



Africa in the World

Conclusion: For Africa — politics for development

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Scenarios are not predictions. They are tools that help to frame alternative futures systematically and to enable a coherent discussion and analysis. Scenarios done using the traditional two-dimensional analysis - in this case, the extent of global fracturing versus efforts at sustainability - present four divergent alternatives that assist in the associated modelling and conceptualisation. Reality will be much more complex and typically ends up somewhere in between. Done well, however, scenarios surface structural trends and the outcomes or effects of different pathways.

Our analysis started by presenting the recent history and likely forecasts of the global distribution of material power and influence, focusing on China and the US. In line with the more detailed research done by our colleagues at the [Frederick S Pardee Institute for International Futures](#) at the University of Denver, we find that a power transition that would see **China overtake the US as the most powerful country in the world will likely occur before mid-century**. However, a larger group of rich countries that share a commitment to individual (as opposed to collective) aspirations (democracy, individual human rights, etc.), aka the West, will continue to dominate globally and maintain a technological, wealth and power advantage even over a global axis led by Chinese and Russian concepts for subsequent decades. These divisions are, however, set to become less stark and decline in importance with the emergence of regionalism. From that perspective, what happens within the West, between the US and the EU, is therefore very important.

The emergence of China as the most powerful country globally will inevitably reshape global relations. However, it will occur in a more crowded and complex world where the ability to exercise power is constrained. Given the combined material power of the West and China's relative international isolation (it inspires fear rather than attraction and has tense relations in its neighbourhood), this trend will eventually deliver a global order that will evolve quite differently from the so-called liberal international order even as Asia partly 'decouples' from the rest of the world. At the same time, there are many examples of Chinese integration with the existing rules and norms, such as the extent to which its actions on debt relief for Africa today are to collaborate with international financial institutions rather than operate outside them and the steady adoption of best project standards in expanded infrastructure in Africa and elsewhere. In that future, Africa will geographically straddle a Western-dominated Atlantic to its north and west and an Indian and Pacific Ocean zone eastward, with China at its core but contested areas of influence emanating from India and others.

Several developments could disrupt this broad structural trend, namely, great power implosion in China (most likely as a result of internal pressures towards democracy) or the US (as internal political divisions widen), or the contraction or the expansion of the EU (through, for example, readmission of the UK, the inclusion of Türkiye and a democratic Russia). Deeper regional integration in Asia, the accelerated impact of climate change, the relations between the US and the EU, and India's foreign policy orientations will likely determine the nature of the subsequent global order. Leadership and leaders matter. Because of the influence of individual leaders such as Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump in shaping their countries' domestic and foreign policies, what happens to them individually could have global ramifications.

Debates on [power and influence](#), such as that set out above, focus on so-called 'great powers' or the 'states that make the most difference,' which does not include any African country. That is typical and occurs despite the large populations of a country such as [Nigeria](#), which, by 2043, would have 375 million people, making it the third most populous country globally. In the Sustainable World, Nigeria would have only 42 million extremely poor people - 11% of its population. Historically, a combination of population growth, slow employment growth and relative deprivation translate into more rapid outward migration, and it will be no different this time. **Migration from Africa is set to increase, and it will have significant economic and political effects, particularly in Europe.** Africans will bring their enormous enterprising, creative, and connectivity assets, which are already evident in the world of music, the arts, film, and literature, as well as in the realm of sport. Therefore, the first effects will likely be cultural, then economic, and ultimately also political. The Old World is ageing, and its demand for lower-skilled labour, which Africa has a large surplus, is increasing. If job opportunities exist, labour will follow, and it will be hard to stop.

Even as no African country emerges as a significant global power, the distribution of power in the 21st century does make the bed in which African states sleep. The issue for Africa is if that bed facilitates more rapid development. For developed countries, the question is whether global stability is possible given the significant wealth, income, health, and education disparities between Africa and neighbouring regions such as Europe, the Middle East, and Asia.

Against this background, Africa's leaders must be cognisant of the limited space for the continent's development and the uphill battle to realise a Sustainable World scenario. **Africa needs geopolitical stability that allows for economic growth and human development.** For example, rather than the all-consuming preoccupation by the West with the war in Ukraine, Africans were seized with the second-order economic effect of the war and the impact it had on driving up global food and fuel prices. African responses to the war reflect a widening divide between the West and the Global South, recently accelerated by events in Gaza.

Africa's foreign policy and development efforts should unequivocally support the policies and approaches that would advance the Sustainable 'best of world' objective through greater convergence and more robust, more effective continental institutions, which support and sustain Africa's aspirations and values as enshrined in Agenda 2063. There is considerable scope in this regard by, for example, upgrading the African Governance Platform into a binding legal protocol similar to that of the Peace and Security Council (PSC) and then holding leaders to account, rationalising the plethora of AU-related institutions that litter the continent but provide little or no added value (such as a toothless Pan-African Parliament), strengthening the relationship between the PSC and the A3 - the acronym for the three African countries that serve on the UN Security Council, etc. Then there are a host of practical measures, such as a lack of progress in implementing the Yamoussoukro Decision on open skies to deregulate air services entirely within the domestic domain of African governments that had made limited progress since 1999, when it was adopted. Most important is the movement towards ever larger integrated free trade regions in Africa that have the most significant development potential for Africa over long-term horizons. Given the political will, African leaders can implement many practical measures to reduce non-tariff constraints on cross-border trade.

The priority for African leadership is to focus laser-like on every obstacle to maximise its sustainable development prospects. That includes a next-generation rules-based global system that will facilitate poverty reduction, economic growth, stability and investment in the Global South. Africa needs to awaken to the importance of advocating for a reformed rules-based system that serves its development interests. It needs to present specific proposals in this regard or at least take a more activist role.

Largely a Western creation, in its current form, the rules-based order constrained armed conflict between major powers during the Cold War era. However, that containment resulted in several proxy wars in Africa and elsewhere. It has not facilitated Africa's development since it is primarily premised on maintaining a global structure that skews developmental advantages to the already rich. It allowed the developed world to spew such amounts of carbon into the atmosphere that it now constrains a similar development pathway for others, even as China is now the most significant global emitter of greenhouse gases by a large margin. For all the progress that globalisation has unlocked, such as through trade and knowledge transfers, the current international system embeds privilege through profit shifting and a global tax regime that does not enforce tax obligations where profits are generated. A world with five permanent seats and a veto within the UN Security Council is regularly touted as the most glaring example of the vast global ramifications, even if the declining authority of the Council would make current proposals on [reform](#) more symbolic than substantive.

AU member states need to focus on the pursuit of a facilitating environment for more rapid growth and poverty alleviation, even as the commitment to national development by ruling elites is absent in Equatorial Guinea, South Sudan, Eswatini and others in addition to a clutch of Francophone countries that have recently fallen victim to military takeovers. Since the achievement of the Agenda 2063 vision is shared amongst only some African leaders, it is up to critical African states to decide if they are willing to embark upon a two-track approach where some countries commit earlier to higher standards of governance than others. Many attempts have been made to achieve this, such as the Conference on Security,

Stability, Development and Cooperation in Africa (CSSDCA), NEPAD and the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), pointing to the many hurdles to such a strategy. The differentiated approach in implementing the [African Continental Free Trade Area](#) goes in this direction, but much more is required. Taking this forward will require a different approach to one that seeks to herd every African country towards a common goal with slow reformers setting the pace for the group.

The war in Ukraine and the fear of China's rising influence have significant collateral damage effects, hastening this trend. **The West needs to make a sharp differentiation between China and Russia and resist simplistic narratives that pit a benevolent West against bad China associated with evil Russia in Africa.** While the US and China are both increasingly embracing the idea of a bipolar struggle, Africans need to work for a multipolar world where they are not in the pocket of any great power.

There is, simply put, no strategic profit to be gained by the ongoing demonisation of China in the US and Europe and vice versa. The Chinese Communist Party will not abandon its collectivist views on politics and development as much as democratic countries will not abandon a belief in individual freedoms and political rights. Nor can the West constrain China's momentum towards great power status. What is needed is a determined effort to rebuild relations between the West and China to one of mutual respect and acknowledgement of the differences in approaches to development and governance.

Africa can continue to seek profit from playing the West off against China as it has in the past, which is likely the default position on the current global trajectory towards a Divided World. What ultimately matters is what Africans do in participating and negotiating with Chinese and Western contractors, being similarly uncompromising in legal language, being willing to walk away from deals if they do not serve inclusive development goals and cracking down hard on any labour or environmental abuses by foreign companies.

The time for unreasonable confidentiality clauses and political conditionality is past. Choosing to side with China, Russia, the US, or Europe on matters not directly concerned with Africa or playing the one-off against the other serves no purpose. In the interests of unity, Africa should not commit to foreign policy support on issues where its interests are not directly at stake.

Developmentally minded African governments should commit to a minimum set of project transparency and implementation requirements (such as public consultation and environmental standards) that apply across the board for all companies and countries that invest in the participating African countries. The requirements should be clear, simple, and public, with all subsequent agreements disclosed, available upon request, and bolstered in a binding legal protocol followed by domestic enactment and implementation.

It is self-evident that coordinated positions among Africa's leading countries on critical matters such as foreign investment, particularly in the mining sector, regarding beneficiation and transparency would maximise the ability to shape the international rules to the advantage of the participating countries. **Strengthening Africa's investment and financing models, with outside support where appropriate, would boost the continent's fortunes.** To facilitate investment into Africa, critical countries with the proper governance institutions and regulatory standards could set themselves up as investment routes to facilitate inward capital flows - a role that Hong Kong played in respect of China for many years.

Looking to the West, what Africa needs is for Western governments to find ways to de-risk investment by its banks and the private sector in the continent. Ultimately, low investments are driven by colonial-era hangovers and negative perceptions that have been deeply ingrained in a Western world that has provided a drip-feed of aid to Africa since the 1960s. Europeans and Americans regularly berate Africans for their lack of development in return for this payment, much of which was to buy loyalty during the Cold War, without sufficient recognition that the amounts and modalities are insufficient to change fundamentals such as Africa's poor human capital endowment that could unlock more rapid growth.

Instead, most Africans see aid as a nominal tax paid for past injustices and an international system skewed against the continent's development. Western rating agencies play a significant role in this regard. They have, for decades, adopted a punitive approach to investment in Africa compared to other regions, driven by the private sector's demand for a secure investment and a lack of knowledge of the continent based on the adverse reporting from a sprinkling of Western news reporters located in Nairobi or Cape Town. Changing these perceptions requires **ongoing engagement, communication and much greater visibility of Africa's development efforts in Europe and North America**. It requires massive student exchange programmes, regular trade fairs and political dialogue — not only visits when gas from Russia runs dry or to counter China's growing influence in Africa.

Much more important for Africa than aid is a reset in the relations between the West and China. The trajectory towards a Divided World will likely accelerate the continent's ongoing and emergent challenges. It is evident in the extent to which Moscow was able to leverage its limited assets in producing fertiliser, wheat, energy, arms, and military cooperation to pursue an anti-Western agenda in Africa to the detriment of stability and development. Africans need to take political and diplomatic action to avoid further collateral damage.

China, Europe, and the US are Africa's most important development partners, even as the continent's trade with other countries in the Global South is increasing. Africa desperately needs Chinese loans, investment and domestic manufacturing contributions, and what the US and the EU can offer under their various initiatives, such as the US's Build Back Better World, the EU's Global Gateway, and the G7's Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment. Chinese companies have already built 60% of World Bank projects, and the West does not have the tools to replace that supply although it has many other offerings, including technology, investment standards, data protection standards, and expertise in project management. Above all, the West sits atop a dam of potential investment monies that could improve Africa's prospects, given a more reasonable risk and investment framework.

Beyond Africa's development needs, the accelerated impact of climate change will, almost inevitably, require an entirely different mindset and approach. Separate themes on [climate change](#) and [energy](#) provide significant additional context and interpretation. Inevitably, those economic transitions with the highest growth content, such as implementing the African Continental Free Trade Agreement, result in the most significant increase in greenhouse gas emissions. Although emissions per capita in Africa are very low, the rapid growth in the continent's population, on top of the expansion of electricity access and greater energy intensity as incomes rise, points to rapid increases. **Africa is not responsible for climate change, but what happens in Africa will determine the global climate future.**

Amongst others, Africa needs to have a severe bout of introspection about **population growth** if it is to grow economically more rapidly, improve the prospects for its young population, and curb greenhouse gas emissions in its own and global interests. The theme on [demographics](#) explains that rapid population growth in Africa is a drag on development, given the low ratio of working-age persons to dependents. Eventually, only much deeper economic and political integration complemented by much more rapid and sustained economic growth in Africa could offset the continent's limited role in shaping global orientations - but that needs to occur sustainably.

How do global players construct a collaborative rather than competitive global system that will enable humanity to survive and prosper in the long term, particularly in Africa? The elements are well established. Most recently, they were reiterated in the UN Secretary-General's briefing to the General Assembly on [Priorities for 2023](#). 'The world', Antonio Guterres warned, 'is staring down the barrel of a confluence of challenges unlike any others in our lifetime. ... This is not a time for tinkering. It is a time for transformation.' Many elements of an appropriate reform agenda are reflected in the September 2021 report by UN Secretary-General 'Our Common Agenda', but instead of action, Guterres warned, 'the chances of further escalation and bloodshed keep growing.' Amongst a host of priorities for urgent action, he listed an agenda for the radical transformation of the global financial architecture to place the needs of developing countries at the centre of every decision and mechanism of that system.

Recommendations from Africa

1. We need geopolitical stability. No instrumentalisation of China-US rivalry or Russia-Ukraine war.
2. Relentlessly pursue development interests: invest in agriculture, set conditions for FDI including knowledge transfers, domestic economic linkages, renewables in addition to baseload energy from nuclear and gas
3. Full transparency on all government contracts, loans to state and SOE's. No hidden debt. To combat corruption and illicit financial flows agree to non-reciprocal tax information exchange mechanisms.
4. Strengthen our continental institutions: legally binding protocol on good governance; development of common technical standards, e.g. railways and ICT.
5. Reform of global financial and trade architecture, reduce cost of sovereign borrowing, provide debt relief, democratise decision-making processes, scale development/climate financing from private sources, global tax reform.
6. Accelerate full implementation of AfCFTA and maintain momentum at sub-regional level.
7. Invest in an early transition to sustainable energy including renewables, baseload from nuclear and gas
8. Encourage emerging technologies and innovation: supportive regulatory frameworks for tech advancements.
9. Act collectively: amplify Africa's voice on international trade, climate policies, global governance reforms.
10. Support Africa's creative industries and tech startups for economic diversification and job creation

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Dr Jakkie Cilliers is the ISS's founder and former executive director. He currently serves as chair of the ISS Board of Trustees and head of the African Futures and Innovation (AFI) programme at the Pretoria office of the Institute. His 2017 best-seller *Fate of the Nation* addresses South Africa's futures from political, economic and social perspectives. His three most recent books, *Africa First! Igniting a Growth Revolution* (March 2020), *The Future of Africa: Challenges and Opportunities* (April 2021), and *Africa Tomorrow: Pathways to Prosperity* (June 2022) take a rigorous look at the continent as a whole.

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