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THE EMERGING INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL ORDER AND ITS DESIRABILITY: SECURITY IMPLICATIONS FOR MIDDLE POWERS

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ABSTRACT
This study evaluates the desirability of the emerging international political order for Nigeria, Brazil and South Africa. A qualitative, exploratory analysis of secondary sources concerning 1990–2025 combines neorealism and constructivism to assess security, fairness, stability, inclusiveness and strategic autonomy. The emerging order is understood as an uneven redistribution of influence, institutional proliferation and normative contestation, rather than a settled multipolar system. The analysis identifies potential gains from diversified partnerships, coalition diplomacy and broader participation. These remain constrained by fragmented regional cooperation in Nigeria's security environment, the implementation demands of Brazil's transnational environmental security agenda, and tensions between South Africa's non-alignment and regional responsibilities. The study concludes that wider diplomatic choice is desirable where it supports effective cooperation, meaningful representation and reduced dependence. Greater visibility alone is insufficient. It recommends capable domestic institutions, sustainable regional commitments and transparent evaluation of external partnerships.

***Key words**: international order, middle powers, security, desirability, strategic autonomy*

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INTRODUCTION

The international political order comprises the rules, institutions, norms and power relationships through which states organise their coexistence. It concerns who sets international agendas, whose interests institutions accommodate and how disputes are managed. Post-Cold War United States predominance supported a particular configuration of authority, but growing non-Western influence and competing governance proposals have intensified debate about its legitimacy and effectiveness (Ikenberry, 2011, 2018). This study understands the emerging international political order as an unfinished transformation involving redistributed influence, additional regional and cross-regional institutions, and contested norms. Movement towards multipolarity is one component of this process; it does not mean that comparable centres of power already exist across military, economic and

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institutional domains. Acharya's (2017) account of a multiplex order recognises diverse actors and arrangements without assuming a single replacement for Western leadership.

For middle powers, the question is whether these changes improve security and meaningful influence. More partners may widen diplomatic choice while dependence on finance, technology, markets and military assistance persists. Additional institutional memberships may increase visibility without changing decision-making authority. Desirability must therefore be assessed through security, fairness, stability, inclusiveness and strategic autonomy. Nigeria, Brazil and South Africa are selected because each combine significant regional resources and diplomatic engagement with limited independent influence over global outcomes. Their different security environments allow comparison of regional leadership, multilateral participation and domestic constraints. They are illustrative cases, rather than a representative sample of all middle powers. The study argues that international change is desirable where diplomatic opportunities produce practical security benefits and accountable governance; those benefits depend on the terms of engagement and institutional capacity.

Statement of the Problem

The principal problem is the uncertain relationship between greater international choice and improved security for middle powers. The emerging order may offer Nigeria, Brazil and South Africa more partners and platforms while weakening the cooperation and predictable rules on which their influence depends. Evaluating desirability therefore requires identifying when greater room for manoeuvre becomes effective autonomy and when it creates new forms of dependence. Scholarship offers competing expectations. Accounts of unipolar stability emphasise restraints associated with a predominant power, while studies of institutional change identify demands for broader participation and reform (Hurrell, 2006; Stuenkel, 2016; Wohlforth, 1999). Neither stability nor inclusion alone resolves how security gains and costs should be assessed together for the selected countries. This study addresses that analytical problem through common evaluative criteria.

The issue matters because these states carry regional responsibilities while facing domestic resource constraints. Diversification may support development and security cooperation, yet generate incompatible commitments or external pressure. The study investigates when changing arrangements strengthen protection and participation, and when fragmentation undermines them. It does not presume that declining Western predominance necessarily produces a fairer or less secure system.

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Objectives

The study asks three questions.

1. What material, institutional and normative changes characterise the emerging international political order?
2. Under what conditions are these changes desirable for middle powers in terms of security, fairness, stability, inclusiveness and strategic autonomy?
3. What security opportunities and vulnerabilities do they present for Nigeria, Brazil and South Africa?

Objectives

The corresponding objectives are to:

1. examine the characteristics of the emerging order, evaluate its desirability using explicit criteria, and
2. analyse its security implications for the three selected countries.

Together, these objectives connect the description of international change to an assessment of its consequences.

Conceptually, the study examines the relationship between changes in international power, institutions and norms and the security and strategic autonomy of middle powers. Desirability is an evaluative judgement based on the five criteria specified above, rather than a statistically measured dependent variable. Geographically, the cases are Nigeria in West Africa, Brazil in South America and South Africa in Southern Africa. The states and their regional and multilateral relationships constitute the units of analysis; the study does not investigate an individual population.

The historical scope covers developments from 1990 to 2025, encompassing the end of Cold War bipolarity, post-Cold War unipolar predominance and subsequent contestation. Methodologically, the study is a qualitative, exploratory examination of secondary sources using comparative and interpretive analysis. Earlier theoretical works provide conceptual foundations, while country examples remain within the historical scope. Domestic governance and regional security arrangements are considered contextual conditions that shape responses to external change.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

International Political Order and Its Emergence

Bull (1977) associates international order with arrangements sustaining basic goals of a society of states, including coexistence and respect for agreements. Ikenberry (2011) emphasises the institutional organisation of power. These approaches distinguish order from polarity: polarity concerns the distribution of capabilities, whereas order also concerns the rules through which power is exercised and accepted. Greater economic dispersion can coexist with persistent military and financial asymmetries, just as institutional innovation can coexist with established organisations. Buzan and Lawson (2015) locate international change within broader historical transformations. Accordingly, emergence denotes an incomplete process. Neither declining predominance nor a larger number of influential actors establishes that stable multipolarity or better governance has resulted.

Middle Powers

Middle powers occupy an intermediate international position. Holbraad (1984) examines their position and conduct, while Cooper et al. (1993) emphasise coalition-building and multilateral diplomacy. Jordaan (2003) distinguishes traditional and emerging middle powers through domestic characteristics, regional positions and international behaviour. The category cannot be reduced to a single economic or military ranking. This study applies four complementary criteria: substantial economic, demographic or military resources within a region; influence over regional political and security affairs; sustained multilateral and coalition engagement; and limited capacity to determine global outcomes independently of great powers. Classification does not imply equivalent capabilities, consistently stabilising conduct or freedom from domestic weakness.

Nigeria qualifies through its regional scale, diplomacy within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and security engagement. Brazil combines substantial resources and South American influence with multilateral activism. South Africa combines regional economic and diplomatic influence with engagement in African and cross-regional institutions. Brazil and South Africa participate in BRICS and the India–Brazil–South Africa Dialogue Forum (IBSA), whose ministerial communiqué records common reform objectives and commitments to sovereign equality (Department of International Relations and Cooperation [DIRCO], 2022). The cases illuminate different constraints: Nigeria faces fragmented regional cooperation; Brazil connects autonomy with environmental and transnational security; and South Africa combines regional commitments with declared non-

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alignment. Their roles vary over time and across issues. Regional prominence is consequently treated as one criterion alongside wider diplomatic engagement, rather than sufficient evidence of middle-power status.

Security and Desirability

Security means protecting sovereignty, political stability and institutional capacity to address threats to the state and its population. Buzan (1991) supports considering political, economic, societal and environmental dimensions alongside military security. This is necessary where organised crime, environmental degradation and transnational violence connect domestic governance to international cooperation. Desirability is evaluated through five criteria. Security concerns effective protection from coercion and transnational threats; fairness concerns the distribution of authority, obligations and benefits; stability concerns predictable commitments and dispute management; inclusiveness concerns meaningful participation in decisions; and strategic autonomy concerns pursuing national priorities without excessive dependence on one external power. These criteria may conflict: wider representation can coexist with weaker predictability. Membership and visibility are therefore possible resources for influence, not proof of improved outcomes.

Evolution of the Order and Debates in the Literature

The Soviet Union's dissolution left the United States with an exceptional concentration of capabilities. Wohlforth (1999) argues that unipolarity reduced incentives for major-power challenges. Ikenberry (2011) instead directs attention to institutions organising and constraining predominance. Subsequent debate asks whether challenges to Western leadership involve adjustment within existing arrangements or a deeper transformation. Ikenberry (2018), Mearsheimer (2019) and Acharya (2014) offer different explanations of these pressures. Middle-power scholarship qualifies structural accounts. Cooper et al. (1993) examine influence through coalition diplomacy, while Jordaan (2003) highlights emerging middle powers' regional orientation and reformism. Such behaviour need not be disinterested: regional influence can be resisted, and demands for global equality may coexist with unequal regional relationships. Hurrell (2006) examines the space available to aspiring powers, while Stuenkel (2016) considers their role in changing global arrangements. Baldwin (1985) explains how economic relationships can become instruments of external leverage.

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This study brings these debates into a focused comparison using common security and governance criteria. Its contribution is to distinguish additional diplomatic opportunities from usable, sustainable influence, while evaluating the consistency between reform claims and the conduct of the selected countries.

Theoretical Framework

Neorealism

Neorealism explains state behaviour through a system lacking central authority and characterised by unequal capabilities. Waltz (1979) identifies structural pressures to protect survival, while Mearsheimer (2001) emphasises uncertainty and major-power competition. These perspectives explain constraints within which middle powers pursue cooperation and autonomy. In this study, neorealism directs attention to stronger partners, credible commitments and the costs of leadership. For Nigeria, it informs analysis of regional divisions and cross-border cooperation. For Brazil, it distinguishes diversified relationships from the material ability to withstand external pressure. For South Africa, it frames the relationship between independent positioning and resources for regional security responsibilities.

The theory contributes to security, stability and autonomy assessments: arrangements are favourable where they reduce vulnerability and expand feasible choices, and unfavourable where dependence or competitive alignments raise costs without improving protection. Neorealism does not determine whether those arrangements are morally fair or inclusive.

Constructivism

Constructivism examines how identities, shared meanings and norms shape interests and appropriate behaviour. Wendt (1992, 1999) challenges the assumption that anarchy inevitably produces one pattern of conduct. Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) explain the emergence and circulation of norms. These insights help explain why states interpret relationships and legitimate conduct differently. For Nigeria, the analysis examines expectations associated with regional leadership and constitutional governance. For Brazil, it considers multilateralism, South–South cooperation and policy autonomy. For South Africa, it examines post-apartheid identity, non-alignment and international law. Such identities are claims assessed against conduct, rather than guarantees of credibility. Constructivism informs fairness, inclusiveness and legitimacy by asking whether reform produces meaningful voice and consistent rules. It also connects trust to security cooperation. Following Checkel's (1998)

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concern with specifying ideational explanations, official statements are treated as evidence of policy justification rather than proof that principles determine outcomes.

Combined Application and Evaluation

Neorealism identifies incentives and constraints associated with power and dependence; constructivism examines their interpretation and the justification of responses. Each country is analysed through external pressures, diplomatic strategies, normative claims and the five desirability criteria. For example, regional cooperation can pool resources while depending on agreement about sovereignty and legitimate authority. A cross-regional coalition can provide leverage without meaningful inclusion if its members cannot influence decisions. The combined approach distinguishes diplomatic platforms from effective agency. It does not assign numerical scores or establish causal effects; it assesses plausible gains and costs while retaining conflicts between the criteria.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative, exploratory design based on secondary-source analysis, consistent with an interpretive approach to complex political processes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Nigeria, Brazil and South Africa are examined as illustrative comparative cases. The purpose is to develop an analytical assessment of desirability, rather than test a statistical hypothesis or estimate the effects of polarity on national security. The source base comprises scholarly books and journal articles on international order, middle powers and international relations theory, supplemented by identifiable official documents on selected country and regional developments. These include ECOWAS statements, Southern African Development Community (SADC) documentation, South African foreign-policy statements, an IBSA communiqué and United Nations material. Sources were retained for their direct relevance to the concepts, selected cases and historical period. Theoretical texts predating 1990 provide the analytical foundations rather than evidence of developments within the period.

The analysis organises material around changes in power, institutional arrangements, normative claims and security cooperation. Country accounts are examined using the same questions: what opportunities arise from external diversification, what dependencies remain, how regional institutions affect security, and how policy claims relate to fairness and inclusion. The interpretation then assesses the implications against security, fairness, stability, inclusiveness and strategic autonomy. Scholarly arguments, official positions and documented events are distinguished throughout. Institutional statements establish decisions

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or declared policy, while interpretations of their wider implications are presented as analytical judgements. The review is narrative and selective; it does not claim exhaustive coverage or a systematic-review protocol. No interviews, participant sample, quantitative dataset or independently measured security outcomes are involved. Accordingly, the findings identify patterns and conditional implications rather than demonstrate that changes in international order caused particular domestic security problems.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Character of the Emerging Order

The reviewed literature supports interpreting the emerging order as uneven and contested. Changes in influence do not proceed at the same pace across military, economic and institutional domains. Established institutions continue to organise cooperation even as states seek alternative forums and broader representation. This is better understood as a reconfiguration of authority than as the complete replacement of one coherent order by another. The findings therefore qualify claims of a settled transition from unipolarity to multipolarity.

For the selected middle powers, this environment creates opportunities to negotiate across several relationships and organise coalitions around particular issues. Yet an increased number of forums can also disperse attention and raise the costs of coordination. The analytical distinction is between additional access and effective influence. Access becomes valuable when states can shape decisions, secure useful cooperation and maintain credible commitments; participation alone does not establish those outcomes.

The same distinction applies to the relationship between regionalism and global governance. Regional institutions may bring security decisions closer to affected states and pool limited resources. They can also lose effectiveness where members disagree over legitimate authority or the terms of cooperation. Cross-regional groupings such as BRICS and IBSA offer diplomatic platforms but should not be described as regional organisations or assumed to provide collective defence guarantees. Their contribution must be assessed according to their actual purposes and capacities.

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Nigeria

Nigeria illustrates how international opportunities are conditioned by the functioning of its immediate security environment. Its regional influence does not remove the need for cooperation with neighbouring states. United Nations reporting on the January 2025 joint United Nations mission to Nigeria situates stabilisation in Boko Haram-affected areas within the wider Lake Chad Basin and emphasises recovery, resilience and regional cooperation (United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel [UNOWAS], 2025). The fragmentation of West African cooperation presents a concrete institutional challenge. Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger withdrew from ECOWAS with effect from 29 January 2025. ECOWAS nevertheless maintained transitional provisions concerning travel documents, trade and movement while arrangements for future engagement were considered (Economic Community of West African States [ECOWAS], 2025). The episode demonstrates that regional disagreement can coexist with efforts to preserve practical cooperation.

From a neorealist perspective, a divided regional environment can increase the resources Nigeria must commit to protect its interests and reduce the leverage available through collective action. Additional external partners may offer equipment, finance or training, but they cannot substitute automatically for functioning relationships with neighbouring states. Diversification is therefore desirable where it improves usable capacity and preserves freedom of decision. It becomes less desirable where incompatible systems, opaque obligations or competition among providers impair coordination.

Constructivism draws attention to the relationship between Nigeria's leadership claims and regional acceptance. Advocacy of constitutional governance can support legitimacy, but its security value depends on whether other states view regional decisions as consistent, negotiated and credible. A leadership role sustained mainly through coercive expectations may weaken the cooperation it seeks to protect. Nigeria's experience consequently suggests that autonomy must include the capacity to sustain regional relationships, rather than simply the freedom to select external patrons.

The principal benefit of the emerging order for Nigeria is the possibility of a wider range of partnerships supporting nationally defined priorities. The principal risk is that diversification occurs alongside fragmented regional institutions and limited domestic capacity to manage external commitments. Judged against the desirability criteria, wider choice is insufficient unless it strengthens cross-border cooperation, transparent procurement and civilian

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protection. The analysis does not attribute Nigeria's longstanding insecurity to the emerging order; it identifies how the order may affect the resources and relationships available to address it.

Brazil

Brazil illustrates the connection between international influence and security issues that extend beyond military competition. Its multilateral activism and participation in South–South coalitions create channels for advancing reform and development priorities. The IBSA communiqué records support for more representative global governance and cooperation on shared challenges (DIRCO, 2022). This establishes a common diplomatic agenda, rather than demonstrating achieved reform. Brazil's security concerns also involve the interaction of organised crime, environmental governance and border management. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2023) identifies connections between drug trafficking and environmental offences in the Amazon Basin, including illegal mining and logging, with consequences for local and Indigenous populations.

The emerging order may benefit Brazil where varied partnerships provide resources for development, environmental monitoring and regional coordination while preserving influence in established institutions. Such gains require the capacity to negotiate terms and implement commitments. Neorealism highlights the limits imposed by unequal access to markets, finance and technology. A state can maintain multiple relationships yet remain exposed to pressure where alternatives are costly or unavailable in a specific sector. Diplomatic breadth should therefore be distinguished from economic or technological independence.

Constructivism helps evaluate the credibility of Brazil's support for multilateralism and equitable cooperation. Claims to environmental leadership and respect for sovereignty need not be incompatible, but they require an account of how international cooperation serves domestic priorities and affected communities. Environmental obligations may impose costs while also supporting resources and trust needed to address shared threats. Reduced external scrutiny is consequently not assumed to be a security benefit, particularly where it weakens accountability or protection from criminal violence.

For Brazil, the order is desirable where coalition diplomacy increases negotiating influence and supports practical cooperation against transnational threats. It is less desirable where geopolitical competition fragments that cooperation or where diplomatic prestige exceeds

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implementation capacity. The case shows why strategic autonomy should be evaluated alongside security and fairness: greater governmental discretion does not itself demonstrate improved protection for populations affected by environmental crime. Effective autonomy includes the institutional capacity to fulfil commitments as well as to negotiate them.

South Africa

South Africa illustrates the tensions between declared independence, regional responsibility and international credibility. In an August 2023 foreign-policy address, President Ramaphosa defended non-alignment, diversified relationships, negotiated dispute settlement and reform of global institutions (Ramaphosa, 2023). Regional engagement provides a second dimension. SADC's account of lessons from its mission in Mozambique records that the mission was deployed in 2021 and closed in July 2024, followed by a review of its implications for future peace support (Southern African Development Community [SADC], 2024). The mission is therefore considered a completed regional operation within the study period.

Neorealism directs attention to whether South Africa can align its external responsibilities with available resources and maintain working relationships across competing centres of power. Regional commitments can protect a shared security environment and strengthen diplomatic standing, but they also carry financial and operational obligations. A more dispersed order is beneficial where partnerships help sustain these responsibilities without creating excessive dependence. It is less beneficial where demands for alignment narrow the room for independent policy or where international commitments exceed implementation capacity.

Constructivism highlights the importance of consistency between declared principles and observable conduct. South Africa's post-apartheid identity and support for sovereign equality provide grounds for diplomatic engagement, but moral authority cannot be assumed from historical identity alone. Partners and domestic audiences assess whether principles are applied consistently. Apparent selectivity can generate reputational costs and reduce trust even where a government presents its position as autonomous.

For South Africa, the central potential gain is the ability to combine continental engagement with diversified international relationships and a stronger voice on reform. The associated risks concern the sustainability of regional obligations and the credibility of non-alignment. Desirability therefore depends on clear policy explanations, manageable commitments and

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consistency in the defence of international rules. These conditions connect inclusiveness and fairness to the practical security value of cooperation.

Comparative Assessment of Desirability

The cases show that the benefits of the emerging order differ according to the security relationships each state must sustain. Nigeria's priorities place particular weight on neighbouring states and regional cohesion. Brazil's experience highlights cooperation across environmental, criminal and development agendas. South Africa's position brings regional commitments and the credibility of independent diplomacy into focus. These differences prevent a single judgement about multipolarity from adequately describing all three countries.

On security and stability, the favourable condition is dependable cooperation supported by institutions capable of implementation. Wider access to external assistance may improve options, but fragmented commitments can raise coordination costs. On fairness and inclusiveness, diplomatic access must translate into a role in defining priorities and allocating obligations. The ability to attend a forum or endorse a communiqué is a weaker indicator than participation in decisions and access to the resources required to carry them out.

Strategic autonomy is strengthened where diversification creates credible alternatives and leaves states able to reject unfavourable terms. It is weakened where nominal alternatives conceal concentrated dependence in important sectors. This suggests a practical distinction between multiplying relationships and improving bargaining capacity. The latter requires domestic administrative competence, information about the costs of commitments and continuity in national priorities. These conditions mediate how changes in international structure are experienced.

The analysis also distinguishes state influence from public security. An arrangement may enhance a government's diplomatic profile while offering little protection against violence, displacement or environmental harm. A judgement of desirability must therefore consider whose interests benefit and how obligations are scrutinised. The selected cases do not justify treating middle powers as uniformly benign actors. Their claims to fairer global governance remain open to evaluation against their regional conduct and domestic implementation.

Taken together, the theoretical lenses explain different parts of this conditional assessment. Neorealism clarifies why more dispersed power does not eliminate vulnerability or unequal bargaining. Constructivism explains why shared understandings and credible principles affect

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the acceptance and durability of cooperation. The comparison suggests that material choice and normative legitimacy reinforce security most effectively when supported by capable institutions. The evidence does not establish a universal causal relationship, but it identifies conditions under which international change is more or less favourable.

Limitations

The study relies on a selective secondary-source review and three illustrative cases. Uneven source coverage and the use of official statements limit the assessment of policy implementation and contested interpretations. No systematic source census, stakeholder interviews or independently constructed outcome dataset is available, so causal attribution and generalisation are limited. Middle-power status and national priorities also change across time and issues. Despite these limitations, the comparison offers an explicit framework for separating diplomatic opportunities from demonstrated security benefits and for identifying questions requiring further empirical investigation.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The emerging international political order is an incomplete reconfiguration of power, institutions and norms whose desirability cannot be inferred from the number of influential states. For Nigeria, Brazil and South Africa, its potential benefits include a wider choice of partners, opportunities for coalition diplomacy and greater scope to advocate institutional reform. These benefits are conditional on the capacity to negotiate usable commitments and sustain the cooperation required to address security threats.

The country analyses identify specific constraints. Regional fragmentation can reduce Nigeria's ability to organise collective responses; transnational crime and environmental governance expose the limits of Brazil's diplomatic autonomy without effective implementation; and South Africa's regional responsibilities and declared non-alignment require resources and consistent justification. These problems are not shown to originate in the emerging order. Rather, they determine whether external opportunities improve security or reproduce vulnerability.

The order is therefore desirable where it strengthens practical protection, meaningful representation, predictable cooperation and the capacity to make independent choices. It is less desirable where additional forums mask unequal bargaining, competitive alignments weaken regional coordination or sovereign discretion displaces accountability. A more

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inclusive order requires both changes in international decision-making and domestic institutions capable of converting participation into secure and fair outcomes.

Policy Recommendations

Nigeria should prioritise practical cooperation with neighbouring states, including arrangements that preserve dialogue across institutional divisions. Its diversified security partnerships should be assessed for interoperability, transparent obligations and contributions to civilian protection. Regional leadership should combine support for constitutional principles with sustained negotiation about shared threats and the distribution of responsibilities.

Brazil should connect coalition diplomacy to cooperation on environmental crime, border management and development. Partnerships should strengthen domestic investigative and regulatory capacity while protecting affected communities. Participation in reform-oriented forums should complement engagement with established institutions, with international influence evaluated through implementable agreements rather than visibility alone.

South Africa should align regional security commitments with sustainable resources and clearly explain how non-alignment applies to particular decisions. Consistent reference to sovereign equality, negotiated settlement and international law would provide a clearer basis for assessing policy. Regional cooperation should include realistic financing, oversight and arrangements for continuity when missions end.

Across the three countries, governments should evaluate major partnerships against security outcomes, decision-making influence, exposure to dependence and accountability. Institutional reform proposals should specify how representation changes agenda-setting and resource allocation. Future research should examine implementation through country-level evidence and stakeholder perspectives to determine whether the opportunities identified here produce durable improvements in security and autonomy.

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