

The [I]Liberal Overton Window of the Rules-based International Order and its Counter-Policiescapes in African Regionalism: Patterns of Fusion, Fission and Diffusion

Nene-Lomotey Kuditchar*

ABSTRACT

The “Overton Window,” originally developed to map the normative structure of acceptable domestic policy, is used in this study to highlight the patterns of fusion, fission, and diffusion that define the engagement of African International Organisations (AIOs) with the rules-based international order (RBIO). While fusion captures the uneven uptake of RBIO norms, fission depicts rupture,

and diffusion depicts their selective incorporation into regional integration agendas. The study notes that the rising influence of non-Western revisionist states has disrupted the regulatory dominance of the RBIO, weakened the policy hegemony of the West, and enabled new pathways for AIO normative re-engineering. These dynamics have intersected with the sovereignty-affirming inclinations of African governments to shape how AIOs pursue their

* PhD. University of Ghana, (Republic of Ghana). Department of Political Science, University of Ghana, (Republic of Ghana). [nkuditchar@ug.edu.gh]; [<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2453-0917>].

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democratic mandates. Anchored on a qualitative, interpretive method, the study analyses policy communiqués and legal texts of the African Union (AU), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)/ Alliance of Sahel States (ASS), and the Tripartite Free Trade Area (TFTA). Findings suggest that AIOs are sites of normative experimentation that do not passively mimic RBIO principles. The AU's hybrid governance regime combines liberal norms. In West Africa, while the ECOWAS shows quasi-fission due to its wavering commitment to its RBIO-inspired norms, the Alliance of Sahel States symbolizes an explicit rupture with liberal internationalism. Having selectively framed itself with WTO-style principles, the TFTA demonstrates diffusion. In conclusion, the study notes that AIOs, as active domains embedded in dialectical processes of normative transactions, serve as co-constitutive arenas where African actors are reconfiguring the normative parameters of the RBIO Overton Window. Hence, any sympathetic analysis of AIOs ought to account for their nuanced interactions with the value system of liberal internationalism.

Keywords: Overton window; rules-based international order; African regionalism.

La ventana [i]liberal de Overton del orden internacional basado en normas, y sus contrapaisajes políticos en el regionalismo africano: patrones de fusión, fisión y difusión

RESUMEN

La Ventana de Overton, originalmente desarrollada para mapear la estructura normativa de las políticas internas aceptables, se utiliza en este estudio para resaltar los patrones de fusión, fisión y difusión que definen la interacción de las organizaciones internacionales africanas (AIO – African International Organizations) con el orden internacional basado en normas (RBIO – rules-based international order). Mientras la fusión refleja la adopción desigual de las normas del RBIO, la fisión representa la ruptura y la difusión describe su incorporación selectiva en las agendas de integración regional. El estudio señala que la creciente influencia de los Estados revisionistas no occidentales ha alterado la dominación regulatoria del RBIO, ha debilitado la hegemonía política de Occidente y ha

posibilitado nuevas vías para la rein-
geniería normativa de las AIO. Estas
dinámicas se han entrelazado con las
inclinaciones soberanistas de los go-
biernos africanos, moldeando la forma
en que las AIO persiguen sus mandatos
democráticos.

Basado en un método cualitativo e
interpretativo, el estudio analiza comu-
nicados políticos y textos jurídicos de
la Unión Africana (UA), la Comunidad
Económica de Estados de África Occi-
dental (Cedeao)/Alianza de Estados del
Sahel (AES) y el Área de Libre Comercio
Tripartita (TFTA). Los hallazgos sugie-
ren que las AIO son espacios de expe-
rimentación normativa que no imitan
pasivamente los principios del RBIO.
El régimen de gobernanza híbrido de
la UA combina normas liberales. En
África Occidental, mientras la Cedeao
muestra una cuasi-fisión debido a su
compromiso vacilante con las normas
inspiradas en el RBIO, la AES simboliza
una ruptura explícita con el interna-
cionalismo liberal. Habiéndose enmar-
cado selectivamente en principios al
estilo de la Organización Mundial del
Comercio (OMC), la TFTA demuestra un
proceso de difusión.

En conclusión, el estudio observa
que las AIO, como dominios activos in-
sertos en procesos dialécticos de tran-
sacciones normativas, funcionan como
espacios coconstitutivos, donde los ac-
tores africanos están reconfigurando
los parámetros normativos de la Ven-
tana de Overton del RBIO. Por tanto,
cualquier análisis comprensivo de las

AIO debe considerar sus interacciones
matizadas con el sistema de valores del
internacionalismo liberal.

Palabras clave: Ventana de Over-
ton; orden internacional basado en nor-
mas; regionalismo africano.

INTRODUCTION

The rules-based international order (RBIO), historically framed and dominated by US-led Western liberal democracies, is facing a profound legitimacy crisis, particularly in the Global South (Zakaria, 2008; pp. 49-53; Kupchan, 2012, pp. 13-15; Ikenberry, 2024). In Africa, this crisis manifests distinctly through the continent's AIOs and the assertive sovereigntist posture of their member states (Murithi, 2023), rendering them as critical sites of the contestation and reconfiguration of the RBIO by way of increasingly questioning, reinterpreting, or outrightly rejecting the normative prescriptions that have shaped the post-colonial conditions of the continent. This inclination is evident in the African Union's (AU) clarification call of "African solutions to African problems" (Ani, 2018), the exit of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger from the International Criminal Court (ICC) (Reuters, 2025) and their termination of strategic partnerships with their Western allies, and the formation of new alliances with revisionist states such as Russia, China, Iran, and Türkiye (de León Cobo, 2024).

This study employs the concept of the "Overton Window", initially

developed by Joseph Overton, to map the normative spectrum of politically acceptable policies in domestic governance (Russell, 2006). It is adapted to examine the contradictions generated between the RBIO's claims of universal validity and applicability and the sovereign aspirations of African states as enacted within AIOs. While Western governments, often acting through international organizations, advocate and coercively impose liberal norms in Africa (Mamdani, 2004; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Benabdallah, 2024), AIOs actively reconfigure the parameters of such external values by diluting their prescriptive power despite the continent's subordinate position in the global power pecking order (Söderbaum, 2004; Taylor, 2010). This reconfiguration, as articulated in this paper, occurs through the three processes of fusion, fission, and diffusion. Fusion involves the selective adoption and adaptation of RBIO principles, as shown by the AU's human rights regime, which paradoxically blends "non-indifference" with a staunch defense of state sovereignty (Williams, 2009). Fission is the quasi or complete rejection of RBIO values, as can be detected in wavering commitment of the ECOWAS to its RBIO-inspired norms and the ASS repudiation of liberal internationalism. Diffusion takes the form of a calibrated structural emulation of RBIO values, with the TFTA being a prime example.

This tripartite conceptual framework, depicting AIOs as crucial counter-sites of normative experimentation,

tersely illustrates Africa's contentious history with liberal internationalism, its navigation of contemporary geopolitical rivalries, and the inherent contradictions between collective action and egoistic national inclinations.

The relationship between African states and the Western proprietors of liberal governance has been fraught since the era of independence dawned on the African continent. During the Cold War, African governments used the OAU as an institutional vanguard to engage the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade liberal order through what Amitav Acharya (2011) terms "norm subsidiarity." Within the bipolar world system at the time, African states were able to transact, for instance, with the European Economic Community (EEC) in the context of the Yaoundé Free Trade Conventions (Cosgrove, 1972; Sakr, 2021) and while simultaneously pursuing statist development agendas and trade protectionism (Kumssa & Jones, 2015). The Soviet Union's retreat from its global hegemonic ambitions and support for its African allies after Gorbachev launched the glasnost and perestroika reforms created a geopolitical vacuum from the early 1980s (Webber, 1992; Keita, 1991) which the US, right up to the end of the Cold War and its immediate "post-Cold War unipolar moment" (Mastanduno, 1997, p. 60), leveraged to impose the Washington Consensus-inspired Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) on Africa (Rodrik, 2006; Riddell, 1992). In the process, the US compelled African states through

the Bretton Woods Institutions to abandon state-led developmentalism and embrace political and economic liberalization and laissez-faire international trade relations, thereby inaugurating, on Western terms, the dawn of the RBIO in full-blown normative rigor on the continent. Now, the OAU, constrained by its iron-clad founding principles of non-interference and institutional rigidity, proved incapable of resisting these pressures, revealing the limits of Pan-African mobilization and solidarity at the time.

As the disciplinary normative power of the RBIO waned amid renewed great power rivalry between revisionist states and the West (Mearsheimer, 2019; Adler-Nissen & Zarakol, 2021), AIOs have (re)gained strategic influence as actors wooed by competing global actors. Consequently, the agency and the scope of AIOs and their member states to engage in normative experimentation have expanded. Unlike the singular choice at hand, especially during the “uni-polar moment”, African governments can now simultaneously transact with the West, China (for commodity backed conditionality-free infrastructure loans and grants) as well as with Russia for hybrid deals made up of economic and security investments (Boas *et al.*, 2010; Lahtinen, 2018; Neethling, 2020). Even so, the enhanced normative agency and scope of African states have led to a profound contradiction: while it has enabled greater AIO normative assertiveness (Cornelissen, 2009; Shaw *et al.*, 2009), it has also

sharpened the tension between national sovereigntist aspirations and regional integration mandates such as the defense of democratic values. As a result, AIOs have had to manage this tension, while seeking a stable position (Kornegay & Landsberg, 2009; Vickers, 2013).

This paper interrogates this state of affairs through three analytical pathways: first, it adapts the Overton Window concept to frame the RBIO as a politically contested value system; second, it illustrates the fusion, fission, and diffusion dynamics in AIOs’ engagement with the RBIO; and third, it suggests that understanding Africa’s geopolitical experiences with the RBIO requires accounting for the nuanced dynamic normative patterns taking into consideration the pluriversal world context of value fragmentation (Eklund, 2020).

The rest of this study is structured as follows: First, a theoretical depiction of the RBIO is presented as a hegemonic Overton Window, illustrating how it ideationally sets the parameters of permissible governance in international affairs. Second, it outlines the patterns of fusion, fission, and diffusion as enacted in the experiential context of AIOs. Third, the study examines the importance and impact of non-Western revisionist actors in the reconfiguration of African policy settings. Fourth, the paper interrogates how the contradiction between sovereignty affirmation and regionalism structures the experiences of AIOs against the background

of the previously shown ambitions of the study. Finally, the analysis makes a case for a “nuanced engagement” with AIOs, situated beyond perspectives that designate African regional integration schemes as subpar examples of external paradigms.

THEORETICAL NOTE: FRAMING THE RBIO AS AN OVERTON WINDOW

Recalling Antonio Gramsci (Fontana, 2008; see also Benabdallah, 2024), the RBIO functions as an ideational “hegemonic project”: a normative apparatus of institutions designed to displace alternative models by normalizing, naturalizing, and universalizing the governance paradigm of Western liberalism. The logic of this hegemonic apparatus defines the Overton Window parameters for a legitimate and appropriate code of conduct in international affairs (Parmar, 2018). For the greater part of the post-colonial era in Africa, this Overton Window delineated the policy imperatives of AIOs within a narrow band of options: multilateralism ideationally structured through sanitized historical experiences of Western institutions, depoliticized development agendas, free-market principles, and liberal democratic politics. The illiberal undertones of this Overton Window are discernible from the sanctions triggered and imposed on states that attempt to pivot away from and operate in contravention of its normative bandwidth. Such punitive measures

range from latent economic sanctions to diplomatic pressure and, in extreme cases, military intervention (Larmour, 2022; Corwin, 2023; Soederberg, 2004; Patrick, 2016).

The application of the Overton Window concept in the context of international affairs, given its initial epistemic framing in domestic contexts, necessitates a theoretical adjustment. Unlike domestic settings, with traits, such as election outcomes and public opinion that may directly shape policy, it is hardly the case in respect of global governance dynamics, where complex scenarios mediated by pressures such as material power asymmetries and discursive contestations, directly dictate the nature of actions and outcomes. Here, akin to Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall’s (2005) “productive power”, commercial interests, often in coordination but sometimes in contention with global agencies such as the World Trade Organisation and the Bretton Woods Institutions, impose the normative designs of the RBIO to delineate the meaning-making structures of international transactions. For African states, this tendency had historically implied two things: On one hand, defection from the RBIO, either by way of statist development, socialist inclinations, non-alignment, or developmental authoritarianism, resulted in being edged out from significant sources of foreign aid, investment, or diplomatic deference. On the other hand, compliance led to restrictive, conditionality

encased neoliberal technical and financial assistance (Grauvogel & von Soest, 2014; Capasso, 2023).

The post-Cold War multipolarity of the global order, marked by the ideational and material ascendancy of revisionist powers, disrupted the “productive power” structuring capability of the Euro-American anchored RBIO (Stephen, 2014). A definitive feature of this shift, states’ access to conditionality-free economic exchanges (Woods, 2008), widened the hitherto narrow RBIO Overton Window within which AIOs functioned, leading to the emergence of what I term ‘counter-policy-scapes’: (enacted) activist plans of strategic selectivity born out of the quest for policy programming autonomy.

To elucidate how African integration schemes ideationally operate in this emergent multipolar normative milieu, the following section sketches the nature of AIO patterns of fusion, fission, and diffusion in relation to the RBIO.

By way of reiteration, fusion, the selective adoption, and adaptation of the RIBO, manifests in, for example, the AU’s Peace and Security Architecture, conventionally codified as the “Responsibility to Protect” notion of liberal interventionism in the quest for “African solutions to African problems” (Derso, 2012, pp. 11-13). Normative fusion patterns of this sort enable AIOs to tap into and mobilize the material and symbolic benefits of RBIO values while concurrently asserting a posture

of normative vigilance and political autonomy. The African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) is also a classic exemplar of RBIO fusion. Although ideationally inspired by the governance principles of the OECD (the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), the APRM is conditioned by Afrocentric values, such as voluntary participation (Mangu, 2014).

Fission, the defection from RBIO prescriptions, typically occurs when the perceived liability of its uptake exceeds its mobilizational benefits. Normative ruptures of this kind render alternative values attractive. The 2023 establishment of the ASS by Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, and the 2025 exit of the trio from the International Criminal Court (ICC), is precisely a result of this perception. Motivated by the belief that ECOWAS has deviated from the purist Pan-African norms with which it was commissioned in 1975, the three countries have broken ranks with the Euro-American paradigm of liberal democratic governance and opted for military-led sovereigntist activism. With this, they parted ways with their Western allies and closed ranks with the leading states of RIBIO revisionism, such as Russia, in a quest for security through military and economic partnerships (Horak *et al.*, 2024). Fission indicates the mobilizational and structuring limits of the RBIO and indicates the pathway to the acquisition of an autonomous agency with which to shape regional integration with alternative values.

The diffusion of the RBIO in AIOs is evident in the architecture of the TFTA with its institutional character defined by WTO-compatible trade regimes infused with transformative regionalism (Erasmus & Hartzenberg, 2018; Mevel, 2019). The dynamics of diffusion are not to be understood as a process of incremental infusion of RBIO principles, but rather the emergence of complementary norm clusters in the form of interconnected nodes of dissimilar scales and capacities, oriented by the same value and aspirational intent. What emerges here is a complex normative ecology comprising contradictory governance regimes that move, unevenly, in the same teleological direction (Winston, 2018).

The foregoing indicates the dialectical contradiction of AIOs: the tension between sacrosanct sovereignty and mobilization for co-creation. This paper foregrounds the cited dialectical contradiction and, as such, has implications for conventional perspectives that dominate discussions on AIOs. First, the study situates itself beyond binary assessments, which rely on indicators such as liberal or illiberal integration processes, and highlights the normative complexities of regionalism in Africa. Secondly, the paper privileges the ideational agency and dexterity of AIO architects by showing how they (re)configure, and flexibly so, the parameters of legitimate conduct which structure the dominant norms of international affairs. Lastly, the study offers a dynamic perspective relevant in

the context of an increasingly decentralized, multipolar world with shifting normative boundaries, wherein the consequences of competitive rivalry present alternative visions and versions of international exchange (Katzenstein, 2019). By designating the RBIO as a contested Overton Window, this study creates an epistemic space within which AIOs, and their regional integration schemes can be reimagined as natural experiments driven by strategic selectivity (Wiener, 2004) and thereby capturing the complexities of Africa's engagement with the RBIO.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive method, grounded in post-colonial international relations theory. It examines how AIOs negotiate, contest, transcend and traverse contradictions inherent in the normative contours of the RBIO, understood as an Overton Window. Focusing on the AU, the West African systems of the ECOWAS and the ASS, and the TFTA, the research design is a comparative multi-case study, with its interrogative sites purposively selected for their varied geopolitical makeup, institutional scales, and disparate mandates. This strategy enables a cross-sectional depiction of the patterns of AIO normative engagement with the RBIO.

By way of, admittedly, a crude operationalization of how norms are tracked and indexed, the study's analytical process is structured as a two-step

endeavor. First, the conduct of a qualitative content analysis of key AIO policy communiqués, legal texts, and treaty provisions. This involves the systematic drawing of subjective inferences from texts explicitly related to core RBIO values, such as democratic governance, human rights guarantee, laissez-faire trade relations, and multilateral dispute settlement regimes. Second, to situate the study beyond formal narratives, the paper conducts a critical discourse analysis of texts to highlight the discursive strategies employed by AIOs and/or their member states to justify, reframe, omit, and/or resist RBIO values. For instance, to illustrate the process of fusion, the paper cites the AU's code of "Responsibility to Protect" not as the mere uptake of an RBIO value but discursively reframed and analyzed as a "right to intervene" sanctioned by the principle of "sovereignty as responsibility" contingent upon the approval of the AU (Deng *et al.*, 1996).

Being aware that they empirically overlap and are separated only for discursive convenience, this paper's analytical heuristic, the notional triad of fusion, fission, and diffusion, are operationalized as follows:

Fusion, evident in the OECD-inspired, voluntary, and non-punitive African Peer Review Mechanism, is the selective uptake and adaptation of RBIO principles, leading to hybrid institutions.

Fission is the repudiation of RBIO norms, leading to inaction and/or the adoption of antithetical values, as well

as strategic partnerships with revisionist actors. The ECOWAS is a moderate case and the ASS an extreme example.

Diffusion manifests as the widespread, structural mimicry of RBIO values and institutional paradigms conditioned by regional imperatives. The institutional formula of the TAFTA, which draws on the normative template of the WTO but infused with positive discrimination and solidaristic 'special and differential treatment' to protect small vulnerable economies, is a classic example.

By way of reiteration, the cited patterns are not fixed and mutually exclusive but overlap in both empirical and logical respects. This paper's analysis is sensitive to this fluidity. An AIO may vary its normative character across several domains and functions, and a single action, such as the AU's establishment of the African Court of Justice and Human Rights, may exhibit dynamics of both fusion and diffusion.

At the risk of overinterpretation, I acknowledge that the issues of reflexivity and positionality suggest that the use of post-colonial international relations inevitably impacts explanation by foregrounding the relationality of power, asymmetry, and agency. To mitigate this risk, this paper's claims are embedded in empirical evidence adduced from documentary data explicitly demonstrating the discursive and institutional processes through which fusion, fission, and diffusion occur. Far from seeking to impose a

pre-determined narrative, the study uses its theoretical framework to highlight the nuanced agency that a positive or liberal institutionalist perspective may conventionally discount or overlook.

Even though it is not fatal, the method is weak because it relies on secondary data and official documents. This comes at the cost of informal insights and firsthand, undocumented, behind-the-scenes diplomatic experiences that may be gained from interviews.

AFRICAN STATES AND THE RBIO

The normative contact between AIOs and the RBIO is simultaneously fraught and foundational. Fraught in the sense that AIOs have historically been embedded in the RBIO as vulnerable entities because of asymmetric power dynamics and normative dependency (Zartman, 1967; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). The RBIO promoted by the West as the normative blueprint of liberal internationalism to enhance the quest for democracy, human rights, and free-market multilateralism is institutionalized in settings such as the WTO and the Bretton Woods Institutions, as well as in multilateral accords and conventions. For its proprietors and advocates, the RBIO ensures predictability and peaceful cooperation in international affairs (Lake, 2010).

However, critics contend that the RBIO is a problematic construct for Global South. They contend it is a value

system specifically designed to underpin the global hegemonic aspirations of the West in the immediate aftermath of WWII, throughout the Cold War, and after (Ikenberry, 2010; Adler-Nissen & Zarakol, 2021).

From the perspective of African post-coloniality, the RBIO functions as a disciplinary regime which locks in and perpetuates the continent's vulnerability to foreign manipulation and exploitation. This is because the pattern of Africa's incorporation into the regulatory logic of the RBIO results from its colonial domination and internal disruption (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015). The fact that most African states, after independence, remain vulnerable to external pressures is primarily because of disorderly decolonization processes, which were acutely entangled with the disruptions of Cold War geopolitics and conditionality-based donor dependency (O'Sullivan, 2005). Given this, and considering that it serves as the foundational import of the RBIO in African affairs, AIOs have persistently agitated for African states to have a voice and, as such, have functioned as the activist institutional vanguards of African governments in their calls for fair and inclusive global economic relations (Brooke-Holland, 2024; Murithi, 2023; Aka, 2001). It is in this context that the engagement of AIOs, with the values of the RBIO, has been one of persistent agitation, negotiation, and tension.

Against this background, African states established the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in 1963, following

the dissolution of the rival blocs of Brazzaville, Casablanca, and Monrovia. Despite deep-seated differences on the pace and depth of unification, the OAU member states agreed on the need to unite behind the organization and grant it a mandate to lead and complete the continent's decolonization and rejuvenation. One gets a sense of the OAU's depth of unity from the status of its Liberation Committee, which was second in rank only to its highest unit, the Assembly of Heads of State and Government (Cervenka, 1977).

Barely a year after the emergence of the OAU, the EEC purposively constituted the *Associated African States and Madagascar* for the conclusion of a reciprocal free trade agreement which came to be known as the Yaoundé Convention. This imperative resulted from a decision taken by the architects of EEC, at its inception in 1958, with the signing of the *Treaty of Rome* to lock newly independent African states into a free trade area centered on Europe (Hansen & Jonsson, 2011).

In 1975, against the backdrop of crippling oil sanctions imposed on Western economies by the *Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries*, an act which emboldened Global South states to demand a *New International Economic Order* (Spaskovska, 2021), the OAU assumed activist leadership of the African, Caribbean, and Pacific Group of States. This posture led to what Christopher Clapham noted as a rare feat during which "African states were able to bargain with

external powers on something approaching equality" (Clapham, 1996, p. 99). Resulting from this, the Yaoundé Convention was reversed by the 1975 non-reciprocal Lomé I Convention marking a watershed moment in the history of Africa's normative exchanges with the RBIO (McCann, 2020). This reversal, among others, provided the impetus for two historically significant developments. First, the establishment of the ECOWAS, an event which partially reversed the colonial-era fragmentation of West Africa, as France broke up the *Afrique Occidentale Française* (AOF) in 1958. The AOF was a federation made up of thirteen colonial territories. The first unsuccessful attempt by West African governments to reverse the fragmentation of the region after France dismantled the AOF was in 1959 (Adedeji, 2002, p. 14). Second, in what Keet (2002, p. 14) refers to as "tactical leapfrogs", Washington revamped and ideationally repurposed the IMF and the World Bank with a mandate to normatively undercut Pan-African policy initiatives. Incapacitated by the 1971 Nixon shock announcement which withdrew Washington's support, the Bretton Woods system (Gray, 2007), was rejuvenated with neoliberal philosophy experimentally developed and tested in Chile by the *Chicago Boys*: Chilean economists trained at the University of Chicago by Milton Friedman, Arnold Harberger, and George Stigler (Clark, 2017).

Oriented with their new neoliberal philosophy, the Bretton Woods

Institutions, ideationally outflanked and displaced the policy initiatives of African states and AIOs in the following pattern. When the OAU unveiled its 1980 state-led *Lagos Plan of Action* (LPA), which cited the imperial legacies of Europe as the reason for Africa's underdevelopment and laid the groundwork for the continent's self-reliance through a reduction in its dependence on the West, the IMF countered with the publication of its 1981 *Accelerated Development in Sub-Saharan Africa: An Agenda for Action* (also known as the Berg Report). Unlike the LPA, the Berg Report cited internal conditions in Africa as reasons for the continent's weak position in the global economy. The Berg Report turned to the IMF/World Bank's blueprint for implementing neoliberal Structural Adjustment Programs across the African continent (Parfitt, 1990).

In 1986, the OAU and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) unveiled the *UN Programme for Accelerated African Recovery and Development*, followed by the 1989 *African Alternative Framework to Structural Adjustment Programme for Socioeconomic Recovery and Transformation*. These were promptly countered in the same year (i.e., 1989) by the World Bank with its publication of *Sub-Saharan Africa: From Crisis to Sustainable Development, A Long-Term Perspectives Study*. Further, when the OAU unveiled its 1990 *Charter for Popular Participation in Development* and its complementary plan of action, the

1991 *New Agenda for Development in Africa*, the World Bank also issued a 1991 document titled *The Challenges of Development*. In addition to these, with the OAU's publication of its 1991 blueprint for the six-stage *African Economic Community*, i.e., *Treaty of Abuja for African Integration and Development*, the World Bank published its *Intra-Regional Trade in Sub-Saharan Africa* report in the same year (see Keet, 2002, pp. 14-15).

In all of this, the OAU took assertive steps to advance the collective interest of African states in international fora in ways beyond the capacities of individual states (Abate & Brunn, 1977; Endeley, 2009). Acting as a coordinating front in settings such as the United Nations and the G77, it functioned as a normative activist in the quest to bring forth a global economic order sensitive to the transformational development and security imperatives of its vulnerable member states (Zang, 1998; Atta-Mills, 1976; Červenka, 1976). Nevertheless, its efforts were constrained by its lack of an enduring systemic capacity to sustain and overwhelmingly increase the tempo and effectiveness of its activist initiatives. Consequently, the Bretton Woods Institutions, through a uniform, continent-wide conditionality-based neoliberal economic re-engineering, undercut the domestic state-led policy interventions of African governments by dismantling both efficient and inefficient state-owned enterprises, government-sponsored social services, and downgraded public sector

institutions, while enforcing democratization (Schoenholtz, 1987). At this stage, African governments became passive recipients of programs designed and operationalized within the normative framework of the RBIO (Riddell, 1992). The Cold War Neoliberal era in Africa, therefore, became one of RBIO normative saturation and policy constraints (Robinson, 1993; Uvin, 2013).

The end of the Cold War, with the transformation of the world order from bipolarity to multipolarity and its attendant flourishing of normative plurality (Schuppert, 2017, pp. 137-193), removed the normative constraints of RBIO saturation in Africa. Hence, institutional (re)configurations rooted in normative assertiveness became viable options (Darkwa & Attuquayefio, 2014). The 2000 transformation of the OAU into the AU is a classic example of institutional re-engineering based on normative audacity and confidence. For one, the Constitutive Act of the AU provided for historically unprecedented firm commitments to uphold and defend human rights and democratic governance (Gerenge, 2023; Elvy, 2013). As a symbol of the newly found normative valor of AIOs, the AU beat the UN to the adoption of the principles enshrined in the 2005 *Responsibility to Protect* (Gumedze, 2010). Informed by the grave lessons from the nonchalance of the UN during the 1994 Rwanda genocide, the AU assumed the moral right to intervene in crises on the continent (Sarkin, 2010). The establishment of

the AU, therefore, marked a historically significant normative recalibration that infused RBIO values in the context of African aspirations as the guiding principles of governance.

Regardless, the African Union's uptake of RBIO values is strategically relative rather than absolute. This inclination, given the continent's history of vulnerability to external pressures stemming from its peripheral status in global affairs, reflects a posture of post-colonial pragmatism. Consequently, institutions such as the ACDEC (*African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance*) and the APRM (*African Peer Review Mechanism*), conditioned with Pan-African values of voluntary, mutual accountability and non-coercive macro-level oversight (African Union, 2012; African Union, n.d.), count as hybrid covenants calibrated to ensure that principles of global governance serve the continent's development aspirations and political realities, rather than uncritically reinforcing a Western-centric, hegemonic, normative framework.

The same holds for the 2018 *African Continental Free Trade Area* (AfCFTA) agreement, which aims to facilitate intracontinental trade using WTO norms adjusted to reduce vulnerability to and disrupt dependence on external markets. Consequently, although the AfCFTA is globally oriented and aligned with *laissez-faire* principles, it also serves as a site of Pan-African economic vigilance and self-determination, structured to

insulate African polities from the ravages of global capitalism (Ngang, 2021; Chidozie *et al.*, 2025).

Meanwhile, the ECOWAS and the SADC (the Southern African Development Community) conducted a normative trial run of interventionist assertiveness in Africa before its adoption by the AU (Tavares, 2011). The ECOWAS set up the ECOMOG (*Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group*) to restore order in the interlinked uncivil wars of Liberia and Sierra Leone, between 1989 and 1997. It also established and operationalized the ECOMIL (*ECOWAS Mission in Liberia*) following Liberia's second collapse from 1999 to 2003 (Aboagye, 2018, pp. 69-100; 265-281; 233-238; Iwilade & Agbo, 2012). The SADC took the form of the 1998 intervention of the *Combined Task Force* in Lesotho. It aimed to stop a coup d'état staged by dissident forces of the *Royal Lesotho Defense Force*. Even though the cited interventions set historical precedents, they highlighted the limitations of principles inspired by the RBIO in the context of AIOs (Abass, 2000; Sampson, 2021; Corda, 2024).

The sketched patterns signify, albeit superficially, the deep-seated undercurrents of AIO interaction with the RBIO. This suggests an engagement logic that is non-linear or non-docile, but rather one of strategic 'self-reflexive' navigation. The outcome is hybrid political orders that blur the distinction between liberal, illiberal, and post-liberal governance. As a result of a strategic synthesis in which adopted

liberal paradigms are conditioned by post-colonial aspirations, governance models that defy clear-cut categorization emerge. Here, AIOs simultaneously embody traits of multilateral cooperation, assertive state sovereignty, and the taming of universalist pretensions. This generates a unique political landscape where conventional epistemic boundaries become porous and eventually inseparable.

The subsequent sections illustrate these tendencies as they manifest themselves in patterns of fusion, fission, and diffusion.

THE AU AND ITS POLICYSCAPE OF RBIO FUSION

The AU, since its inception in 2002, has developed a complex normative balancing posture through its concurrent adoption of RBIO values and attenuation of aspects that contravene the sovereign interests and political imperatives of its member states. Specifically, to the extent that it upholds the norms of electoral democracy and constitutional governance, it discounts the practice of regime-change interventions and the pursuit of the "shock therapy" treatment favored by Western advocates of liberal internationalism (Nair, 2013). This posture enables the AU to maintain its legitimacy by assuming the role of a norm advocate sensitive to the realities of its members and vigilant against the corrosive effects of external governance models.

For instance, the AU's ACDEG (*African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance*) is premised on RBIO inspired principles of political liberalism as articulated with provisions on free and fair elections (Article 3) (African Union, 2012), institutional counterchecks (Article 14) (African Union, 2012), and civil liberties (Article 12) (African Union, 2012). However, the ACDEG is based on a gradualist strategy of incremental intensification and the conviction that governments and polities ought to be allowed to create and operationalize their own liberal governance systems at their own pace.

Furthermore, the AU operationalizes its mandate of democratic advocacy as an elite-driven process of inclusion rather than as strictly enforced pluralism. Even though the standard normative fare of the RBIO is constitutionalism, competitive multiparty democracy, and presidential term limits (Gill, 2007), the AU is inclined toward constitutionality and is lenient on hegemonic-party governance, if elections are conducted, even if in a nominal sense. The AU sanctions unconstitutional regime changes, but it also accommodates constitutional coup d'états, presidential third termism, and indefinite incumbency. Constitutional coup d'états are achieved through manipulation of legal loopholes, unilateral constitutional amendments, or rigged public referendums (Mbaku, 2018). A classic example is Togo's recent constitutional reform, which was engineered by its government and approved by the National Assembly. Under

this new constitutional dispensation, the executive branch is headed by two incumbents: the President of the Republic (Head of State), mandated with symbolic powers, and the *President of the Council of Ministers* (Head of government), who functions as the country's policy architect and leader of the majority party in its National Assembly. Although critics of the constitutional reform contend that it is a calculated tactic by Faure Gnassingbé, the current democratically elected President in power since 2005, to extend his tenure in office until 2025 (Adaba, 2024), the AU has been silent.

The AU has also not consistently upheld its principle of sanctioning coups d'états (Souaré, 2014; Vilmer, 2016). The protocols for actions mandated in the event of unconstitutional changes in government, as outlined in the 2000 *Lomé Declaration* (African Union, 2022), were not operationalized, for instance, in the aftermath of the 2013 coup d'état in Egypt (Sallam, 2024). The AU's halfhearted pattern of upholding its anti-coup sanctions regime is also evident in its inclination to opt for informal dialogues and promotion of transitional power-sharing agreements in the event of unconstitutional changes in government. As in the case of the 2019, coup d'état in Sudan which toppled the government of Omar al-Bashir, the AU suspended the country but quickly adopted a mediatory role between the Transitional Military Council junta and civilian groups. In 2021, following the outbreak of another

coup, the AU suspended Sudan again; however, it quickly softened its stance by commencing negotiations with the transitional government. The same pattern was evident in the aftermath of a 2008 coup in Zimbabwe (Phakathi, 2018; Damman & Day, 2022).

The tempo of the AU's relations with the ICC is another classic indicator of the AU's RBIO norm fusion characteristics. Although many African governments were early enthusiastic signatories of the Rome Statute, they soon developed apprehensions due to their perception that the ICC seemed overly interested in prosecuting African Heads of State. This perception culminated in concerted calls by African governments for ICC reforms or the creation of an African alternative. They served notice to leave the ICC *en masse* if their demands were not met (Vilmer, 2016; Gichuki, 2014). Meanwhile, in 2004, in the pursuit of *African solutions to African problems*, the AU set up the ICC modelled *African Court of Justice and Human Rights* (ACJH) with two subagencies: a section for general affairs and a human rights unit. After a decade, the AU adopted the Malabo Protocol mandating the creation of a third section of the ACJH with a limited mandate in international criminal law. Unlike the ICC, it cannot try sitting presidents and incumbent senior government officials (African Union, 2019). These AU transactions represent a pragmatic, middle way norm diffusion strategy that prioritizes vigilance over strict adherence to liberal

internationalism. This approach adapts the RBIO by incorporating sovereign immunity for incumbents, thus shielding the AU and its member states from its most corrosive effects (Nyinevi & Fosu, 2023).

THE ECOWAS/ASS FISSION POLICYSCAPE

The ECOWAS and the ASS are a compelling illustration of the pattern AIOs' disengagement with RBIO principles. The ECOWAS' commitment to democratic governance and constitutional order, as stipulated in its 2001 *Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance*, gives it the mandate to intervene in West African political crises (Cowell, 2021). However, in recent years, especially after 2020, a discernible inconsistency has developed between its normative mandate and enforcement. The ECOWAS's reaction to the concurrent military coups in Mali (2020 and 2021), Guinea (2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023) vividly illustrate reluctance in pursuit of its mandate (Suleiman & Onapajo, 2022). In sharp contrast to its reputation as a confident enforcer of democratic governance anchored on the principle of 'sovereignty as responsible stewardship' (Onapajo & Babalola, 2024; Francis, 2000), the ECOWAS rescinded its decision to sanction the three countries after it imposed suspensions, economic sanctions and threatened military intervention to restore democratic rule in Niger. Indeed, it resorted to reconciliation with the juntas, promising to

reinstate their membership and assist in combating extremist and violent organizations active in the Sahel (Lawal, 2023; O'Kane, 2024; North Africa Post, 2025).

In the end, the three countries left the ECOWAS, accusing it of being an imperialist stooge of Western governments and formed the ASS, a military cum development bloc. They severed ties with Western governments and forged close partnerships with Russia, Iran, China, and Türkiye (Wabwireh, 2022; Donelli & Cannon, 2023; Wilén, 2025; de León Cobo, 2024; Laessing, 2024; Sputnik Africa, 2024). In 2025, they also withdrew from the ICC, citing it as a politicized instrument of Western control (Reuters, 2025).

The liberal normative faltering of the ECOWAS, which can be interpreted as a pragmatic-fission with the RBIO, occurred along a dual axis: first, in the specific instances of its reaction to the coups in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, the ECOWAS, suspended its fidelity to liberal values with respect to the juntas and succumbed to their anti-RBIO resistance. This, given its historic reputation as an assertive actor, is a downgrade of its status as the paragon of liberalism in West Africa; second, the ASS, symbolizing a relatively explicit fissure, emerged as an anti-RBIO coalition against both the ECOWAS, with the exit of the three juntas, and international organizations and states professing the political virtues of liberal ordering. It is worth noting that the normative fissure between the ECOWAS and the RBIO,

beyond the inconsistent enforcement of protocols, is also accounted for by the ECOWAS member states who have explicitly rejected its liberal framework.

However, for one to read the ASS initiative as a mere repudiation of the RBIO is to miss the nuances of its analytical essence and implications. The actions of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger are not geared to counteract international liberal order(ing) but to challenge its specific, hegemonic liberal instantiation. In this respect, the ASS, as a normative institutional buffer, does not imply an anarchic or knee jerk retreat from the RBIO but a sovereignty-maximization scheme enacted through the active construction of a normative counter-order. The very move of creating the ASS is itself a rules-based endeavor, only that it is predicated on a different value proposition and imperative: the primacy of unfettered national sovereignty and collective military autonomy. The initiatives of the trio prioritize security and economic development unencumbered by externally imposed political conditionalities, reflecting a conscious choice for an alternative model of statecraft. Therefore, the posture of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger reflects a nuanced rejection of liberal internationalism. They are not merely withdrawing from the RBIO system but actively aiming to establish a new, parallel regional cooperation framework that clashes with the liberal ethos of the ECOWAS. While renouncing the normative hegemony of the West, the juntas operate within the

pragmatic reality of a multipolar world, strategically partnering with revisionist powers. This pursuit of a staunchly sovereigntist path has, without doubt, compelled the ECOWAS to moderate its liberal stance.

THE RBIO DIFFUSION POLICYSCAPE OF THE TFTA

The TFTA is the most vivid example of the RBIO diffusion dynamics within AIOs. The TFTA is comprised of three regional blocs: the EAC (*East African Community*), SADC (*Southern African Development Community*), and COMESA (the *Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa*). Even though it is a trade liberalization agenda modeled like the WTO (Babatunde & Odularu, 2017; African Union, 1991; Angwenyi, 2016), there are instances where the two institutions normatively diverge, creating a condition of paradigmatic ambivalence. In such cases, the TFTA appears as a hybrid institution that concurrently absorbs and refracts the values of liberal internationalism through its imperatives. Consequently, its policy architecture suggests that diffusion, other than being a unidirectional global-regional transfer of norms, is a dialectical process of translation and domestication.

One can detect the pattern of explicit diffusion in the TFTA's mimicry of the WTO's procedural grammar, as evident in its tariff reduction protocols, non-discrimination regime, and dispute resolution procedures (Babatunde

& Odularu, 2017; Angwenyi, 2016). Additionally, the TFTA's protocol on the phased liberalization of trade in goods, services, and dispute settlement mirrors the multistage negotiation process of the WTO, as enacted in the Uruguay and Doha Rounds. Just as the WTO, the TFTA has adopted regular, institutionalized consultations, technical committees, and ministerial oversight, all embedded in predictable procedural norms, to enhance dialogue and promote the convergence of rule interpretation horizons (Akinkugbe, 2020, p. 139).

Nonetheless, the TFTA's structurally emulates the WTO. However, it is adjusted to account for the TFTA's technocrats' awareness of the asymmetric and vulnerability outcomes of world trade liberalization schemes under the auspices of the WTO. Hence, the TFTA's protocols reflect historically informed regional imperatives, such as industrial autonomy and transformation, food sovereignty, and infrastructure interoperability.

Normative selective adaptation, as a mode of diffusion, is also evident in the character of the TFTA. The commitment of its member states to the principles of liberal internationalism is tempered by protective schemes to accommodate infrastructural deficits, infant industries, and asymmetric economic capacities. The same can be said about its phased liberalization schedules, special and differential treatment provisions, and safeguarding clauses. These institutional formats signify a

pragmatic convergence to ensure external credibility and regional legitimacy.

Having said this, the very dynamic of selective adaptation also animates normative divergence. What the members of the TFTA procedurally commit to, they substantively resist based on their national proclivities. Additionally, their pledge to economic liberalization often appears as either rhetorical flourishes or nonchalance. Further, the TFTA's member states rarely utilize their dispute settlement process, instead preferring unilateral actions that often induce conflict (Desta & Gérout, 2018; Oloruntoba, 2018). Hence, from the experiences of the TFTA, diffusion and divergence are interconnected, with each dynamic animated by its refractive and hybridized character.

The TFTA's normative polycscape is one of refracted diffusion in the form of ongoing negotiation between the contradictions of global norm conformity and the imperative of regional self-determination. The dynamics of its selective adaptation functions enable both incorporation and differentiation, allowing it to inhabit the RBIO while subtly redrawing its normative parameters. The TFTA, therefore, illustrates the strategic recalibration of liberal internationalism via hybrid and contextually selective processes (Oloruntoba, 2018), illustrating how AIOs reconfigure the Overton Window of the RBIO from within.

ANALYSIS: THE AIO-RBIO INTERFACE-REFLEXIVITY AND DIALECTICAL SYNTHESIS

The profound normative transactions that occur at the AIO-RBIO interface transcend the mere perspectives of passive mimicry or outright objection. The dynamics also do not fit neatly into the fixed categories of liberal or illiberal. Rather, the value exchanges depict a turbulent process of normative titration enacted through co-constitution, where the conventional parameters of liberal internationalism are continuously negotiated and reconfigured in a post-colonial context. The essence of this state of affairs lies in a dialectical contradiction: the imperative of AIOs to meaningfully tap into the norms of the RBIO contrasts with the fidelity required to assert their mandate of defending regional autonomy and the quest for self-reliance, given the lessons of the continent's imperial past (Mentan, 2010). This study, drawing on the experiences of the AU, the ECOWAS and ASS in West Africa, and TFTA, demonstrates that the said dialectical contradiction animates a praxis of self-reflexivity that challenges and tames the RBIO's universalizing, one-size-fits-all hegemonic claims and intent.

This self-reflexivity is critical. AIOs engage with Western normative paradigms not to reify a monolithic "African" position or perspective, but to avert the

reification of Western worldviews on the continent. AIOs, as a result, open the norms of liberal internationalism for contestation and co-constitution through interaction. The experiences of the AIOs highlighted indicate that international norms acquire meaning in the context of peripherality by being channeled through concrete, ongoing processes of (re)interpretation and institutionalization, rather than through abstract validation or affirmation (Mohanthy, 1989). This dynamic temporality, where colonial-era legacies are repurposed in the pursuit of contemporary aspirations, requires analytical frameworks situated beyond hierarchy and/or fragmentation, and that can accommodate contingency, fluidity, and creativity (Acharya, 2016).

Even so, the empirical patterns of fusion, fission, and diffusion, as outlined, are more than descriptions. They provide the very basis from which one can plausibly systematically project future scenarios of the AIO-RBIO normative interface. The trajectory incremental convergence, evident in the TFTA's pattern of diffusion demonstrates that in technical, non-political domains like trade regulation, a significant convergence with RBIO-compatible economic structures is not only likely but can be actively pursued. This suggests that where member state's material interests in economic integration and institutional efficiency converge, on condition that their sovereignty is less directly threatened with corrosion, AIOs may incrementally

synchronize their protocols with the RBIO, leading to phased, sector-specific convergence.

Conversely, the scenario of fission, as suggested in the normative rupture of the ECOWAS and the ASS, suggests that when the perceived liabilities of adhering to the values of the of RBIO, in terms of undermined sovereignty and hegemonic external political conditionalities, outweigh the benefits, and viable alternative strategic partners exist, a definitive normative defection becomes a rational strategy. This template of forging sovereigntist, counter-hegemonic alliances is likely to be replicated in other contexts where similar pressures of regime insecurity and revisionist geopolitical opportunity converge. This may lead to a relatively acute, fragmented, and multipolar African normative landscape.

Nevertheless, the AU's fusion complex seems to be the most consistent and institutionally embedded pattern in Africa. Its pragmatic balancing postures, demonstrated by its hybrid architecture and calibrated stance on coup d'états shows that the most likely overarching normative trajectory is one of recurrent dialectical intensification in the form of dynamic unstable transactions of compromise underpinning protocols of mutual constitution. All in all, the RBIO in the context of AIOs is not simply adopted or rejected but is perpetually contested, disrupted, and recalibrated through its encounter with assertive African agency. The tenacity of this hybridized dynamic across the

core political spaces of governance, security, and justice affirms that the fundamental dialectic between universalist norms and particularist sovereignty imperatives will mature. In the process, it will define the character of AIOs, and ensure that the RBIO Overton Window remains a contested and fluid space for the foreseeable future.

CONCLUSION

Finally, after reflecting on the nuanced normative transactions between AIOs and the RBIO, this study culminates with a philosophical illustration that transcends conservative classifications of norm compliance, rejection, or mimicry, articulating the RBIO global normative architecture as a flexible, multipolar site of interaction. Within this space, AIOs are neither docile actors nor outright dissidents, but self-reflexive co-creators of emergent international governance frameworks. This perspective is anchored on the recognition that AIOs, defined by their unique historical legacies and the logic of postcolonial trajectories, engage with the values of the RBIO through strategic norm innovation. This innovation is deeply embedded in the tension between the defense of sovereignty and integration, autonomy, and interdependence.

The empirically sketched documented patterns of fusion, fission, and diffusion provide an evidence-based outlook for projecting the future trajectory of this relationship. The pathway

of incremental alignment is driven by the widespread diffusion of RBIO-compatible structures, as seen in the TFTA Tripartite Free Trade Area, indicating functional convergence in technical, non-political domains. Conversely, the trajectory of acute norm fragmentation is prefigured by the ECOWAS/ASS fission, setting a precedent for the Alliance of Sahel States and providing a clear template for other states chafing, anxious, and under pressure from the perceived impositions of liberal internationalism. However, the most probable and defining future scenario pathway is continuous and recurrent dialectical intensification. This is the logical outcome of the persistent AU embodied fusion embodied by the African Union, creating a permanent, dynamic tension where the RBIO Overton Window is neither adopted nor repudiated but is perpetually stretched, contested, reconfigured, and opened for renegotiation. The future of the AIO-RBIO interface, therefore, is not a final resolution. Instead, it signals an enduring and generative praxis of mutual adaptation, where African agency ensures the global order is relentlessly altered from the perceived low perch of Africa in the international pecking order of geopolitical prominence.

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