Editorial Note
African Union's Permanent Membership of G20: Implications for Africa's Role in Global Affairs

Prof Jideofor Adibe,
Editor-in-Chief
Journal of African Union Studies

Introduction

On 9 September 2023, the Group of 20 (better known as G-20) in its summit in New Delhi, India, announced a decision to welcome the African Union (AU) as a new permanent member, effectively transforming the inter-governmental forum into G-21. September 9, the day the invitation was announced, coincided with the 24th anniversary of the Sirte Declaration in Sirte, Libya, where the African Union was announced as a successor to the Organisation of African Unity. Prior to the admission of the AU as a permanent member, it had been an invited member of the forum. The AU's new status with the G20 mirrors a similar status enjoyed in the group by the European Union (EU), one of the largest economies in the world and the world's largest single market area. The EU is a permanent member of the 'club' alongside three of its member States - France, Germany, and Italy – and is normally represented by the president of the European Commission and President of the European Council. The G-20 (prior to the admission of the AU) represents around 85% of global GDP and 75% of global trade, as well as two-thirds of the world's population (McBride, Siripurapu, & Berman, 2023). The African Union consists of 55 member states, although six nations are currently suspended. It has a combined GDP of $3 trillion and a population of 1.4 billion (Munyati, 2023). The permanent members

of the G20 are now Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, South Korea, Mexico, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Türkiye, United Kingdom and United States, along with the EU and the AU.

What does AU's permanent membership of the G-20 really mean for Africa?

The G-20 was founded on 25 September 1999 in the wake of Mexico's financial crisis of 1994 and the Asian crisis of 1997 when the finance ministers and Central Bank governors from the G-7 group announced that they would work together to establish an informal mechanism for dialogue with major emerging economies of the world within the framework of the Bretton Woods system. It will be recalled that in 1997 major Asian countries - South Korea, Thailand, Philippines, Indonesia, and Singapore - got into deep financial trouble after Thailand unpegged the Thai Baht from the US dollar, which in turn triggered off a series of currency devaluations and massive flights of capital (Swaniti Global, 2022). The G-20 is made up of 19 countries plus the European Union. Its establishment seemed to be a recognition of the importance of the emerging economies amid changes in the global economic landscape. The group has evolved over the years. A turning point in its evolution was the global financial crisis of 2008 which affected the major economies of the world, forcing them to rethink and convene a summit of the G-20 at leaders' level for the first time in Washington DC in 2008. Previously only the finance ministers and central bank governors of the forum members met.

The G-20 has received as much kudos as it has received criticisms. Supporters for instance argue that since achieving implementable global goals would require joint efforts of countries, private corporations and individuals, the G-20's ability to bring together leaders from both developed and emerging economies around the table, is, on its own, a laudable achievement. In this sense the G-20 is seen as representing a broader spectrum than the narrower perspective of the Group of Seven (G-7) which focuses on the most industrialized economies of the world. It has also been argued that the organisation's relatively loose structure compared with what we have in traditional international organisations makes it "especially well-suited to provide injections of political impetus for policy problems" (Carin & Shorr,2013). There were equally instances

where bilateral meetings on the summit's side-lines have led to major international agreements (McBride, Siripurapu, & Berman, 2023).

Critics have however argued that though the group was credited with helping to manage the global financial crisis of 2008, it could actually have prevented the crisis if it had heeded the warning of an impending economic meltdown by the Bank for International Settlements (Swaniti Global, 2022). Critics also argue that the G-20 Summits are often bogged down by "haggling over detailed, but often anodyne, communiqués" (cited in McBride, Siripurapu, & Berman, 2023).

It is important to appreciate that the admission of the AU as a Permanent Member of the G-20 came at a time of increasing geopolitical rivalry in which the G-20 is seen as potentially weakened by an increasingly influential BRICS led by China and Russia, (which compete with the USA-led Western nations). BRICS is a neologism coined in 2011 by the British economist Jim O'Neil, a former Goldman Sachs analyst, who used the acronym to refer to the economies of Brazil, Russia, India and China. BRIC was later turned to BRICS when South Africa was bracketed into the group in its first expansion in 2010.

Is the admission of the AU as a permanent member of the G-20 part of the competition among the various systems of geopolitical alliances – the G-7 (led by the USA), BRICS (led by China and Russia), AU, UN etc.? What is there for Africa in the AU being a permanent member of the G-20? Was the decision by the G-20 to invite the Au to become a permanent member influenced by the expansion of the BRICS group in August 2023 when it invited six countries (Saudi Arabia, Iran, Ethiopia, Egypt, Argentina and the United Arab Emirates) to join the group in a move described by some as an audacious acceleration of its push to reshuffle a world order it sees as unfair and outdated? (Adibe, 2023). Was the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi who announced the admission of the AU merely using that invitation to bolster his own profile in Africa and in the world political stage at large?

With the continent facing numerous developmental challenges - from problems of climate change, resurgence of military coups to a rise in 'illiberal democracies' (Plattner, 2019; Zakaria, 1997) - experts disagree on potential benefits to be harnessed from membership of the G-20. While some like Robert Besseling, Chief Executive officer of the South Africa-based intelligence advisory group Pangea-Risk believes that AU's permanent membership "is more of a symbolic development than a substantive event" he nonetheless conceded that AU's entry into the G20 may "help diversify global alliances and open new avenues for

cooperation" (cited in Solomon, 2023). It could also be argued that membership may help to amplify African voices in global affairs because the relative loss of influence by the UN (in which Africa has the largest regional membership) in shaping world affairs to groups like G-7, G-20 and BRICS means also a decline in the continent's voices as African countries are under-represented in the latter groups. In this sense, the G-20 could be a useful platform for Africa to potentially influence the global agenda especially on issues of international cooperation.

Though Africa may gain from a permanent membership of the G-20, The G-20 itself stands to gain even more. For instance, prior to admitting the AU as a Permanent Member, South Africa was the only African member of the body. This means that with the admission of the African Union, the G-20 (whose influence seems to be declining amid the rise in the profile of BRICS), has managed to expand its legitimacy– at least in the eyes of many Africans. By co-opting more African member countries through the AU, it has also potentially bolstered its position to compete more effectively with BRICS and other groupings that seem desirous of challenging the currently Western-dominated world order. Similarly, given the clamour for the democratization of certain global institutions such as the United Nation's Security Council and the Bretton Woods institutions (Boutros-Ghali, 1995; Mohseni-Cheraghlou, 2022), the G-20 seems, by the invitation of the AU to become a full member, to have positioned itself as a more inclusive intergovernmental body than the United Nation's Security Council which has five permanent members that wield veto powers.

How Africa can benefit maximally from membership of the G-21

To be able to benefit maximally from whatever opportunities full membership of the (now) G-21 offers, Africa must first put its house in order. It must heal itself of the "begging bowl syndrome" and the "victim complex" because the continent cannot aspire to be treated as an equal partner in the comity of nations when it does not in truth see itself as being equal to others or when it unwittingly puts itself in subordinate relationship with other countries as it constantly shops for pity with its begging bowl. It is true that there are major constraints posed by the structure of the international system on the continent's ability to manoeuvre but some Asian countries have shown that such constraints can be overcome. Africa needs to develop the confidence to tell itself it has come of age. There is a need for the AU to put in place effective

structures and processes that will ensure that it participates effectively in all the relevant meetings of the group – not just the summit of the leaders of the countries that make up the members. The AU needs to be able to articulate and defend African interests and should not allow itself to be used to further the objectives of the competing centres of global power.

While the contributors to this issue of the journal do not speak directly African Union's admission as a permanent member of the G-20, they address various issues that confront the AU in its integration efforts, which in turn could affect the ability of the continental body to maximally harness the opportunities offered by its membership of the G-20, (now G-21).

In 'Pan-Africanism as Responsibility': A Building Block for African Unity?', Tinashe Sithole and Keaobaka Tsholo argue that pan Africanism should be seen as an ideal to promote the values and responsibilities of African states for actions that promote unity within and across Africa. They noted that in the last 50 years, Africa has experienced increased intrastate conflict, secessionism, election-related violence, and violence by criminal enterprises and terrorist groups driven by greed for extractive resources. They argued that African leaders have undermined the ideals of Pan-Africanism in their countries, which in turn negatively affects the peace and unity of the continent.

Masilo Lepuru, in 'Continental Pan-Afrikanism and its Discontents: Towards the hegemony of Garveyism in Afrika', discussed the problematic relation between settler colonialism and Pan-Afrikanism, arguing that the "continentalism of Kwame Nkrumah which accepts both Arab and European settlers on the continent has resulted in the biological survival of Afrikans being in question.". The author discussed Chinweizu's suggestion that Afrikans should abandon Nkrumah's continentalism and embrace Garveyism in the form of Black Power Pan-Afrikanism. He contended that "until Afrikans address settler colonialism in the south and north by adopting Garveyism, the dream of Afrikan unity and prosperity will not only remain elusive but will never be attained." The author however failed to convincingly explain how this Garveyism will automatically solve all the problems of the continent, including those imposed by the structure of the international system and the nature of domestic politics in the various African countries.

In 'Towards a Comprehensive Approach to Assess and Measure Regional Integration' Tarek Abdel-Latif Aboul-Atta and Mourad Medhat Elzeiny compared various methodologies for assessing regional

integration projects. They studied 10 cases of regional blocs and 3 integration indices, which they used to monitor and assess the regional integration process. Based on this, they concluded from their data that 38 indicators were the most influential in assessing the regional integration projects.

Enoch Ndem Okon, Victor Ojakorotu & Joseph Chidi Ebegbulem in their article, 'The Securitisation of Sahel: Issues and Challenges', focused on the identification and explanation of the issues hindering the implementation of the securitisation agenda in the African Sahel. The authors identified several factors including the enormous cost of the security and development component of the agenda, heterogeneity in the apparently homogenous region, the murky nature of the Sahelian threats, the nature and focus of the security agenda and partnership, and hegemonic competitions within the region - as the main issues hindering the smooth implementation of the securitisation agenda in the Sahel. They recommended that the UN and the West should invest massively in the transformation of the Sahel from desert to greenbelt, as well as in the provision of infrastructural facilities across the region in order to create jobs and propel economic development.

In 'Regional Integration, COVID-19 and the Fundamental Development Challenges of the 21st Century: Reference from the Southern African Development Community', Daniel N. Mlambo used the SADC, a Regional Economic Community (REC), to draw a picture of how the COVID-19 pandemic and other challenges affected integration efforts in the continent.

Seane Mabitsela in 'Significance of Cooperation Between the Organization of African unity (O.A.U) and the United Nations, 1965-1975', discusses the significance of the cooperation between the Organisation of African Union, (the precursor to the African Union), and the United Nations, focusing on the resolutions of the General Assembly from 1965 to 1975. The author contended that by analysing the resolutions of the UN during the period, the article was able to draw useful inferences on the nature of the co-operation between the OAU and the UN at that time.

In 'The Domestic Politics and Policies in Nigeria and South Africa: Catalyst or Hindrance to AfCFTA Goals', James Akpan Udoh & Michael Sazelo Mkhize discuss the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), a free trade area that covers almost the entirety of the African continent which was brokered by the African Union (AU) and signed on March 21, 2018, in Kigali, Rwanda. They discussed how the domestic

politics of South Africa and Nigeria could hinder or catalyze the attainment of the goals of AfCFTA in both countries.

Ayuba Caleb & Dominique Emmanuel Uwizeyimana in 'Resolving conflicts in Africa's Democratic Setting: Exploring the role of the African Union', interrogated the multifaceted issues around elections and electoral violence in Africa's democratic environment, using Nigeria and Kenya as case studies. They noted that primordial imperatives are often mobilised as drivers of political violence in both countries and called for the involvement of the African Union in the resolution of conflicts and violence resulting from electoral violence.

In 'The Impact of African Union's Call for "Silencing-the-Guns" on Cooperation, and Peacebuilding amid COVID-19 in Conflict-Affected African Countries (CAACs)', Samuel Agunyai, Saheed Ayinla Ogundare and Oluwatobi O. Adeyemi discussed the African Union's regional call for "Silencing the Gun", This was a call by the AU on conflicting parties in conflict-affected African countries (CAACs) to drop their guns and work collaboratively to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. They noted that there was only a weak or temporary heeding to that call, which for them, raised a number of interesting questions. Drawing on peacebuilding and state fragility theories, the authors examined the impact of the African Union's "Silencing-the Guns" on cooperation and peacebuilding during COVID-19 in Conflict-affected African Countries (CAACs).

References

Adibe, Jideofor (2023), 'The wedding goes on without us', *Premium Times*, August 29, https://www.premiumtimesng.com/opinion/618457-brics-the-wedding-goes-on-without-us-by-jideofor-adibe.html

Boutros-Ghali, Boutros (1995), *Agenda for Peace* 2nd ed, New York, United Nations

Carin, Barry & Shorr, David (2013), 'The G20 as a lever for progress', *CIGI G20 Papers* No. 7, February 2013 The Centre for International Governance Innovation, (https://www.cigionline.org/sites/default/files/g20no7_0.pdf)

McBride, James, Siripurapu, Anshu, and Berman, Noah (2023), 'What does the G-20 do?', *Council for Foreign Affairs* https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-does-g20-do

Mohseni-Cheraghlou, Amin (2022), 'Democratic challenges at Bretton Woods Institutions', *Ethnographics*, April 11, https://www.atlanticcou

ncil.org/blogs/econographics/inequality-at-the-top-democratic-challenges-at-bretton-woods-institutions/

Munyati, Chido (2023), 'The African Union has been made a permanent member of the G20 – what does it mean for the continent?, *World Economic Forum*, September 14, https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/09/african-union-g20-world-leaders/

Plattner, Marc F. (2019), 'Illiberal Democracy and the Struggle on the Right', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 30 (Issue 1), pp 5-19

Solomon, Salem (2023), 'Can African Union's permanent membership in G20 bring about real change?', *Voice of America*, September 12, https://www.voanews.com/a/can-african-union-s-permanent-membership-in-g20-bring-about-real-change-/7265001.html

Swaniti Global (2022), 'G-20: Origin, History and Evolution', December 1, (Available: https://www.swaniti.com/research-analysis/g-20-origin-history-and-evolution/)

Zakaria, Fareed (1997), 'The Rise of Illiberal Democracy', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 76, No. 6 (Nov. - Dec., 1997), pp. 22-43