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When distant wars hit close to home

From fuel prices to defence gaps, Africa's reliance on global systems is being tested by far-off crises. Stronger local frameworks are needed

Africa is breathing a sigh of relief, however fleeting it may be. After two frenzied weeks of airstrikes and missile exchanges, sparked by Israel's June 13 offensive to cripple Iran's nuclear ambitions, a fragile ceasefire has emerged. This uneasy pause, stitched together by Washington after its own forceful entry into the conflict and strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities, laid bare the brutal choreography of modern warfare. As soon as US President Donald Trump announced the truce, global markets pirouetted. Oil prices dipped as supply anxieties eased, swiftly pulling trading sentiment back to pre-conflict levels.

Distant conflagrations often scorch close to home in Africa due to the continent's heavy reliance on external supply chains. For instance, after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, African nations scrambled to secure wheat and grains sourced from Ukraine, even as embargoes on Russian oil and Black Sea trade disruptions sent energy prices soaring across the continent. This same structural frailty re-emerged at the onset of the Israel-Iran conflict. And when the Iranian parliament voted for the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, a critical maritime artery through which nearly 20 per cent of world oil passes, African markets convulsed. Nigeria's National Petroleum Company Limited swiftly hiked petrol pump prices in Lagos and Abuja to 915 Naira per litre from around 860 Naira. Dangote Refinery, Africa's largest private oil refiner, followed suit, raising ex-depot prices, which triggered higher retail costs and fears of prolonged supply challenges.

In Ghana, President John Dramani Mahama directed the implementation of emergency measures to soften the blow, warning that the missile exchanges risked unravelling hard-won fuel price cuts.

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North Africa, frequently bracketed into the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, fared no better. Egypt absorbed a particularly vicious early blow. Its main stock index plunged

continent's heavy reliance on external supply chains.

by nearly eight per cent on the first trading day after the conflict began, marking its sharpest fall in five years. Tourist confidence eroded in parallel as authorities postponed the much-anticipated opening of the $1 billion Grand Egyptian Museum. Energy systems in the region also faltered as Israel pre-emptively shut down its Leviathan and Karish offshore gas fields, which supply roughly 20 per cent of Egypt's gas needs. The latter forced Cairo to divert scarce gas reserves to electricity generation, suspending industrial consumption to avert national blackouts and a repeat of last year's crippling power cuts.

These exogenous shocks pile atop Africa's internal fissures, including conflicts in Sudan, Ethiopia's Tigray region, eastern Congo and Sahelian insurgencies, which have uprooted millions, hollowed state institutions and pulverised social infrastructure. Rising global food and energy costs push already precarious lives to the brink, contract humanitarian budgets and cause local economies to buckle as attention and resources pivot to the newest front-page emergencies.

Compounding this is Africa's chronic dependence on imports, despite its immense resource wealth. Over half of the continent's imports and exports are tied to five economies, all outside it, while only 16 of 54 African nations source more than 0.5 per cent of their intermediate goods regionally. Intra-African trade limps at 17 per cent, dwarfed by Asia's 59 per cent and Europe's 68 per cent. Though rich in minerals, petroleum and agricultural lands, Africa captures just two per cent of global trade. Countries like Nigeria and Angola, flush with crude wealth and which should theoretically benefit from higher oil price surges, bleed foreign reserves importing refined fuel at exorbitant prices due to decades of elite sabotage and institutional corruption.

A tinderbox

Beyond economics, the Israel-US-Iran conflict revealed Africa's soft underbelly on security. The continent largely stands exposed to any possible military spill over, with many countries reliant on outdated Soviet-era air defence systems that lack modern radar, electronic warfare integration and networked capabilities to engage contemporary aerial threats. Moreover, growing anti-West resentment, intra-religious divisions, poverty, Islamist militancy and emboldened local terror groups linked to transnational networks have created a combustible

environment primed for violence. Armed groups in this environment can act autonomously, are inspired by or aligned with foreign agendas, possess sophisticated tactical knowledge and are beginning to leverage unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and low-cost drones to further destabilise already fragile states.

Meanwhile, the acceleration of transactional foreign policy under Trump's revived 'America First' doctrine also threatens to reduce Africa to a chessboard for resurgent global rivalries, even as it marks a regression toward a world where raw power eclipses international law and collective norms. Recent developments suggest that African states can no longer find refuge in non-alignment stance, as they once did during the Cold War. In June, Ghana's abstention from a critical International Atomic Energy Agency vote on Iran's compliance drew criticism from Israel over her neutral position.

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The intersection of all these threats emphasises why Africa must embrace true independence. Economic sovereignty must become a non-negotiable principle for continental resilience, compelling states to act decisively to deepen intra-continental trade. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), envisioned as the world's largest single market, remains stalled by weak infrastructure, fragmented customs regimes and divergent national interests. Without substantial investments in modern transport corridors, harmonised standards and robust regional manufacturing capacity, the AfCFTA risks devolving into yet another rhetorical aspiration, unable to achieve its potential to increase intra-African trade by 50 per cent by 2035.

Equally urgent is rebuilding domestic industrial and agricultural capacity. African states must stop waiting for foreign investors to set priorities and pace. Energy and food security are both development targets and national survival imperatives. Cooperative farming networks, public-led refineries, food storage and warehousing facilities, as well as agro-industrial investments, can reduce dependence on volatile global markets and reclaim control over important sectors that have long been ceded to multinational and private interests.

On security, Africa must finally accept that true defence cannot be outsourced. Relying on foreign armies and mercenary networks, from

American contractors to Russian paramilitaries, entrenches dependency and local war economies. Only dedicated national-cum-regional security architectures, rooted in shared intelligence, mutual accountability and coordinated rapid-response forces, can effectively restore state authority and guarantee international respect.

A moral horizon

The world now faces multiple possible futures: the survival of a US-led post-1945 rules-based system; a fragmented multipolar world order dominated by regional hegemons and shifting alliances; or a new paradigm grounded in shared moral legitimacy rather than brute force. Amid the turbulence of a shifting global order, Africa has a unique opportunity to assert itself as a beacon of moral and ethical legitimacy.

But to seize this strategic role, Africa must unite its divided voices at global forums. Its divergent foreign policy positions not only reflect varied colonial legacies and national priorities, but also a deeper contested sense of what it means to be 'African'. Geographic, religious, economic, linguistic, and cultural interests and differences continue to fracture cohesion. These complexities surface clearly in voting patterns on global issues, such as the UN General Assembly votes condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine and, more recently, the resolution on Israel's occupation of Palestine.

Yet, there are existential and moral issues on which Africa cannot afford division. Given the continent's shared history of violent extraction, slavery and imperial subjugation, questions concerning wars and conflicts that spread nothing but devastation demand a unified stance. A united Africa must become a fierce advocate for global peace, human dignity and collective self-determination.

A good lever for this ambition is the continent's push for genuine representation at key decision-making tables, particularly at the UN Security Council, where it has been systematically excluded for decades. The Council's near-paralysis in responding to multiplying global troubles reinforces the call for a radical reshaping of global governance. The Ezulwini Consensus, now two decades old and put forward by the African Union, demands two permanent African seats and five non-permanent seats, alongside the abolition or at least democratisation of veto power.

This moral horizon, however, demands more than outward advocacy. It requires confronting internal contradictions such as kleptocratic elites, failing democracies and broken social contracts, rent-seeking oligarchies,

as well as neoliberal orthodoxies that prize capital above communities. At the heart of this domestic transformation also lies Africa's youth, the continent's greatest strategic asset. By 2050, one in four people on Earth will be African. This demographic force carries the potential to transform markets, influence global politics and reshape cultural narratives. Yet, this promise will never manifest unless it is matched by universal, high-quality education and robust support for entrepreneurship and civic engagement.



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