Global Power Shifts

Key Uncertainties

Jakkie Cilliers

Last updated 24 August 2026 using IFs v8.72

Key Uncertainties

The four global scenarios presented in this theme could be upended by a range of high-impact, low-probability developments, such as great-power implosion (e.g., in the US or China) and regional developments in Europe or Asia.

The US is already starkly divided and increasingly violent. Trump's approach to the rest of the world is strengthening the hand of autocrats everywhere, undermining the global rules-based system, and ultimately accelerating the relative decline in US power and influence. It will cement the trend toward a Divided World or even a World at War scenario, but could open the door to a Growth World if the US pursues a Grand Bargain with China, leading to that outcome.

A variant of great-power implosion in China and Russia would likely follow democratisation in either or both countries. In Russia's case, disruptive change is almost certain to follow the end of Vladimir Putin's presidency, which began in 1999. While changes in both countries, as well as in North Korea, and the democratisation of oil-rich Middle Eastern countries may be desirable from a liberal and normative perspective, all will likely entail significant negative economic consequences. In the case of China, these will be global.

The correlation between income and democracy is contested; however, a significant body of work indicates that democracy becomes increasingly likely once income exceeds certain thresholds. If that theory holds, the Chinese Communist Party and many Middle Eastern countries will soon be in trouble. The democratisation of China (i.e., replacing the current authoritarian model with a political system that provides for greater individual choice and freedoms) will almost inevitably be violent and economically disruptive. Chinese average income level growth rates vary across scenarios and are highest in the Sustainable World, followed by the Growth World, implying that these scenarios would present China with the earliest associated challenge.

Regional developments could also significantly impact global power potential, such as the EU's breakup or expansion. The UK has already left the EU, a decision which most voters now regret. At regular intervals, others threatened the same, although Russia's war on Ukraine and the damage that Brexit did to the UK reduced threats of similar endeavours by others for several subsequent years. A breakup of the EU will have significant adverse effects globally. On the other hand, substantial enlargement, with the UK rejoining the EU and the inclusion of countries such as Türkiye or a democratic Russia, could unlock positive opportunities.

Further, if Asians set aside their differences, strengthen their political cooperation and overcome the deep divisions between countries such as Japan, Korea, India and China, Asia could become globally dominant, and a vastly different international order may emerge. However, that is unlikely, given the strong tensions between China, India and Japan, never mind the role of the two Koreas. Historically, two large, adjacent powers (China and India) have competed rather than cooperated, and relations between them have been tense. More likely, Japan and others will enter closer ties with India as a bulwark against China.

Perhaps the least predictable structural factor in this theme is the potential disruptive effects of generative artificial intelligence (AI). According to some, the potential destructive effects of AI are similar to those of nuclear weapons, and the pathways to control proliferation are the same, starting with the involvement of the AI superpowers, the US and China.

Already, at the time of the release of Claude Mythos in mid 2026, Anthropic expressed concern that 'AI models have reached a level of coding capability where they can surpass all but the most skilled humans at finding and exploiting software vulnerabilities.' Weeks later, in July 2026, OpenAI and Anthropic both reported incidents in which AI models 'escaped' their controlled testing environments and compromised other systems.

© 2026 AFRICAN FUTURES & INNOVATION PROGRAMME

Today, recursive self-improvement appears increasingly plausible and, according to a recent forecast, could be realised in 2027, given current rates of acceleration. At that point, AI systems would be able to improve their capabilities and then use those improvements to make themselves even better, creating a feedback loop of accelerating improvement with no way to switch it off unless current designs include a kill switch, which is unlikely in open-source models. Recursive self-improvement could not only result in an 'intelligence explosion' but also means that AI development likely becomes highly nonlinear. Free of human control, these systems may develop and use programming languages that rapidly become alien and incomprehensible to people, as the human ability to understand what is being done lags further and further behind.

The authors of the forecast, a host of AI experts, describe the scenario as their 'best guess' of what AI in 2027 might look like. Even if their estimates are off by a year or three, the findings are alarming. By 2027, they argue, AI could be well beyond the stage where it outperforms humans across most cognitive tasks and could independently make scientific and engineering discoveries, though not in all domains.

These challenges are most severe in the worst-case World at War scenario, in which AI eventually wages war(s) and proxy wars in cyberspace rather than on the physical battlefield, with unpredictable outcomes. In this context, the realisation that the US and China are approaching AI parity may be a positive development, given the need for the two superpowers to buy into any associated global governance arrangement.

© 2026 AFRICAN FUTURES & INNOVATION PROGRAMME

Reuse our work

- All visualizations, data, and text produced by African Futures are completely open access under the Creative Commons BY license. You have the permission to use, distribute, and reproduce these in any medium, provided the source and authors are credited.
- The data produced by third parties and made available by African Futures is subject to the license terms from the original third-party authors. We will always indicate the original source of the data in our documentation, so you should always check the license of any such third-party data before use and redistribution.
- All of our charts can be embedded in any site.

Cite this research

Jakkie Cilliers (2026) Global Power Shifts. Published online at futures.issafrica.org. Retrieved from https://futures.issafrica.org/thematic/17-global-power-shifts/ [Online Resource] Updated 24 August 2026.

© 2026 AFRICAN FUTURES & INNOVATION PROGRAMME

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*

About African Futures & Innovation

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.

The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect those of the ISS, its trustees, members of the Advisory Council or donors. Authors contribute to ISS publications in their personal capacity.