

African Agency Towards Global Powers:

A View from the Southern African
Development Community (SADC)



FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS



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Introduction

In 2024, the African Center for the Study of the United States at the University of the Witwatersrand (Republic of South Africa) commissioned a study entitled “African Agency Toward Global Powers: A View from Regional Economic Blocs”. Agency, in a nutshell, refers to the capacity to exert political influence externally. Thus, the study investigated the extent to which Africa, particularly the regional economic blocs (RECs), was able to influence and shape its relations with various global powers and actors. It analysed bilateral and multilateral actors, as well as other development partners, such as international financial institutions. The study focused on five (5) of the eight (8) RECs recognized by the African Union, namely, the Arab Maghreb Union (UMA), the East African Community (EAC), the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the Southern African Development Community (SADC).

The global powers that the study focused on include the United States of America, the European Union and, where necessary, some of its member states and the People's Republic of China. In some instances, other global powers such as India, Russia, the Gulf States, and Japan were included. The study also touched on the RECs' engagements with multilateral organizations.

Using both desk reviews and fieldwork, the study's overall aim was to produce knowledge on the engagement of RECs with global powers. A book on the study is currently under production. This report focuses on the SADC. The objective is to summarise the findings and to provide stakeholders with key findings and recommendations to inform their interactions with global powers.

Findings of the Study

In the case of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the study made the following findings:

- While the global powers and actors are guided by foreign policies and various frameworks, SADC does not have a foreign policy framework shaping its agenda and guiding relations with global powers and the actors it has relations with. As such, the global powers engage with SADC based on sets of objectives and interests, while SADC seems to fit within those global powers' objectives and interests. Additionally, SADC does not have diplomatic representation with global powers.

- The SADC Treaty does not provide much guidance on positions that SADC should adopt in its relations with partners or the positions that it should adopt on many pressing global issues, such as the international trading and financial system, and the reform of the United Nations and other leading international organizations. The study also didn't find strong linkages between SADC's decisions and the African Union's positions on key global and international issues. These are the issues that global powers pursue in the SADC region or with SADC as an REC.
- As a result of economic weakness caused by factors such as undiversified economies and states designed to primarily serve elite interests, SADC continues to rely on global powers and partners for institutional and development finance. On institutional finance and support, for instance, it was found that a substantial number of internal activities, including capacity and administrative support, are funded by some of the global powers. In terms of development finance, the study found that funding channelled towards SADC prioritized the interests of the global powers and, in some respects, negated SADC's core interests. This dependence undermines SADC's agency, as the organization is unable to exert meaningful influence on those it depends on. In several instances, the study found evidence of SADC abandoning its own objectives and interests to align with those of global powers.
- SADC's agency is undermined by the fact that some of its member states are also members in other RECs. This dual membership is counterproductive, as some SADC member states end up pursuing multiple agendas in the different RECs in which they belong. This lessens the impact that would have been achieved had member states focused all their energy on driving agendas through a single regional organisation. In fact, the problem multiplies when the cases of some member states belonging to more than two RECs are considered. The study shows that global powers have different interests with different member states in different RECs, further complicating engagements and agendas. It was also found that some member states opt in and out of the decisions made by SADC to pursue their interests in alternative RECs, often with significant negative implications for SADC's engagement with global powers. This weakens the organisation's capacity to amplify its voice on important issues and lessens its capability to advance agency based on collective intra-SADC goals and objectives. Although countries with dual or multiple memberships may reap the benefits, such dual memberships suggest a lack of confidence in the SADC to advance the holistic interests of the member states. This is particularly the case with cases and issues where global powers have a great interest in the SADC region as well as in other RECs.

Recommendations of the study

Informed by the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

- SADC should initiate and adopt a foreign policy framework that would guide its relations with global powers and actors. The foreign policy framework would be guided by SADC goals and objectives, take cognisance of the interests of each of the global powers, and serve as a key negotiation document for engagements. It would also ensure SADC's diplomatic representation in the political headquarters of each of the significant global powers.
- SADC is also encouraged to guide and support its member states to construct developmental states. Not only would this result in improved living standards for citizens of SADC countries, but it would also liberate SADC states from dependence on global powers for development finance. To this end, SADC should negotiate with global powers on areas of engagement from a position of internal and intra-SADC agency and be courageous to decline forms of engagement that subvert the developmental interests of the region.
- Finally, to ensure focus and commitment to its agenda, SADC should have a conversation about dual/fragmented membership of regional organisations by some of its member states. Additionally, SADC should consider a coordination mechanism with other RECs for alignment on matters involving issues in member states that spill over between regions.