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Neutrality or Strategic Alignment? African Foreign Policy in the Emerging US-Israel-Iran Geopolitical Divide

Moshood Abiodun OLATUNJI, Ph.D
Department of Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution,
Federal University of Agriculture and Development Studies,
Iragbiji, Osun State, Nigeria
moshood.olatunji@fuadsi.edu.ng

Hammed Afolabi OSUOLALE AICMC
Institute of Peace and Security Studies,
Fountain University, Osogbo, Osun State, Nigeria.
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0005-1601-7987
osuolalehammed1@gmail.com

Musili Oladipupo ABASS
Department of Political Science, Fountain University, Osogbo,
Osun State, Nigeria. / *abassoladipupo@mail.com*

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Abstract
This study seeks to analyze African foreign policy in the face of rising polarization in international relations, with particular emphasis on the rising geopolitical fault line between the US, Israel, and Iran. As the international system continues to witness rising multipolarity, the traditional notion of neutrality is being tested by rising economic, political, and security demands. Previous studies of African foreign policy have depicted African states as either non-aligned or constrained, failing to account for the agency inherent in their foreign policy practices. This paper, based on the constructivist school of thought in international relations and the concept of strategic autonomy, attempts to rethink the traditional notion of neutrality as strategic neutrality. This study undertakes this analysis qualitatively by relying on documentary evidence of policy positions, diplomatic interactions, and recent literature. The study finds that rather than being the result of structural constraints, neutrality in the context of the geopolitical divide is an active agency that manifests itself in the form of diplomatic ambiguity. Although the structural factors are important in this context, the agency of African countries in the context of the geopolitical divide is evident in the absence of rigid alignment and the presence of diversified relations. The study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by conceptualizing neutrality in the context of agency and the geopolitical divide.

Keywords: Strategic Neutrality; African Foreign Policy; Global Governance; Multipolarity; Strategic Autonomy

Introduction

The modern-day global system is largely marked by the forces of geopolitical polarization, the dynamics of changing alliances, and the constantly shifting power balances at the global level. The revival of the great power rivalry and the escalation of regional conflicts, especially the dynamics of the emerging conflict between the US, Israel, and Iran, are some of the key factors that have led to the increasingly fragmented global system. As the modern-day global system is emerging, the crises that are unfolding at the global level are no longer geographically confined but are having significant implications at the regional levels (Ikenberry, 2023; Acharya, 2022). As such, nations are increasingly being forced to deal with the complex web of alliances in the system where the option of remaining neutral is becoming strategically imperative but at the same time becoming increasingly elusive.

As part of this larger transformation, Africa holds a peculiarly intricate position. Traditionally connected to the ideologies of non-alignment and strategic neutrality, African nations have traditionally attempted to protect their sovereignty and independence by evading involvement in rivalries between great powers. This practice, grounded in historical postcolonial international relations and furthered through multilateral structures like the African Union, is part of a longstanding tradition dedicated to maintaining African sovereignty in an asymmetrical world order (Tieku, 2022). Nevertheless, today's geopolitical circumstances are pressing African nations in ways that are unprecedented. The rising overlap between Middle Eastern conflicts and global economic structures, especially in terms of energy, security, and diplomacy, has amplified the extent to which African nations are exposed to and entangled in external geopolitical circumstances.

Despite this fact, available literature on global geopolitics and African foreign policy has exhibited some limitations. For instance, literature on global polarization has often been state-centric and focused on powerful states, without adequately taking into account how Africa and other regions actually respond and react to these issues (Acharya, 2022). Secondly, literature on African foreign policy has often portrayed Africa as either being influenced by external forces or as a bloc that seeks non-alignment, without adequately analyzing the underlying logic and reasoning for this position (Aning & Edu-Afful, 2022). Thirdly, the idea of neutrality is often portrayed as if it is an automatic position rather than as something that is actually negotiated in response to changing global forces.

Such a situation is important because it highlights the ways in which African states are, in fact, exercising agency in a constrained and evolving international system. In relation to the emerging geopolitical divide between the US, Israel, and Iran, neutrality can no longer be conceived of as a passive or default form of foreign policy. Instead of reifying neutrality as a state of non-alignment, this paper argues that it should, in fact, be reconceptualized as a practice that African states are strategically utilizing in order to navigate competing external pressures.

This study differs from other studies in three significant ways. First, it challenges the marginalization of African agency in the discourse of global governance by offering a more central role to African states in the game of great power politics. Second, it breaks with the dominant binary in the discourse of African foreign policy, which often portrays African states as either non-aligned or externally constrained, by showing that neutrality is also a form of strategic ambiguity and balancing in international politics. Finally, it breaks with the dominant understanding of neutrality as an objective status by offering a more nuanced understanding of neutrality as a process.

Thus, the study locates itself in relation to other studies in the field by offering a reframed and extended version of the discourse of African neutrality in international politics. It argues that neutrality is not an objective status but, rather, a form of strategic positioning that enables African states to navigate their vulnerabilities and benefit from the polarizing effects of globalization in Africa.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Global Polarization and the Limits of System-Level Analysis

Current studies of global governance have highlighted the shift from the liberal international system to a more fragmented and multipolar system characterized by geopolitical competition and the formation of exclusive zones of influence (Acharya, 2022; Ikenberry, 2023). In the context of such studies, global conflicts such as those between the US, Israel, and Iran are often explained in terms of competition and realignment between great powers.

However, these studies are still system-centric in their approach, prioritizing the role and interests of powerful states while offering little insight into the perspective of regions such as Africa in dealing with these issues. The question that arises in this context is:

Where is Africa located in the context of these discussions of global polarization?

It is noticeable in most of these discussions that Africa is treated more as a geopolitical space and not as a place of decision-making. This is a limitation in the sense that it ignores the role of African states in dealing with global conflicts.

African Foreign Policy: Between Non-Alignment and Structural Constraint

The body of knowledge on African foreign policies in the past has generally been influenced by the legacy of non-alignment, which underscores autonomy, sovereignty, and non-entanglement in any conflict between or among the great powers (Tieku, 2022). Recent bodies of knowledge on African foreign policies, however, underscore the extent to which African states are embedded in a condition of structural dependency (Aning & Edu-Afful, 2022).

While useful, such bodies of knowledge on African foreign policies have generally underscored a conceptual binary:

1. Africa as autonomous and non-aligned
2. Africa as dependent and externally constrained

This binary, however, poses an important analytical question:

Does this framework capture the strategic foreign policies of African states in a new global order?

This binary, by oscillating between autonomy and constraint, fails to capture the strategic maneuvering that takes place within the boundaries of such constraints. African foreign policies, in other words, are overstated or understated.

Rethinking Neutrality in a Multipolar World

The notion of neutrality is at the core of any debate on foreign policy in the Global South. Neutrality is traditionally understood as non-alignment or non-partisanship in geopolitical conflicts. However, in recent literature on foreign policy in the Global South, neutrality is being challenged by globalization, interdependence, and geopolitical pressures.

However, much of the literature on neutrality in foreign policy in the Global South still portrays it as either:

1. a normative ideal, or
2. a fading and unsustainable phenomenon

This creates an interesting question: *is neutrality in fact fading away, or is it being reframed?*

Neutrality is not being interrogated in existing studies on foreign policy in the Global South. Neutrality is still being assumed either in decline or irrelevant in the context of global polarization.

Identifying the Gap: Beyond Passivity and Binary Thinking

Collectively, this body of literature indicates an incomplete understanding of the subject:

1. Global governance literature marginalizes African agency
2. African foreign policy literature is binary in its understanding of autonomy and constraint
3. The nature of neutrality is static, not dynamic and strategic

This is an obvious analytical gap:

How do African states utilize neutrality in an active way as a means of coping with conflicting global pressures?

In other words:

Is African neutrality an indication of weakness or an active means of engagement and survival in a polarizing world?

Scholarly Positioning: Extending and Reframing the Literature
This paper is an extension and reframing of existing literature.

1. It extends global governance literature by inserting African agency into its analysis of polarization in international relations.
2. It reframes African foreign policy literature in its binary understanding of autonomy and constraint.
3. It changes the understanding of neutrality in international relations from static to dynamic.

The main argument of this paper, which is developed in the following sections, is that:

1. The states of Africa are not neutral in a passive way; instead, they practice strategic neutrality.

This changes the focus of the analysis from:

1. Passive to strategic
2. From non-alignment to alignment
3. From static to dynamic neutrality

Theoretical Implication
This study, which conceptualizes neutrality as a form of strategic action, also speaks to some of the debates in international relations theory, particularly with regard to:

1. The role of the Global South in international relations
2. The character of agency in the presence of structural constraint
3. The development of foreign policy in a multipolar world

Theoretical Framework: Strategic Neutrality and Constructivist Agency
This study is grounded in the constructivist perspective of international relations, which is complemented by the concept of strategic autonomy. The constructivist perspective argues that the dynamics of international politics are not entirely explained by material power and constraints, but are also influenced by social meanings, norms, and identities (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2021). Under this perspective, the actions of the state cannot be explained solely in relation to its response to external pressures, but are also related to its understanding of its own positioning in the system of international relations and its actions in response to that understanding. This perspective therefore directs the analytical lens away from the state's obligations and towards its actions in constraint.

At the same time, the idea of strategic autonomy also focuses on the potential of states, especially in the Global South, to make independent policy choices in the face of asymmetrical global power relations. In other words, it is an idea that focuses on dependence and agency. In this sense, it is an idea that focuses on dependence and agency. In other words, it is an idea that

acknowledges the limitations of states in international relations but also recognizes their potential to make independent foreign policy decisions (Acharya, 2022).

Core Assumptions of the Framework

This research is underpinned by three core assumptions based on these theories:

1. **Agency within Constraint**
   African states are not mere passive actors in international relations. They are actors that are constrained by structural limitations but are capable of making independent foreign policy decisions.
2. **Normative and Interpretive Action**
   The foreign policy actions of African states are not only guided by their interests but also by their norms and perceptions of legitimacy.
3. **Strategy as Practice**
   The foreign policy of neutrality is not static. It is an action that is constantly being practiced through diplomatic means such as ambiguity, balancing, and engagement.

Limitations of Existing Theoretical Applications

Although both constructivism and strategic autonomy have been widely used in international relations theory, their application in previous studies also had certain limitations. One of the major limitations is that, in applying constructivism theory, researchers have generally focused on norm diffusion and identity formation, but not on the deliberate utilization of ambiguity or indeterminacy in state behavior.

Another limitation is that the theory of strategic autonomy is generally applied in relation to major or emerging powers, such as India or China. However, there is limited application of the theory in relation to African countries. Where it is applied in relation to Africa, it is generally in relation to structural weaknesses or capacities.

Finally, both theories generally apply neutrality in either of two ways:

1. As a norm,
2. As a constraint, but not in relation to neutrality as a strategy.

Theoretical Contribution: Reconceptualizing Neutrality as Strategy

This study is unique in that it breaks away from previous studies on both theories by being the first to apply the theory of "strategic neutrality."

Instead of considering neutrality as:

1. The absence of alignment, or'
2. The residual category in global politics,'

This paper conceptualizes neutrality as:

'The deliberate, negotiated, and context-dependent strategy through which states navigate external pressures.'

This, in a way, extends the constructivist theory by considering that:

1. 'Ambiguity can be normatively and strategically constructed'
2. 'Non-alignment is an actively performed practice of diplomacy'

This study also extends the theory of strategic autonomy by showing that:

1. 'Autonomy does not necessitate independence from global powers'
2. 'Autonomy can be exercised through engagement, silence, and flexibility'

Application to This Study

This theory directly applies to the analysis of African foreign policies in the context of the US-Israel-Iran geopolitical divide.

It enables us to:

1. Understand neutrality in terms of strategic agency, rather than indecision
2. Examine diplomatic action, such as silence, abstention, or selective engagement, in terms of strategic action
3. Explore how African states are building and negotiating their positioning in a polarized world system

Rather than examining whether African states are neutral or aligned, it challenges us to ask:

1. How is neutrality practiced, and for what strategic purposes?
2. Positioning Within Academic Debate

This study positions itself in relation to existing academic debates through its engagement with and extension of constructivist institutionalism and strategic autonomy. It Contributes to:

1. Theoretical refinement of existing debates in foreign policy analysis
2. Filling the gap between constructivist theory and foreign policy practice in the Global South
3. Reframing neutrality in terms of dynamics and strategy
4. Extending the utility of strategic autonomy in analyzing African foreign policy action

ANALYSIS: Strategic Neutrality and the Politics of Alignment in Africa

Neutrality as a foreign policy tenet of African states has always been a dominant theme, especially considering the legacy of non-alignment and the need for states to maintain sovereignty in a highly unequal world. However, considering the emerging geopolitical tensions between the US, Israel, and Iran, there arises a pertinent and critical issue of concern, especially for African states, and that is:

Can African states truly remain non-aligned in a highly polarizing world order?

On the surface, African states may be seen as remaining neutral, especially considering the fact that they neither openly support nor openly condemn any of the parties involved. However, a deeper analysis of the situation reveals that the very notion of neutrality is not as absolute as it may initially appear. From a constructivist perspective, neutrality is not conceived of as absence of action but rather as a social construct that is based on states' interpretations of their strategic environment. Neutrality is, therefore, not so much about absence but more about states' self-presentations and self-positionings in global political discourse. This perspective is problematic in that it challenges the current understanding of neutrality in the literature, which sees neutrality as an endangered practice or as a foreign policy posture in decline. Neutrality is not in decline but is, in fact, being redefined and strategically used, which brings us to the real question:

How is neutrality practiced in the face of constraint?

Strategic Ambiguity and Diplomatic Balancing

This evidence appears to imply that African states are increasingly engaging in what may be referred to as a form of strategic ambiguity. In this context, there are:

1. cautious diplomatic statements
2. abstentions or split voting patterns in international forums
3. selective engagement with competing global partners

This, therefore, brings us to a pertinent analytical issue:

Is this a symptom of indecision or a strategy of survival and positioning?

This study, through the lens of the concept of strategic autonomy, argues that this form of ambiguity is not a weakness but a strength of African states. It, therefore, allows them to maintain a certain level of flexibility and avoid the risks of retaliatory action, as well as maintain access to diverse and competing global partners.

This study, therefore, contributes to existing literature by offering a new perspective on what may be seen as a symptom of indecision or a lack of direction. It, therefore, argues that this may, in fact, be a form of strategic balancing, and that, as a result, African foreign policy may not be as reactive as it may initially appear.

Structural Pressures: Economic Dependence and Security Realities

Despite the strategic deployment of neutrality, African states do not exist in a vacuum. Their foreign policies are subject to structural pressures, which affect the deployment of neutrality.

The key areas of structural pressure include:

1. dependence on international energy markets
2. dependence on foreign aid and investment
3. security cooperation with foreign powers

This, in turn, begs an important research question:

To what extent can neutrality be maintained in the context of structural dependence?

The answer to this question appears to be that, in reality, neutrality is limited rather than freely chosen. For instance, an economic relationship with Western countries or a security cooperation agreement with foreign powers may, in theory, affect foreign policies, even if there is no explicit alignment. Yet, instead of negating agency, structural pressures result in a complex form of agency. African states, in fact, display a form of negotiated neutrality, which is a complex process of balancing structural pressures. This study both confirms and extends existing literature. While previous research focuses on structural dependency (Aning & Edu-Afful, 2022), this research extends it to demonstrate that such dependency does not negate agency; it merely redefines it.

Fragmentation and the Limits of Collective African Positioning

Another important aspect of the analysis is the absence of a unified African response to global geopolitical tensions.

Can Africa act collectively in the context of global polarization, or is there inherently fragmented foreign policy?

The African Union (AU) and other regional forums have consistently encouraged the adoption of collective positions through the lens of sovereignty and non-alignment principles. However, the reality is that African nations are driven by divergent national interests, leading to fragmented responses.

What are the sources of fragmentation in Africa's response?

1. differences in economic relationships
2. differences in security imperatives
3. differences in historical and diplomatic relationships

From the constructivist lens, the above implies that there is no singular 'African perspective,' but rather divergent national perceptions of national interest. This contradicts the literature's assumption of Africa as a cohesive entity.

Theoretical Implications: Rethinking Neutrality as Strategy

The analysis of all these dimensions reveals a more general theoretical implication:

> Neutrality is not a state of being, but rather an active and strategic practice.

This conclusion breaks with previous research in three main ways:

1. It contradicts the assumption that neutrality is in decline, *neutrality is being transformed, not eliminated*
2. It disputes the dichotomy of alignment vs. non-alignment, *a spectrum of strategic positioning is at work*
3. It transforms our view of African foreign policy, from reactive behavior… to strategic agency

Addressing the Research Question

The key question: Can African states uphold neutrality in a polarized global order?

> The response is: Yes, but not in its traditional form

African states are not entirely neutral; they are also not entirely aligned. Rather, they engage in:

> *strategic neutrality, which is a dynamic, negotiated, and contextual approach to foreign policy.*

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore whether African states are capable of maintaining neutrality in an increasingly polarized global order in line with the changing US-Israel-Iran geopolitical equation. By moving beyond conventional understandings of neutrality as inaction or an increasingly marginal feature of foreign policy, this study has revealed that neutrality is at the core of African states' foreign policy, though in an entirely new form. This study's findings indicate that African states are no longer maintaining neutrality in terms of non-alignment. Rather, as revealed in this study, African states are maintaining strategic neutrality, a dynamic and negotiated approach to foreign policy that involves elements of ambiguity and balance. This approach is aimed at maintaining state autonomy in an increasingly constrained structural context.

Furthermore, the analysis reveals that the foreign policy of Africans cannot be understood in terms of dichotomies of autonomy and dependence. Although the role of structural constraints is important, it does not negate agency. Instead, it reconfigures agency, leading to a form of strategic action where neutrality becomes a means of coping with vulnerability, as well as a way

of remaining flexible and avoiding costly alignment commitments. Significantly, the analysis also reveals the fragmented nature of African responses to global polarization. The absence of a united continental front, therefore, reinforces the argument that African states operate on the basis of diverse and separate interests and strategic considerations. Such diversity further supports the argument that neutrality is not a fixed or uniform practice but a differentiated and contextual practice.

In answering the research question, this study reveals that African states are capable of maintaining neutrality, but this is in a redefined and strategic form. Neutrality, as a practice, does not disappear but instead continues as a form of active and adaptive practice that allows states to cope with a complex and constantly evolving global environment.

Recommendations

The implications of the findings of this study are significant for policymakers and regional bodies.

1. Improving Strategic Coordination among African Countries: The African governments should improve their diplomatic coordination through regional bodies such as the African Union. This would improve bargaining power and reduce risks of fragmented responses.

2. Institutionalizing Strategic Neutrality in African Foreign Policy: The African governments should move beyond an informal and often reactive understanding of strategic neutrality. They should develop foreign policies that recognize and guide strategic neutrality. This would improve consistency in diplomatic engagements.

3. Reducing Structural Vulnerabilities: In order to maintain significant autonomy, African states should address their underlying economic and security dependencies:
    1. Diversify trade relationships
    2. Enhance regional economic integration
    3. Develop domestic capabilities

Reducing vulnerabilities will provide African states with more available strategic options.

4. Enhancing Diplomatic Capacity and Strategic Communication: Considering the role of ambiguity and balancing, African states should develop their diplomatic capabilities to effectively navigate complex international relationships without sending alignment signals.

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