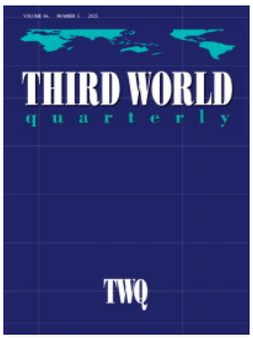

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Ideology and the question of agency in Africa's international relations: the case of Ghana

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ABSTRACT

This article reconceptualises the role of ideology in shaping African agency in international relations, offering a nuanced perspective on how African governments navigate global in(ter)dependence. Responding to calls for more substantive engagement with African agency, it decisively moves beyond established narratives of resistance to highlight a more complex and dynamic understanding of agency. By theorising the interlinkages between ideology and foreign policy, the article demonstrates that African states are not passive actors but strategic agents who contest conventional African ideas, resist external pressures, and selectively embrace external policies aligned with the distinctive ideological orientations of successive governments. Through an analysis of Ghana's foreign policy under the Nkrumah, Rawlings, and Kufuor administrations – focusing on regional integration and economic diplomacy – the article generates conceptual bases for understanding small-state behavior in the international system. These insights not only reshape scholarly debates on Africa's global engagement but also have broader implications for rethinking Global South agency and the accountability of African governments in foreign policymaking. The article thus advances intellectual agendas both within African international relations and the larger discipline, with the potential to influence future research and policy analysis well beyond the Ghanaian case.

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Introduction

In my 2015 interview with former Ghanaian President Jerry John Rawlings, he reflected on the ideological tensions and challenges his administration faced in navigating Ghana's foreign policy. He described the PNDC government's ideological diversity, noting,

> we did not have a common ideology; what we did have in common was a shared belief in the urgent need to put Ghana firmly on a new path towards repairing the rot of previous years and working towards social, economic and political renewal.[1]

This approach, Rawlings explained, was driven by an acute awareness of Ghana's dependency on international financial institutions and the realities of global power asymmetries.

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Crises in the early 1980s – from economic collapse and natural disasters to the mass deportation of Ghanaians from Nigeria – compelled the socialist-inclined regime, despite its ideological commitments, to make strategic choices, such as engaging with Bretton Woods institutions. Yet, Rawlings stressed, 'there was no sudden U-turn in ideology, but a practical response to real needs'. This reflection captures the core concern of this article: the complex interplay between ideology and agency in African international relations.

Ghana's foreign policy under the leadership of Kwame Nkrumah, Jerry John Rawlings, and John Agyekum Kufuor offers a compelling lens through which to examine how smaller states manage ideological commitments alongside structural dependencies in the international system. By foregrounding Ghana's experience, this article contributes to broader scholarly debates on Africa's position in the global order and the nature of African agency. Specifically, it engages with ongoing discussions about how African states reconcile developmental ambitions with external pressures (Acharya 2018; Harman and Brown 2013; Lala 2020), and how they navigate the apparent tensions between dependency and activism on the world stage (I. Odoom and Andrews 2017).

While much of the existing literature focuses on the material constraints that shape African foreign policy, this article brings ideology back into the conversation. In doing so, it addresses an important gap in the scholarship: the tendency to downplay the role of ideological frameworks in shaping African international relations, often based on the assumption that rhetoric and action are inconsistently aligned, or that external influences inevitably overwhelm ideological objectives (Akokpari 2001, 2005; Clapham 1970). However, recent scholarship challenges this view, emphasizing that structural conditions and ideological commitments are not mutually exclusive (Paget 2023; A. Thompson 2023). Indeed, as Freeden (2006, 19) argues, ideologies are 'necessary, normal, and [which] facilitate (and reflect) political action'. African elites, far from being ideologically passive, often ground their strategies in reasoned sets of ideas and values (Jones 2023). The challenge lies not in the absence of ideologies but in the dominant application of Western analytical frameworks that overlook the context-specific interpretations of African leaders, even when they use similar vocabularies (Siaw 2024).

By adopting a non-pejorative definition of ideology as 'interconnected sets of ideas and values… embedded in institutions, organizations, and social movements' (Jones 2023, 359), this article shows how ideology provides critical insights into the operation of agency, even in contexts of structural dependency. Agency, in this context, extends beyond mere influence to encompass actions that reflect ideological intent. While conventionally defined as 'the ability of states, intergovernmental organizations, civil society, and individual actors to exert influence in their interactions with foreign entities' (Coffie and Tiky 2021, 245), this article builds on calls for a more nuanced understanding of agency that emphasizes 'intentionality, accountability, and subjectivity' (Gwatiwa 2022, 1). In line with Brown's (2012) call for greater nuance, this article demonstrates how Ghanaian policymakers exercised agency not only through resistance but also by navigating ideological competition within established paradigms and selectively adopting external policies that aligned with their ideological objectives.

The argument advanced here is grounded in empirical research. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in Ghana in 2015 and 2019 – including semi-structured interviews with former Presidents Rawlings and Kufuor, as well as ministers, diplomats, and key policymakers from all three administrations – the article is further supported by archival research and analysis of parliamentary records and public statements. Focusing on regional integration and

economic diplomacy, two domains where African agency is frequently questioned, the article demonstrates that Ghanaian administrations deployed a spectrum of strategies that challenge the perception of smaller states as passive actors in global politics.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section develops the theoretical framework linking ideology and agency, highlighting their contextual and interactive dynamics. The subsequent sections present the empirical analysis of Ghana's foreign policy across the Nkrumah, Rawlings, and Kufuor administrations, focusing on regional integration and economic diplomacy. The conclusion reflects on the broader implications of Ghana's experience for understanding African agency in international relations and for advancing debates on ideology and agency in the study of international relations.

Theoretical link between ideology and agency in African international relations

The role of ideology in shaping agency and foreign policy has often been overlooked in discussions of African international relations. This neglect can be traced to long-standing assumptions about African politics: the tendency of governments to deprioritize issue-based politics amidst economic stress, high turnover in leadership, weak institutionalization, and limited policy differentiation. Additionally, the legacy of colonialism and reliance on institutions like the Bretton Woods system has created an impression that African states have little room to act beyond externally imposed constraints (Egwim 2024; Kweitsu and Akuamoah 2021; Omotola 2009). Such perspectives, however, obscure the more complex reality: ideology continues to shape African policymaking and agency, even in the face of structural limitations.

Consider, for instance, landmark initiatives like the 1967 Arusha Declaration, the 1969 African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC) Program of Action, and the African Union's (AU) Agenda 2063. These ideologically driven efforts were born out of aspirations to reshape Africa's trajectory in the face of systemic challenges (Jones 2023). Similarly, leaders such as Ignatius Kutu Acheampong in Ghana, who repudiated debt in defiance of international norms, or Ibrahim Babangida in Nigeria, who pursued an alternative to the IMF, regardless of the performative aspects of their policies, demonstrated that even under constraints, ideology shaped their policies and responses to global pressures (Jones 2023; Kraus 1977). These examples challenge two common assumptions: first, that African governments are merely passive recipients of external policies; and second, that their actions lack coherent, ideologically grounded pathways to development.

To unpack these dynamics more systematically, it is essential to move beyond reductive accounts of ideology and African foreign policy behavior. Contextualising ideologies, as I have argued (Siaw 2024), offers a more textured and nuanced framework for analysing the connection between ideology and policy. This framework situates macro-ideologies or 'big isms,' such as socialism or liberalism, as internalized ideas by their global reach, influence and relatively encompassing nature. African governments often adopt these ideologies out of intrinsic commitment or close alignment with their aspirations (Freeden 2021; Maynard 2019). However, macro-ideologies or big-isms alone are insufficient to explain policy outcomes; they must be understood in relation to contextual factors.

Contextual ideas emerge from local and international variables relevant to each society or country. These include ideational components influenced by historical, cultural, and

institutional dynamics. For example, Africa's colonial legacy has embedded anti-colonialism and economic independence as critical ideological components that leaders must navigate, regardless of their broader ideological commitments. Additionally, institutions such as the United Nations, AU, Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) constitute contextual ideational structures that governments respond to, whether through resistance, adaptation, or instrumentalisation (Carlsnaes 2013; Maynard 2019; Siaw 2024).

This interplay between internalized macro-ideologies and contextual ideas is crucial for understanding African agency. It reveals why actions resisting external pressures – often perceived as merely reactive – may align with a government's ideological commitments. At the same time, it clarifies how seemingly conformist or externally driven choices can nonetheless reflect a conscious exercise of agency.

Rethinking agency beyond resistance

Like ideology, the concept of agency in African international relations has been limited by conventional understandings. Dominant narratives often equate agency with resistance, framing African actors as assertive only when they oppose external forces or deviate from established norms (Acharya 2018; Brown and Harman 2013; Coffie and Tiky 2021). While resistance is a form of agency, it is far from being the only one. African governments often exhibit agency through compliance, adaptation, ideological competition and strategic reshaping of external influences to align with governments' goals. By examining the interactions between macro-ideologies and contextual ideas, ideological contextualisation offers a more nuanced lens for understanding the complexities of agency in African states.

Consider, for example, the prevailing view of 'Africa + 1' summits as arenas for external domination. Such perspectives overlook the strategies African leaders employ within these forums to secure favorable terms, advance regional priorities, or assert ideological commitments (Soulé 2020). Another illustration of this strategic engagement is the Tanzanian government's decision not to join the African Union Mission in Somalia in 2007 – while seemingly oppositional to a concerted African effort to show agency, this move reflected a careful calculation based on domestic and regional considerations (Jaensch 2021). Similarly, governments may align with external policies not out of passivity, but because these alignments further their ideological objectives – as seen in Kufuor's embrace of the HIPC initiative or Rawlings' selective adoption of structural adjustment reforms.

The cases examined in this article introduce two additional layers to the agency debate: first, they show that nuanced reinterpretations of, or ideological contestations within, conventional ideas – such as Pan-Africanism and regional integration – signal active engagement by policymakers rather than passive acceptance; second, they demonstrate that agency extends beyond resistance to include proactive engagement. In this view, aligning with external policies that resonate with a government's ideological objectives constitutes a deliberate exercise of agency.

This article builds on the work of scholars like Peg Murray-Evans, who challenge the narrow framing of agency in African politics as mere resistance. As Murray-Evans argues, such a focus risks obscuring the diverse strategies African states employ to navigate global structures, including actions that sustain existing norms or enable survival in unequal systems (Murray-Evans 2015). Here, ideology serves as a crucial analytical lens. When state policies

align with ideological commitments, they should be recognized as expressions of agency – even when they involve compliance or incremental, non-disruptive choices (Táíwò 2022).

To better capture the complexities of African agency, I adopt a hybrid definition of agency as 'the ability or capacity of an actor to act consciously and, in so doing, to attempt to realize his or her intentions within the context of uncertain or indeterminate social structures' (Hay 2002, 94; Murray-Evans 2015, 1848). This definition emphasizes intentionality, accountability, and subjectivity, broadening the scope of agency to include actions that are not immediately recognizable as resistance.

Ghana's engagement with Bretton Wood's institutions across various administrations illustrates this broadened perspective on the agency. While Rawlings' government resisted certain aspects of structural adjustment, it also adapted elements to align with its broader ideological goals. Similarly, Kufuor's neoliberal policies, although seemingly conforming to global norms, represented a strategic effort to position Ghana as a regional leader in economic diplomacy. These examples highlight the non-linear and multifaceted nature of agency in African politics.

Integrating ideology into the study of African agency provides a richer framework for analysing how states navigate global power structures. Ideological contextualisation reveals the interplay between internalized macro ideas and contextual imperatives, challenging portrayals of African states as passive or dependent. Additionally, broadening the concept of agency beyond resistance emphasizes the diverse strategies African governments deploy to pursue their priorities – whether through compliance, adaptation, reinterpretation, or contestation. These theoretical insights establish the foundation for the empirical analysis of Ghana's foreign policy under Nkrumah, Rawlings, and Kufuor, highlighting how their engagements with regional integration and economic diplomacy not only reflected ideological commitments and challenges, but also served as critical arenas for exercising agency.

Ideology and agency in Ghana's foreign policy

Ghana's foreign policy has attracted a range of scholarly interpretations, which can broadly be grouped into two approaches. One strand explains Ghana's international relations primarily through systemic factors, emphasizing global dynamics and external pressures (Akokpari 2005; Boafo-Arthur 1999; Roland 1976). Such accounts often understate the role of agency, casting Ghanaian policymakers as passive recipients of global forces. The other strand focuses on domestic and individual-level factors, thus implicitly recognizing the role of agency (Gebe 2008; Grilli 2015; Kumah-Abiwu 2016; Kumah-Abiwu and Boafo-Arthur 2022; T. Odoom and Tieku 2012). Yet, despite these valuable contributions, ideology remains an underexplored dimension – except in studies of Ghana's early post-colonial period (Armah 2004; Grilli 2019; S. Thompson 1969) or in analyses of Rawlings' so-called ideological 'U-turn' during the Structural Adjustment era (Boafo-Arthur 1993; Kpessa-Whyte 2022).

This gap has reinforced the dominant narrative of Ghana's foreign policy as being largely shaped by external pressures, overshadowing the nuanced ways policymakers engage with the rest of the world. By neglecting the role of ideology, such analyses miss how Ghana's leaders have balanced resistance, conformity, adaptability, and instrumentalisation in pursuit of their ideological goals. For instance, Boafo-Arthur's work highlights the neo-liberal orientation of Kufuor's administration and its influence on Ghana's international engagements. Yet, while this analysis acknowledges the role of ideology, it ultimately stops short of linking

this ideological orientation to expressions of agency (Boafo-Arthur 2007). This omission largely sustains the problematic notion that ideology has lost relevance in the post-Cold War era, particularly given the frequent citation of blurred ideological lines between the NPP and NDC as evidence of its decline.

Yet, ideology remains a central thread in Ghana's foreign policy. Core ideological pillars - anti-colonialism, economic independence, Pan-Africanism, and good neighborliness - remain central to the country's international relations (Siaw 2021). These ideological tenets provide broad interpretative flexibility, allowing successive governments to express agency in ways that reflect their ideological commitments. While these ideas, along with the institutional and structural context, have remained relatively constant across administrations, their interpretation and practical application have varied depending on the government in power. These variations stem from the government's macro-ideology and its interactions with other contextual variables. For example, as I will elaborate below, a socialist government may approach economic independence, anti-colonialism, and relations with Bretton Woods institutions with a focus on self-reliance and systemic critique, whereas a neoliberal or capitalist-leaning government might favor market-driven reforms and international partnerships that align with the logic of global capitalism. Recognizing this flexibility challenges the narrative of ideology's irrelevance and highlights how Ghanaian policymakers have mobilized ideologies as vehicles of agency to navigate external constraints and advance national priorities.

Ideological profile of the three administrations

The three post-independence administrations – led by Kwame Nkrumah, Jerry Rawlings, and John Kufuor – each reflected distinct ideological orientations that shaped their foreign policy strategies.

Nkrumah's administration, widely identified as socialist, framed socialism as a means to reclaim Ghana's historical greatness and assert African agency in a world dominated by capitalist and imperialist powers. He described it as 'a non-aligned version of second-world socialism,' blending modern technology with human values (McCain 1979, 46). Socialism, for Nkrumah, was tied to Pan-Africanism and anti-imperialism, positioning Ghana as a leader in African unity and global anti-colonial movements. This, he argued, offered a path to 'recreate the history of our nation as we translate into practical reality the dreams and visions of our forefathers'.[2]

Rawlings' tenure reflected an evolving ideological trajectory. In my 2015 interview, he described his government as ideologically diverse yet united by a 'shared belief in the urgent need to put Ghana firmly on a new path towards repairing the rot of previous years'. The PNDC government comprised groups across the socialist-Marxist spectrum, from revolutionary hardliners to moderates who accepted compromises to rebuild Ghana's socialist socio-economic infrastructure. The administration maintained a strong ideological affinity with Nkrumah's legacy, particularly its anti-Western stance and alignment with international proletarianism. When I interviewed a former cabinet minister of the Rawlings administration, he noted that the PNDC even considered adopting the name Convention People's Party (CPP) during its political transition, but ultimately formed the National Democratic Congress (NDC). This transition to social democracy, further marked by the NDC's membership in the Socialist International, reflected ideological adaptation under external and internal pressures, including Ghana's Structural Adjustment Program and demands for political pluralism (Abbey 2018).

Kufuor's administration had a strong ideological foundation rooted in classical liberalism. As part of the Danquah-Busia-Dombo tradition, the New Patriotic Party (NPP) embraced a vision of 'property-owning democracy,' promoting individual freedoms, economic liberalization, and pro-Western policies. In my interview, Kufuor emphasized his party's commitment to democracy and freedom: 'We are not revolutionary, we are not radicals. We appreciate the centrality of the human being. Even when we feel strongly about things, we want to convince stakeholders why the world should go the way we think we should go'.[3] This approach echoed the liberal and pro-Western foreign policies of the Busia administration (1969 – 1972), where Kufuor served as a Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs, and reflects the NPP's alignment with global center-right networks like the International Democrat Union (Goldsworthy 1973).

Despite their ideological differences, all three administrations shared commitments to economic independence, anti-colonialism, and Pan-Africanism. These principles shaped their approaches to global dynamics, demonstrating the enduring relevance of ideology in Ghana's foreign policy. However, each administration operationalised these commitments through its ideological lens, highlighting the role of contextualised ideologies in advancing an understanding of agency in nuanced ways.

Regional integration and economic diplomacy as sites of agency

Several strategic priorities have defined Ghana's foreign policy, but regional integration and economic diplomacy stand out as key arenas where ideology and agency intersect within the context of structural hindrances. These areas have attracted scholarly attention for their potential to enhance Africa's agency or, equally, expose its limitations. By examining Ghana's engagement with these policy domains under Nkrumah, Rawlings, and Kufuor, this article highlights how ideological commitments informed their approaches to navigating structural constraints. Far from being passive or reactive, Ghana's foreign policy demonstrates how contextualising ideologies enables us to see how governments exercise agency in diverse and nuanced ways.

Regional integration: ideological contestations and expressions of agency

Regional integration has been a cornerstone of Ghana's foreign policy, shaped by the ideological commitments of its leaders and their responses to Africa's developmental challenges. Defined as a deeper form of interaction among countries based on geography, shared identity, and similar levels of development, regional integration in Africa is often rooted in Pan-Africanism. According to the African Union (AU), Pan-Africanism is an ideology and movement that promotes solidarity among Africans worldwide, emphasizing that unity is essential for economic, social, and political progress. The AU asserts that Pan-Africanism stems from the belief that 'African peoples, both on the continent and in the diaspora, share not merely a common history, but a common destiny'.[4]

While Pan-Africanism provides a foundation for African integration efforts, it is not monolithic. Using the contextualisation framework, Pan-Africanism can be understood as a contextual ideological component whose interpretation varies depending on internalized macro-ideologies and interpretation of other contextual variables such as anti-colonialism and economic independence. These variations influence critical questions about regional integration: 'who with,' 'where,' 'how,' 'why,' and 'when' (Yakohene 2009, 2). The different

interpretations of Pan-Africanism challenge the notion that some versions lack agency, revealing instead a range of expressions that reflect distinct ideological commitments and active engagement with an idea that is typically viewed as singular or uniform. This diversity is evident in Ghana's approach to regional integration under the administrations of Nkrumah, Rawlings, and Kufuor.

Kwame Nkrumah's CPP administration positioned Pan-Africanism at the heart of Ghana's foreign policy, seeing it as essential for Africa's liberation and development. For Nkrumah, Pan-Africanism and the African personality were integral to his vision of African socialism, which he believed was necessary to counter colonialism and economic dependency. He famously declared, 'The independence of Ghana is meaningless unless it is linked up to the total liberation of Africa' (Ahlman 2021, 35).

Nkrumah's commitment to regional integration extended to the creation of an All-African socialist government. In his book *Class Struggle in Africa*, he called for 'the total liberation and unification of Africa under an All-African socialist government' (Nkrumah 1970, 88). Members of his government reinforced this vision. Dowuona, a CPP MP and Minister of Education maintained that 'African personality is a basic element of Nkrumaism'.[5] This emphasis on unity was also reflected in Ghana's 1960 Republican Constitution, which included provisions for surrendering Ghanaian sovereignty to a Union of African States. As Nkrumah articulated, such a union would provide an all-African approach to the problems of the African continent (Gallagher 2018).

These ideological tenets formed the backbone of Nkrumah's approach to regional integration, though they faced criticism from opposition members who questioned 'whether this union means the unconditional surrender of their respective sovereignty and to whom'.[6] Building a union of African states at different levels characterized his government's approach. For instance, the Ghana-Guinea-Mali union (1958–1963) provided frameworks for shared political, economic, and collective security initiatives, supported by Ghana's financial backing, including a relaxed loan of about £10 million to Guinea and Mali (Asamoah 2014). Ghana's leadership in the Casablanca Group – a coalition advocating political and economic union – further demonstrated Nkrumah's Pan-Africanist commitment. The tension betwwen this group and the Monrovia Group - who favored a more gradual path to integration - partly laid the groundwork for the Organization of African Unity (OAU), with Nkrumah warning against the dangers of 'Balkanisation' and championing a united Africa to counter global power asymmetries.

As mentioned earlier, the 1960 constitution of Ghana uniquely provided for the 'surrender of the whole or any part of the sovereignty of Ghana'[7] to foster African unity – something no subsequent Ghanaian constitution has done. His administration's involvement in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) reinforced these principles, promoting a neutral stance in global politics to preserve African agency and reduce dependence on the international status quo (Botchway and Amoako-Gyampah 2021). Nkrumah's interpretation of Pan-Africanism demonstrated how ideology could drive agency, as his administration actively redefined the terms of African unity and global engagement.

The Rawlings administration, while ideologically distinct, maintained elements of Nkrumah's Pan-African legacy, particularly in its early years. Members of the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) I interviewed revealed that this was because the administration's ranks included pro-Nkrumaist groups. This ideological connection influenced their anti-colonial and anti-Western stance, exemplified by their defiance of Western influence to participate in the 1982 African Cup of Nations and the OAU summit in Libya. Zaya Yeebo,

the PNDC's Secretary for Youth and Sports, explained that these actions were intended to reinforce Ghana's independence and strengthen African unity against external threats.[8]

The Rawlings administration leveraged NAM conferences to advocate for a new international economic order and oppose neo-colonialism. Its promotion of South-South cooperation and opposition to U.S. policies, such as sanctions on Cuba and the Reagan administration's 1986 attack on Libya, echoed Nkrumah's vision of active engagement in global affairs. However, the two administrations diverged significantly in their approaches to regional integration. While Nkrumah's 1960 Constitution permitted Ghana to cede sovereignty to a union of African states, the 1992 Constitution under Rawlings does not make such a constitutional provision. This reflected both ideological transformation and reaction to a different regional context. As Prof. Kwamena Ahwoi, a former cabinet minister of the administration, explained in my interview with him, 'in Nkrumah's time we didn't have these regional groupings in Africa… we had ECOWAS, the SADCC, the East African Community, COMESA, and the preference was for trying to gain regional integration first before we strive for continental unity'.[9]

This approach underscored the administration's active engagement with Pan-Africanism, shaped by stronger and more legitimate regional structures.

Despite these differences, the Rawlings administration's interpretation of Pan-Africanism demonstrated African agency, highlighting how ideological commitments evolved in response to shifting domestic and international contexts.

Under John Kufuor, Ghana's approach to regional integration became more institutional and economic-focused, reflecting the administration's liberal ideology. In my interview with Kufuor, he acknowledged the importance of Pan-Africanism and regional unity but emphasized how his party has ideologically interpreted this link:

> I am very much in line with my predecessors, my forbearers Danquah-Busia… But I tell you we really appreciate the continental movement towards eventual unity… We see all these movements as building blocks to the eventual continental unity that we will be granted when we get there, especially in this era of globalization. But for us to use subversion to try to whip everybody else in line, that's not our way. We don't subscribe to that.

Kufuor's administration prioritised sub-regional organizations like ECOWAS, strengthening democratic institutions and promoting good governance as the foundation for integration. He also believed economic integration was necessary for achieving broader African unity. Ambassabor D. K. Osei, who was Kufuor's personal secretary, revealed in my interview that Kufuor believed, 'We [Africa] should do it [regional integration] through building the economic communities and integrating them and use them as a platform for continental unity'.[10] These ideas translated into regional economic initiatives. During the 2007 AU conference, Kufuor resisted calls for immediate political unification, a stance that critics like James Bomfeh, a former CPP secretary I interviewed, argued undermined Ghana's historical leadership in Pan-Africanism. However, this position aligned with the administration's belief in gradualism and institutional regionalism.

This commitment to a gradualist approach was evident in Ghana's leadership in the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and its African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM). As a voluntary tool for monitoring governance practices across African countries, Ghana's role highlighted Kufuor's emphasis on accountability and democratic reforms. Ghana became the first country to undergo review under the APRM, underscoring Kufuor's belief that

domestic political responsiveness and accountability should precede efforts towards continental unity (NEPAD 2012). This approach also reflected the administration's understanding of regional integration as a process rooted in strengthening state capacity and aligning governance standards rather than pursuing symbolic gestures of unity.

By framing regional integration as a step-by-step process grounded in democratic values and institutional development, Kufuor's administration demonstrated an alternative expression of African agency. This approach, while distinct from the more rapid unity vision of Nkrumah or the anti-Western and institutional strategies of Rawlings, highlights the ideological diversity underlying Pan-Africanism and how it continues to evolve in response to changing regional and global contexts.

The different interpretations of Pan-Africanism under the Nkrumah, Rawlings, and Kufuor administrations reveal the diverse expressions of African agency in regional integration efforts. While Nkrumah envisioned a unified Africa as the cornerstone of African agency, Rawlings balanced this ambition with the growing prominence of regional organizations, and Kufuor emphasized incrementalism through institutional collaboration and democratic governance. These differences challenge the notion that African agency resides solely in collective action or immediate political unification (Tieku 2021). Instead, they highlight how individual states and leaders, shaped by distinct ideological commitments, actively interpret and engage with Pan-Africanism. The tensions during the 2007 AU conference in Accra, reminiscent of the Casablanca-Monrovia divide, illustrate how ideological contestations continue to shape the trajectory of regional integration. Recognizing these nuances not only broadens our understanding of Ghana's foreign policy but also underscores the pluralistic and evolving nature of African agency in the pursuit of regional unity.

Economic diplomacy, ideology and agency in Ghana's foreign policy

Economic diplomacy has historically been viewed as a domain where African states have limited agency due to structural dependencies on international financial institutions (IFIs) and powerful states (Akokpari 2005; Bayart 2000; Graham 2017). However, Ghana's economic diplomacy under the Nkrumah, Rawlings, and Kufuor administrations reveals that agency is not only present but also actively expressed through strategic adaptations, resistances, and diverse engagements. These actions reflect broader commitments to economic independence, anti-colonialism, and Pan-Africanism. While relations with Bretton Woods Institutions (BWIs), such as the IMF and World Bank, are central to understanding Ghana's economic diplomacy, these administrations also navigated ideological constraints in other economic relations, highlighting the nuanced interplay between ideology and agency.

This section analyses how each administration navigated Ghana's relations with the Bretton Woods Institutions and other economic engagements, demonstrating how ideological commitments shaped governments' responses and their ability to act within structural limitations that demonstrate agency, through and beyond resistance.

Ideology and agency in the context of Bretton Wood's diplomacy

Under Nkrumah's Convention Peoples Party (CPP) administration (1957–1966), Ghana's economic diplomacy was driven by a strong ideological commitment to socialism intertwined with anti-colonialism, economic independence and Pan-Africanism. Nkrumah viewed

economic self-reliance as integral to Ghana's liberation and its ability to resist neo-colonialism. This was encapsulated in his statement that Ghana's goal was to 'recreate the history of our nation' and 'to redeem its past glory and reinforce its strength for the realization of its destiny'[11] by positioning itself as a leader in global development for the continent. For Nkrumah, economic independence was not just about industrialization but for industrialization to help Ghana and Africa assert agency in an unequal international order.

This ideological stance shaped Ghana's cautious relationship with the IMF. Despite joining the institution in 1957, the Nkrumah administration hesitated to engage fully with its programs due to concerns over foreign control. Instead, Ghana financed its ambitious industrialization projects through cocoa revenues, national reserves, and loans, emphasizing import substitution and trade controls. However, the collapse of cocoa prices by the mid-1960s led to severe budget deficits, forcing Ghana to engage with the IMF. Even then, the government kept negotiations secret, and when IMF conditions began to align with existing fiscal prudence measures, the administration claimed ownership of these policies to avoid ideological contradictions and demonstrate a narrative of agency to the Ghanaian population (Akonor 2006).

This approach further demonstrated a performative aspect of agency through resistance, as the government sought to maintain its ideological posture while addressing economic challenges and navigating relationships with actors whose policies do not align with the government's ideologies. There were no more significant engagements with the fund until the government's overthrow in 1966. While these actions reflected parts of the government's ideological commitments, they also underscored the practical challenges of maintaining economic independence in a structurally dependent global system. Ultimately, Nkrumah's economic diplomacy highlighted the tension between ideological ambitions and material realities, demonstrating a nuanced form of agency through selective engagement and resistance.

The Rawlings Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) administration (1981–1993) and subsequent National Democratic Congress (NDC) government (1993–2001) faced one of the most contentious periods in Ghana's economic diplomacy, marked by its ideological transformation and engagement with the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP). Initially, the administration aligned itself with Marxist-socialist ideals and solidarity with international proletarian states, advocating for economic independence and resisting neo-colonialism. Rawlings frequently criticised the 'forces which continue in their efforts to disorient and hence control us'[12] and sought a 'new international economic order'[13] to address Africa's structural dependency. Yet, the dire economic realities of the early 1980s, characterized by severe fiscal deficits, hyperinflation, and a combination of natural and external shocks - including drought, bushfires, and Nigeria's suspension of petroleum supplies and deportation of Ghanaians, compelled the government to reassess its approach to economic diplomacy (Siaw 2015).

In my 2015 interview, Rawlings reflected on this tumultuous period, describing the PNDC's immediate focus on resolving crises, such as finding alternative fuel sources and resettling more than one million Ghanaians expelled from Nigeria. '1982 and 1983 were years of unprecedented crises,' Rawlings remarked. He further remarked that 'ironically, it was the efficiency with which we tackled these challenges that made the international community revise their opinions of the PNDC as a government'. This recognition of the PNDC's competence laid the groundwork for the administration's eventual engagement with Bretton Woods institutions.

Initially, Rawlings' administration sought alternatives to IMF support by courting 'progressive states' such as Libya, Cuba, and the Soviet Union. Delegations were dispatched with the hope of securing aid, but as Rawlings admitted, these missions yielded 'little except good

wishes, some ideological books, and a few scholarships'. By late 1983, it became evident that the PNDC needed 'more practical thinkers and doers and fewer ideologues,' Rawlings argued.[14] This shift in approach culminated in the crafting of a recovery program that sought funding from international lending agencies, particularly the IMF.

The decision to adopt SAP was deeply contentious within the PNDC, reflecting ideological divisions between hardline Marxist-socialists and pragmatists. Figures like Chris Atim and Akata Pore, who opposed neoliberal policies, condemned the decision, with some going into exile or being accused of attempting coups in response. Some criticised Rawlings as a 'fraud' and called the IMF a 'financial monster, the mercenary headquarters of imperialist monopoly companies' (Akonor 2006, 33). Despite these internal tensions, the Rawlings administration demonstrated ideological flexibility, framing the engagement with the IMF and World Bank as a necessary compromise to stabilize Ghana's economy (B. Agyeman-Duah 1987a; Hutchful 1985).

This 'pragmatism' did not represent a wholesale abandonment of socialist principles. As mentioned earlier, Rawlings believed that 'there was no sudden U-turn in ideology, but a practical response to real needs'. The administration implemented measures to mitigate the social impacts of SAP. These included wage increases and expanded public spending - actions that exceeded IMF fiscal targets. For instance, following a 50% cedi devaluation in 1986, the PNDC increased wages by 28.6%, doubling the wage bill to 30 billion cedis – well beyond IMF targets (Amo-Agyemang 2017). While these measures were criticised as fiscally indisciplined, they reflected the PNDC's ideological commitment to protecting the livelihoods of ordinary Ghanaians (Ahiakpor 1991; Hutchful 2002). Rawlings' government thus navigated a hybrid approach – accepting neoliberal prescriptions while striving to preserve socialist objectives.

Rawlings' narrative highlights how the agency was exercised within the constraints of structural adjustment. The administration's selective adaptation of IMF conditions and efforts to maintain social protections challenge the notion of African governments as passive recipients of external policies. Instead, the PNDC demonstrated agency through ideological recalibration and a commitment to balancing external demands with domestic ideological priorities.

Kufuor's New Patriotic Party (NPP) administration (2001–2009) marked a departure from the ideological ambivalence of previous governments. As a self-identified 'property-owning democracy' party rooted in classical liberalism, the NPP prioritised economic liberalization, fiscal prudence, and strong partnerships with Western-led financial institutions such as the IMF and World Bank (I. Agyeman-Duah 2004; Siaw 2021). This ideological clarity shaped Kufuor's proactive approach to Ghana's debt challenges, exemplified by the administration's decision to join the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative shortly after assuming office (IMF 2004).

Kufuor framed Ghana's enrolment in HIPC as a strategic choice consistent with his administration's ideology. During a 2002 speech, he remarked, 'We have no regrets for working at [HIPC] to achieve a decision point… We are destined to be a gateway to the sub-region if not for the African continent'.[15] Unlike previous administrations, which viewed IMF programs as externally imposed constraints, Kufuor's government saw HIPC as an opportunity to stabilize Ghana's economy while retaining ownership of the reform agenda. This perspective aligned with the administration's broader ideological emphasis on prudent fiscal management and creating an enabling environment for economic growth (I. Agyeman-Duah 2004).

In my interview with Kufuor, he described his economic diplomacy as deeply pragmatic: 'The only ism that concerns us much was pragmatism… We emphasize the economy, and

this was how, even without taking the HIPC initiative, we got Britain to first write off the indebtedness; the interest on our indebtedness'. This proactive engagement with creditors underscored Kufuor's strategy to secure debt relief on terms favorable to Ghana to ease the financial constraints on the government and provide resources for domestic priorities. While framed as pragmatism, this overall approach reflects key neoliberal principles, including market-oriented reforms, and leveraging external partnerships to stabilize and liberalize the economy, consistent with the administration's broader ideological alignment (Doyle 1986).

Kufuor's administration also demonstrated agency through its direct engagement with the Bretton Woods institutions, as achieving HIPC completion required sustained negotiations and adherence to IMF-mandated reforms. However, the government exercised discretion in implementing these reforms, prioritising areas that aligned with its development goals. For instance, Kufuor personally lobbied IMF officials to secure additional flexibility during key stages of the program. As Ambassador D.K. Osei explained in my interview with him, the president was actively involved, particularly in ensuring Ghana reached the HIPC completion point: 'The number of times he called the then managing director of IMF… was unmatched. He pursued debt forgiveness as if it was a personal mission'. As highlighted earlier, this overall strategy aligned with the liberal and pro-Western orientation of the earlier Busia administration (1969–1972), where Kufuor had served as deputy foreign affairs minister.

By aligning Ghana's economic diplomacy with its ideological commitments and proactively engaging with Bretton Woods institutions, the Kufuor administration exercised a distinct form of agency. It transformed what could have been a dependency-driven relationship into a platform for achieving strategic goals, demonstrating how ideological congruence and diplomatic persistence can enhance agency within the constraints of economic dependence.

Beyond Bretton Woods: ideology and agency in Ghana's broader economic diplomacy

While Ghana's economic diplomacy often centers on its relations with Bretton Woods institutions, its broader engagements with diverse global actors reveal how ideological commitments shaped foreign economic policies and expressions of agency. Across the Nkrumah, Rawlings, and Kufuor administrations, these ideological commitments influenced Ghana's strategic objectives, choice of partners, and framing of relationships.

Nkrumah's government pursued development through state-led industrialization, which was guided by a commitment to socialism, intertwined with anti-colonialism, economic independence, and Pan-Africanism. These ideological commitments shaped Ghana's preference for cooperation with socialist states while securing significant support from Western partners. For instance, delegations to the Soviet Union and China garnered aid for key projects like Ghana's nuclear reactor and technical institutions, with the Soviet Union's share of Ghana's total trade growing from 7% to 23.8% between 1962 and 1965 (Grundy and Farlow 1969).[16] However, Western nations provided over £220 million in aid by 1966, compared to £60–80 million from communist countries,[17] with projects like the Volta River Project (VRP) being reliant on Western financing. This illustrates the economic realities that even ideologically driven states could not fully disengage from the West, especially given the legacy of colonialism that had left Ghana with a heavily dependent economy after independence (Amankwah-Amoah and Osabutey 2018; Nkrumah 1963). It further emphasizes why

economic independence, anti-colonialism, and the aspiration to free Ghana from enduring non-African alignments became central to Nkrumah's socialism.

Based on my interview with a career diplomat who was a speechwriter for Nkrumah, it became clear that Nkrumah instrumentalized his non-alignment rhetoric, leveraging Ghana's leadership in the anti-colonial movement to attract support from both blocs. While he often framed the West as neo-colonial, he simultaneously highlighted Ghana's strategic importance in securing Western funding for projects aligned with the government's geopolitical interests. This blend of ideological conviction and strategic engagement demonstrated agency by leveraging Cold War rivalries to advance Ghana's industrialization goals.

The Rawlings-led PNDC/NDC government initially embraced a Marxist-socialist orientation, fostering close ties with Libya, Cuba, and the Soviet Union. Early delegations sought economic support aligned with Ghana's revolutionary ideology, with Kojo Tsikata declaring socialist countries to be 'the true friends of Africa' (B. Agyeman-Duah 1987b, 636). However, severe economic challenges in the 1980s, including fiscal deficits and hyperinflation, compelled a strategic pivot towards the IMF and World Bank, fracturing the administration.

While adopting the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP), the administration maintained strong ties with 'progressive' states, including agreements with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) to revitalise technical cooperation projects like vocational schools and gold refineries (Boafo-Arthur 1999; Kulkova and Sanusi 2016). High-level visits further emphasized these efforts,[18] though they diminished after the USSR's collapse. While relations with the West were framed as largely transactional and rooted in economic necessity, engagements with socialist states were depicted as a fusion of economic partnership, cultural solidarity, and ideological affinity. This enabled the PNDC/NDC to preserve its ideological identity amid structural constraints.

Under Kufuor, the NPP government's distinctly neoliberal approach to economic diplomacy aligned with its vision of positioning Ghana as the 'gateway to Africa' (Bolaji 2015; Reed 2006). This strategy prioritised private-sector growth, trade liberalization, and foreign investment, avoiding heavy state involvement in industrialization and focusing instead on creating conditions for private-sector success through measures like the public procurement law and the Banking Act (2004) (Siaw 2021).

Kufuor strategically diversified Ghana's partnerships, maintaining strong ties with Western allies while deepening economic relations with China and India. In my interview with Ambassador D. K. Osei, he further revealed that Kufuor personally lobbied Chinese President Hu Jintao to secure $562 million in funding for the Bui Dam (Obour et al. 2016). Relations with the West were framed as partnerships rooted in shared democratic values, exemplified by the $547 million Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) grant. On the contrary, engagements with the East, such as the Bui Dam, were framed as transactional, pursued for economic benefits without the ideological undertones seen under Nkrumah or Rawlings. This approach redefined Ghana's role as a regional economic hub and exemplified agency through strategic alignment with global economic trends.

Framing agency in Ghana's economic diplomacy and regional integration

Across all three administrations, the narrative framing of economic diplomacy and regional integration played a pivotal role in asserting Ghana's agency. In this context, agency was not a fixed attribute but a practical achievement, emerging through ideological

interactions and practices that were relational, situational, and often contested (Braun, Schindler, and Wille 2019). Each government actively sought to 'own' its policy decisions, presenting them as ideologically consistent with broader commitments to economic independence, anti-colonialism, and Pan-Africanism. This construction of agency highlights the dynamic interplay between practices, narratives, and structures in navigating global power asymmetries.

For Nkrumah, reclaiming Ghana's past glory anchored his economic diplomacy and Pan-African vision. He framed industrialization as not only a pathway to economic independence but also a means of positioning Ghana as a leader in African and global affairs. Initiatives like the Volta River Project and the pursuit of African unity were presented as deliberate, ideologically driven efforts to advance African self-determination. Even in his dealings with Bretton Wood's institutions, Nkrumah framed fiscal prudence as a domestic priority instead of a concession to external pressures, reinforcing the narrative of independence and agency.

The Rawlings administration adopted a similarly assertive narrative. Although critics often interpret the adoption of the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) as a betrayal of its revolutionary ideals, the government framed this decision as a pragmatic response to economic reality. As mentioned earlier, in my interview, Rawlings emphasized that 'there was no sudden U-turn in ideology, but a practical response to real needs'. While implementing IMF policies and conditionalities, the administration resisted certain measures, such as wage reductions, and sought to adapt neoliberal reforms to align with socialist objectives, maintaining its connection with the masses. Rawlings also championed South-South cooperation, engaging with 'progressive' countries like Cuba and Libya to counterbalance Western influence. Though these efforts did not always yield significant economic gains, they reinforced Ghana's image as an active agent in promoting African solidarity and independence, echoing Nkrumah's Ghana-Guinea-Mali union, which had seen Ghana extend material support to the two countries.

Under Kufuor, narrative ownership was evident in his administration's framing of the HIPC initiative and regional integration efforts. Unlike previous administrations that approached IMF programs with reluctance, Kufuor framed HIPC as a strategic choice aligned with the administration's neoliberal ideology. The administration consistently described it as a pathway to economic recovery and as integral to Ghana's positioning as the gateway to Africa. Similarly, the administration's approach to regional integration emphasized institutional strengthening and economic cooperation, with ECOWAS framed as a foundation for gradual continental unity rather than immediate political unification.

Each administration also framed broader external economic relations in line with its ideological leanings. Nkrumah portrayed relations with the Eastern Bloc as partnerships of solidarity against Western neo-colonialism, blending economic goals with shared political aspirations. Rawlings similarly framed ties with progressive states as extensions of Ghana's revolutionary ethos. By contrast, Kufuor framed relations with the East, particularly China, as transactional, while portraying partnerships with the West as grounded in shared democratic principles - reflecting his administration's embrace of Western liberalism.

These narratives illustrate how Ghanaian governments acted as purposeful agents, leveraging ideological framing to navigate structural constraints. Nkrumah projected Ghana as a leader in African unity and liberation, embedding his initiatives in the broader struggle against imperialism. Rawlings reconciled leftist ideals with economic recovery,

framing SAP as a necessary compromise while maintaining solidarity with progressive states and ideas. Kufuor framed his government as focused on growth through neo-liberal economic policies and democratic values. This dynamic interplay of ideology, narrative framing, and strategic agency illustrates how smaller states like Ghana navigate global power asymmetries. Agency, in this context, is not limited to resistance but includes ideological contestation, adaptation, and strategic acceptance of external policies aligned with each government's ideological goals.

Conclusion

This article challenges the pervasive non-ideology thesis in African politics by showing how contextualized ideologies reveal the nuanced manifestations of African agency. Examining Ghana's economic diplomacy and regional integration under Nkrumah, Rawlings, and Kufuor, it demonstrates that agency is not linear or monolithic, but emerges from the interplay between macro- and context-specific ideas, and structural constraints that shape policy choices.

Through differing interpretations of Pan-Africanism, these administrations adopted distinct approaches to regional integration. Nkrumah advanced continental unity as essential to African agency, Rawlings balanced Pan-African ideals with shifting regional dynamics, while Kufuor prioritised incrementalism through institutional cooperation and democratic norms. These variations highlight the diversity of agency produced through ideological contestations within African regionalism, challenging the notion that only certain strategies constitute authentic agency.

In economic diplomacy, the administrations pursued different paths shaped by their ideological commitments. The Nkrumah and Rawlings administrations, rooted in socialism, resisted neoliberal institutions to varying extents, grounding their resistance in the pursuit of economic independence and anti-imperialism, while Kufuor engaged these institutions, framing participation as an active expression of agency. These cases show that African agency encompasses both resistance and strategic accommodation, informed by distinct ideological commitments.

An over-reliance on macro-ideologies like socialism or neoliberalism risks obscuring nationally specific ideological formations – including anti-colonialism, economic independence, and Pan-Africanism – and their dynamic interplay with structural ideological pressures. This is particularly evident in economic diplomacy, where international institutions such as the IMF limit choices, but also in less institutionalized domains, like neighbor relations, where ideologies may influence actions more significantly.

By placing macro-ideologies within a broader landscape of contextually grounded ideas, this article promotes a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between ideology and agency. It challenges the prevalent use of Western analytical frameworks that overlook how African leaders reinterpret similar ideological vocabularies in ways influenced by local contexts. Beyond contributing to Ghanaian foreign policy scholarship, this analysis provides insights into African and postcolonial international relations. For both scholars and policymakers, it enhances the tools for understanding state behavior and leadership accountability. Ultimately, this article transcends descriptive analysis to propose an intellectual agenda that rethinks African agency, capturing its diversity and Africa's evolving engagements with global structures.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Ethical approval

This research was conducted under ethical approval granted by the Ethics Committee of Royal Holloway, University of London. Before each interview, participants were provided with a Participant Information Sheet, which also served as the consent form. This form outlined the purpose of the study, the rationale for participant selection (purposive sampling), the nature of their involvement, procedures for voluntary withdrawal, measures to ensure data confidentiality and privacy, potential benefits of the research, and an explanation of risk management (noting that no significant risks were identified).

The form also included the researcher's contact details and those of the academic supervisors, as the study forms part of a PhD project. These details were left with the participants after the interviews to allow for follow-up or withdrawal at a later date.

The project was explained verbally to all participants, and they were given the opportunity to ask questions based on the information provided. All participants gave informed verbal consent to participate, including permission to record and transcribe the interviews for academic publications. Some participants consented to be identified by name, while those who preferred anonymity are referred to using generic descriptors. In all cases, consent was obtained to publish the material included in this article.

Notes on contributor

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Notes

1. (Jerry John Rawlings, pers. comm., June 23, 2015).
2. Kwame Nkrumah: Parliamentary Debate [Hansard], Official Report of 4th July, 1960, col. 7.
3. (John Agyekum Kufuor, pers. comm., October 17, 2019).
4. Special Edition for the 20th AU Summit. 2013. AU Echo. https://summits.au.int/en/sites/default/files/AUEcho_27012013_v2.pdf,:1.
5. Alfred J. Dowuona-Hammond (Minister of Education): Parliamentary Debate [Hansard] Official Report of 9th August, 1960, col. 687.
6. S. G. Antor (UP MP, Kanda North): Parliamentary Debate [Hansard] Official Report of 19th July 1960, col. 86.
7. Part 1 of the 1960 constitution of the Republic of Ghana.
8. Fiifi Anaman (March 19, 2017) How Ghana Managed an Unlikely Ascension unto the African Football Throne. Accessed November 20, 2020. Retrieved from https://africa.businessinsider.com/sports/the-last-time-how-ghana-managed-an-unlikely-ascension-unto-the-african-football/g8kswsx.
9. (Prof. Kwamena Ahwoi, pers. comm., September 24, 2019).
10. (Ambassador D. K. Osei, pers. comm., August 7, 2019).
11. Kwame Nkrumah (1965, September 3) [Speech by Osagyefo the President to the National Assembly]. Collection of President Nkrumah's speeches. PRAAD, Accra, Ghana.

12. Address by Flt. Lt. J J Rawlings at the 6th Summit of the Non-Aligned countries in Havana, September 1979.
13. Address by Flt. Lt. J J Rawlings at the 9th Summit of the Non-Aligned countries in Belgrade, September 1989.
14. (Jerry John Rawlings, pers. comm., June 23, 2015).
15. Daily graphic May 3, 2002 Page 1.
16. West Africa (December 17, 1966, p. 1459). No. 2585; See Jan Triska and David Finley (1968, p. 278), Soviet Foreign Policy New York: Macmillan Co.
17. Economist (August 6, 1966, p. 551+) What Went Wrong. The Economist Historical Archive, 1843-2014, Accessed December 20, 2019, Retrieved from.
18. Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) delegations visited Ghana in 1985, 1986, 1987(twice), 1988, and 1989, and the delegation of PNDC visited the USSR in 1988. In April 1991, the Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of the USSR, A. Piotrovsky, visited Ghana.

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