



GLOBAL POWER POLITICS AND THE IRAN CONFLICT: STRATEGIC LESSONS FOR AFRICAN SOVEREIGNTY AND CONTINENTAL AUTONOMY

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Abstract

Power disparities characterize the global order and great powers seek hegemony through military power, strategic alliances and information domination. The escalation of tensions between the US, Israel and Iran has sparked off a revival of questions about agency, imperialism and the developing world as pieces in a grand game. This paper seeks to assess the geostrategic consequences of the War on Iran and its potential implications for the autonomy of African states. The conflict in Iran is far from confined to the Middle East, and demonstrates how regional conflicts have become sites of global power struggles, producing economic and political reverberations across the world. This paper shows how qualitative analysis of academic articles, policy reports and geopolitical analysis from 2020 to 2026, analyze how Realist and Dependency Theories account for Africa's vulnerability to power dynamics. The analysis will reveal how nominal independence is rendered meaningless in the absence of functional infrastructure, how security partners threaten national sovereignty, how dependence on external import economies makes states fragile and how the continent's disunity ensures Africa has no significant say in global decision making. Ultimately, the paper makes a case for restructuring Africa's role in the world through strengthening its institutions, internal capacity building, concentrated development investment and non-alignment so as to ensure genuine security.

Keywords: African sovereignty, Continental autonomy, Global power politics, Iran conflict, Strategic autonomy.

Introduction

The current international landscape is marked by a noticeable imbalance of power. Dominant nations often steer global political changes through military strength, economic sway, strategic partnerships, and their narratives on geopolitics (Mearsheimer, 2021; Nye, 2021). Lately, the rising tensions between the United States and Israel on one side and Iran on the other have sparked important discussions about sovereignty, intervention, regional security, and the challenges facing developing areas within the global political framework (Katzman, 2021; Cordesman, 2020). But this conflict isn't just about the region; it also highlights the larger dynamics of global power struggles. It shows how rivalries among major powers can lead to significant economic, political, and security repercussions across the international system (Alden & Schoeman, 2021; Shaw et al., 2021).

For Africa, these tensions highlight ongoing structural issues that still undermine real sovereignty and strategic independence, even after many years of political freedom. A lot of African countries still rely heavily on outside help for military support, technology, foreign investments, economic aid, and diplomatic backing. This reliance limits their ability to create and follow their own strategic policies in the global arena. As a result, when global geopolitical crises hit, African economies and political systems often show significant weaknesses, leading to economic instability, energy supply chain disruptions, rising inflation, and increased political uncertainty (African Development Bank, 2024; World Bank, 2023; United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2022). The rising tensions around Iran are causing some real worries about how global energy markets might fluctuate, especially for African economies that rely on imports.

Africa is also dealing with its own set of problems, like scattered diplomatic responses and a lack of a unified geopolitical strategy that could help coordinate actions during major international crises. The African Union has done some good work in promoting regional cooperation and managing conflicts, but its ability to influence global security discussions and international norms is still pretty limited (Tieku & Gelot, 2023). Because of this, African nations often find themselves on the sidelines in global decision-making, mostly reacting to what's happening elsewhere instead of having a say in shaping those events. This situation raises bigger questions about Africa's role

on the world stage, its strategic strength, and how well it can act in the global competitive environment.

The Iran conflict therefore must be viewed within a wider, globally competitive context. In the face of this competition, this study looks at the geopolitical politics underlying the Iran dispute and how this plays into a global power game. It considers its impact on the sovereignty of African states, on the economic viability of the continent and Africa's capacity for strategic independence. Finally, it tries to elicit lessons of strategy and policy which could enhance the continent's geopolitical resistance, its cooperation and its self-sustaining place on the global stage.

Conceptual Review

Concept of Global Power Politics

Global power politics involves contestations among states and primary international actors over their influence in international politics. States and international actors attempt to wield influence using a variety of tools such as their military strength, economic power, diplomatic leverage, technological capabilities, or ideological predominance. In the International Relations discipline and more specifically in realist tradition, power politics is perceived as a relentless rivalry between states vying for primacy of their respective national interests and security within a self-help international system characterized by anarchy (Mearsheimer, 2021). Realist proponents maintain that it is these great powers that determine how international politics unfold through their assertion of military and economic power and the rest of weaker states comply with dominant powers.

Nye (2021) also uses "soft power" to explain global power as the capacity to get others to want what you want, either through the attraction of ideas, culture and policy or military force. At the present time in international politics it is Military Power, Economic Power, Technological Power, media power and alliance power which all contribute to determine which State possesses geopolitical strength. The present standoffs between the USA, Israel and Iran exemplify global power politics at work in the contemporary international arena. It encompasses wider geopolitical competition and security issues (e.g. Competition over nuclear status, regional power and security, the issue of energy and the clash of ideologies). Major Powers get involved in areas of critical importance due to their national security interests, security of access to resources and geopolitical

dominance (Cordesman, 2020; Katzman, 2021) which affects weaker regions like Africa in ways that are often indirect.

Furthermore, students of Global International Relations assert that historically, Africa was located at the periphery but vital part of the world power structure (Raineri & Baldaro, 2022). The continent's relevance in the world power configuration stems from its rich natural resources, geographical advantage, growing population, and large markets, even if its level of access to world governing institutions restricts the country from being a driving force of global affairs.

The Iran Conflict in Concept

The Iran conflict is considered as long-drawn-out confrontation involving Iran and great Western powers such as the US, along with Israel and Saudi Arabia within the regional theatre. It covers political, economic, ideological, military and nuclear differences that began escalating following the Islamic revolution in 1979 in Iran; a period through which Iran's external policy has been largely geared towards opposing western dominance in the Middle East as well as increasing its strategic dominance in the region (Nasr, V. 2021; Takeyh, R. 2020; Akbarzadeh, S. 2023). According to Katzman (2021), the Iran conflict is a multilayer issue characterized by nuclear proliferation concerns, economic sanctions, proxy wars, cyber warfare and competition over regional supremacy. The US and its allies have repeatedly accused Iran of sponsoring militia groups and developing nuclear weapon capabilities. Iran has consistently argued that its nuclear program is primarily for civilian purposes. This dichotomy has led to successive diplomatic crises, military showdowns and economic sanctions which in turn influence the oil markets and international security.

According to Cordesman (2020), the Iran conflict is part of an attempt by Iran to challenge the existing US and Israeli spheres of influence in the region and enhance its own power position. It has forged alliances with key non-state actors in the region such as Hezbollah and Syria in an attempt to improve its own position in the region. Western powers in turn view growing Iranian power as a threat to global and regional stability. Geopolitical developments have now shown that the Iran conflict is not confined to the Middle East. Its broader impact can be seen in the spheres of international trade, maritime security, energy supplies and global economic stability. Recurring

diplomatic crises in the Persian Gulf have translated to volatility in oil prices and inflation and uncertainty in international markets especially for African and other developing countries that rely heavily on imports (World Bank, 2023; African Development Bank, 2024).

This conflict also mirrors the transformation of the world system to a multipolar world order where rising states such as China and Russia seek to challenge western Hegemony and the extent to which Iran cooperates with such states as well as such organizations as Shanghai Cooperation Organization shows how power relations are changing globally.

Concept of Sovereignty

Sovereignty can be defined as supreme authority of a state to govern itself without external intervention. The concept is fundamentally a Western one and it is tied to the Westphalian system of mutually exclusive and equal states that exist independently in the international system. In today's context of globalization and competition in the international world system, the concept of sovereignty is no longer used in the same sense as in former times, especially for developing states (Bodin, 1576; Krasner, 1999). The concept of sovereignty for Africa goes beyond that of formal political sovereignty to the extent to which African states exercise control over their economy, the security and their policies and also their development agenda. Grovogui (2002) argues that African sovereignty cannot be studied from a purely Western perspective because of the colonial past, and it was colonialism and subjection that determined how the African states came to exist in their present forms and as such sovereignty has to be understood in terms of dependency, interventionism and unequal global power relationship.

Contemporary scholarship argues that many African states currently hold "limited sovereignty". This means that African states cannot exercise complete sovereign authority over themselves due to their dependency on aid, partners in security system, external loan and international financial institution (Okoli, 2024). Okoli (2024) opines that African sovereignty in the current period will be determined by the extent to which states engage with and pragmatically navigate geopolitical competition so that their national interests can be protected. Finally, sovereignty within the new international system is now linked to a state's capacity. States without the technological capacity, economic buoyancy, military readiness, or institutional capacity cannot meaningfully be

independent despite legal sovereignty. In the Iranian case, great powers' conflicts can compromise the independence of weaker states that rely on foreign markets and energy supplies.

Concept of Continental Autonomy

Continental Autonomy is defined as the capacity of African States and Institutions to take independent foreign, economic and security objectives without over-reliance on outside powers. It involves regional self-sufficiency, strategic cooperation, economic integration, and collective diplomacy actions within a framework of Pan-Africanism and African Regionalism. Pan-Africanism is the underpinning principle behind Continental Autonomy. The ideology stresses African unity, solidarity, self-determination, and development vis-à-vis foreign dominance. As pointed out by Abrahamsen (2020), Pan-Africanism is a political and intellectual undertaking seeking to establish a fair international order through collective continental actions against hegemonically inclined global arrangements.

The establishment of African Union (AU) and African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) are representative of Africa's quest for continental integration and self-sufficiency. Yet, writers and scholars are concerned that major obstacles still stand on the continent's path including lack of coherent institutions and coordination, external economic dependence, lack of political fragmentation, and insecurity. (Koderó, 2023). Continental Autonomy also involves a concept referred to in recent literature as developmental sovereignty which encompasses the capacity of African States to formulate and implement development policies based on internal needs rather than foreign demands. (Asian Review of Political Economy, 2026). This implies state control over strategically significant sectors such as energy, information technology, infrastructure, trade, food security and digital governance.

Lessons of the Iran conflict for Africa highlight the imperative of strengthened regional institutions, diversified economic partners, energy security, strategic diplomacy, and collective security arrangements. The long-term survival of autonomy for Africa depends on the weakening of extreme dependence, enhancement of continental resilience, and improvement of African negotiating power in the international system.

The Interrelationship of Global Power Politics, the Iran Conflict, African Sovereignty, and Continental Autonomy

Global power politics, the Iran conflict, African sovereignty, and continental autonomy are inextricably intertwined in the contemporary international system. Global power politics entails the contest among the powers for dominance over international affairs, security, advantage and interests, utilizing military power, economic tools, technology, and diplomacy (Mearsheimer, 2021; Nye, 2021). In this scenario, the Iran conflict, in part, has been conceptualized as the geopolitical struggle between Iran, on the one hand, and the United States and its allies (including Israel), on the other, over regional influence, ideology, possession of nuclear weapons, and control over the global energy supply (Cordesman, 2020; Katzman, 2021). The growing ties between Iran and China/Russia reflect the nascent development of a multipolar order resistant to Western dominance.

The Iran conflict also has far-reaching ramifications for Africa due to its position in the global political economy. Dependence on foreign direct investment, externally procured fuel, foreign loans and external security partnerships make a majority of African states susceptible to the unintended consequences of superpower geopolitical conflict. Sovereignty traditionally refers to the supreme power of a state in controlling its internal affairs; however, many African states are experiencing "conditional" or "limited" sovereignty since they depend on external powers for their survival, both technologically and in terms of external aid. As such, geopolitical tensions involving Iran and the Middle East have an impact on the rising prices of petroleum products, thereby exacerbating inflation rates, reducing trade, and putting fiscal pressures on African economies. This ultimately weakens African countries' policy autonomy.

Using a dependency approach, the dependency on the stronger world powers helps strengthen existing relations between dependent and dominant actors and, thereby perpetuate African economic and political dependency. (Amin, 1974; Akbarzadeh, 2023; Adebajo, 2020 & Alden, 2021) are among those scholars who argue that weaker states may reproduce dependent relationships with stronger global actors such as through reliance on external markets, foreign technology, security assistance, external financial aid, among other avenues, even with South-South cooperation having the capacity to reproduce similar dependency relations in the form of

strategic dependence. To combat these dependent relations, there exists the quest for Continental Autonomy as an ideology derived from Pan-Africanism; it can be defined as "the ability of African states and institutions to pursue independent political, economic and security interests" (Adebajo, 2020).

Therefore, the interplay of African sovereignty and continental autonomy underscored the necessity of collective action to advance African interests within a growingly competitive world system. Institutions such as the AU and the ACFTA would significantly increase Africa's bargaining capacity, strategic resilience, and economic independence. Indeed, as advocated by scholars such as Adedeji (2002) and Lopes (2023), Africa has to achieve diversity of diplomatic relations, as well as economic relations while developing internal productive capacities in areas like energy, technology, agriculture, industry and defence. In conclusion, the conflict in Iran was a critical strategic lesson for Africa, that long-term sovereignty and continental autonomy are inextricably tied to regional unity, economic self-reliance, strong institutions and consistent geopolitical actions in an anarchic world system characterized by multiplicity.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopted three closely related theoretical framework: realism, dependency theory and pan-Africanism. With this framework, it helps us to understand both world power relation and Africa's place in world system.

Realism

Realism is one of the most prominent theories of international relations. Realism argues that the international system is anarchical. The system has no superior authority over states; thus states rely on themselves for survival (Mearsheimer, 2021). Power-military and economic power-became a central element in the conduct of politics. From the realist perspective, Iran conflict revealed how imbalance of power and alliances shape geopolitics. States possessing greater military power, advanced technologies and robust alliances are capable of wielding greater influence and protecting national interests.

The theory has bearing to the study because it helped explain how states strive to achieve power, security, survival and national interest in a dynamic and competitive international system. The theory explained Iran conflict as a struggle of influence and balance of power among Iran, U.S., Israel, and other states. It helped emphasize the relevance of self-help and strategic independence for Africa that extreme dependency on stronger states would hinder its sovereignty and policy autonomy, hence the importance of strengthening African Union and African Continental Free Trade Area as a vehicle for greater regional cooperation, economic independence, defense and security cooperation and diversified foreign partnership.

Dependency Theory

The dependency theory has provided an alternative vision of the global economy. Dependency theorists argue that colonial historical interactions and unequal transactions of capital in the post-colonial system have locked underdeveloped regions into enduring reliance on developed countries. Walter Rodney's position was that colonialism had constructed the conditions for structural dependence in the world economy (Rodney, 2020). The dependence of African economies on external forces, for instance on oil prices during periods of geopolitically driven turmoil in the global system, represents the role of the continent in the unequal world economy characterized by its technological reliance on industrialized nations.

The dependency thesis relates to the topic as it clarifies the vulnerability of weak states in the international system: by relying on dominant countries for access to credit, technologies, protection, energy resources, and international markets. Weak states are subject to their dominant partner states for financing, technology, protection, resources and market access. The work illustrates how geopolitical situations such as the Iranian crisis have repercussions on African economies through fluctuations in oil prices, aid conditionalities, and external political intervention, reducing African states' space for maneuvering and undermining its sovereignty. Dependency thesis also makes an important contribution towards calling for continental self-reliance, regional integration, economic diversification and political independence, to offset dependency on dominant actors.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative approach, focusing on documentary analysis. We gathered data from academic journal articles, scholarly books, international policy reports, and respected global media publications published between 2020 and 2026. The study also utilizes thematic analysis to uncover key themes related to sovereignty, geopolitical intervention, economic vulnerability, and strategic autonomy. Sources were chosen based on their academic credibility, relevance to the topic, and their contribution to ongoing discussions about global power politics.

Findings

The findings from the documentary analysis of recent geopolitical events concerning the Iran conflict provide several interconnected insights into global power dynamics and Africa's role in the international arena.

Firstly, the results suggest that formal sovereignty does not necessarily equate to genuine political independence in today's global landscape. The Iran conflict illustrates that even nations with significant military and economic strength can be vulnerable when faced with powerful international coalitions. This indicates that sovereignty is increasingly linked to strategic capabilities, such as military deterrence, technological progress, and robust economic institutions.

Secondly, the research highlights that dependence on external security partnerships can lead to long-term strategic vulnerabilities. The Iran crisis exemplifies how alliances with dominant global powers can expose smaller or allied regions to indirect security threats. Countries hosting foreign military bases or relying heavily on external security assurances may find themselves caught in geopolitical rivalries that are beyond their control.

Thirdly, the analysis shows that global geopolitical conflicts can have substantial economic ripple effects, especially for developing regions. Disruptions in global energy supply chains and fluctuations in oil prices can significantly impact these areas. Disruptions in global energy supply chains, changes in oil prices, and instability in international trade can significantly impact economies that rely heavily on imported energy and external markets. For many African nations, these shocks can result in inflation, fiscal challenges, and increased economic uncertainty.

Fourthly, the study points out that institutional and diplomatic fragmentation within Africa is a significant barrier to the continent's global influence. While organizations like the African Union aim to coordinate policies across the continent, African countries often find it difficult to present a united front during major global crises. This lack of cohesion undermines Africa's capacity to shape international norms related to intervention, sovereignty, and conflict resolution.

Fifthly, the findings highlight the rising significance of information power and strategic narratives in modern geopolitical conflicts. Military confrontations are often accompanied by competing narratives that seek to either justify or discredit certain actions on the global stage. Consequently, controlling information flows, media portrayals, and diplomatic messaging has become essential in influencing global perceptions of legitimacy and legality.

In summary, these findings indicate that the conflict involving Iran provides broader insights into the changing dynamics of sovereignty, power, and vulnerability in today's global political landscape.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study can be better understood by looking at them through the lenses of Realism, Dependency Theory, and Pan-Africanism, as each perspective highlights the structural dynamics revealed by the conflict involving Iran.

From a realist viewpoint, the conflict supports the long-held belief that power is the main driving force in international relations. Realist scholars like John J. Mearsheimer argue that the international system is characterized by anarchy, where states must rely on their own capabilities to ensure their survival and security (Mearsheimer, 2021). The situation in Iran illustrates how military strength, strategic alliances, and technological advancements shape the geopolitical landscape in which states operate. Although international law and diplomatic institutions are in place, the actual distribution of power largely dictates whether states can protect their sovereignty and effectively pursue their national interests.

Simultaneously, the findings strongly echo the principles of Dependency Theory, which highlights the structural inequalities present in the global political economy. As noted by Walter Rodney, historical events like colonialism and unequal economic relationships have established enduring patterns of dependence that continue to impact many developing regions (Rodney, 2020). Africa's susceptibility to global economic shocks, particularly fluctuations in energy prices and instability in global supply chains, exemplifies this structural position. Thus, the crisis surrounding Iran demonstrates how geopolitical conflicts occurring outside the continent can still have significant economic repercussions for African economies that are deeply woven into these unequal global systems.

The findings also underscore the continued relevance of Pan-Africanism as a strategic framework for addressing Africa's geopolitical challenges. Scholars such as Tim Murithi and Abdul Karim Bangura Magu emphasize that stronger unity among African states and deeper regional cooperation are essential for increasing the continent's global influence and protecting its sovereignty (Murithi, 2020; Magu, 2023). The fragmented diplomatic responses of African states to major global crises reveal the limits of purely national foreign policy strategies. Greater coordination through continental institutions could significantly strengthen Africa's bargaining power in global governance discussions.

Another important issue highlighted by the study is the role of institutional agency in international diplomacy. Scholars such as Thomas Kwasi Tieku and Linnéa Gelot observe that the African Union has increasingly attempted to assert a stronger diplomatic voice in global affairs (Tieku, 2022; Gelot & Tieku, 2023). However, the effectiveness of such institutions depends largely on the political commitment of member states and their ability to formulate coherent collective strategies.

The research also points to the growing importance of information power in contemporary geopolitical competition. Modern conflicts are not fought solely on the battlefield but also in the realm of narratives and public perception. Competing interpretations of events are used to shape international legitimacy and diplomatic support. This observation aligns with the work of Joseph S. Nye Jr., who emphasizes the importance of soft power and strategic communication in

international politics (Nye, 2021), as well as Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, who highlights the need for intellectual and epistemic independence in Africa's global engagement (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021).

Overall, the conflict involving Iran illustrates how military capability, economic interdependence, and ideological contestation interact to shape outcomes in global politics. For Africa, the central lesson is that sovereignty must be supported by strong strategic capabilities, resilient economies, and effective institutional cooperation. Without these foundations, states remain vulnerable to external pressures and global instability.

Conclusion

The conflict involving Iran serves as a crucial lens for examining the dynamics of global power politics. Even with international institutions and legal frameworks in place to guide state behavior, the outcomes of global politics are still heavily influenced by the distribution of military, economic, and technological power among nations. The rising tensions around Iran exemplify how strategic competition among major powers can lead to consequences that ripple far beyond the immediate area of conflict.

For Africa, this situation underscores a significant truth: political independence does not necessarily equate to true sovereignty in today's international landscape. Genuine sovereignty demands not just formal recognition but also the strategic ability to safeguard national interests and resist external pressures. This study reveals that Africa's ongoing challenges—such as economic dependence, fragmented institutions, and limited geopolitical coordination—continue to hinder the continent's capacity to influence global political trends.

The theoretical framework used in this study illustrates the benefits of integrating perspectives from Realism, Dependency Theory, and Pan-Africanism to analyze Africa's role in global politics. Realism emphasizes the critical role of power and strategic capability in determining state actions. Dependency Theory sheds light on the structural inequalities within the global political economy that exacerbate Africa's economic vulnerabilities. Meanwhile, Pan-Africanism offers a normative

and strategic approach to tackling these issues through unity, cooperation, and collective self-reliance.

Ultimately, the key takeaway for Africa from the Iran conflict is clear: the continent needs to shift from reactive diplomacy to a proactive geopolitical strategy focused on economic transformation, stronger institutions, and deeper continental integration. By prioritizing these areas, Africa can better position itself in the global arena. By concentrating on these key priorities, Africa can slowly transform its role in the global landscape from one marked by structural vulnerability to one defined by strategic autonomy and collective influence.

Policy recommendations

The results of this study highlight several key policy recommendations for African governments and institutions.

Firstly, it is crucial for African nations to focus on long-term economic transformation. This means investing more in industrialization, energy development, and technological innovation to lessen reliance on external markets and supply chains.

Secondly, enhancing regional security cooperation across the continent is essential. Initiatives like joint defense agreements, intelligence sharing, and coordinated peacekeeping efforts within the African Union can bolster Africa's ability to collectively address global security challenges.

Thirdly, African countries should aim to establish a cohesive continental foreign policy that can effectively guide diplomatic actions during significant international crises. A unified diplomatic approach would enable the continent to assert itself more confidently in global governance discussions.

Fourthly, it is vital to increase investment in African research institutions, think tanks, and independent media. By strengthening Africa's intellectual and informational resources, the continent can better challenge external narratives and foster more informed policymaking.

Lastly, Africa should expedite its economic integration through initiatives like the African Continental Free Trade Area (ACFTA). By boosting intra-African trade and production networks, the continent can create more resilient internal markets that can withstand global economic shocks.

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