THE IJR LENS ON AFRICA

5 March 2026 Column

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PAN-AFRICAN PERSPECTIVES ON THE EMERGING GLOBAL ORDER

Africa was historically excluded from the design of the international system. At the San Francisco Conference of 1945, which established the United Nations (UN), only four African states - Ethiopia, Egypt, Liberia and apartheid South Africa - were present, while the rest of the continent remained under European colonial exploitation and control. This absence entrenched structural marginalization from the very inception of global governance. Since then, African states have consistently criticized the inequalities of the international system, particularly the concentration of decision-making power which continues to remain in the hands of the few allies who were victorious against the Nazi regime in the aftermath of the Second World War.

Today the world is experiencing an uneven transition from a unipolar order dominated by the United States to a more diffuse, contested, and uncertain multipolar order.

> **MULTILATERAL INSTITUTIONS ESTABLISHED AND DOMINATED BY THE VICTORS OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR NEED TO EVOLVE**

There is growing recognition that the multilateral institutions established and dominated by the victors of the Second World War need to evolve, becoming more inclusive and equitable in order to more effectively address global challenges such as peace, security, governance, climate change, regulating artificial intelligence and the improving socio-economic livelihoods around the world.

This transition represents not merely a shift from unipolarity to multipolarity, but a deeper contestation over the principles and legitimacy of global order itself.

What does Multipolarity Means for Africa?

The African continent remains on the margins of global decision-making, often perceived as an object rather than a subject of international order. However, Africa is also increasingly recognized as a site of demographic dynamism, resource endowment, and political activism that can no longer be ignored. The continent's youthful population, critical minerals, and expanding markets position it as a potentially decisive actor in shaping global discourses, narratives and transformations. Yet the ability to translate potential into agency depends on the coherence of Pan-African strategies and the effectiveness of African institutions.

African politicians, diplomats, and intellectuals have long criticised the polarisation of global politics for undermining multilateral cooperation. They highlight the selective application of international law and the instrumental use of international organisations as evidence of a structurally biased system.

Contemporary crises—including the US kidnapping of the sitting head of Venezuela, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Israel–Palestine conflict, the civil war in Sudan, and violent extremism in the Sahel, Mozambique, and Somalia—have further underscored the weaknesses of collective security and the inability of the United Nations system to provide stability. In the ensuing gap, Africa has begun to assert itself more actively as an international actor. African governments and societies are seeking fairer representation in existing institutions and are articulate ambitions to shape the rules and norms of a new global order.

Pan-African Perspectives on Multipolarity

Pan-African perspectives gravitate towards rethinking of global order itself. Africa's role cannot be confined to belated participation in existing institutions but must be understood as an active force that contests legitimacy and advances alternative principles of solidarity, justice and accountability. The African Union's Agenda 2063 as a long-term visionary framework through which Africa articulates its collective aspirations. These sources illustrate that Pan-Africanism should be understood not only as a diplomatic project but as vehicle which African actors are utilizing to reshape international order and demand its transformation.

Pan-African ideas of solidarity, collective self-reliance and historical redress continue to inform contemporary debates on global order. Much of the existing literature on multipolarity frames change primarily through the prism of great-power rivalry, often reducing the Global South to a passive backdrop.

> **THE VERY PRINCIPLES ENSHRINED IN THE UNITED NATIONS CHARTER ARE APPLIED SELECTIVELY AND UNEVENLY, ESPECIALLY BY THE MAJOR POWERS WHO DESIGNED THE MULTILATERAL SYSTEM.**

Global order is often described in through a deceptively simple political realist prism as the arrangement of power and authority in international relations. However, global order is neither neutral nor inevitable and it is a historically constructed configuration of rules, institutions, and norms buttressed by material capabilities and maintained by selective and biased ideologies. Global order is therefore fundamentally about legitimacy and claims to universality as it is about coercion and force. Treating global order in these terms opens space to examine not only the structures that sustain it but also the contestations that reveal its fragility.

The very principles enshrined in the United Nations Charter, such as sovereignty and self-determination, are applied selectively and unevenly especially by the major powers who designed the multilateral system. The application of international law reveals a litany interventions by major powers that are the very definition of hypocrisy and double standards, which are designed to legitimize domination while foreclosing claims to equality. For Africa, these dynamics have meant that global order was never a neutral arena into which states could simply enter; it has always been a terrain of subordination and struggle.

This structural inequality has become increasingly visible in the contemporary crisis of multilateralism. For example, the failures of the collective security system are not new, but the accumulation of unresolved crises has eroded confidence in its credibility. The genocide in Rwanda in 1994, where the United Nations proved unwilling and unable to prevent mass atrocity despite clear warnings, remains a devastating reminder to African policy makers of the costs of selective inaction. Similar failures in Srebrenica in 1995, or the catastrophic aftermath of NATO's intervention in Libya in 2011, which has unleashed a torrent of radicalized forces across the Sahel and into West Africa, reinforce the perception that global institutions are often more effective at reproducing instability than ensuring security. These episodes cannot be dismissed as exceptional lapses; they expose deeper pathologies in a system in which legality and legitimacy are subordinated to the strategic interests of a handful of states who were victorious during the Second World War.

The Security Council epitomises this dilemma. Its design, with permanent membership and veto power for the five states that emerged victorious from the Second World War, was from the outset an expression of great-power privilege rather than democratic representation. In practice, the Council's authority has been repeatedly undermined by deadlock, selective enforcement, and blatant double standards. The United States and its allies, notably the United Kingdom, have justified unilateral interventions in Iraq, and France has joined these misadventures under the rubric of NATO in Kosovo, or Libya on the grounds of humanitarian necessity. Not to be out-done Russia's invasion of Ukraine remains the most stark representation of the pathology of a the selective application of international law and the violations of principle of sovereignty, which is the foundational element of the UN Charter.

China also invokes non-interference to shield its own their own acts of aggression and subjugation, for example against the Uyghurs and Tibet. The Council has thus become less a guarantor of collective security than an arena in which normative claims are weaponised for geopolitical ends, and it is now much more akin to a United Nations Insecurity Council. For African states, often relegated to the margins of decision-making, this bemusing spectacle of major powers behaving badly, highlights the structural unfairness of a system that demands compliance while denying voice.

The economic dimensions of global order present parallel contradictions. Institutions that claim to manage interdependence in the collective interest, such as the IMF, the World Bank, or the WTO, have historically entrenched the subordination of African economies. The structural adjustment programmes in the 1980s and 1990s imposed austerity and liberalisation that undermined social welfare and eroded the capacity of African states, while burdening them with unsustainable debt. More recently, trade regimes have constrained African industrialisation by enforcing intellectual property rules and privileging Global Northern agricultural subsidies. Even initiatives framed as inclusionary, such as climate finance or pandemic relief, have reproduced dependency by failing to transfer resources at the scale required or by attaching conditionalities that reinforce hierarchies.

These experiences reveal that the crisis of multilateralism is not only about security failures but also about the economic inequities embedded in the very design of global governance.

Against this backdrop, the current transition to a more multipolar order is frequently acknowledged as an opportunity to rebalance global governance. Yet multipolarity, if understood merely as the diffusion of material capabilities to a wider set of states, does not in itself promise a more equitable system. The rise of emerging powers such as China, India, or Brazil has created new poles of influence and new lines of credit, but it has not dismantled the hierarchies of global governance. The BRICS grouping has articulated demands for reform of international financial institutions and greater voice for the Global South, but it has also revealed the contradictions of middle powers pursuing their own strategic interests rather than collective transformation. Multipolarity thus risks entrenching a fragmented order in which competing hegemonies vie for influence, leaving Africa caught between rival patrons.

African perspectives on global order do not simply seek belated inclusion in existing structures. They often question the legitimacy of those structures altogether.

Pan-African critiques insist on solidarity, justice and accountability as the principles that should underpin global order rather than great-power privilege or economic extraction. They resonate with earlier traditions of African political thought, from Kwame Nkrumah's vision of continental unity to Julius Nyerere's emphasis on equality and self-reliance. The continuity of these claims demonstrates that African actors are not merely petitioning for recognition. They are articulating alternative visions of what international order could mean.

> " AFRICAN STATES HAVE BECOME INCREASINGLY ASSERTIVE IN DEMANDING CLIMATE FINANCE, TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER, AND ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF HISTORICAL RESPONSIBILITY WITH THE CALL FOR CLIMATE REPARATIONS.

African Agency in the Multipolar World: A Mixed Bag?

African agency is complex and should not be romanticised. States frequently invoke unity in international forums yet divide along linguistic, ideological, or clientelist lines when votes are cast. The African Union has articulated ambitious frameworks, including the Ezulwini Consensus and the Common African Position on United Nations Reform, but translation into bargaining leverage has been uneven due to external dependence, intra-continental divergence, and capacity bottlenecks in negotiation. This African Common Position signals a refusal to accept marginality as a structural destiny and demonstrates the capacity to generate norms rather than only absorb them.

These contradictions are especially evident in the field of peace and security. African states are among the largest contributors to UN peacekeeping, frequently providing troops for missions designed elsewhere. At the same time, regional organisations such UN Security Council, as in early responses to crises in Burundi and Darfur, but they also highlight the reliance on external funding that continues to limit autonomy. A similar dynamic is visible in economic governance. African participation in climate diplomacy has often been constrained by limited leverage. At the same time, states have become increasingly assertive in demanding climate finance, technology transfer, and acknowledgment of historical responsibility with the call for climate reparations.

The African Continental Free Trade Area represents a deliberate attempt to shift the terms of engagement by building a continental market that enhances bargaining power. From this perspective, market integration operates as sovereignty pooling that manufactures negotiating authority rather than as trade liberalisation alone. Taken together, these dynamics identify the locus of the contemporary crisis in multilateralism in the domain of legitimacy rather than efficiency.

African perspectives reveal that an order built on exclusion, hierarchy, and asymmetric norm enforcement cannot plausibly claim universality. By privileging solidarity, justice, and accountability as ordering principles, Pan-African approaches open analytical space to rethink how global governance is authorised and by whom.

Pan-African Perspectives on the Emerging Multipolarity

The issue of whether the so-called unipolar order is being replaced by a multipolar world order is a symptom of the crisis of multilateralism.[1] The condition of multipolarity already exists, for others the world is currently undergoing a transformation which will lead towards a condition of multipolarity.

Africa remains marginalized, side-lined, and often perceived as peripheral within the existing international order. Despite historical transitions from colonization to independence, the continent still functions under residual colonial structures that determine its role as a supplier of raw materials and a recipient of global decisions, rather than a shaper of global governance. Africa often finds itself relegated to the background in global negotiations and excluded from key decision-making processes. Although there are moments of symbolic presence, they rarely translate into concrete influence.

A key obstacle to Africa's effective engagement in the global order is its institutional fragility, marked by poorly resourced and staffed diplomatic missions; inadequate training and negotiation capacity, especially in trade and international law; and fragmented and underfunded regional institutions. Africa's agency is further undermined by a dependence on foreign aid, lack of indigenous policy ownership, and an externally driven reform agenda. While the continent has generated numerous policy frameworks implementation remains weak or inconsistent due to the failure of progressive political action, mal-governance and corrupted systems, and half-hearted execution of national and regional policies.

[1] Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) & International Peace Institute (IPI), 'African Perspectives on the Emerging Global Order' Survey Report, April 2025.

> **AFRICAN GOVERNMENTS NEED TO COMMIT TO FINANCING THEIR OWN SECURITY BY ADOPTING AN AFRICAN UNION LEVY OF 5% OF ITS 54 NATIONAL DEFENCE BUDGETS**

A self-evident antidote to this is the revival and reanimation of the Pan-African unity and solidarity as a force to be reckoned with in the international sphere. Pan-Africanism as an important driver of agency as a uniting ideology and framework underpinning African solidarity. However, Pan-Africanism needs to be revived and to evolve and take on new forms to address contemporary challenges, empower African agency and shape the continent's profile in the global arena.

Africa must intentionally reclaim its agency and this involves crafting internal coherence, community-informed positions including drawing upon indigenous knowledge systems to inform African policy solutions. On this basis, the continent can forge and adopt a cohesive Pan-African external foreign policy and strategy across the continent, by drawing upon the provisions of the African Common African Defense and Security Policy of the African Union. In addition, African governments need to commit to financing their own security by adopting an African Union levy of 5% of its 54 national defence budgets which can generate significant resources to buttress a robust continental security capability. Furthermore, the importance of asserting moral authority as seen in South Africa's legal action at the ICJ, which illustrates how Africa can take principled positions based on its own historical experiences.

Africa holds tremendous economic potential, notably because it has the youngest population in the world and holds 30% of the worlds critical minerals, 8% of the worlds oil supply, and a significant scope to scale up its digital, green and blue economies. African states must move beyond raw material exports to value-added production and insist on local beneficiation in foreign investment agreements. The importance of negotiating better trade terms, especially with the Global North metropoles Washington, London, Paris, Brussels, Beijing and Moscow, in the absence of which the continent will not fully utilize its export opportunities which will be a primary factor for Africa's growth.

" THE DIVERSIFICATION OF PARTNERSHIPS IS SEEN AS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR AFRICAN COUNTRIES

Economic integration initiatives like the AfCFTA as a pathway towards increasing Africa's competitiveness and leverage in global politics. In order, to buttress these processes the African Union needs to fully ratify its Protocol on the Free Movement of People and to issue AU passports to the continent's citizens to facilitate cross-border trade and knowledge exchange. Furthermore, the transition from unipolarity to a more multipolar world order has provided African countries with more options to engage with a wider range of global powers. The diversification of partnerships is seen as an opportunity for African countries to pursue their interests more actively and leverage the competition between different global powers. [2]

[2] Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) & International Peace Institute (IPI), 'African Perspectives on the Emerging Global Order' Survey Report, April 2025.

There is value of common African positions and the role of the AU in advancing a unified voice for the continent. As an illustration, the 2026-2036 theme of 'Justice for Africans and Peoples of African Descent through Reparations', provides the African continent with policy framework to compel in particular European partners, to re-negotiate the principles of their partnership, based on an acknowledge of the historical exploitation of the continent to fuel the industrial growth of European colonial empires as well as the United States' slave-ownership-driven industrial growth. For African policy makers, reparations is not exclusively about financial compensation, it is also about a restoration of the humanity of African people, who find themselves deliberate and permanently consigned to the lowest scales of socio-economic existence in the United States and Europe. In this regard, the call for reparations is an integral part of the campaign to agitate for the systemic repair and a remaking of world order in order to achieve restitution for Africa's exclusion from the formation and construction of the multilateral system.

Leveraging the Multipolar World Order to Secure Africa's Interests

The evolving global order presents a complex landscape filled with both challenges and opportunities for Africa. The international system is in transition, and the nature, trajectory, and even outcome of this change remains unpredictable and unquantifiable.[3] The current global order and governance structures have limited representation, especially of African countries, are inequitable, have contested legitimacy and double standards, and many questioned the relevance of such governance institutions for the 21st Century.

[3] Faith Mabera, 'In a Changing Global Order, Africa is Embracing its Agency', International Peace Institute (IPI) Global Observatory, 21 October 2025, p.1.

Africa can lay the foundations for asserting itself more effectively, by overcoming governance deficits, strengthening its economic independence, and fostering regional cooperation by leveraging on its demographic advantage, Pan-Africanism, and initiatives like the AFCFTA to shape global affairs on its own terms. Carlos Lopes, the former Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, argues that "the future of multilateralism is likely to hinge on a new approach centred on coalitions of the willing."[4] Mabera concurs with this view when she notes that "a growing number of African leaders and citizens have challenged long-held tropes of peripherality and deficiency, instead leveraging Africa's strategic assets and asserting African agency in the quest for greater autonomy in global affairs."[5]

There is a need for African countries to move from a reactive stance to proactive global leadership grounded in indigenous values, strategic partnerships, and a reimagined continental "foreign policy" posture.

In addition, it is evident that there is a gaps between Africa's policy vision and its implementation realities, the under-utilization of cultural and demographic soft power, and the imperative to create a unified continental voice in global governance.

There is cautious optimism about Africa's potential role in shaping the global order. However, Africa's ability to leverage on its opportunities will require the revival of Pan-African unity and solidarity. In addition, transformative change within the continent which can in parallel be leveraged to contribute towards the remaking of the global order will be a challenging, gradual, and incremental process. Ultimately, the effectiveness of African participation in the new global order will depend on the continent's collective aspirations, its commitment to achieving them, and its regional organizations' effectiveness in articulating and advancing African issues. Africa needs to strategically navigate the existing global governance and order that is shaped by histories of injustices and emphasize on equitable, participatory, and inclusive global system.

[4] Carlos Lopes, 'Erosion of Consensus-based Governance will have profound impact on multilateral negotiations', Daily Maverick, 16 April 2025, available at: https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2025-04-16-erosion-of-consensus-based-governance-will-have-profound-impact-on-multilateral-negotiations/ accessed 1 November 2025.
[5] Mabera, 'In a Changing Global Order, Africa is Embracing its Agency', p.1.

Article 109 of the United Nations Charter: A Pathway to Reform

As a concrete and practical way forward, African stakeholders, especially AU member states need to build a coalition of the willing at the UN General Assembly to invoke Article 109, of the United Nations Charter to convene a General Conference to Review the United Nations Charter, as a pathway to launching a broad debate and negotiation on the key elements of a new multilateral system.[6] In particular, the debate launched by Article 109 can be utilized to reform and transform the UN Security Council, as well as the dominant global financial and trade architecture, anchored by the IMF, World Bank and World Trade Organisation (WTO). A UN General Assembly resolution invoking Article 109 cannot be vetoed by the Permanent Five (P5) members of the UN Security Council and consequently there is significant scope for African countries to build a coalition of willing countries to drive this agenda.[7]

Conclusion

The emerging multipolar order and the crisis of the multilateral system, means that African countries and societies working individually still remain vulnerable to global manipulation and exploitation. The African Union's ability to play its role as an international actor, is still complicated by the difficulty of forging consensus among African states and maintaining that consensus in the face of often divergent national interests.

[6] Tim Murithi, 'Order of Oppresion: Africa's Quest for a New International System', Foreign Affairs, May/June 2023, available at: https://www.foreignaffairs.com/africa/global-south-un-order-oppression, accessed 1 November 2025.
[7] Tim Murithi, 'The Urgency of a United Nations Charter Review Conference: Rethinking Multilateralism, Peace and Security', Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 10 July 2023, available at: https://ny.fes.de/article/the-urgency-of-a-united-nations-charter-review-conference.html, accessed 1 November 2025.

> **AFRICA NEEDS TO INCREASINGLY PRIORITIZE REGIONAL INTEGRATION AS A STRATEGY TO ENHANCE THE CONTINENT'S BARGAINING POWER WITHIN THE GLOBAL ORDER WITH INITIATIVES LIKE THE AFRICAN CONTINENTAL FREE TRADE AREA**

In this regard, a cogent Pan-African posture towards global re-ordering, evident through the adoption of common continental positions and leveraging the role of the African Union as a global actor to harness its collective agency, is emergent and embryonic rather than being a fully-fledged expression of the continent's collective will and agency. African countries need to move beyond holding on to their illusionary sovereignty and proactively pool their resources by working together in order to harness a Pan-African agency, which can be understood in the context of this article as a geopolitical claim founded on the notion of taking back full and independent control over the continent's affairs from the clutches of illegitimate external interference. The influence of non-state actors and the need for a critical and it is necessary to revive the practical spirit of Pan-Africanism.

Africa needs to increasingly prioritize regional integration as a strategy to enhance the continent's bargaining power within the global order with initiatives like the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), and contributions to shaping decisions at International Court of Justice (ICJ) on international law.

The African continent needs to move from being a passive spectator in the institutions and system of global governance and order affairs by asserting itself as a significant player in the emerging multipolar world order.

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- IJR is collaborating with the International Peace Institute (IPI) on a project to collect original data on African Perspectives on the Emerging Global Order. In 2024 and 2025, Surveys and Focus Groups were conducted in South Africa, Nigeria and Kenya, this article draws upon some of the findings of the project.

PREVIOUS ISSUES

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