

“Bounded States”: How (Extreme) Risk Constrains the Aspiration for Status

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Abstract

We introduce the concept of “bounded states” to analyse how aspiration and risk (exposure and vulnerability to threats) shape the politics of status-seeking among states. We do so by examining how vulnerability to domestic and geopolitical threats constrain the aspiration of states for higher status in the international system, using the African Union Agenda 2063 strategic initiative as an illustrative case study. We draw on a review of key policy documents and secondary data analysis to highlight the tension between the collective aspiration for continental transformation and the catastrophic risks posed by climate change and geo-economic competition. We argue that African states, acting as “bounded states,” navigate these risks through a constrained version of Pan-Africanism—which we term as bounded Pan-Africanism—balancing their ambitions with the realities of high vulnerability to internal and external threats. In conclusion, this study offers new insights into the complex dynamics of status-seeking for states in a volatile global landscape.

Keywords

African Union Agenda 2063; bounded states; catastrophic risk; climate change; geoeconomics; Pan-Africanism; status-seeking

1. Introduction

Status is a key feature of international politics. In an anarchic system where states are the primary actors, status determines a state’s position and survival prospects, especially in the context of international political change. Scholars have long studied how great powers maintain international order and how rising powers challenge it (Gilpin, 1982; Mukherjee, 2022; Paul, 2016; Waltz, 1979). Recently, attention has shifted to the

role of middle powers and smaller states in influencing, if not shaping, the international order (de Carvalho & Neumann, 2014; Holbraad, 1984; Patience, 2014).

At the core of this analysis is the question of status-seeking, where scholars have explored why and how states position themselves in the international system, and the risks attendant to such positioning. Of primary interest is the risk of a major or catastrophic war due to great power conflicts, as states jostle between maintaining and upending the status quo. Phrases like the “Thucydides trap” (Allison, 2017) and “the tragedy of great power politics” (Mearsheimer, 2001) have become synonymous with such status-seeking. Similarly, scholars emphasise the omnipresent risk of subjugation for smaller states, given their vulnerability and disadvantaged position, and their quest for security (Jackson, 1992; MacDonald, 2014; Murray, 2018; Rodney, 1981; Roman & Simmons, 2002). More capable states, usually middle powers, employ hedging strategies to mitigate the risk of domination by powerful states (Ciorciari & Haacke, 2019; V. Jackson, 2014; Stiles, 2018).

While the literature and debates on vulnerability, risk, and status-seeking are insightful, they face three key limitations. First, they do not closely associate risk and aspiration or how these aspects shape the politics of status. Aspiration is usually attributed to great powers seeking to dominate the international system, while vulnerability to threats is often confined to failed challenges by rising powers or the fear of challenging the global order borne by small states. This conceptual disconnect between vulnerability, risk, and aspiration in shaping status-seeking is a gap in the literature. Second, the literature focuses on world-making through hegemony, primarily discussing international political change and power transitions, while the role of smaller states in “world-shaping” is relatively under-explored (see Barnett & Campbell, 2010; Browning, 2006; de Carvalho & Neumann, 2014; Elman, 1995, for exceptions). Third, studies on status-seeking, especially concerning small states, focus on individual states rather than collective efforts by groups of states, limiting the discussion on the politics of collective status-seeking.

Against this backdrop, we address these limitations by demonstrating how risk (exposure and vulnerability to threats) shapes the politics of (collective) status-seeking by states. We show how vulnerability to domestic (state fragility) and geopolitical security (external intervention) threats constrain the aspirations of states, turning them into “bounded states.” We argue that status-seeking by states is shaped by the tension between their aspirations for a higher position in the international order and the constraints imposed by internal and external risks. As such, higher-risk situations need more sensitivity, creativity, and complexity in managing status-seeking politics.

To illustrate our argument, we examine how African states have sought to enhance their position in the international system through the aspirational pursuit of continental unity and transformation while simultaneously attempting to overcome state fragility and navigate geopolitics. We focus on the African Union (AU) Agenda 2063, an ambitious 50-year strategic initiative for the continent’s transformation, as a project to enhance the status of African states (AU, 2015). Pan-Africanism has served as a collective aspiration for an “emergent Africa” (Mangeni & Juma, 2019). However, this aspiration is constrained by the extreme risks posed by inter alia existential politics of climate change (Colgan et al., 2020; Green et al., 2019), geopolitical change, the fragility of the post-colonial state (Mamdani, 1990, 1996, 2003), and intensifying geoeconomic competition (Roberts et al., 2019). We draw on a review of key policy documents and secondary data for the empirical analysis.

Overall, we make three main contributions in this article. First, we introduce the concept of “bounded states” to demonstrate how vulnerability to threats constrain the aspirations for status-seeking by states. Second, we present the empirical case study of status-seeking in Africa, illustrating how states in the continent attempt to navigate the tension between collective aspiration and extreme domestic and geopolitical risks as they strive to enhance their status in the international system. Third, our findings are relevant not only to the academic community but also to policymakers and practitioners operating in a complex geopolitical environment.

In the remainder of the article, we begin by reviewing the literature on status politics, highlighting the limited connection between risk and aspiration. We then introduce the concept of “bounded states” to demonstrate how risk and aspiration shape the politics of status-seeking for states. Following this, we present an illustrative case study of Africa. We conclude with a summary of our discussion and suggest avenues for future research.

2. Power and Status-Seeking

Status has been a key aspect of international politics. IR scholars have long studied how status shapes the behaviour of states in an anarchic system where there is no overarching authority. Central to this analysis is the issue of international political change, with a focus on how the quest—especially by powerful states—to enhance their status in the international political system has led to intense geopolitical and geoeconomic contestations, including wars. This has resulted in an enduring focus on peaceful change as a major challenge not only for IR scholars but also for policymakers tasked with formulating and implementing grand strategy (Carr & Cox, 2016; Gilpin, 1982; Keohane, 1984; Mearsheimer, 2001; Morgenthau, 1948, parts 8–10; Waltz, 1979).

In conferring status to states, scholars have identified four main types of powers and shown how their perceived status shapes their behaviour in the international system. Great powers have sought to maintain the status quo by exercising hegemonic power, expressing, and/or expanding their spheres of influence or interest; or defending the international order they created (Keohane, 1980; Mearsheimer, 2001). Rising powers on the other hand have sought to challenge the status quo, often leading to competition or conflict with great powers (Allison, 2017; Gilpin, 1982; Mearsheimer, 2014). Popular phrases such as the “Thucydides trap” (Allison, 2017) and “the tragedy of great power politics” (Mearsheimer, 2001) capture this dynamic. Middle powers have navigated the international system through several manoeuvres including hedging strategies, avoiding alignment with great powers, and pursuing multi-pronged diplomacy with competing powers (Holbraad, 1984; Patience, 2014). Small states—the focus of this study—have mostly been presented as either marginalised or subjugated in the international system, a designation that diminishes their aspirations of enhancing their status within it (see de Carvalho & Neumann, 2014, for an extensive discussion).

Vulnerability to threats has been a major aspect of analyses of power politics and status-seeking. However, the focus has primarily been on conflict (war as a means of international political change; Allison, 2017; Gilpin, 1982) or the subjugation of smaller states by great powers through (neo)imperialism (MacDonald, 2014; Roman & Simmons, 2002). When examining the risks for small states in their quest for higher status, scholars have often portrayed them as risk averse. Moreover, they do not usually connect the aspects of vulnerability, threats, and aspiration to present a more nuanced picture of the politics of status-seeking. Most conspicuously, scholars have largely overlooked the collective aspect of status-seeking by small states.

We seek to overcome these limitations by showing how risk through vulnerability to threats constrain the aspirations of status-seeking, focusing on small states, a task we take up in the next section.

3. Conceptualising “Bounded States”

In this section, we theorise how aspiration and risk shape the politics of status-seeking by small states. We introduce the term “bounded states” to describe states that seek to reconcile the tension between their aspiration for higher status in the international system and their vulnerability to the combined domestic and external threats that constrain this aspiration. Essentially, the aspiration for status-seeking by these states is bounded by risk.

3.1. Defining “Bounded States”

We define “bounded states” as those states that are constrained by some form of vulnerability that may endanger their sense of security or even survival. Since the most important objective of a state is security and/or survival, upon which all other objectives are premised, all states are by definition “bounded states.” However, the degree to which states are bounded significantly varies, as some are more vulnerable to threats than others. Drawing on the extensive literature on status-seeking, we argue that the status of a state depends on the balance between its capabilities and vulnerabilities, as illustrated in Figure 1, which presents a typology of status-seeking in international politics.

As such, great powers are relatively less vulnerable while also possessing significantly greater capabilities to both achieve security and shape international affairs. Conversely, small powers have limited capability but are highly vulnerable, especially to the influence of more powerful states. Great powers, therefore, tend to pursue primacy while small powers contend with the risk of subjugation. Middle powers have a nominal balance between capabilities and vulnerabilities. Overall, vulnerability creates a risk of subjugation, while capability creates the aspiration for higher status or dominance through primacy. Capability and vulnerability thus shape the status-seeking strategies of states.

Following this logic, our conception of “bounded states” in the present study concerns small states that are highly exposed and vulnerable to internal and external threats. This conception of risk for “bounded states” is distinct from that prevalent in the literature. Concerning small states, the literature usually focuses on the risks of challenging the status quo, where great powers may respond by exerting their influence or even subjugating the challenging states. Small states may act as surrogates of great powers as a coping strategy (de Carvalho & Neumann, 2014, pp. 10–11). Risk may also arise from marginalisation, especially by great powers, where small states may be excluded from or play a peripheral role in shaping the international order, or from the lack of capabilities to engage effectively.

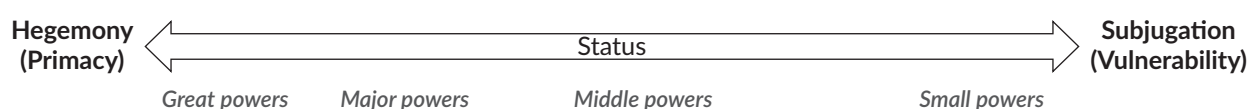


Figure 1. A typology of status-seeking by states in the international system.

3.2. *Bounded Pan-Africanism: Between Aspiration and Risk*

Aspiration arises from a sense of identity. “Status” in this regard means occupying a position in a social hierarchy, while “status-seeking” refers to actions undertaken to maintain or improve one’s placement in the hierarchy (de Carvalho & Neumann, 2014, pp. 4–5). Thus defined, states, either individually or collectively, can aspire to a higher status in the hierarchical international system.

Small states can thus gain, leverage, and exercise influence through intrinsic, derivative, and collective influence mechanisms (Long, 2017). In a derivative sense, therefore, small states can—and where there is sufficient proximity—rely on their relationship with great powers to project their influence beyond their relative position in world politics. Collectively, smaller states can deploy coalition-building techniques of supportive or “like-minded” states, often through regional and/or global institutions. Small states can also tap into the intrinsic power drawn from their assets to project influence beyond their relative status (Long, 2017, p. 201). Through these mechanisms, individually, states such as Singapore, Hungary, and Barbados have adeptly carved out influential positions in the international system (de Carvalho & Neumann, 2014; Guo & Woo, 2016; Kang, 2003, p. 171). Collectively, aspiration can be seen in how African states have attempted to harness Pan-Africanism as a shared philosophical identity for continental integration and leverage collective capabilities (Emerson, 1962; Mangeni & Juma, 2019; Mangeni & Mold, 2024; Nye, 1965).

“Bounded states” are shaped by two types of risks: domestic and external. Domestic risks typically arise internally from a variety of factors that exacerbate state fragility, including weak institutions and governance systems that make it difficult for a state to assert itself internationally (Caverley, 2021). Examples include states facing civil conflicts or threats of secession (Gebreluel, 2014; Griffiths, 2014; Hatherell & Welsh, 2021). External risks often stem from geopolitical factors that potentially undermine a small state’s sense of security including coercive militaristic or non-militaristic intervention, where great and middle powers interfere in the internal affairs of small states. Former colonial powers have been shown to deploy sophisticated strategies to maintain influence in their former colonies through an array of instruments of neocolonialism including asymmetrical trade and financial mechanisms (Lemay-Hebert, 2015; Sabaratnam, 2017; Sartre, 2001). Recent studies suggest that middle powers also aim to influence small states, primarily through geoeconomic competition or by forming alliances that align with the activities of greater powers within the target states (Aktürk, 2021; Almezaini & Rickli, 2016). As a result, “bounded states” often use their relative access to intrinsic, derivative, and/or collective influence mechanisms to augment their limited material capabilities alongside their sense of “moral posture.” Crucially, “bounded states” can also act collectively as peer groups, either through regional groupings or coalitions with “like-minded states thereby enhancing their collective bargaining capabilities and reducing their vulnerabilities in the international system” (de Carvalho & Neumann, 2014, pp. 12–13).

We now turn to an illustrative case study to show how vulnerability to threats constraints the collective status-seeking of “bounded states,” focusing on African countries. We focus on an extreme category of risk referred to as catastrophic risk, given the unique circumstances of the African continent. A catastrophic risk refers to any threat that could lead to significant population loss or severely disrupt human civilisation (Kemp & Rhodes, 2020, p. 2). We specifically focus on how the catastrophic risk of underdevelopment has manifested in domestic and external dimensions (Rodney, 1981) and how it has shaped the collective aspiration of African states as they have sought to transform the continent from the unfortunate

caricature of the “hopeless continent” (The hopeless continent, 2000) to an “emergent Africa” (Mangeni & Juma, 2019).

We chose Africa as a case study for three key reasons. First, African states engage both individually and collectively through regional and continental institutions, providing a distinct analytical lens for studying the politics of status-seeking. Unlike the EU’s supranationalism or the ASEAN model, African collective agency is rooted in the ideology of Pan-Africanism (Mangeni & Juma, 2019). Second, many African states face high vulnerability due to their low-income status, as Africa includes 33 of the 50 Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and 6 of the 36 Small Island Developing States. Third, Africa’s mix of small and middle powers offers a diverse range of status-seeking strategies, making it ideal for analysing how states navigate the tension between individual and collective agency amidst varying levels of vulnerability and capability. This combination makes Africa a compelling case study to explore how aspiration and vulnerability shape status-seeking in international politics, as shown in Figure 2.

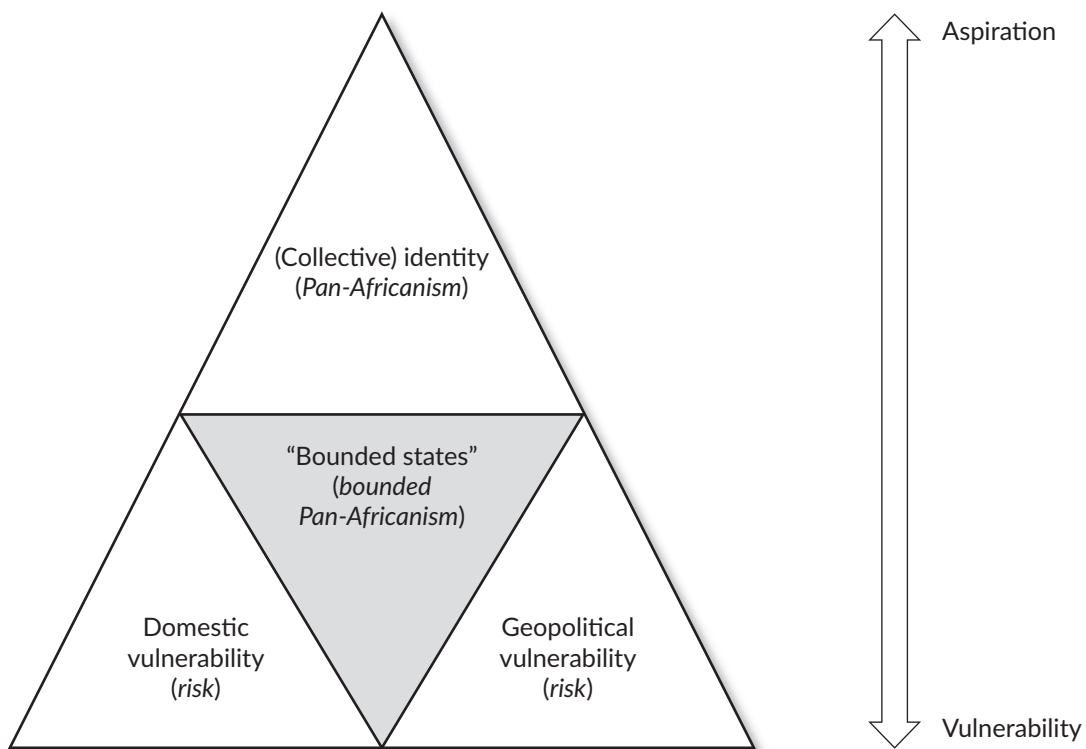


Figure 2. An illustration of “bounded states” and the derivative concept of bounded Pan-Africanism, demonstrating how aspiration and vulnerability to threats shape the politics of status.

Bounded Pan-Africanism also captures the concept of graduation in the status of African states. While most African states are LDCs, some of them have graduated to low-middle-income economies. Seven African countries have successfully transitioned from LDC status to low-middle-income status. Botswana was the first to graduate in December 1994, followed by Cabo Verde in December 2007, and Equatorial Guinea joined the ranks in June 2017. These countries’ progress marks significant economic and developmental advancements but also changes their status and strategies for status-seeking, as well as shaping the collective aspiration of continental agency. Some African states, like South Africa, are middle powers as they have greater relative capabilities to engage on the global stage, especially in leveraging the notion of Ubuntu

(da Costa, 2023; Emelianenko, 2023). Our conception of bounded Pan-Africanism accommodates this dynamic, especially the “graduation dilemma” that these states face in relinquishing some of the privileges that come with being LDCs, such as duty and quota-free access to major global markets (Milani et al., 2017). By drawing on Africa’s unique circumstances, we seek to highlight the novel contribution to the politics of collective status-seeking under conditions of extreme risk.

4. Pan-Africanism as the Politics of Aspiration

Africa occupies a unique but contradictory status in the world. On the one hand, it is renowned for its abundant resources, ancient civilisations, and status as the cradle of humankind. On the other hand, the continent has endured centuries of strife, including slavery, colonialism, civil conflicts, genocide, and geopolitical intervention and subjugation. Against this contradictory backdrop, the continent has sought to carve out a higher status for itself in the international system. It has harnessed the philosophy of Pan-Africanism as a galvanising force to attempt to overcome vulnerability to domestic and geopolitical threats and to transform the continent into a vibrant and prosperous region (Mangeni & Juma, 2019; Nye, 1965).

4.1. Bounded Pan-Africanism

When African states adopted the AU Agenda 2063 strategic initiative in 2013, this milestone received limited coverage in both public and scholarly forums. Ironically, the initiative is an ambitious 50-year framework for the continent’s transformation, developed and adopted by African member states (AU, 2015). Yet, it could be one of the most transformative initiatives globally, especially given Africa’s rapid demographic changes. We argue that the AU Agenda 2063 initiative can be understood as an aspiration by African countries, as “bounded states,” to enhance their global status (Getachew, 2020) by harnessing the ideology of Pan-Africanism (Tella, 2018). This aspiration is, however, constrained by vulnerability to domestic and geopolitical threats, as will be elaborated in Section 4.2. The bounded nature of African states is in this sense also informed by a philosophy that is also constrained by Africa’s intra- and extra-continental dynamics.

The AU Agenda 2063 could be thus understood as a *de facto* grand strategy for not only reshaping the socio-economic dynamics of the African continent but also expanding the scope of the continent’s influence in global politics (Tella, 2018). Exemplified by its mantra, “The Africa We Want,” the AU Agenda 2063 is guided by seven main aspirations: (1) A prosperous Africa based on inclusive growth and sustainable development; (2) an integrated continent, politically united based on the ideals of Pan-Africanism, and the vision of Africa’s Renaissance; (3) an Africa of good governance, democracy, respect for human rights, justice, and the rule of law; (4) a peaceful and secure Africa; (5) an Africa with a strong cultural identity, common heritage, values, and ethics; (6) an Africa whose development is people-driven, relying on the potential of African people, especially its women and youth, and caring for children; and (7) Africa as a strong, united, resilient, and influential global player and partner (AU, 2015, p. 2). These aspirations demonstrate the continent’s ambition to enhance its status in global politics by harnessing the collective spirit of Pan-Africanism (Mangeni & Juma, 2019; Mangeni & Mold, 2024; Tella, 2018).

The AU Agenda 2063 is an ideal example of collective aspiration as it lays out what could be considered a grand strategy for the continent. By outlining an agenda spanning half a century, and to be implemented in decadal iterations, the AU Agenda 2063 seeks to significantly transform the African continent and make it

more influential in the global arena. Moreover, the AU Agenda 2063 includes 15 flagship projects that would drive this transformation, seeking to triple the continent's GDP by the year 2050, thus creating a vibrant society where the population is expected to double by the year 2050 and quadruple by the end of the century. Crucially, the AU Agenda 2063 is also designed to be flexible to accommodate the diverse national interests across the continent. At the conceptual level, therefore, the AU Agenda 2063 is an example of collective status-seeking through strategic initiative, and it is unique and distinct from grand strategies of single great powers or supranational entities such as the EU (Mangeni & Juma, 2019; Mangeni & Mold, 2024). Thus, the AU Agenda 2063 is illustrative of bounded Pan-Africanism, where the aspiration for collective action is constrained by a vulnerability that is manifested through internal and external threats, as detailed in Section 4.2.

Importantly, bounded Pan-Africanism captures the tension, and at times contradiction, between the individual and collective aspirations of African states. On the one hand, African states have drawn on Pan-Africanism as an organising logic for continental cooperation and integration, especially through the establishment of continental institutions such as the Organisation of African Unity in 1963, which was later reconstituted to the AU in 2002, and the AU Development Agency (AUDA-NEPAD). More recently, the AU Agenda 2063 is the latest example of collective aspiration through continental integration. However, this pursuit of collective aspiration is at times constrained by divergent national interests and circumstances, given the diversity of states in the continent and their varying capabilities and vulnerability to internal and external threats. We underscore the tension that arises from the collective aspiration and heterogeneous national interests, a reality that has largely escaped conceptual clarity. We thus contend that the concept of "bounded states" in general and bounded Pan-Africanism in particular, captures this creative tension.

4.2. Extreme Risk as a Constraint

Due to historical and contemporary factors, the African continent is highly vulnerable to significant risks. Bold aspirations of the AU Agenda 2063 should, therefore, be understood within a broader context that is fraught with risk. The designers of the initiative were not oblivious to the challenges the continent faces, as indicated in the aspirations. We, however, aim to highlight vulnerability to extreme threats that have not been previously considered in the design and analysis of the AU Agenda 2063. Crucially, we seek to show how African states are creatively addressing these catastrophic risks, an approach that is largely absent in the existing literature.

Given Africa's unique context, we focus on catastrophic risk, a category of extreme risk that could undermine human societies and civilisation (Beard & Hobson, 2024; Beard et al., 2023; Kemp & Rhodes, 2020). Specifically, we examine the pernicious risk of underdevelopment, which has constrained Africa's aspirations for centuries (Amin, 1972; French, 2021; Rodney, 1981). We analyse how the existential politics of climate change and intensifying geoeconomic competition are constraining the aspirations of the AU Agenda 2063. Importantly, we demonstrate how African states have sought to reduce their vulnerability and mitigate these risks. Nevertheless, most African states remain classified as fragile, highlighting their continued susceptibility, as shown in Figure 3.

This fragility makes African states highly vulnerable to both internal (domestic) and external (geopolitical) threats, as shown in the subsequent sections.

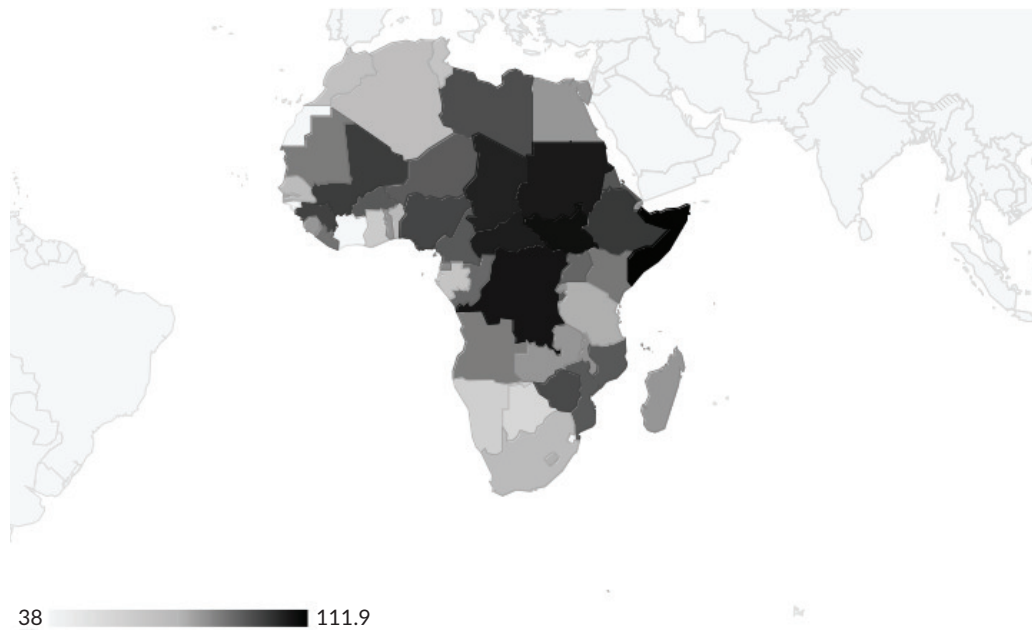


Figure 3. State fragility in Africa. Notes: Darker shades (higher index) represent greater fragility—many African states are fragile; This figure is based on the data from the Fragility of States Index (2024).

4.2.1. Existential Politics of Climate Change

Climate change is one of the defining challenges that could upend or even end human civilisation (Kemp et al., 2022). Scientific reports, particularly those by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), have conclusively demonstrated Africa’s vulnerability to the extreme impacts of climate change. In the Sahel region, for example, the rate of warming is three to four times higher than the global average (IPCC, 2023). Studies have also estimated that extreme climate impacts significantly undermine economic development on the continent, as they not only destroy agriculture-based livelihoods but also cost African governments up to a quarter (25%) of their domestic revenues (Waidelich et al., 2024, p. 595).

But less examined is the risk posed by the existential politics of climate change (Colgan et al., 2020; Green et al., 2019). When countries adopted the Paris Agreement in 2015, they were expected to submit their national climate action plans, formally known as Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). African countries had been active in the negotiations, but they faced significant challenges in preparing their NDCs. A key challenge was the limited support in the form of means of implementation (Mol)—climate finance, technology transfer, and capacity building. Mol is crucial for African countries due to their high vulnerability and limited capability in addressing climate change. By signing the Paris Agreement, African countries committed to supporting global collective action to address climate change. However, they also faced the risk of unfulfilled pledges for Mol (Mbeva et al., 2023).

In preparing their NDCs, African countries made part or all of their NDCs conditional on international support. This conditional commitment was made despite the assurances of Mol support in the Paris Agreement treaty text (Makomere & Mbeva, 2018). As Figure 4 shows, almost all African states have submitted conditional NDCs, illustrating the tension between their aspiration to join the global collective climate action and the risk of Mol commitments not being fulfilled.

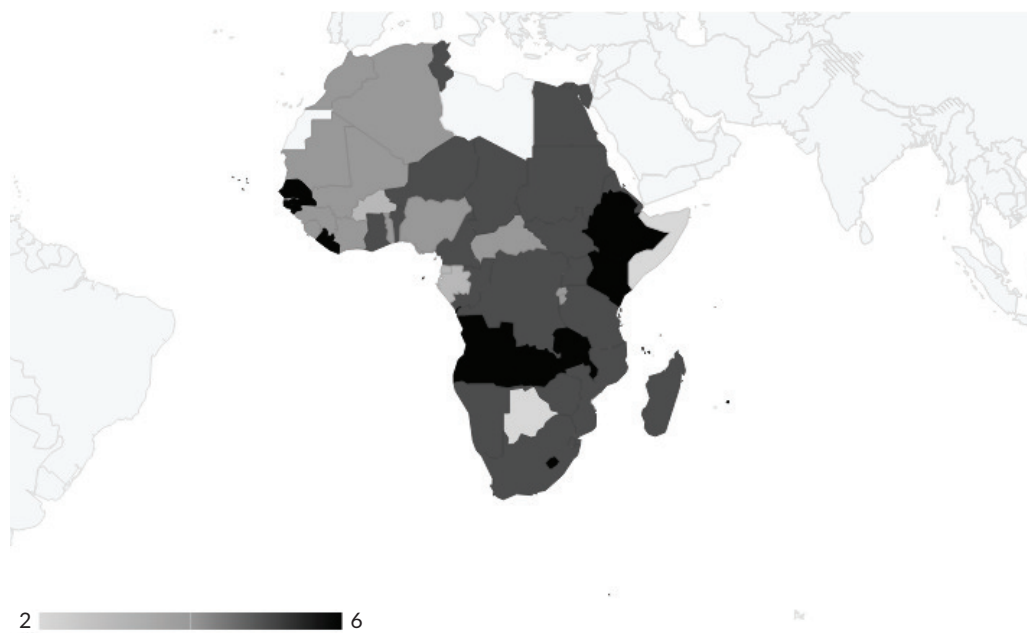


Figure 4. Conditional first-generation NDCs submitted by African countries under the Paris Agreement; Notes: Most African NDCs are conditional; the scale is an index of six Mol elements: mitigation finance, adaptation finance, technology needs, technology transfer, capacity building, and equity/fairness; an NDC that is conditional on all the six elements would have an index of 6, and 0 if it is not conditional; this figure is based on the data from the NDC Explorer by Pauw et al. (2022).

Limited capability to implement NDCs is prevalent across the various country income groups in Africa, but it is especially acute in low-income countries, as shown in Figure 5.

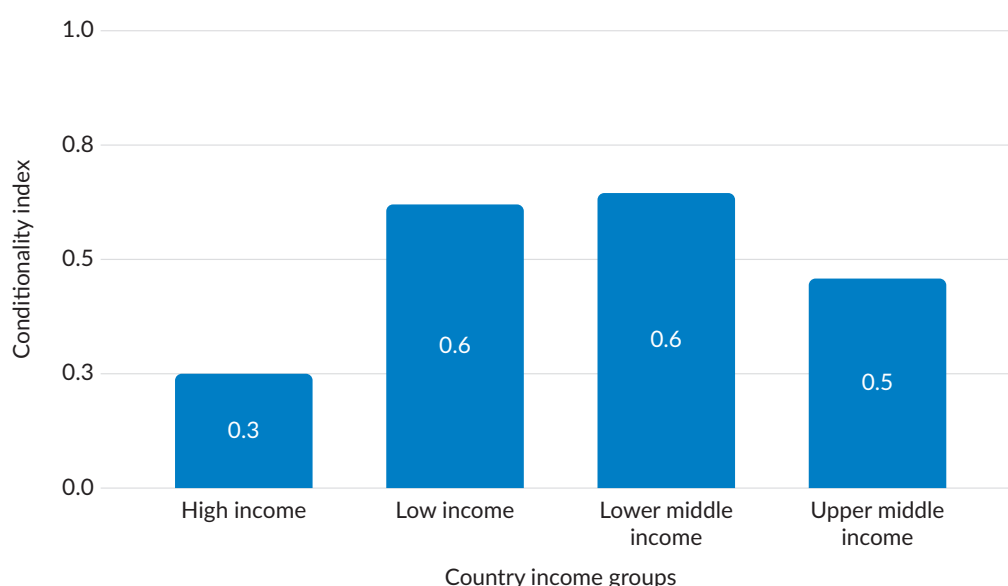


Figure 5. Capability challenges across country income groups in Africa. Notes: Low-income and lower-middle-income country groups have significant capability challenges, as their NDCs include conditional elements on finance, technology transfer, capacity building, and equity/fairness; The index has been normalised to range between 0 and 1, for the six conditional elements of mitigation finance, adaptation finance, technology transfer, and capacity building; This figure is based on the data from the NDC Explorer by Pauw et al. (2022).

Almost all African countries have also pledged net-zero targets, mostly by the year 2050. These targets require balancing greenhouse gas emissions with carbon sinks (Hale et al., 2022, 2024). However, there are concerns about whether net-zero commitments are feasible in Africa, especially without sufficient international support. Additionally, since the implementation of the Paris Agreement relies on the submission of successively more ambitious NDCs—a model referred to as “catalytic cooperation” (Hale, 2020)—there are concerns about the opportunity costs for African countries (Makomere & Mbeva, 2018; Mbeva et al., 2023; Okereke, 2024). Some African states have already expressed “buyer’s remorse” after being pressured to commit to deep emission reductions without the requisite support. For example, in its first NDC, Chad committed to reducing its GHG emissions by 70%. Policymakers later revised this infeasible target to a more realistic one of 19.3% (King, 2016).

State fragility is also a key factor shaping Africa’s climate politics. African states that are the most fragile tend to have NDCs with the most conditional elements, as illustrated in Figure 6.

Recent debates on addressing the worsening impacts of climate change have taken a demographic turn, focusing on intergenerational implications (see Hale, 2024, for a prominent example). One of the most viral graphics from the latest IPCC Sixth Assessment Report depicted the intergenerational impacts of catastrophic global warming scenarios (IPCC, 2023, p. 7). Africa’s population is expected to double by the year 2050 and quadruple by the end of the century (Ritchie & Roser, 2024). This rapid population growth, coupled with Africa contributing the largest share of future generations this century, makes grappling with the intergenerational consequences of climate impacts a major risk for the continent. As Figure 7 shows, African countries with the most significant capability challenges in addressing climate change are also facing the most intense demographic pressures.

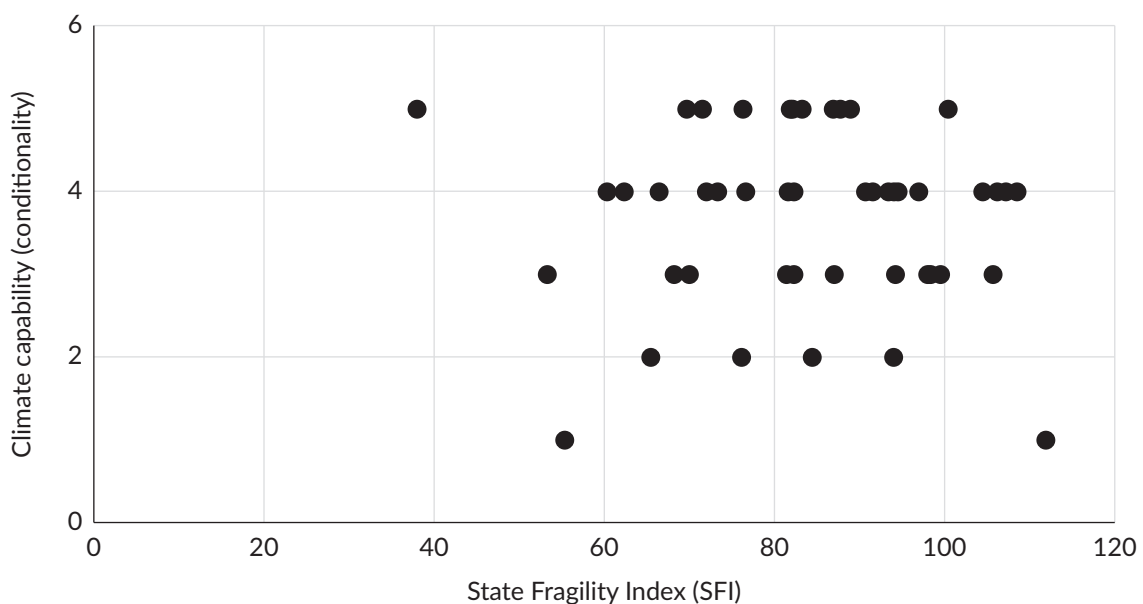


Figure 6. State fragility and the capability of African states to meet their climate targets. Notes: States that are the most fragile also have the most conditional NDCs; This figure is based on the data from the Fragile of States Index (2024).

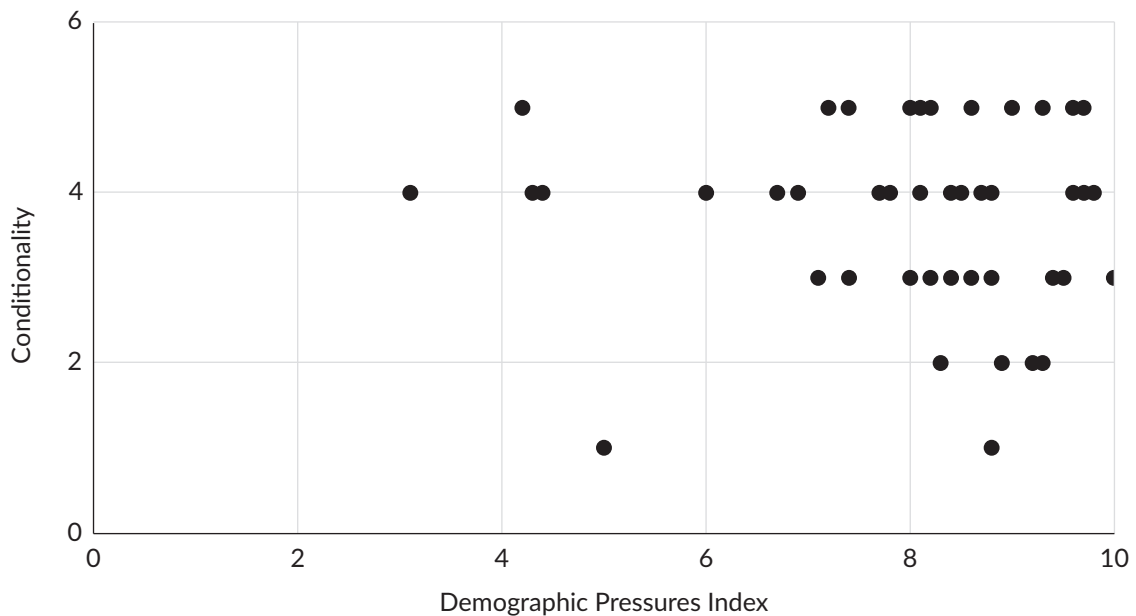


Figure 7. How demographic pressures exacerbate climate capability challenges. Notes: African countries with the most significant capability challenges are also most prone to demographic pressures, thus underscoring the intergenerational risks of catastrophic climate change. This figure is based on the data from the Fragility of States Index (2024).

As African states aspire to contribute to global efforts to address climate change, thereby enhancing their status as a “good power,” they are also facing the risk of ecological degradation—or even collapse—and underdevelopment. Viewed in the context of the “climate endgame,” where African states are highly vulnerable, the unfolding politics of the global just transition—contributing to common global targets while addressing domestic risks—poses a major challenge for African countries (Mbeva et al., 2023). This tension highlights that African states are “bounded states,” navigating between aspiration and vulnerability to extreme threats.

4.2.2. Geoeconomic Risk

External intervention in Africa has been a major challenge for the continent for centuries, from the Indian Ocean and Atlantic slave trade enterprises to colonisation and, more recently, neo-colonialism (French, 2021). African states have sought to navigate the risks posed by external interventions while crafting a unified continental strategy of transformation.

Geoeconomics provides an appropriate lens through which to assess African states as “bounded states.” African states have long sought to establish a common economic market and geopolitical partnerships as a means of advancing self-determination, particularly given the continent’s marginalisation in the global economy (Benabdallah, 2020; Milhorance & Soule-Kohndou, 2017; Soulé, 2020). The adoption of the African Continental Free Trade Area Agreement marked a significant step towards this aspiration of a common market, culminating from decades of diplomatic initiatives, notably the 1991 Treaty for the Establishment of the African Economic Community, also known as the Abuja Treaty. Remarkably, the African Continental Free Trade Area was adopted against a backdrop of de-globalisation and in record negotiating

time. African Continental Free Trade Area is thus indicative of the collective aspiration for an “emergent Africa” as a geoeconomic power (Mangeni & Juma, 2019; Mangeni & Mold, 2024).

However, the aspirations for a continental market are being challenged and even undermined by geoeconomic developments. Established as a stepping stone to the single continental market, Regional Economic Communities (RECs) in Africa are facing significant challenges. This is most evident in West Africa, where Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali have withdrawn from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) due to the latter’s support for foreign intervention to overthrow the military juntas in the region (Chafer et al., 2020; Guichaoua, 2020; Mann, 2021; Pigeaud & Sylla, 2024). United by their objective of ejecting France, the former colonial power, and the US from their countries, the military leaders of these three states withdrew from ECOWAS and established the Alliance of Sahel States in 2023, with support from Russia and a collective security pact (Asadu, 2023; Balima & Mazou, 2023; Millar, 2024). This shift from the economic logic of RECs to the geoeconomic logic of the Alliance of Sahel States underscores the constraints on continental integration in Africa. This trend exemplifies institutional status theory, where international institutions play a key mediating role in the politics of status-seeking (Mukherjee, 2022, Chapter 3).

As with many other African states, the three Sahel states are also fragile and thus highly vulnerable to external geopolitical intervention, as Figure 8 demonstrates.

African states that are highly vulnerable to external intervention also face significant challenges in terms of state legitimacy, as Figure 9 shows. Due to its colonial legacy, the postcolonial state in Africa has struggled to meet the growing socio-economic demands of its citizens, thereby undermining its legitimacy. As Mamdani (1990, 1996, 2002, 2003) has shown, the postcolonial state in Africa faces numerous pressures, including

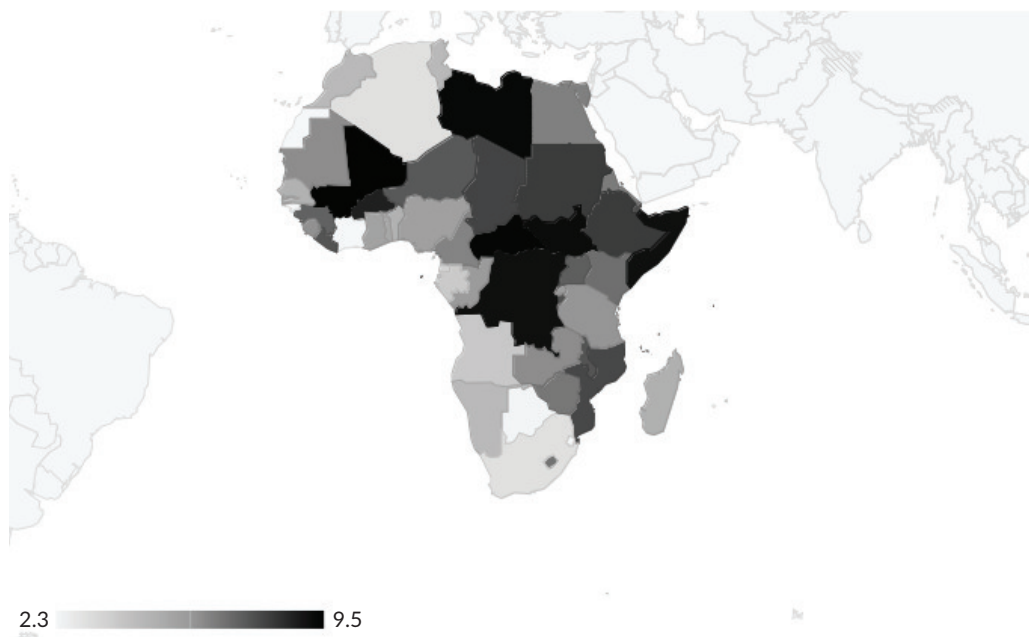


Figure 8. Vulnerability of African states to external (geopolitical) intervention. Notes: Many African states are highly vulnerable to such intervention, thus creating a geopolitical risk. This figure is based on the data from the Fragility of States Index (2024).

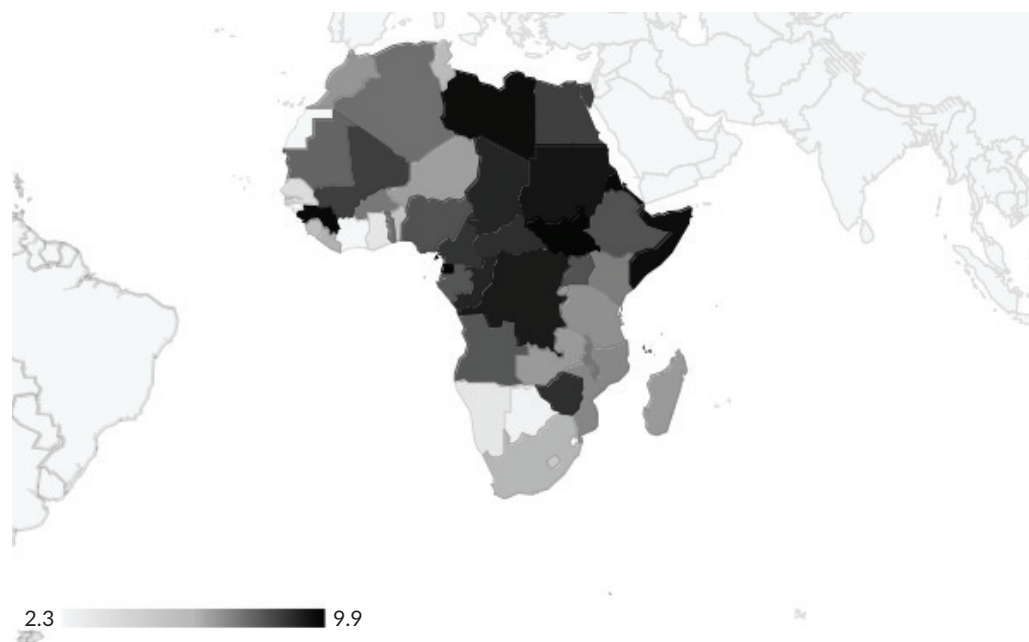


Figure 9. Legitimacy of African states. Notes: Many African states have a crisis of legitimacy, as illustrated by the darker colour shades; This figure is based on the data from the Fragility of States Index (2024).

ruptures that have led to extreme political violence, including genocide, due to the politicisation of ethnic groups through the colonial process.

Taken together, the existential politics of climate change and geoeconomic intervention pose significant risks to Africa’s aspiration for a higher status in the international system, as outlined in the AU Agenda 2063. African states have, nevertheless, sought to address these risks through institutional innovation. For them, status-seeking involves managing the tension between the collective aspiration for continental transformation through Pan-Africanism and the constraints imposed by domestic and geopolitical risks. Thus, African states must navigate their role as “bounded states,” relying on a constrained version of Pan-Africanism that is bound by (high) vulnerability to threats, which we refer to as bounded Pan-Africanism.

In addition to the foregoing case studies, bounded Pan-Africanism is evident in other African status-seeking initiatives. African states now have a seat at the G20, represented by the AU Commission. While this signals a collective aspiration for a larger global role, it highlights challenges, including whether the seat should be used for policy or political purposes, and how to represent the interests of all African member states (Adibe, 2023; Das & Tiwary, 2023). Similarly, the 2023 African Climate Summit, led by Kenya, sparked backlash for potentially undermining Africa’s long-standing common climate positions, such as on limited historical responsibility and commitment to the principle of common but differentiated responsibility (Ngam, 2023; Rumble & Gilder, 2023).

5. Conclusion

In this article, we have shown how aspiration and (extreme) risk shape the politics of status-seeking. We have introduced the concept of “bounded states” to demonstrate how risk limits the aspirations of states. Using the AU Agenda 2063 as a case study, we have demonstrated how domestic and geopolitical risks

constrain its pursuit of status goals. Future research could explore how catastrophic and existential risks, such as climate change and advanced AI, shape status-seeking politics, connecting this to discussions on societal collapse and transformation (Scheffer et al., 2023). Another opportunity could be to examine the nexus of vulnerability and collective status-seeking in emerging groups like BRICS and similar blocs in the unfolding multiplex world order (de Carvalho & Neumann, 2014), especially given the UN and its member states' recent formal recognition of catastrophic and existential risk as a defining feature of long-term multilateral cooperation (UN, 2024, p. 1, para. 2).

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Data associated with this research is available from the authors upon request.

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