

# Africa in an Evolving Global Order: Navigating the Perilous Waters of Multilateralism's Decline

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## Abstract

*The post-Cold War liberal international order, underpinned by multilateral institutions, faces unprecedented strain. This article examines the implications of this fragmentation for Africa, arguing that the continent faces disproportionate threats from the erosion of multilateralism. Utilizing qualitative analysis of policy documents, institutional actions, and empirical studies (2018-2025), the study identifies key drivers: great power rivalry (US-China-Russia), rising nationalism, institutional paralysis, and the proliferation of minilateral arrangements. Findings reveal that Africa's developmental aspirations, security, and voice in global governance are increasingly jeopardized. While demonstrating agency through initiatives like the African Continental Free Trade Area and Africa Union reforms, Africa struggles against systemic pressures. The article concludes that safeguarding effective multilateralism is critical for Africa's future and offers policy recommendations for African states, regional bodies, and global actors to reinforce multilateral cooperation tailored to contemporary challenges.*

**Keywords:** Africa, Global Order, Multilateralism, International Institutions, Great Power Rivalry, African Union, United Nations, Global Governance, Minilateralism, Development

## 1. Introduction

In their 2025 report *Africa's Agency in a Contested World*, du Plessis, Colliers, and Sonnenfeld argue that Africa must proactively shape its role within an increasingly uncertain and multipolar global landscape. Published by the Institute for Security Studies, the study outlines four possible global futures: Sustainable World, Divided World, Growth World, and World at War, each presenting distinct challenges and strategic implications for the continent. The authors emphasize that Africa's ability to assert meaningful agency will depend on its success in strengthening regional integration, deepening institutional reforms, and presenting a unified voice in global platforms such as the G20, the United Nations, and BRICS+. They advocate for a strategy of constructive non-alignment, which would allow African countries to navigate competing global interests while advancing their own development priorities, particularly through frameworks like the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and the African Union's Agenda 2063 [1].

Complementing this perspective, Fan and Zhang, in their study *Exploring Economic Integration in Africa: A Complex Network and Panel Regression Approach*, employ complex

network theory and panel data analysis to examine the structural drivers of regional economic integration [2]. Their research identifies key factors influencing the strength of economic ties between African countries, including development levels, institutional quality, infrastructure, and geographic proximity. The findings suggest that while economic integration remains uneven across the continent, it is steadily progressing largely due to improvements in infrastructure and policy coordination within regional blocs such as ECOWAS and SADC. The study underscores the importance of both structural conditions and policy frameworks in fostering deeper and more resilient integration [2]. These visions for Africa's future are emerging amid the broader decline of the post-1945 international order, which was founded on rules-based multilateral institutions such as the United Nations, the Bretton Woods system, and later the World Trade Organization. These institutions promised collective security, economic cooperation, and equitable development [3]. Although historically marginalized within this system, Africa has long relied on multilateralism for conflict resolution, development financing, trade preferences, norm-setting, and amplifying its collective voice [4]. However, the early

21st century has witnessed a marked erosion of this order driven by resurgent geopolitical rivalries, the rise of illiberal powers, institutional gridlock, nationalist retrenchment, and the far-reaching disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic [5,6]. In this increasingly fragmented and contested global environment, urgent questions arise about the future of international cooperation and its implications for Africa, whose development and security remain closely tied to the stability and fairness of the global system.

The accelerating decline of effective multilateralism presents acute and specific threats to African states and the continent's collective interests. This article addresses the central problem: How is the fragmentation of the global order and the weakening of traditional multilateral institutions threatening Africa's security, development aspirations, and influence in global governance, and what are the potential pathways for mitigating these threats? Key dimensions of this problem include:

- How is great power rivalry undermining consensus within multilateral bodies crucial for Africa (e.g., UNSC, WTO, climate negotiations)?
- To what extent are minilateral groupings bypassing inclusive multilateral forums, potentially marginalizing African voices and interests?
- How does institutional paralysis (e.g., UNSC vetoes, WTO Appellate Body crisis) impede African priorities like conflict resolution, trade diversification, and climate finance?
- What are the implications of shifting global norms (e.g., sovereignty vs. intervention, human rights) for African agency and stability?
- How can African states and the African Union (AU) navigate this complex landscape to protect and advance their interests?

The contributions of this paper are twofold. First, it offers a comprehensive assessment of Africa's position within an evolving global order, with a particular focus on the threats posed to multilateralism. This analysis draws upon an integrated synthesis of foundational theoretical frameworks and recent empirical studies, providing a nuanced understanding of the continent's challenges and opportunities in the current geopolitical context. Second, the paper proposes a forward-looking and interconnected research agenda aimed at guiding future investigations into the mechanisms, risks, and developmental implications associated with Africa's engagement in a shifting multilateral landscape. In doing so, the study serves as a valuable resource for scholars, policymakers, and development practitioners seeking to navigate and respond to the complexities of Africa's role in a transforming global order.

## 1.1. Literature Review

### 1.1.1. Theoretical Perspectives

Predicts the resurgence of power politics as US hegemony wanes, leading to competition where institutions become arenas for rivalry rather than cooperation [7]. Africa risks becoming a "theatre" for proxy contests, with multilateral forums paralyzed by great power discord [8]. Emphasizes

the value of rules and institutions in mitigating conflict and facilitating cooperation [9]. The weakening of these institutions is seen as detrimental to global public goods provision, disproportionately affecting developing regions like Africa reliant on collective action (e.g., climate, pandemics, trade rules) [10]. Focuses on changing norms and identities. The contestation over liberal norms (democracy, human rights, rules-based order) creates uncertainty for African states navigating between competing normative frameworks promoted by traditional Western powers and emerging actors like China [11,12]. Argue that the existing multilateral order has always been hierarchical and reflected Western interests [13]. Its crisis presents both a threat (further marginalization) and an opportunity to push for a more equitable, genuinely multipolar system that incorporates African perspectives more substantively [14].

### 1.1.2. Empirical Findings (Latest Studies - 2018-2025)

Studies confirm increased instrumentalization of UNSC agendas by major powers, hindering responses to African conflicts (e.g., Libya, Sahel, Sudan) [15]. US-China competition impedes consensus on African debt relief and infrastructure financing [16,17]. Research highlights the proliferation of clubs (G7, G20, BRICS+, Quad) making decisions affecting Africa with limited African input (Lesage, 2023). While potentially efficient, they lack legitimacy and accountability from an African perspective [18]. Vaccine nationalism during COVID-19 starkly illustrated this exclusion [19,20]. Empirical analyses document the detrimental impact of the WTO Appellate Body crisis on African economies seeking to leverage trade rules [21]. UNSC reform paralysis continues to exclude Africa from permanent representation despite Ezulwini Consensus demands [22]. Recent reports consistently show Africa receiving a fraction of needed climate adaptation and mitigation finance, hampered by complex multilateral processes and unmet developed world pledges [23,24]. Studies document proactive responses: AU institutional reforms (e.g., PSC, silencing the guns), AfCFTA operationalization, strategic partnerships diversification, and leveraging collective voting power in some UN forums [25,26]. However, challenges like internal divisions and resource constraints persist [27].

## 2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, employing critical policy analysis and documentary research methods. Data were collected from the following sources:

- Official documents from primary source such as United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions, African Union (AU) Assembly decisions, AfCFTA agreements, and World Trade Organization (WTO) reports; speeches by prominent African and international leaders; and policy statements from major global powers.
- On the other hand peer-reviewed academic journals, books, and book chapters published between 2018 and 2025; reports from respected think tanks including the Institute for Security Studies (ISS), European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM), Brookings Institution, Chatham House, and the Carnegie Endowment; as well as

data from international organizations such as the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), African Development Bank (AfDB), World Bank, and International Monetary Fund (IMF).

- Thematic analysis was employed to identify key threats, African responses, and patterns of institutional interaction. Process tracing was used to examine the impact of specific events such as voting behavior on the Ukraine conflict at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) on African positions and broader multilateral dynamics. The analysis is anchored in the theoretical frameworks discussed earlier, with an emphasis on power relations, institutional effectiveness, and African agency.
- Additionally, the study includes a systematic literature review examining empirical research related to the theme “Africa in an Evolving Global Order: Navigating the Perilous Waters of Multilateralism’s Decline.” This review draws on a wide range of sources, including scholarly articles, governmental publications, and reports from global financial institutions like the IMF and World Bank. The review aims to assess how Africa is navigating and positioned within this shifting international landscape.
- A rigorous and comprehensive search strategy was implemented to include diverse methodologies and perspectives on Africa’s evolving role. Studies published between 2018 and 2025 were reviewed, with particular focus on empirical research and policy-relevant analyses centered on the continent.
- The inclusion and exclusion criteria were determined based on the studies’ relevance to the core research questions, geographic scope, target population, publication type, and the nature of the interventions examined. The review adhered to the methodological guidelines outlined by Villalonga-Olives et al. (2018), and Google Scholar was continuously monitored to capture recently published and pertinent literature, including works released after the initial search window.
- This study provides a nuanced and thorough examination of Africa’s position in the current global order, offering insights into future trajectories. It aims to integrate theoretical and empirical findings to support informed and forward-looking policy recommendations.
- However, several limitations were acknowledged. The generalizability of the findings is limited due to the broad synthesis of diverse sources. Potential publication bias may have influenced the prevailing narratives and themes within the reviewed literature. Moreover, linguistic limitations may have restricted access to significant non-English materials, potentially omitting valuable perspectives.

### 3. Discussion & Interpretation of Findings

The findings paint a concerning picture for Africa within the fragmenting global order:

Great power rivalry, particularly between the US and China, is paralyzing key institutions. The UNSC is frequently deadlocked on African conflicts. The WTO struggles to address agricultural subsidies harming African farmers or digital trade rules. Climate negotiations (COP) see vital finance commitments deferred [28,29]. This paralysis

directly impedes African security and development. While groups like the G20 include AU representation, decision-making often occurs in smaller, exclusive formats. Initiatives like the US-led “Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment” (PGII) or China’s Belt and Road Forum operate largely outside inclusive multilateral frameworks, potentially creating dependency or fostering competition that undermines African unity and ownership [30,31]. The expansion of BRICS+ attracts African interest as an alternative forum but raises questions about its coherence and ability to deliver concrete benefits [32]. The lack of UNSC reform remains a profound symbol of Africa’s exclusion from global power structures [22]. The cumbersome processes of accessing climate finance through mechanisms like the Green Climate Fund (GCF) disadvantage under-resourced African states [33].

The retreat from rules-based trade threatens AfCFTA’s success and export diversification. Reduced multilateral development aid and unpredictable flows from bilateral partners increase vulnerability. Conflict resolution is hampered by vetoes and declining support for UN/AU peace operations [34]. Vaccine inequity during COVID-19 was a stark demonstration of how unilateralism and nationalism can override multilateral solidarity, leaving Africa behind [19]. Despite systemic pressures, Africa is not merely passive. The AU demonstrates agency in conflict mediation (e.g., Ethiopia, Sudan – albeit with mixed success) and norm-setting (e.g., Lomé Charter on maritime security). The AfCFTA is a bold, albeit challenging, attempt to leverage collective strength. Strategic “multi-alignment” allows states to engage diverse partners [35]. However, internal divisions (e.g., tensions between ECOWAS members, AU consensus-building difficulties), governance challenges, and resource limitations significantly constrain this agency and weaken Africa’s collective bargaining power [4,27]. The erosion of multilateralism amplifies pre-existing vulnerabilities in Africa. While African agency provides crucial counterpoints, it operates within a global system increasingly dominated by power politics and exclusive clubs. The continent risks being further marginalized in setting global agendas, accessing vital resources, and securing its peace. The findings support realist predictions of institutional decline under power competition but also highlight the liberal institutionalist concern about the loss of global public goods. Constructivist and critical perspectives are validated by the ongoing contestation over norms and the struggle for a more equitable order.

### 4. Conclusion

The threats posed to multilateralism by the evolving global order are not abstract concerns for Africa; they are existential challenges to its security, development, and place in the world. The paralysis of key institutions, the rise of exclusionary unilateralism, and the intensification of great power rivalry create an environment where African interests are easily sidelined or become pawns in larger geopolitical games. While the AU and individual states are actively seeking pathways to navigate this turbulence through reforms, regional integration, and strategic

partnerships, their efforts are severely constrained by both internal weaknesses and overwhelming systemic pressures. The future of multilateralism is inextricably linked to Africa's future. A world where cooperation falters and power reigns supreme is one where Africa's vast potential remains unrealized and its vulnerabilities exacerbated. Reinventing effective multilateralism, adapted to 21st-century realities and inclusive of African voices and needs, is not merely desirable but essential for global stability and shared prosperity [36,37].

#### 4.1. Policy Recommendations

##### 4.1.1. For African States and the AU

- Accelerate AU institutional reforms (funding, decision-making, PSC effectiveness). Prioritize implementation of AfCFTA and harmonize regional positions on key global issues (climate, trade, security). Invest in diplomatic capacity and technical expertise [25,27].
- Pursue coherent "multi-alignment" strategies to maximize leverage and access resources/diverse partnerships, while safeguarding core interests and avoiding proxy entanglements. Actively engage within multilateral forums (G20, BRICS+) to push African agendas while simultaneously advocating for the primacy of inclusive multilateral institutions [26,32].
- Maximize coordinated voting in the UNGA and other universal bodies. Develop clear, evidence-based policy alternatives on global challenges (debt, climate finance, digital governance) [22].
- Enhance conflict prevention, mediation, and peacekeeping capabilities. Strengthen regional economic communities as building blocks for continental integration and resilience.

##### 4.1.2. For Multilateral Institutions (UN, WTO, IFIs)

- Urgently address legitimacy deficits, particularly UNSC reform to include permanent African representation. Reform governance and voting structures of IFIs to reflect current economic realities [23].
- Simplify procedures for accessing climate finance and development assistance. Strengthen support for AU/regional peace and security architectures. Revive the WTO dispute settlement system and prioritize development-focused trade agendas.
- Actively work to integrate multilateral initiatives into broader multilateral frameworks where possible, ensuring transparency and inclusivity.

##### 4.1.3. For Global Powers (Traditional and Emerging)

- Genuinely recommit to rules-based multilateralism, respecting the authority of core institutions and abiding by their decisions.
- Refrain from using multilateral forums solely as arenas for geopolitical competition, especially regarding African issues. Respect African agency and ownership.
- Honor existing obligations on climate finance, development aid (0.7% GNI), and debt relief transparently and predictably.
- Provide substantial, predictable support for AU and regional capacities in peace, security, and economic integration without imposing conditionalities that undermine

ownership.

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