Africa in the World

For Africa: Politics for Development

Jakkie Cilliers, Marvellous Ngundu and Blessing Chipanda

Last updated 24 August 2026 using IFs v8.72

Table of contents

For Africa: Politics for Development

A no-regret strategy across all scenarios

Africa's power potential rises over the forecast horizon, but demographic weight alone is insufficient. The continent's labour force remains constrained by high dependency ratios in many countries, uneven education and health outcomes, low capital per worker and weak productivity. The priority is therefore to strengthen the domestic foundations of power: capable institutions, productive employment, reliable energy, human capital and competitive firms.

The first no-regret priority is to implement the AfCFTA more deeply and reduce non-tariff barriers. UNCTAD estimates that non-tariff frictions restrict African trade substantially more than tariffs and that transport and infrastructure gaps raise the cost of regional commerce. Practical measures include interoperable customs systems, risk-based border management, mutual recognition of standards, improved transport corridors, regional electricity trade, digital trade rules and easier cross-border payments.

Second, African governments should strengthen resilience to external financing and supply shocks. This includes prudent debt management, deeper domestic capital markets, local-currency financing where feasible, regional trade-finance facilities, strategic infrastructure maintenance and contingency planning for disruptions to food, fuel, shipping and payment systems. Diversification should apply to both financing sources and export markets.

Third, investment governance should be partner-neutral and transparent. Participating governments should apply a minimum set of project requirements to all external investors: publication of material contract terms, competitive procurement where appropriate, public consultation, environmental and social safeguards, beneficial ownership disclosure, credible dispute resolution mechanisms and transparent accounting of sovereign liabilities. AidData's research on Chinese loan contracts illustrates why comparable disclosure standards are important regardless of the creditor.

Priorities in cooperative scenarios

In a Sustainable World and, to a lesser extent, a Growth World, African governments should exploit favourable external conditions to accelerate continental market integration, infrastructure investment and productivity-enhancing reforms. Priorities include scaling regional transport and energy networks, harmonising investment and competition rules, improving education and health systems, and using climate finance and development finance to crowd in private investment without weakening debt sustainability.

Cooperative scenarios also create more room for differentiated integration. Groups of willing states can move faster on customs cooperation, capital-market integration, common infrastructure standards or labour mobility while maintaining pathways for others to join later. Previous initiatives such as NEPAD and the African Peer Review Mechanism generated institutional and normative gains but fell short of their original ambitions; the lesson is to combine continental objectives with enforceable, practical implementation among coalitions able to move first.

Priorities in fragmented or conflict scenarios

In a Divided World or World at War, resilience becomes more important than maximising short-term trade efficiency. Governments should protect essential transport and energy corridors, build regional food and fuel contingency plans, strengthen cybersecurity and payment-system redundancy, and preserve fiscal space to withstand shocks. Regional markets serve as a buffer against disruptions in global markets, making AfCFTA implementation more important amid fragmentation.

Foreign policy should preserve strategic flexibility where core African interests are not directly at stake. Coordinated African positions will be most valuable where they concern shared material interests - including market access, debt restructuring, tax rules, technology standards, climate finance and the terms of investment in strategic sectors. Strategic pluralism is feasible only if countries avoid contractual or security dependencies that deprive them of the ability to switch partners.

Implementation and external partnerships

Larger and institutionally stronger African economies can help anchor regional investment by providing credible financial services, project preparation, dispute resolution and regulatory platforms for investments spanning several countries. Such hubs should be designed as transparent gateways to regional markets, with safeguards against treaty shopping, illicit financial flows and tax base erosion, rather than as opaque conduit jurisdictions.

External partners also have a role. The US, European countries and other providers of long-term capital can expand political-risk insurance, partial credit guarantees, currency-risk facilities, project-preparation funding, local-currency lending and blended-finance structures. These instruments should mobilise genuinely additional investment while maintaining clear risk-sharing and avoiding arrangements in which public institutions absorb losses without corresponding public benefits.

Regardless of the scenario, Africa's strongest long-term strategy is to increase the value of intra-African cooperation. Deeper economic integration, stronger institutions and sustained productivity growth would give African states greater capacity to shape external relationships rather than simply adapt to them. The objective is not strategic isolation, but greater choice: enough domestic and regional capability to engage China, Europe, the US, India, the Gulf states and other partners on terms that advance African development.

Chart 14: Recommendations from Africa

Africa's greatest source of future geopolitical power is not choosing the right external partner, but building sufficient domestic and collective capability to make external partners compete on African terms.

To this end:

- **Make African integration the foundation of geopolitical power.** Accelerate practical implementation of the AfCFTA, especially by reducing non-tariff barriers, integrating customs and payments, harmonising standards and building regional transport and electricity networks.
- **Practise strategic multi-alignment rather than choosing geopolitical camps.** Maintain productive relationships with all key partners, using competition among them to secure better financing, technology, market access and infrastructure.
- **Turn Africa's collective weight into bargaining power.** Coordinate positions through the AU, regional organisations, the G20, the African members of the UN Security Council and other forums.
- **Use strategic resources to drive industrialisation, not simply exports.** Move from ownership of minerals and commodities towards greater control of value chains through beneficiation, local processing, technology transfer and stronger local-content requirements.
- **Set the same transparent rules for every external partner.** Apply partner-neutral standards to all investors: publish material contract terms, use competitive procurement where appropriate, disclose sovereign liabilities and beneficial ownership, enforce environmental and social safeguards, and establish credible dispute-resolution mechanisms.
- **Convert demographic weight into productive power.** Prioritise education, health, reliable energy, infrastructure, productive employment, capable institutions and competitive firms rather than assuming population growth automatically translates into influence.
- **Build resilience before the next global shock.** Reduce vulnerability to debt, food, fuel, shipping, financing and payment disruptions through prudent debt management, deeper domestic capital markets, local-currency financing where feasible, diversified export markets and financing sources, strategic infrastructure maintenance and regional contingency arrangements.
- **Use regional markets as Africa's insurance against global fragmentation.** Protect critical transport and energy corridors, strengthen regional food and fuel arrangements, improve cybersecurity and payment-system redundancy, and preserve fiscal space.
- **Manage competition among Africa's emerging powers.** Africa's influential states should use their capabilities to build coalitions The AU needs to serve both as a mechanism for managing rivalry among African powers and as an institution for aggregating their capabilities externally.
- **Make strategic autonomy the ultimate objective.** Africa should neither isolate itself nor simply substitute one external dependency for another. The long-term goal should be sufficient domestic capability, regional integration and productivity growth to give governments genuine choice

Donors and sponsors

IDRC · CRDI Canada

Hanns Seidel Foundation

Sweden Sverige

HUMANITY UNITED

AUDA-NEPAD AFRICAN UNION DEVELOPMENT AGENCY

Cite this research

Jakkie Cilliers, Marvellous Ngundu and Blessing Chipanda (2026) Africa in the World 2043. Published online at futures.issafrica.org. Retrieved from https://futures.issafrica.org/thematic/18-africa-in-the-world/ [Online Resource] Updated 24 August 2026.

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*

Dr Marvellous Ngundu is a Senior Research Consultant at AFI. He holds a Ph.D. in Economics from the University of Johannesburg in South Africa. He is the recipient of the 2024 Megatrends Afrika Research Fellowship at the Kiel Institute for the World Economy (ifw) in Germany, as well as the 2020/2021 fellowship program of the China Africa Research Initiative (CARI) at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies in the United States. His research interests lie in the fields of international, political, and development economics, with a particular emphasis on Africa-China economic relations.

Dr Blessing Chipanda is a Senior Research Consultant in the African Futures and Innovation (AFI) programme at the Institute for Security Studies (ISS), which he joined in January 2023. An economist by training, his research focuses on development economics, international trade, public policy, and econometric modelling. Within the AFI programme, he specialises in long-term forecasting and policy analysis to explore Africa's development trajectories. He has co-authored numerous reports and policy briefs that employ data-driven scenarios to support strategic planning and decision-making on the continent's economic and human development prospects. Before joining the ISS, Blessing served as an assistant lecturer and research assistant in the Department of Economics at the University of Pretoria. He holds a PhD in Economics from the University of Pretoria.

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.