Global Power Shifts

Introduction

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A series of recent seismic shocks, such as war in Europe, turmoil in the Middle East and the transactional policies of US President Donald Trump, have disrupted the geopolitical landscape. The international system's metaphorical tectonic plates are shifting in a manner no less consequential than with the collapse of the Soviet Union, and perhaps even more so. Whether and how these shifts will proceed over the coming decades will have profound implications for the global order and for the political orientation and freedom of action of countries within it.

This theme explores future geopolitical landscapes through the lens of measures of national power and influence. It unpacks the material factors that make a nation more or less powerful or influential, then explores their trajectories across four alternative global futures. We frame the future within four alternative global scenarios: a Sustainable World, a Growth World, a Divided World and a World at War, each highlighting how sustainability, globalisation and interstate tensions might shape the geopolitical order. A separate theme on Africa in the World explores the implications of these scenarios on the African continent and key states within it.

The analysis incorporates results from modelling the global distribution of power and influence, drawing on various indices embedded in the International Futures forecasting platform from the Pardee Institute at the University of Denver. The Global Power Index (GPI) provides a comprehensive, quantitative assessment of a country's broad power capabilities relative to those of other states across the international system. The Diplomacy, Military and Economy (DiME) Index focuses on core capability components. The Formal Bilateral Influence Capacity (FBIC) Index assesses influence capacity between country pairs. While necessarily broad, these metrics and their core drivers offer useful anchor points from which to moor our understanding of where the future of international relations may be headed.

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About the authors

Dr Jakkie Cilliers is the founder and former executive director of the ISS. He currently serves as chair of the ISS Board of Trustees, head of the African Futures and Innovation (AFI) programme at the Institute's Pretoria office, and an extraordinary professor at the University of Pretoria. His 2017 best-seller Fate of the Nation addresses South Africa's future from political, economic and social perspectives. His four most recent books, Africa First! Igniting a Growth Revolution (March 2020), The Future of Africa: Challenges and Opportunities (April 2021), Africa Tomorrow: Pathways to Prosperity (June 2022) and *Africa's Road to Prosperity: 10 Things to Know* (July 2026) offer rigorous analyses of the continent as a whole. From August to December 2025, Cilliers was a Richard von Weizsäcker Fellow at the Robert Bosch Academy in Berlin, during which he worked on *Africa's Road to Prosperity*

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Scenarios and forecasting can help Africa identify and respond to opportunities and threats. The work of the African Futures & Innovation (AFI) program at the Institute for Security Studies aims to understand and address a widening gap between indices of wellbeing in Africa and elsewhere in the world. The AFI helps stakeholders understand likely future developments. Research findings and their policy implications are widely disseminated, often in collaboration with in-country partners. Forecasting tools inspire debate and provide insights into possible trajectories that inform planning, prioritisation and effective resource allocation. Africa's future depends on today's choices and actions by governments and their non-governmental and international partners. The AFI provides empirical data that informs short- and medium-term decisions with long-term implications. The AFI enhances Africa's capacity to prepare for and respond to future challenges. The program is headed by Dr Jakkie Cilliers.

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