FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 03.11.2025 | Sefa Ikpa

Africa in the age of many powers

As Africa broadens its partnerships across a multipolar world, new opportunities emerge. So do familiar risks of unequal exchange and external control

For decades, Africa's foreign policy posture has been shaped by the gravitational pull of Western influence. Following the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States and its Western allies dominated global politics. African states largely aligned their foreign policy, trade, diplomacy and security priorities with Europe and America — a continuation of post-colonial dependency, often disguised in the language of development partnership.

That order is fading.

Slowly, unevenly and sometimes awkwardly, Africa is recalibrating its place in a rapidly shifting global landscape.

The post–Cold War illusion that the West held a monopoly on development wisdom has long collapsed under the weight of unmet promises and shifting global realities, giving way to a far more fluid and pragmatic order. Across Africa, governments are diversifying alliances; China's Belt and Road Initiative, Russia's assertive military and diplomatic return, the Gulf capital's quiet but pervasive spread across Africa's infrastructure and finance, and the growing presence of India, Turkey and Brazil are some examples.

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Within the continent, there is also a palpable shift toward inward-looking solutions in what is perhaps a robust and well overdue experiment with alternative paths to development. Regional frameworks such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and the African Union's Agenda 2063 represent attempts to convert political independence into economic sovereignty.

dominance.

Yet, beneath this surface of strategic diversification lies a familiar danger. Africa's new partners may speak the language of South–South cooperation and mutual benefit, but their methods remain steeped in the same logic of extraction that defined earlier eras of Western dominance. Can genuine sovereignty emerge within a global system still governed by the same capitalist logic that once justified dependency?

The fault lies not in diversification itself, but in the absence of a radical break from the economic orthodoxy that still measures progress in returns rather than redistribution. While African governments may extract short-term gains from global rivalry, the experiment with multipolarity, though necessary, risks becoming another rerun of externally defined progress if it is not grounded in redistributive and people-centred development.

Reassessing partnerships

This recalibration of foreign policy is evident across the continent in the way that African countries are navigating the intensifying rivalry between the United States and China. Governments are learning to turn this competition into leverage, extracting better terms on infrastructure projects, debt rescheduling and technology transfer by pitting one power's ambition against the other's. Kenya's balancing act between Beijing's Belt and Road financing and Washington's security cooperation captures this new pragmatism; so does Angola's deliberate move to diversify its oil partnerships away from Chinese creditors toward Gulf and Western investors.

The recent expansion of BRICS, now including Egypt and Ethiopia, reflects this same search for manoeuvrability — an effort to engage with multilateral platforms that promise to reform, or at least soften, the asymmetries of the global financial system. While such platforms remain imperfect and sometimes politically inconsistent, they nevertheless reflect a growing desire for a global order where Africa is not perpetually at the margins of decision-making.

In this recalibration, economic diplomacy has become another of Africa's instruments. The continent's leaders have recognised that their combined markets – over 1.4 billion people and immense natural resource wealth – offer bargaining power if used strategically. In practice, this has meant increased assertiveness in negotiating infrastructure loans, trade agreements and energy projects. Zambia, Ghana, and even Nigeria have, in different ways, used global competition to renegotiate debts and

attract more diversified investment portfolios. Similarly, North African states have positioned themselves as energy partners to Europe while simultaneously courting Gulf sovereign wealth funds and Chinese investors.

For all its promise, the new multipolar reality is not without dangers.

Nowhere is Africa's pragmatic turn more evident than in the security arena. As confidence in Western-led interventions declines, many governments are reassessing where – and with whom – they build their defence partnerships. The collapse of France's Operation Barkhane and the drawdown of UN peacekeeping missions in Mali and the Democratic Republic of Congo have left a vacuum that non-Western actors have been quick to fill. Russia, through Wagner-style deployments in Mali, the Central African Republic and Sudan, has offered a combination of military assistance and political backing that appeals to regimes seeking autonomy from Western oversight. Turkey, now a significant defence player, has exported drones and training to Ethiopia, Libya and Somalia, using its defence industry to cement broader diplomatic and economic ties. Meanwhile, Gulf states such as the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia are quietly underwriting counterinsurgency operations and infrastructure projects across the Sahel and Horn of Africa, merging security and investment in a single strategic package.

Yet, for all its promise, the new multipolar reality is not without dangers. Fragmented alliances and competing spheres of influence could weaken continental coherence. The African Union's peace and security mechanisms, already overstretched, risk being sidelined by ad-hoc bilateral arrangements that prioritise short-term gains over long-term stability. Global power competition may turn Africa into an arena for proxy rivalries, as seen in the Horn of Africa, where the Red Sea's geopolitical importance has attracted overlapping interests from the US, China, the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. Another layer of these risks presents itself in the opaque nature of many of these agreements, the use of mercenaries in domestic conflicts and the absence of regional accountability mechanisms, all of which threaten to deepen instability rather than resolve it. As seen in Mali and the Central African Republic, reliance on private military companies can yield short-term security gains

but at the expense of long-term institutional reform.

True strategic agency requires more than balancing one suitor against another.

The challenge, therefore, is not diversification itself but direction. The question is not simply who Africa's partners are, but how these relationships are structured and to whose benefit.

Africa's engagement with a multipolar world must be guided by principles that protect sovereignty, advance regional integration and promote collective development rather than transactional opportunism. This requires the AU and regional blocs to coordinate more assertively on continental interests such as climate finance, debt relief, technological governance and security cooperation in global forums.

Without transparency, institutional reform and continental coordination, the economic diversification that comes with such multipolarity risks mutating into new dependency. Africa will need to define its economic sovereignty by dismantling the global hierarchies that still define its value through extraction and its progress through debt. Initiatives like the AfCFTA and the AU's reform agenda show the beginnings of such a vision.

The promise of multipolarity carries both liberation and risks. The liberation comes from breaking the illusion that power flows only from the West; the risk lies in mistaking the abundance of suitors for genuine sovereignty. True strategic agency requires more than balancing one suitor against another. It demands a shared continental vision anchored in transparency, accountability and people-centred governance.

Multipolarity is not an endpoint; it is a crossroads. What Africa does next will determine whether this new era marks a genuine break from post-Cold War dependency or simply the latest chapter in an old story.



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