



# The Role of Africa in the United Nations

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Ambassador Hank Cohen,  
Members of the National Committee on American Foreign Policy,  
Distinguished Members of the diplomatic community,  
Friends and colleagues,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to thank the National Committee on American Foreign Policy for organizing this event and for inviting me to deliver this keynote address.

The topic of my remarks today is on “The Role of African Nations in the United Nations.” My main message is that African nations have made important contributions to the UN mandate on a wide range of issues outlined in the UN Charter and that there is therefore need to strengthen their contributions by fostering a constructive partnership between Africa and the UN on African and global issues.

I am convinced that this forum will develop ideas on how to recalibrate this partnership and suggest ways in which African regional initiatives can complement UN efforts in the three key areas of the UN Charter, namely, peace and security, human rights, and development.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The late Lord Caradon said it best decades ago: “there is nothing wrong with the UN that is not attributable to its members.” However, I have always focused on the implicit positive turn within Lord Caradon’s words. That is that everything which is right with the UN is also attributable to its member nations.

It is this viewpoint that has guided my engagement with the United Nations, whether in service of my nation, Nigeria, or as a representative of two Secretaries-General in a variety of assignments. In carrying out my responsibilities, whether in Africa or elsewhere in the world, I have always striven to ensure that the best lessons from Africa are incorporated and reflected in the principles of the UN’s Charter and in the work of the organization.

In over 20 years of interacting with the UN, I have observed that, while the organization and its sister institutions are engaged in Africa across the full breadth of issues at the core of the UN Charter, there is a discernible reluctance in the UN to partner with African nations on the issues that affect

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Africa the most and on which Africans have sought to provide their own perspectives and solutions.

Part of the problem resides in the widespread perception—almost a stereotype—of Africans as passive recipients of UN assistance whether on peace and security, development, human rights and its corollary, humanitarian assistance.

I do not dispute the fact that Africa is at the center of UN efforts in these three key aspects of the UN Charter. Lives have been saved thanks to UN actions. My contention is with the attempt to confine the continent to a beneficiary status. For, as legitimate members of the international community, holding over one-third membership in the UN General Assembly, African nations are entitled to such assistance within the purview of the UN Charter, just as many other nations had been in the years following the founding of the United Nations and its funds, programs and specialized agencies such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the United Nations Development Program, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, and the World Health Organization.

Africa's role in the work of the United Nations is not limited to receiving international assistance. Since joining the UN, African nations have made significant contributions to the work of the UN, consistent with the UN Charter, on peace and security, human rights and/or humanitarian fields.

African countries continue to provide substantive support to peacekeeping across the globe as troops and police in contributing countries and in terms of civilian staff. For example, national personnel who are recruited for peacekeeping missions across Africa provide invaluable substantive local knowledge without which most such operations would be meaningless.

Several African contingents and civilian staff serve in high-risk environments where they live, often in precarious conditions, and die. As head of the largest peacekeeping operation in the world with a predominantly African character, I have witnessed and spoken about this reality often with pride but also great sadness.

African nations not only provide peacekeeping contingents, they also release their own cadres to lead UN efforts in the promotion of the Charter's values globally. Boutros-Boutros Ghali, Kofi Annan, Abi Farrah, Robert Gardner, Adebayo Adedeji,

Teslim Elias, James Jonah, Francis Deng, and several other sons and daughters of Africa, including my humble self, have been called upon to lead UN action at the level of the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Secretariat, UN agencies, and in various theatres of operation globally. Africa's assessed contribution to the UN budget may be relatively meager, but the individual and collective contribution of its sons and daughters to the work of the organization has no other continent to envy.

Finally, Africa's contributions in the development of new doctrines and practices are equally noteworthy. Africa is used as an experimental ground for emerging doctrines and new practices on a whole range of issues. As a few examples, I would cite the protection of civilians mandate given by the Security Council to peacekeeping missions, the majority of which are operating in Africa; the internally displaced persons; and hybrid peacekeeping operations.

There have also been aspirations and sources of innovation of new jurisprudence from the continent. Many among this gathering would certainly recall the adoption by the defunct Organization of African Unity, OAU—now the African Union, AU—in September 1969, of the OAU Refugee Convention, which was adopted in the context of the OAU-led decolonization struggles in southern Africa. The OAU Refugee Convention is still considered the most progressive international instrument on refugee protection. It reaffirmed the international refugee jurisprudence as contained in the UN Refugee Convention of 1951, but made an important contribution by elaborating the principles of voluntary repatriation, international solidarity, and burden-sharing that were absent in the UN convention.

I also have in mind the OAU Algiers Declaration of 1999, which, among others, considered terrorism a transnational phenomenon and a serious threat to the stability and security of states, their national institutions and, more importantly, to international peace and security. This was two years before 9-11! The Algiers Declaration also declared that unilateral use of force in international relations outside the duly conferred UN Security Council mandate opens the way to practices inimical to world peace and security.

In the development field, Africa has the largest number of active regional organizations with the stated objective of promoting regional integration.

This trend was consolidated by the OAU-sponsored Abuja Treaty of 1990, which continues to spearhead integration efforts. The New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), adopted in the early 2000s, enhances the Abuja Treaty by providing the nexus between security and development considerations.

Perhaps most significant of all is undoubtedly the insistence by African regional organizations, particularly the AU and ECOWAS, about the need for the UN to agree on a flexible and progressive interpretation of Chapter VIII of the UN Charter. The practice by regional organizations to engage in peace enforcement emerged first with the authorized military intervention in Liberia in 1990 undertaken by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Although the Nigerian military regime of the late General Abacha has been sharply criticized, especially for its repressive domestic policies, one thing is beyond doubt: Abacha's decision to send Nigerian troops, under the flag of the ECOWAS intervention force (ECOMOG), to quell the atrocious rebellions in Liberia and Sierra Leone, while the UN and the international community remained silent, probably saved the two countries as we know them today.

The second experiment in African regional peacekeeping came with AMIS (African Mission in Sudan) in Darfur, again in reaction to the international community's apparent indifference to the plight of the people of Darfur. This experiment was later turned into a hybrid AU–UN operation that is the first and only peacekeeping operation of its kind in the world.

Thirdly, there is the African Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). While the UN and the international community gave up on Somalia, the AU took upon itself, against the views of many cynics in the international community, to rescue the deplorable security situation there and help the country restore much-needed law and order for its own sake and for the security and stability of its neighbors. Today, the AMISOM operation has the support of the UN Security Council and European Union, among others.

Finally, much criticism has been leveled against the AU for its position on Libya, for example. It is true that regional organizations like the AU or ECOWAS do not always adhere to a common position on critical political issues, but this phenomenon is not unique to Africa. However, the AU's concern about Libya's

potentially dangerous spillover effects throughout the Sahel region, immediately south of the Sahara Desert, has proved justified to the extent that powerful countries that had earlier dismissed the AU turned around to support regional and UN efforts to control the smuggling of Libyan weapons of war in the region.

These four examples clearly show that Africans are quite capable of solving their problems on their own and, by extension, to make invaluable contributions to the maintenance of international peace and security. There is, therefore, need for a change of paradigms from analyses of African countries as mere consumers of international peace and security. In this regard, and especially concerning peacekeeping and peacemaking, the time is probably gone, at least in the African context, when the UN unilaterally decided peacekeeping deployments and operations. Hybrid operations now appear to be the way of the future in international peacekeeping. This, in fact, is the message I repeatedly hear from the AU in my capacity as the head of the joint UN–African Mission in Darfur (UNAMID), which is the very first such experiment. It is also the position stressed by the chairperson of the AU Commission in his address during the last UN Peacekeeping Day. It should be heeded because, emboldened by their peacekeeping and peacemaking relative successes and confident in their keen understanding of the realities on the ground, African regional organizations will increasingly resist any attempt to impose a unilateral, business-as-usual decision-making process on peace and security matters, and rightly so.

UNAMID demonstrates daily that the hybrid model can work and that it has several comparative advantages politically, operationally, and financially. The approach of hybrid operations as a viable way to develop and maintain regional and international engagement in resolving conflict situations should be encouraged and strengthened. Persistence to maintain the traditional business-as-usual decision-making frame of mind will likely strengthen the voices of dissatisfaction about the effectiveness of the UN's responses to conflicts in Africa and lead African nations and the regional organizations of which they are members to limit their engagement with the UN on issues of common concern.

Obviously, the UN is not perfect, but if we, as members of the global organization and as Africans,

are ever to see the UN work most effectively, African initiatives would have to be seriously taken into account—not just consulted perfunctorily—as we seek to deliver as one. At the same time, African nations must do more to adhere to unified, common positions and perspectives on continental and global issues.

The African continent contains 54 of the UN's 193 member nations. However, they often act individually, and, with few exceptions, their engagement is not consistent with the collective strategy or vision adopted at the regional level. It is, therefore, of the utmost importance for African nations to be more proactive on global issues and articulate innovative solutions consistent with the UN Charter and the guiding principles of their respective regional organizations.

For its part, the UN must recognize the importance of African perspectives and work with the continent more fully in the development of the UN as an organization and the policies that affect the continent. It is true to say that, taken individually, African nations have had little discernible influence on UN policies. In 1994, the Security Council could have stopped the genocide in Rwanda if some among its powerful members had supported the recommendations proposed by the delegation of Nigeria as a non-permanent Member. However, when they act collectively and with a sense of purpose, as ECOMOG did in Liberia and Sierra Leone, and the AU in Darfur

and Somalia, African nations can constitute a formidable group to reckon with.

The continent of Africa is currently host to seven out of the seventeen global peacekeeping missions. Over recent years, African nations have focused not only on the deployment of peacekeeping [troops], but on developing new ways of addressing the root causes of conflict. This is one of the goals of NEPAD. The focus in Africa is no longer just on the number of blue helmets, but also on the adoption of early recovery and development as a way to address the root causes of conflicts. This new approach to peacekeeping should be encouraged as a much less expensive way for achieving durable peace.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In this keynote speech, I deliberately focused on the future of UN–Africa relations. My concluding message is a simple one: let us work together to help foster a constructive partnership between Africa and the UN on the issues that affect Africa and the world. I am convinced that this partnership can not only bring a cohesive global perspective in accordance with the UN Charter, but it will definitely encourage the development of innovative thinking and practices to address African and global challenges. This is, therefore, a shared responsibility, our shared responsibility to facilitate such an approach and the desired outcomes.

Thank you for your attention.