). Debates within this ideology operate across a number of different divisions, reflecting both particular African issues and broader global political currents. In the mid-twentieth century, the focus of Pan-African thinkers was on decolonization and political freedom, but divisions emerged between supporters of a federal African state and those who favored individual African nations, guaranteed by the principle of sovereignty. As the Cold War became increasingly important in the 1960s and 1970s, further debates continued between communists and liberals.

Pan-African thought was born in the New World in the early to mid-1800s, and throughout its long history, it has been, by its very nature, international thought.[1] In the words of the leading Pan-Africanist and African-American intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois, the "idea of one Africa to unite the thought and ideals of all native peoples of the dark continent belongs to the twentieth century and stems naturally from the West Indies and the United States, where various groups of Africans, quite separate in origin, became so united in experience and so exposed to the impact of new cultures that they began to think of Africa as one idea and one land" (Du Bois 2015, 7). Distance and alienation, in other words, were foundational to the notion of one, united Africa, often spearheaded by intellectuals with very limited lived experience on the continent itself. For the early Pan-Africanists of the New World, like Alexander Crummell, Edward W. Blyden, and Marcus Garvey, Africa was the natural future home for all black people who had been forcibly ripped from the continent by the slave trade, and in their thinking, unity was intimately linked to the welfare and equality of Africans in the United States and the Caribbean. Their vision was of a transatlantic, black international, stressing African unity but also transnational solidarity and the humanity of all colonized and subjugated people.

Although Pan-Africanism emerged in the Americas, it reached political maturity when its leadership migrated from the diaspora to the continent. This coincided with the turbulent aftermath of the Second World War and the intensifying struggle for decolonization. Against this background, the Fifth Pan-African Congress met in Manchester in October 1945. Adopting the slogan "Africa for Africans," the Congress launched a powerful call for an end to colonialism and the imperial world order. Under the intellectual leadership of Kwame Nkrumah, Pan-Africanism became both "an expression of African nationalism" and a tool of resistance against colonialism and neocolonialism (Nkrumah 1963, 135). Rejecting the borders bequeathed by the colonial powers, he argued for the creation of a supranational entity, a "Union of African States." Unless "Africa is politically united under an All-African Union Government, there can be no solution to our political and economic problems," he stated in no uncertain terms. Without federal unity, political independence would be meaningless, as imperialism would adopt and extend "its economic grip" (Nkrumah 1963, 33). African countries would thus forever be the slaves of powerful countries and the subjects of endless neocolonial domination in a hierarchical international system (Nkrumah 1963, 217; Nkrumah 1965). This radical vision not only threatened the colonial order of the time but promoted the conception of a powerful new African federal state, which would be a major player on the world stage.

The support for political unity among Pan-Africanists, however, began to decline in the years following the Manch-

ester conference. As more African states gained independence, two contrasting positions began to emerge in a series of diplomatic meetings. The Monrovia group, including many of the Francophone countries as well as Nigeria, supported a moderate version of Pan-Africanism, based on individual sovereign nations. The Casablanca group, led by Nkrumah, promoted a more radical vision of a united African state. These debates were fueled by fears that the Monrovia group was supported by many of the former colonial powers, as well as a desire among African leaders to prevent the creation of a new federal state that was dominated by Nkrumah. Ultimately, the two groups were able to agree on the formation of the OAU, but the resulting compromise owed far more to the moderate version of Pan-Africanism than Nkrumah's vision. Thus, despite its continued commitment to a unified continent, the OAU was primarily focused on decolonization and the attainment of independence. In its inaugural meeting, the organization declared the borders of Africa sacrosanct and cemented national sovereignty and territorial integrity as the principles of continental cooperation. This eventually coalesced into a principle of noninterference in the domestic affairs of its member states, frequently reducing the OAU to "a silent observer" of the atrocities committed by some of its members (Murithi 2020, 377). Sovereignty, in other words, trumped unity (Abrahamsen 2020).

By the 1990s, both African politics and the global political order had shifted significantly, altering the attitude of African leaders to questions of continental governance. One of the most important developments was the end of apartheid in South Africa, which marked the final blow to formal colonialism as well as creating a new regional power committed to Pan-Africanist ideals. By the end of the decade, there were calls for an "African Renaissance," which emphasized a positive, collective African culture and philosophy, exemplified by South African "Ubuntu." This stoked a renewed interest in Pan-Africanism, and more ambitious visions of political unity for the future. In this context, the OAU was increasingly viewed as an anachronistic "club of dictators," no longer capable of dealing with the new challenges posed by the twenty-first century. Perhaps ironically, this spirit was most influentially championed by Libyan President Muammar Gaddafi, who presented a proposal for a United States of Africa at the 1999 meeting of the OAU at Sirte in Libya. While this expansive proposal was rejected by the assembled leaders, it was influential in the creation of the AU. The Libyan proposal included the creation of an African president and a united African army, as well as common economic and foreign policies. At the time, these proposals seemed wildly ambitious, but they nevertheless laid the groundwork for crucial elements of the AU's political architecture, including a more interventionist security policy and a stronger commitment to Pan-Africanism. Crucially, the new organization also expanded to include the African diaspora, declaring it the "sixth region" of Africa. This move has been hailed as the "third phase" of the institutionalization of Pan-Africanism (Adi 2018), and overall, the formation of the AU represented a break with the compromise forged at the OAU and a step in the direction of Nkrumah's more maximalist vision of Pan-African unity.

The AU was not just a response to the new spirit of the African Renaissance but also to the emerging post-Cold War global liberal order and the new principles that animated international politics in the era of US hegemony. The era's optimistic belief in the benefits of globalization and the spread of liberal democracy infused the organization and shaped its values and policies. Thus, the AU, while still

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[1] This section draws on Abrahamsen (2020).

upholding the centrality of sovereignty and borders, allowed for collective intervention in times of crisis to protect African citizens, mirroring and in many ways spearheading global calls for a "responsibility to protect." The organization was also committed to the new paradigm of human security and endorsed the move away from the previous preoccupation with national security and the integrity of borders toward a focus on the well-being and rights of individual citizens. Moreover, as we discussed above, the AU was founded on a commitment to democracy, good governance, and the free market, explicitly supporting the main tenets of the broader global liberal order. Contemporary Pan-Africanism as articulated by the AU thus has a liberal foundation, and as such, it is at odds with some of its earlier, more radical versions, which embraced Marxist or African socialist ideals. Indeed, early twenty-first century debates questioned whether the Pan-Africanism of the AU represents a home-grown, organic African political ideology or a transplanted Eurocentric perspective that supports the dominant power structures of the global order (Adi 2018). At the same time, the Pan-Africanism of the AU is closer to the radical expressions of unity promoted by the early Pan-Africanists, underlining the fluid, evolving nature and multiple expressions of Pan-African ideology (Abrahamsen 2020).

This fluidity and multiplicity of Pan-Africanism are also evident in recent efforts by African thinkers to move beyond previous binary divisions between an "African personality" (as articulated by writers like Blyden and Nkrumah) and Western culture, instead emphasizing the crucial role that Africa has played in the creation of the modern world (Mbembe 2001; 2020). These perspectives allow us to shift from thinking about the AU's liberal Pan-Africanism as an exogenous belief system imposed from the West to considering the AU as a key player in rethinking the liberal global order and advocating democracy and human rights from an African and historically evolving Pan-African perspective.

The AU and the Liberal International (Dis)Order

Pan-African thought is by its very nature international thought, concerned simultaneously with the welfare of Africans on the continent, with continental integration, and with Africa's place in the world (Abrahamsen 2020). Indeed, for many Pan-African thinkers, these issues are inseparable, and Africa's place in the global order has had a significant impact on the development of Pan-Africanism and the policies of the OAU and the AU. As an ideology, Pan-Africanism has developed in dialogue and interaction with global events and ideational trends, and while both the OAU and AU have been constrained by their positions within the international system, they cannot be seen as simply adapting or reacting to outside forces. Instead, both Pan-African ideology and actors have helped shape the direction and values of international politics, albeit from a position of relative weakness and marginality.

The OAU was born from opposition to the failing imperial order of the mid-20th century, and its Pan-African insistence on the right to sovereignty was instrumental in the process of decolonization. The dream of a united Africa was intended in part to shield African states against the overwhelming influences of Western great powers and their rivals behind the Iron Curtain during the Cold War, and even after leaders embraced the boundaries bequeathed to them by colonialism, they continued to defend the continent's unity in the face of external domination. The OAU's effectiveness and ability to defend an African position, however, was severely hampered by the geopolitical conflicts of the Cold War, as African countries took sides or became pawns in superpower rivalries (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013). This was mirrored and reinforced by the ideological disputes within newly independent African states, as socialist and communist approaches came into conflict with liberal perspectives, creating further strife both among and within states. Indeed, countries like South Africa, Angola, and Mozambique became battlefields in superpower proxy wars, destabilizing the continent and sustaining the last holdouts of colonial governance.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the international financial institutions, most notably the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, came to exert increasing power on the continent. As Africa became mired in an economic crisis and external debt, the two Washington-based institutions demanded neoliberal structural adjustment in return for debt relief and development assistance. African leaders and the OAU had a very different interpretation of the continent's economic predicament, seeing it as a result not of "bad governance" but economic dependence and previous "solutions" prescribed by the international finance institutions. In stark opposition to the policies of neoliberalism, the OAU in 1980 adopted The Lagos Plan of Action for the Economic Development of Africa, 1980–2000 (OAU 1980). Blaming Africa's economic difficulties on international factors, the Plan put forward a long-term, collective strategy for increased self-sufficiency, partial disengagement from the world economy and further intra-African trade and integration. In its emphasis on unity, integration and self-sufficiency, the Plan had clear Pan-African inspirations. It stood little chance. Faced with the advancing dominance of neoliberal economic orthodoxy, African countries, one by one, fell into line with the demands of the international finance institutions and Western donors.

The return of multiparty democracy to the continent in the early 1990s signaled a growing ideological convergence with the norms of the emerging post-Cold War liberal world order. As we argued above, the birth of the AU was in part a response to this new era of globalization and openness, and the values and norms of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law were enshrined in its founding statutes and institutions. This environment of ideological convergence, as we have seen, enabled the AU to provide a platform for a united African voice on the world stage and to help shape the direction of an increasingly liberal world order.

The current challenges to the liberal rules-based international order, however, are changing the global conditions within which the AU operates.[2] Within the West, the waning commitment to multilateral cooperation became painfully evident in 2016, with the UK voting to leave the EU and the United States electing a President campaigning on an "America First" platform. President Donald Trump's hostility to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the EU, and other traditional allies, together with his transactional foreign policy, strained the US-led liberal global order. Right-wing challengers to liberal orthodoxies have continued to gain prominence and influence in numerous

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[2]In this context, we adopt a minimalist conception of "international order," referring to relatively stable patterns of relations and practices in world politics that emerge from the behavior of states and other international actors and that also constrain and enable their actions (Cooley and Nexon 2020, 31). While the post-war liberal world order is undeniably hierarchical and unequal, it is liberal in the sense that it is based on three distinct principles: democratic political systems that broadly respect political and human rights, free economic exchange within and among states, and the management of international affairs via multilateral institutions and other forms of governmental cooperation (Cooley and Nexon 2020, 16).

European countries and beyond, building transnational coalitions that further threaten multilateral institutions dedicated to collective economic and security policies. Pushing not only for more nationalistic, sovereigntist economic policies and tighter immigration controls, transnational right-wing movements around the world are also joining forces to ensure more conservative approaches to LGBTQ+ rights, family policy, and abortion both within their own countries and within key multilateral institutions like the UN (Abrahamsen et al. 2020; Bob 2012).

Significant challenges to the liberal world order have also emerged from authoritarian great powers like China and Russia, seeking to exit from American hegemony and define an alternative international order (Cooley and Nexon 2020). While far from unified in their visions and missions, both China and Russia seek a more multipolar world order, and both regard the liberal democratic norms of contemporary global governance as hypocritical and as a threat to their own regimes. One indication is the Joint Statement issued after President Xi Jinping and President Vladimir Putin met in February 2022, which calls for "genuine multipolarity" and denounces attempts to impose "democratic standards" (Kremlin 2022). As the statement continues, the Western attempt to impose universal human rights and other liberal values is misdirected because all "countries have different histories, cultures, and national conditions, and each has the right to independently choose its development path."

This critique echoes Pan-African views of the liberal world (dis)order as unequal and dominated by the West, and the call for multipolarity accordingly finds ready support in many African countries. As part of their strategies to augment their international status and reshape the world order in their image, China and Russia have significantly expanded their relations with Africa, seeking political, economic, and security allies. China's expanding presence is well-known, and China is now Africa's largest trading partner and bilateral creditor, as well as a crucial source of infrastructure investment. All African states, except Eswatini which still recognizes Taiwan, are members of the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), and military cooperation has advanced under the umbrella of the China–Africa Security Forum. Russia has also actively sought a closer relationship with the continent, although it remains an economic minnow compared to China, the United States, and the EU. Nevertheless, Moscow's trade with the continent doubled to about $20 billion between 2015 and 2022, and Russia is Africa's biggest arms supplier, accounting for 44 percent of total arms exports to the continent (Wezeman, Kuimova, and Wezeman 2022, 7). Between 2015 and 2019 alone, Moscow signed ninteen military collaboration agreements with African governments, many of them weak, authoritarian states in need of foreign support. Most controversially, the Wagner Group, a quasi-mercenary outfit, has become centrally involved in regime security in several countries, often exchanging military muscle for access to gold, gemstones, and other valuable resources.

This more competitive geo-political environment has offered Africa new "exit" options from the strictures of the liberal world order (Cooley and Nexon 2020). The unipolar post-Cold War period, when Western countries and multilateral institutions like the IMF and the UN were the only sources of development aid, finance capital, and security and military assistance, has been firmly replaced by a situation that allows African countries greater agency and opportunity to diversify their economic, political, and security relationships (Soulé 2020). From a Pan-African perspective, this strengthens Africa's independence and power to define its own economic and political strategies. The ready availability of economic assistance from China has, for example, been a welcome escape from decades of subjection to the conditionalities of Western funding. Growing economic interest from China, Russia, and other countries like India, Turkey, and the Gulf states has given African states the possibility of pursuing new trade and financial partners, again reducing dependence on former colonial powers or a few dominant countries. Politically, the escape from the conditionalities of the unipolar era also provides African countries with greater freedom to define their own social and political models according to their own timetables and agendas.

Such opportunities aside, the current geopolitical situation poses a significant threat to two key aspects of the AU's Pan-Africanism. First, it threatens to undermine the AU's liberal commitment to democracy, as set out in the Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance. The presence of illiberal models of governance and the willingness of authoritarian states to support allies regardless of their human rights records may enable and embolden African leaders to ignore and abandon the norms promoted by the AU in the last two decades. Second, the geopolitical divisions threaten the AU's Pan-African ambition to speak with a united voice on the world stage. In the same way as the OAU's effectiveness and ability to defend a unified African position were hampered by the rivalries of the Cold War, the AU may struggle to advance a common African agenda is today's increasingly polarized world.

The aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has brought this twofold challenge to the AU's Pan-Africanism in to clear view. The AU condemned Russia's aggression shortly after the invasion, and the three African members of the Security Council did the same in the first vote in February. In the UN General Assembly (UNGA), however, the African vote split right down the middle, with twenty-eight countries voting for the resolution and twenty-six abstaining or absenting themselves, while Eritrea stood solidly with Russia. Even more African countries abstained from voting on the later resolution to suspend Russia from the UN Human Rights Council over "gross and systematic violations and abuses of human rights" in Ukraine (United Nations 2022). On the one-year anniversary of the invasion, when the UNGA voted overwhelmingly for Russia's immediate withdrawal from Ukraine, fifteen African countries abstained, while Mali and Eritrea sided with Russia. At the same time, South Africa, one of the most important countries on the continent, hosted a joint naval exercise with Russia and China, casting severe doubts on its claims to nonalignment and neutrality.

Africa's failure to wholeheartedly join the condemnation of Russia rankled Western leaders and diplomats, who have sometimes voiced their disappointment in somewhat high-handed, patronizing tones. The US Ambassador to the UN, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, for example, vowed "to do additional work to help these countries to understand the impact of Russia's war of aggression" (Thomas-Greenfield 2022). A succession of leaders and diplomats from both sides have subsequently visited Africa, seeking friends and allies in support of "their side." In July 2022, Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov embarked on a four-country tour to Egypt, Ethiopia, Uganda, and Congo-Brazzaville, stressing his country's (but in fact, the Soviet Union's) long-standing anticolonial credentials and contributions to African independence struggles. At the same time, France's President Emmanuel Macron was in Cameroon, Benin, and Guinea-Bissau to rally support for Ukraine, while the US Special

Envoy for the Horn of Africa, Michael Hammer, visited Egypt and Ethiopia, followed shortly afterward by the US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, who used his tour to announce the United States' new Africa strategy.

On the one hand, this resurgence of interest in Africa is a long-overdue recognition of the continent's centrality and importance in world affairs. The new US Africa Policy admits as much, stating unambiguously that "Sub-Saharan Africa's governments, institutions, and people will play a crucial role in solving global challenges" (United States Government 2022, 5). It also emphasizes the need to "listen" and "consult," thus acknowledging Africa's own agency and agenda in global politics—and by implication, indicating a less patronizing, top-down approach. On the other hand, the competition for African allies is reminiscent of Cold War rivalries and threatens the continent's fragile unity. Tellingly, the US Africa strategy is explicitly framed in geopolitical terms: China, the strategy asserts, "sees the region as an important arena to challenge the rules-based international order," whereas Russia uses its "economic and security ties to undercut Africans' principled opposition to Russia's further invasion of Ukraine and related human rights abuses" (United States Government 2022, 5). Russia is playing a similar blame-game, suggesting that its approach to Africa "dramatically differs from the "master"—"slave" logic imposed by former metropolitan countries, which reproduces the obsolete colonial model" (Lavrov 2022). In advance of the second Russia–Africa Summit and the Russia–Africa Economic and Humanitarian Forum in July 2023, Putin touted Russia's consistent support for "African people in the struggle for liberation from colonial oppression," emphasizing "the traditionally close cooperation on the world stage" (Putin 2023). Only seventeen heads of state turned up for the summit, less than half the forty-three that attended the first summit in Sochi in 2019. Notably absent were the Presidents of Nigeria, Kenya, and Rwanda, while South Africa's Cyril Ramaphosa and the AU's Moussa Faki Mahamat were both present, calling for an immediate end to the war and the resumption of grain exports from Ukraine's ports.

As individual countries have chosen different positions toward the war in Ukraine and the attendant geopolitical rivalry, the AU has struggled to present a unified African position while suggesting a path of neutrality, nonalignment, and peace negotiations. Senegalese President and then Chairperson of the AU, Macky Sall, made a case for Africa's neutrality at the UN General Assembly, noting that instead of being a stage for another Cold War, Africa wants to be a "pole of stability and opportunity open to all its partners on a mutually beneficial basis" (Sall 2022). In practice, however, the AU's actions are at best ambiguous, indicative of a near-impossible balancing act of simultaneously pleasing Moscow's supporters in Africa, member countries opposing the war, and countries committed to neutrality. The organization's claim to neutrality has been repeatedly questioned following the June 2022 meeting between Vladimir Putin, the chairperson of the AUC, Moussa Faki Mahamat, and President Sall, when the latter openly criticized Western sanctions against Russia (Mhaka 2022; see also Nathan 2022). The AU's apparent reluctance to let Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky address African heads of state further underlined the difficulty in establishing a common African position—a difficulty that is likely to intensify as the war continues and geopolitical divisions deepen. The AU's ability to uphold its democratic norms and commitment to human rights has also come under increasing strain. In response to Putin's overtures, militarized states like the Central African Republic, Burkina Faso, Mali, Uganda, and Cameroon have strengthened their ties and military cooperation with Russia, thus tightening their autocratic hold on power. Several of the countries that abstained in the UN votes are supported by Russia and the Wagner Group, indicating not only Russia's success in buying support but the obstacles posed to the AU's role as a democratic norm entrepreneur on the continent.

Navigating these increasingly tense and polarized geopolitical waters represents a significant challenge for the AU in the years ahead. Arguably, the need for a unified Africa on the global stage has never been greater during the twenty years of the organization's life, nor have the challenges to its democratic principles been so profound. At the same time, the increasing recognition of Africa's centrality to world affairs places the AU in a potentially stronger position than ever before to shape and influence the direction of international politics. In confronting these challenges, the AU could do well to engage and recommit to key tenets of Pan-Africanism, focusing on its call for unity, respect for sovereignty, democracy, and human rights, as well as a more equal and just international order. The speech by Kenya's Ambassador to the UN, Martin Kimani, serves as an inspiration in this regard, acknowledging both Africa's legacy of colonial oppression and the imperial aggression of Russia toward Ukraine. Stoking "the embers of dead empires," Kimani warned in the Security Council in the immediate aftermath of Russia's invasion, risks creating "new forms of domination and oppression." Africa, he concluded, is better served by defending multilateralism and respect for the territorial integrity of UN member states, rejecting a "dangerous nostalgia" and instead "look forward to a greatness none of our many nations and peoples had ever known" (Kimani 2022).

It would be delusionary to think that efforts to make the liberal international (dis)order more just and equal will be anything but an arduous, conflictual, and long-term process, but there are signs that major powers are willing to consider changes (Gowan 2023). United, speaking with a strong Pan-African voice, the AU and Africa have the power, agency, and ideological resources to push for a reformed, more just and equal world order. Divided, this is a near mission impossible.

Introducing the Articles

As the above discussion shows, a deeper understanding of the AU and its Pan-African principles is central to the study of global politics, and the essays collected in the Special Forum are a step in this direction. Taking Pan-Africanism seriously as a political ideology, the Special Forum explores the last twenty years of the AU and Pan-Africanist debates, as well as the possibilities for new futures drawn from the African experience. The articles also engage with theoretical debates about Africa and its place in the world, seeking to open up new and productive lines of inquiry in order to address contemporary challenges in Africa and globally.

The papers cohere around three overlapping and intersecting themes; (1) the ways that Africa and the AU have shaped international politics over the last twenty years and therefore must be understood as important actors in global politics; (2) the manner in which Pan-Africanism influences, conditions, and constrains African political practice; and (3) the importance and productiveness of theoretical debates about African and Pan-African identity.

The first theme builds on recent work that has highlighted the marginalization of Africa in IR, and the importance of taking a more global approach to the discipline and being attentive to perspectives from beyond the West.

All the articles in the Special Forum demonstrate in one way or another that Africa is significant for IR, not merely as a space for international development, humanitarian aid, or democracy promotion, but as a continent where actors with agency have had an impact in material, ideological, and theoretical terms. In this way, the articles respond to the calls for a "Global IR" and provide important insights from African cases that are of relevance for the wider discipline. More specifically, the articles highlight the AU as an important global actor, not only spearheading regional and global governance but also pioneering unique forms of continental governance. In particular, Kathryn Nash's article "The African Union's Regional and Global Governance in the Post Pandemic Era" and Oumar Bah's "Exit from Nuremburg to The Hague: Pan-African Visions and the Road to Arusha" demonstrate the emergence of new norms and approaches to health governance, international human rights, and criminal law. Analyzing the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA), Thomas Tieku and Afua Yakohene's contribution highlights the progress toward Africa's long-standing quest for economic integration, but crucially underlines the dangers of uncritically adopting global models of free trade. As such, the Special Forum cautions against an uncritical embrace of any sign of "African agency," encouraging instead a careful engagement with the power and politics of African actors on the global stage.

The second, closely connected theme highlights how Pan-Africanism influences, conditions, and constrains African political practice. As many of the articles show, Pan-African political thought has provided important critiques and inspiration for the study of global order while also informing African positions on global governance and international institutions like the International Criminal Court. Striking an optimistic note, Samuel Oloruntuba calls for a new Pan-Africanism that can help the AU accelerate continental unity and thus challenge the subordination of Africa in the global order. Calls for unity aside, Pan-Africanism also contains strong nativist strands (Abrahamsen 2020), and African politics has struggled with issues of nativism and other forms of violent identity-based politics that are now understood as wider global challenges beyond the continent. Farai Chipato's "The Global Politics of African Identity: Pan-Africanism and the Challenge of Afropolitanism" addresses these issues.

The challenges and difficulties associated with discussions of African identity and Pan-African politics echo through many of the articles, making it the third theme of the Special Forum. Antonia Witt engages directly with this theme in her analysis of the AU's attempt to forge a Pan-African identity for itself, using the slogan "I am an African. I am the African Union." This effort to legitimize the institution, however, seems to have had little effect on ordinary citizens' allegiance to the AU, indicating that direct experience rather than knowledge and ideology determines citizens' support. As several of the articles suggest, the question of an African and/or Pan-African identity matters—for the future of the continent, the sustainability of the AU as a regional governance organization, and the authoritarian potential of nativist and nationalist forms of politics.

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