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EXAMINING IRAN'S PRESENCE IN AFRICA THROUGH A GLOBAL SOUTH LENS

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Abstract

This paper examines Iran's presence in Africa through a Global South lens, aiming to reframe it beyond dominant interpretive frameworks that situate it within the logic of geopolitical rivalry, ideological expansion or the binary of influence versus containment. The paper proceeds from the premise that understanding this presence does not depend solely on its quantitative scale or geographical reach, but also on the conceptual framework through which it is assessed, as well as the applicability of prevailing criteria of agency to contexts shaped by an unequal international structure.

The paper adopts an analytical-interpretive approach grounded in a critical review of the literature and the construction of a conceptual framework informed by global international relations (IR) theory and critiques of international political economy, with the aim of redefining the notions of presence and agency within the Global South context. It finds that Iran's presence is characterized by a selective and gradual pattern, shaped more by considerations of constraint management and partner diversification under sustained structural pressures than by any comprehensive expansionist project.

The paper further proposes redefining agency as a relative capacity to expand room for maneuver within an unequal international structure through adaptive and relational strategies. In doing so, it contributes to a broader discussion on how the roles of Global South actors in international relations should be analyzed by interrogating and redefining prevailing normative criteria in light of their structural positioning.

Keywords: Iranian presence in Africa, Global South, constrained agency, international political economy, strategic repositioning, critique of Western-centrism.

Introduction

In most of the literature, Iran's presence in Africa is approached through dominant Western interpretive frameworks that situate it within patterns of geopolitical competition, or within binary logics of threat and containment, or alternatively interpret it as an ideological extension of the 1979 Iranian revolution. While these approaches have contributed to the analysis of key dimensions of the phenomenon, they often begin from concepts of agency and power that were historically developed within Western experience and subsequently generalized as universal analytical standards. As a result, external presence is implicitly assessed in terms of its capacity to generate extended influence or reshape the international environment, without examining the suitability of this criterion for contexts operating under different structural conditions.

Within this context, the paper draws on Amitav Acharya's approach to "Global International Relations,"⁽¹⁾ which calls for moving beyond Western-centric theorization and reconstructing conceptual categories to incorporate non-Western experiences in defining power, agency and sources of international legitimacy. It also engages with Samir Amin's theory of "Unequal Development"⁽²⁾ and his analysis of a state's position within the international political economy, to understand how structural positioning shapes strategic room for maneuver and informs foreign policy tools and priorities.

The paper is grounded in the central premise that understanding Iran's presence in Africa is not determined solely by its scale or geographical reach, but also by the conceptual framework through which this presence is assessed. Reframing it from a Global South perspective allows it to be understood as a form of agency emerging within an unequal international structure, in which a state's options, instruments and constraints are redefined in light of its position within the international system.

From this perspective, the paper's central question is: How does the Global South perspective contribute to reinterpreting Iran's presence in Africa in terms of its motivations, instruments and limits of agency?

This question branches into several sub-questions: first, those concerning the limitations of prevailing interpretive frameworks and their implicit assumptions; second, those relating to the redefinition of the concepts of presence and agency within an unequal international context; and third, the analysis of the determinants of Iranian foreign policy and its patterns of engagement in Africa.

Methodologically, the paper adopts an analytical-interpretive approach based on a critical review of the literature aimed at identifying dominant interpretive patterns and their conceptual limitations. It then develops a conceptual framework grounded in a Global South perspective, which is subsequently applied in a contextual analysis linking the determinants of Iranian foreign policy to the broader international environment. In addition, it relies on a qualitative analysis of economic and diplomatic data pertaining to Iran-Africa relations, distinguishing between official discourse, institutional decision-making mechanisms and

actual practices. This enables a comprehensive examination of the phenomenon across its multiple dimensions, without reducing it to a single quantitative indicator or a purely security-based reading.

Accordingly, the paper is structured into three main sections. The first addresses the prevailing interpretive frameworks of Iran's presence in Africa, examining their theoretical premises and limitations. The second is devoted to constructing a conceptual framework from a Global South perspective. The third shifts to the applied level, where Iran's presence in Africa is analyzed in light of the determinants of foreign policy and its actual patterns of engagement. The paper concludes with a discussion of the key theoretical and methodological findings that emerge from the analysis, as well as the research directions they open for future inquiry.

Iran's Presence in Africa — Prevailing Interpretive Frameworks

Existing literature has addressed Iran's presence in Africa through a range of approaches, most of which reflect prevailing paradigms in international relations, particularly classical realism and neorealism, foreign policy analysis grounded in institutional perspectives, as well as readings informed by South–South discourse that do not necessarily interrogate its underlying epistemological assumptions. A review of this scholarship shows a general tendency to interpret Iran's presence primarily through the logics of geopolitical competition, ideological expansion or strategic repositioning, with only limited analytical attention devoted to rethinking this presence from a Global South perspective.

Within the geopolitical framework, Iran's presence is situated in what the literature describes as the “new scramble for Africa,” in which the continent is conceptualized as a space for the redistribution of influence among emerging global and regional powers. Studies on geopolitical transformation in Africa have reinforced this view, arguing that the growing role of actors such as China, Russia and Türkiye has reshaped the continent's competitive landscape, turning it into an arena for the strategic repositioning of midlevel and emerging powers.⁽³⁾ In this context, Iran is classified as a middle power seeking to expand its influence in specific regions, particularly East Africa and the Horn of Africa, thereby positioning itself within a network of overlapping competitive interactions.

However, while this interpretation highlights the competitive dimension, it implicitly assumes the existence of a coherent expansionist capacity and treats the Iranian case as an extension of the behavioral patterns of other rising powers, without sufficiently accounting for the distinctive nature of Iran's position within the international system.

In a second approach, Iran's presence in Africa is understood as an extension of an ideological discourse established since the 1979 Iranian revolution. This discourse is grounded in anti-hegemonic rhetoric and the construction of South–South relations. From this perspective, Tehran's engagement with the continent is seen as a continuation of the revolutionary dimension of its foreign policy, with

Africa viewed as a suitable arena for activating narratives of resistance to imperialism and for building relations with non-aligned and post-colonial states.⁽⁴⁾

However, this interpretation is challenged by the empirical reality that the declared discourse on Africa has not always been accompanied by a coherent implementation strategy. Rather, at different stages, it has taken on an ad hoc character, shaped by economic pressures, sanctions and efforts to reinvigorate diplomatic engagement. Consequently, reducing Iran's presence to a fixed ideological dimension obscures the gap between rhetoric and practice and overlooks the evolving nature of Iran's foreign policy priorities.

Within the framework of foreign policy analysis, some of the literature focuses on Iran's decision-making processes as an entry point for interpreting its foreign behavior. These studies suggest that institutional interactions are managed within a hierarchical system overseen by the top leadership, producing a degree of coordination in strategic decisions.⁽⁵⁾ From this perspective, foreign policy actions are not reduced to a rivalry between the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the civilian government, but are instead understood as the outcome of a network of institutional interactions in which regime consensus is continuously reshaped.

While this approach is important for unpacking internal structures, it remains primarily focused on domestic decision-making dynamics. It does not sufficiently incorporate Iran's position within the international system, nor the structural constraints that shape its options in external contexts beyond its immediate regional environment, such as Africa.

This intersects with the "strategic partnerships" approach, which views the engagement of non-Western powers in Africa as part of a broader reconfiguration of the international order toward greater multilateralism. In this framework, such partnerships are generally understood as flexible and selective arrangements, shaped by the capabilities of the actors involved and by local contextual considerations, rather than as deep institutional alliances or long-term economic integration.

Within this perspective, Iran-Africa relations are situated within the pattern of middle-power engagement on the continent. However, the framing of Africa as a strategic arena in official discourse has not consistently translated into a coherent operational strategy or a sustained economic presence.⁽⁶⁾

These trends indicate that the existing literature, despite its diversity, tends to analyze Iran's presence in Africa through lenses of influence and balancing, or through the dichotomy of ideology versus interest or via internal decision-making dynamics, without adequately interrogating the underlying criterion of agency itself.

In this context, reviewing these dominant frameworks is not intended to dismiss the explanatory value of security, ideological or institutional approaches, but rather to expose their analytical limitations when detached from their broader structural context. Iran's presence in Africa, as reflected in the literature,

cannot be fully understood if it remains confined to the dichotomy of threat versus influence or reduced to a discourse of abstract solidarity. Instead, it calls for a reframing that begins from the actor's position within an unequal international structure and from the nature of the agency available to Global South states under enduring constraints.

The Global South Perspective and Reconstructing the Concept of Presence

The Global South perspective starts from the premise that the international system is structured around inequality, in which resources, opportunities and constraints are distributed unevenly, and that many core concepts in international relations were historically formulated within the context of Western experience before being generalized as universal analytical standards. In this context, Acharya calls for moving beyond Western-centric theorizing through a "Global International Relations" approach, emphasizing that incorporating non-Western experiences is not simply a matter of expanding geographical representation, but of reconstructing the concepts themselves so that they are no longer shaped by Western experience in defining power, agency and influence.⁽⁷⁾ This approach involves a dual critique: first, of the West's monopoly over theory production; and second, of the universalization of concepts that emerged in specific historical contexts as if they were equally valid explanatory tools for all actors.

It also draws attention to the limitations of existing theoretical instruments in accommodating contributions from the non-Western world, highlighting an imbalance in knowledge production that is no less significant than inequalities in the distribution of material power.⁽⁸⁾

In this context, the concept of the "Global South" is not employed as a geographical label or a homogeneous political bloc, but rather as a structural position within the international system, defined by the degree of unequal integration into the global division of labor and by the nature of interdependence with the system's centers. Analyses of the global system, drawing on the distinction between center, periphery and semi-periphery, have demonstrated that a state's position within this hierarchy shapes its strategic room for maneuver and determines the limits of its foreign policy options.⁽⁹⁾

Amin also stressed that unequal exchange relations not only generate economic dependency but also reproduce forms of epistemic dominance that render the very criteria of evaluation reflective of the center's standpoint. As a result, a state located in the semi-periphery does not operate within a neutral field of possibilities, but rather under structural conditions that reshape both its instruments and its outcomes.⁽¹⁰⁾

This, in turn, requires a reconsideration of the criterion of agency itself. Mainstream scholarship/literature tends to measure agency in terms of influence and the capacity to impose will or reshape the international environment. Such criteria reflect the experience of major powers endowed with extensive material and institutional resources. However, when applied to developing countries,

they often result in labeling them as “weak” or “failed,” without questioning the adequacy of the criteria themselves. Moreover, critical literature on unequal sovereignty has shown that the agency of post-colonial states is exercised within a system that places prior constraints on its scope. This necessitates redefining agency as a relative capacity to achieve objectives within specific structural constraints, rather than as an absolute capacity to impose will or generate hegemony.⁽¹¹⁾

Consequently, the concept of “presence” must be reframed from a Global South perspective as a pattern of gradual engagement shaped by the interaction between a state’s structural position, its available instruments and the contexts within which it operates. This shift is consistent with studies on the Global South’s position in world politics, which argue that South–South relations are not grounded in rigid alliances or in the reproduction of traditional power balances, but rather in adaptive and selective arrangements reflecting disparities in resources and differences in priorities.⁽¹²⁾ In this sense, presence is assessed in terms of sustainability and the capacity to diversify options, rather than merely by its scale or geographical scope.

This definition requires incorporating an interactive dimension into the analysis. Presence is not a unidirectional process emanating from a state and imposed upon a passive environment; rather, it is constituted through interactions with other actors who themselves pursue strategies of partner diversification and risk management.⁽¹³⁾ Within this framework, reducing Southern states to passive recipients reproduces a form of cognitive centrism that assumes agency resides primarily at the center, while marginalizing the capacity of these states to maneuver and reshape interactions. Accordingly, reconstructing the concept of presence requires moving from a one-way model to an interactive one, in which agency is understood as the outcome of reciprocal relations within an unbalanced structure.⁽¹⁴⁾

In light of the foregoing, presence in the Global South is not assessed solely through quantitative indicators such as the volume of investments or the number of agreements, but rather through its contribution to expanding a state’s margin of maneuver within the international system and its capacity to redistribute risks and opportunities under existing constraints. Agency, in this sense, is relative and context-dependent, determined by a state’s ability to convert its structural position into a space for maneuver, even when it remains far from any hegemonic position.

This shift in evaluative criteria allows for a reinterpretation of cases traditionally categorized as having limited impact, viewing them instead as expressions of adaptive strategies within a constrained structure, rather than as failures to meet externally derived standards of power. Accordingly, invoking a Global South perspective recalibrates the analytical lens applied to the phenomenon under study, shifting the focus from questions of the extent of influence to questions concerning the nature of possible agency from a non-hegemonic position.

Contours of Iran's Foreign Policy and Its Presence in Africa

Analyzing Iran's presence in Africa requires moving beyond general descriptions toward a deconstruction of the determinants of its foreign policy as the outcome of the interaction between internal and external factors operating within a constrained international context. Approaches to Iranian foreign policy suggest that Iran's behavior is shaped within a complex institutional framework, in which policy choices are formulated through formal mechanisms that integrate security, economic and political considerations, with priority given to national security and regime preservation.⁽¹⁵⁾ Accordingly, perceptions of external threat, the pursuit of reduced isolation and the diversification of channels of international engagement emerge as key determinants guiding foreign policy action.⁽¹⁶⁾ These factors become even more salient in light of the intensification of sanctions over the past decade, as economic restrictions have reshaped patterns of external engagement by pushing the state to seek alternative avenues less dependent on the Western financial system. Within this context, the diversification of geographical partnerships, including renewed engagement with Africa, is better understood as an extension of the reorganization of foreign relations under these constraints, rather than as an autonomous strategic shift detached from its structural environment.

These constraints are reflected in the nature of Iran's presence on the continent, which is selective and geographically concentrated in East Africa, particularly in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. This region is considered suitable for the deployment of economic diplomacy tools in sectors such as agriculture, technical and engineering services, pharmaceuticals and certain low-cost industrial activities.⁽¹⁷⁾

This pattern does not indicate an even distribution of engagement across the continent so much as it reflects a calculated allocation of resources shaped by logistical and political considerations, within the framework of what is domestically referred to as the "resistance economy."⁽¹⁸⁾ Iranian exports to African countries reached approximately \$1.2 billion in the year ending March 2022, compared to around \$579 million in the preceding year.⁽¹⁹⁾ This represents a relatively significant increase; however, it remains limited in comparative terms, particularly when set against Chinese–African trade, which exceeded \$250 billion annually during the same period.⁽²⁰⁾ Iranian exports to Africa are concentrated in petrochemical products, plastics, selected industrial goods, agricultural equipment and pharmaceuticals, while imports from several African countries remain confined largely to raw materials and specific commodity goods.⁽²¹⁾

On the diplomatic front, the revitalization of Iran's presence in Africa during the tenure of former President Ebrahim Raisi was linked to an effort to integrate the continent more firmly into its foreign policy orientation at a time marked by stalled negotiations with the United States and European powers over the nuclear issue, alongside sustained economic pressure and financial isolation.⁽²²⁾ Within this context, 2023 witnessed a presidential tour encompassing Kenya, Uganda

and Zimbabwe, during which memoranda of understanding were announced in the fields of trade, energy, agriculture and health.⁽²³⁾ This formed part of a broader trend toward institutionalizing diplomatic engagement in East and Southern Africa. The initiative was accompanied by official rhetoric grounded in the principles of South–South cooperation, respect for sovereignty and non-interference. However, an examination of these relations suggests that the reopening of embassies and the convening of joint committees were not consistently matched by a corresponding expansion in economic resources or investment flows, rendering the diplomatic presence more visible in its symbolic and institutional dimensions than in the depth of its material economic engagement.

Moreover, Iran's presence is shaped within a multilateral framework, in which its agency is not determined solely by Tehran's agency, but is also conditioned by the strategies of other actors on the continent. African states themselves pursue policies of partner diversification and external balancing to avoid dependency on any single actor, which renders any external presence subject to complex local and regional dynamics. Analyses further indicate that competition with other regional and global actors, alongside considerations related to Iran's international image, influence the scope of potential expansion in bilateral relations. This also extends to cultural and educational instruments, which may encounter official or societal reservations due, in some cases, to concerns over sectarian sensitivities, thereby producing differentiated impacts depending on the specific local context.⁽²⁴⁾

Data indicate that patterns of Iran's presence in Africa emerge at the intersection of internal institutional determinants, external economic and structural constraints and multi-actor African contexts. These factors determining patterns of Iranian presence are discussed below within the framework of a Global South perspective.

■ **Constrained agency:**⁽²⁵⁾ Iran operates in Africa within the limits imposed by the structure of the international system and its semi-peripheral position within it, in addition to a comprehensive sanctions regime that restricts its capacity for financing, fund transfers and market access. In this sense, agency does not imply absence of action, but rather action exercised within a restricted margin of maneuver, oriented toward managing a non-hegemonic position within an unequal international system.

■ **Adaptive agency:**⁽²⁶⁾ Iran's engagement with East Africa appears less as an autonomous expansionist project and more as a mechanism for redistributing risks. Agency thus takes on an adaptive character, aimed at reducing vulnerability and compensating for constraints, without implying a qualitative transformation in the state's position within the international balance of power. The ability to sustain alternative channels, however limited, reflects a form of agency associated with managing constraints rather than overcoming them.

■ **Relational Agency:**⁽²⁷⁾ The outcomes of Iran's presence are not determined solely by Tehran's intentions, but are shaped through interaction with African states that themselves pursue strategies of partner diversification and of maximizing gains from competition among external actors. In this context, Iranian agency becomes the product of reciprocal relations rather than a uni-directional trajectory, rendering it inherently relative and contingent upon the local environment's capacity to accommodate it within its internal dynamics.

This reading points to a broader methodological implication: reframing from a Global South perspective does not merely add a descriptive layer, but rather reconfigures the very question of analysis. Instead of focusing on the extent of "expansion," attention shifts, on the one hand, to how Iran manages constraints, and on the other, to how it leverages its non-hegemonic position as a relative space of maneuver within an unequal international system.

In this sense, Iran's presence in Africa does not appear as an expansionist project, but rather as a continuous process of repositioning within a structure that constrains it while simultaneously offering limited opportunities for action. The central question, therefore, is not whether Iran is expanding, but how it manages the limits of its power within its international context.

Conclusion

The paper concludes that Iran's presence in Africa cannot be fully understood when assessed through metrics derived from the experience of dominant powers endowed with abundant resources and the capacity to reshape regional and international environments. Reframing the analysis from a Global South perspective highlights the need to interrogate the very standard of agency itself, and to move beyond reducing the assessment of this presence to quantitative comparisons or measures of influence. Instead, it calls for an analysis of how a state operates within an asymmetrical structure and of its capacity to maximize its scope for action within the constraints imposed by its structural constraints.

The analysis shows that Iran's foreign policy toward Africa is shaped at the intersection of domestic determinants related to the structure of decision-making and national security priorities, as well as external constraints associated with sanctions and the state's position within the international system, and diverse African contexts in which multiple actors pursue their own strategies of partner diversification and gain maximization. Accordingly, patterns of Iranian presence — whether reflected in its intensified presence in East Africa, its sectoral selectivity in particular fields or its intensive diplomatic engagement accompanied by relatively limited economic resources — appear to reflect a logic of management of constraints more than a coherent expansionist project. In this sense, Iranian agency is best understood not as the capacity to reconfigure regional or global balances of power, but rather as a relative capacity to sustain alternative channels

of engagement, redistribute risks and reduce vulnerability within a constraining international environment.

This interpretation does not deny the geopolitical or ideological dimensions of Iranian foreign policy. Rather, it situates them within a broader analytical framework that links domestic institutional determinants, external structural constraints and the dynamics of African contexts. As a result, the analytical focus shifts from the question of the “extent of expansion” to that of the “nature of possible agency,” and from assessing presence according to standards of dominance to understanding it as an ongoing practice of negotiation within an unequal international structure. Herein lies the paper’s theoretical significance: it not only offers a reinterpretation of a particular case but also contributes to a broader debate on how the roles of Global South actors should be analyzed in international relations. More specifically, it proposes an epistemological shift from reliance on ready-made concepts toward interrogating the historical and intellectual conditions under which such concepts are produced, and from measuring phenomena against fixed normative benchmarks to reconsidering the benchmark itself within the context of global power relations.

Accordingly, reframing Iran’s presence in Africa extends beyond the limits of this particular case and opens a broader research agenda concerning how patterns of external engagement by Global South states can be understood within an international system whose political and epistemological foundations continue to reflect deep structural asymmetries. The central task, therefore, is not to prove or disprove the “scale” of presence, but rather to develop analytical tools capable of capturing the plurality of forms of agency in a world that can no longer be adequately understood through the lens of a single center.

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