Council of Councils
Sixteenth Regional Conference

October 26–28, 2025
Pretoria, South Africa

Hosted by

Institute for Security Studies (ISS)
&
Council on Foreign Relations (CFR)

Council of Councils Mission Statement

The defining foreign policy challenges of the twenty-first century are global in nature. To help direct high-level international attention and effective policy responses to these threats and opportunities, the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) has created a Council of Councils (CoC). The CoC is composed of twenty-seven major policy institutes from some of the world's most influential countries. It is designed to facilitate candid, not-for-attribution dialogue and consensus-building among influential opinion leaders from both established and emerging nations, with the ultimate purpose of injecting the conclusions of its deliberations into high-level foreign policy circles within members' countries.

Participants are welcome to disclose ideas from CoC meetings, and may attribute that information to the CoC, but may not reveal the identity, country, or the affiliation of any speaker, participant, or institution attending the meeting. On and off-the-record sessions will be noted on the agenda. An official photographer will be present, and pictures will be displayed on the official webpage and social media sites, but use of personal recording devices and cameras is prohibited.

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International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS)

UNITED STATES
Council on Foreign Relations (CFR)

Council of Councils Sixteenth Regional Conference
Final agenda

Sunday, October 26, 2025

Freedom Park
Heritage Site and Museum
Corner Koch & 7th Avenue
Salvokop, Pretoria, 0002

4:00 p.m. – 8:00 p.m. *Freedom Park Visit and Opening Dinner*

Speaker:
To be announced

Presider:
Ottilia Anna Maunganidze, Head of Special Projects, Institute for Security Studies (South Africa)

Monday, October 27, 2025

Institute for Security Studies
Block C, Brooklyn Court
361 Veale Street
New Muckleneuk, Pretoria, 0181

8:30 a.m. – 9:00 a.m. *Registration and Coffee* *Lounge Area*

9:00 a.m. – 9:15 a.m. *Introduction to the Council of Councils Sixteenth Regional Conference* *Seminar Room*

Welcome by:
Fonteh Akum, Executive Director, Institute for Security Studies (South Africa)
Michael Froman, President, Council on Foreign Relations (United States)

9:15 a.m. – 11:45 a.m. *Session One* *Seminar Room*
Framing Possible Pathways to a Safe, Secure, and Stable World

9:15 a.m. – 10:00 a.m. *Diagnosing the Problems*

Guiding questions: How can we achieve the ideals of the UN Charter despite gridlock at the UN Security Council? What factors should shape

global stability, and who are the leading actors shaping global security futures? Is the future of global cooperation shifting toward greater informality, regionalism, and clubs? Who are some other players in the global landscape and what is their role going forward?

Speakers:
Fonteh Akum, Executive Director, Institute for Security Studies (South Africa)
Stefan Mair, Director and Executive Chairman, German Institute for International and Security Affairs (Germany)
Mely Caballero-Anthony, President's Chair and Associate Dean, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (Singapore)

Presider:
Esther Brimmer, James H. Binger Senior Fellow in Global Governance, Council on Foreign Relations (United States)

10:00 a.m. – 10:10 a.m. *Breakout and Transition to Breakout Discussions*

10:10 a.m. – 10:50 a.m. *Breakout Discussions on Specific Prescriptions*

Breakout A *Situation Room*
Managing security issues within the UN system

Breakout B *Executive Director Board Room*
An emerging era of nuclear proliferation?

Breakout C *Pulse Room*
Is the future of global cooperation "minilateral"?

Breakout D *Seminar Room*
What are the roles of regional organisations and the private sector?

10:50 a.m. – 11:00 a.m. *Transition from Breakout Discussions*

11:00 a.m. – 11:45 a.m. *Discussion* *Seminar Room*

11:45 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. *Coffee Break* *Lounge Area*

12:00 p.m. – 1:00 p.m. *Session Two (Hot Topic Discussion)* *Seminar Room*

Cartels, Trafficking, and Terrorism: Global Cooperation to Counter Transnational Organised Crime in the Age of Global Fracture

Guiding questions: What is the current state of transnational organised crime (TOC) and how has it evolved over the past decade? What are the threats posed by TOC to global peace and security? What is the state of cooperation to address TOC amid increasing global competition? How can cooperation be enhanced in international law enforcement collaboration despite global tensions? How could constraints on financing be used to counter transnational organised crime? How could blocking cyber tools help fight transnational organised crime? How have terrorist threats evolved over the past decade? Are there links between terrorist groups and transnational organised crime?

Speakers:
Marc Hecker, Executive Director, French Institute of International Affairs (France)
Avishay Ben Sasson-Gordis, Senior Researcher, Institute for National Security Studies (Israel)
Martin Ewi, Senior Researcher, Institute for Security Studies (South Africa)

Presider:
Chris Tuttle, Senior Fellow and Deputy Director of Studies, Council on Foreign Relations (United States)

1:00 p.m. – 2:00 p.m. *Lunch* *Lounge Area*

2:00 p.m. – 3:00 p.m. *Session Three* *Seminar Room*

Is Consensus Possible on Global AI/Tech Governance?

Guiding questions: How do we govern artificial intelligence (AI)? What are the implications (positive and negative)? How does this issue affect think tanks?

Speakers:
Paul Samson, President, Centre for International Governance Innovation (Canada)
Andrea Renda, Director of Research, Centre for European Policy Studies (Belgium)

Presider:
Memduh Karakullukçu, Former Vice Chair and President, Global Relations Forum (Turkey)

3:00 p.m. – 3:30 p.m. *Group Photo and Break* *Lounge Area*

3:30 p.m. – 4:45 p.m. *Session Four* *Seminar Room*

Trade, Tariffs, and Power: The Future of Global Economic Cooperation

Guiding questions: What roles can international organisations play amid trade wars? How can rules be reestablished without a rule-based system? Are trade wars the key determinant of global power?

Speakers:
Carola Ramón, Vice President, Argentine Council for International Relations (Argentina)
Michael Froman, President, Council on Foreign Relations (United States)
Selim Yenel, President, Global Relations Forum (Turkey)
Amy L. Glover Drake, Board Member, Mexican Council on Foreign Relations (Mexico)

Presider:
Ottilia Anna Maunganidze, Head of Special Projects, Institute for Security Studies (South Africa)

4:45 p.m. – 6:30 p.m. *Free Time*

6:30 p.m. – 9:30 p.m. *Reception, Discussion, and Dinner*

Priva
103 Club Avenue
Waterkloof Heights
Pretoria, 0065

Speaker:
To be announced

Presider:
Fonteh Akum, Executive Director, Institute for Security Studies (South Africa)

Tuesday, October 28, 2025

8:30 a.m. – 9:00 a.m. *Registration and Coffee* *Lounge Area*

9:00 a.m. – 10:15 a.m. *Session Five (Hot Topic Discussion)* *Seminar Room*

Unlocking the Diplomatic Gordian Knot: Pursuing Sustainable Peace in the Middle East, Africa, and Ukraine

Guiding questions: What are the main factors contributing to the intractability of wars? Is there a need for a new kind of diplomacy or new institutions? What is the nature of the international peace mediation landscape?

Speakers:
Michele Valensise, President, Institute of International Affairs (Italy)
Ottilia Anna Maunganidze, Head of Special Projects, Institute for Security Studies (South Africa)
Sanusha Naidu, Senior Research Fellow, Institute for Global Dialogue (South Africa)

Presider:
Adivhaho Ramaite, Research Officer, Institute for Security Studies (South Africa)

10:15 a.m. – 10:30 a.m. *Coffee Break* *Lounge Area*

10:30 a.m. – 11:45 a.m. *Session Six* *Seminar Room*

Africa and the World: The World in Africa

Guiding questions: How are African states and regional organisations enhancing the continent's agency in a changing global context? Why does the reform of global governance matter for Africa? Between trade and aid—what does the transitional turn in interstate relationships mean for development outcomes in Africa? What are the implications for development after the closure of USAID and reductions by the other donors? What have been African states' responses?

Speakers:
Tighisti Amare, Director of the Africa Programme, Chatham House (United Kingdom)

Zhou Yuyuan, Senior Fellow and Deputy Director, Shanghai Institutes for International Studies (China)
Priyal Singh, Senior Researcher, Institute for Security Studies (South Africa)

Presider:
Steven Gruzd, Head of the African Governance and Diplomacy Programme, South African Institute of International Affairs (South Africa)

11:45 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. *Concluding Remarks* *Seminar Room*

12:00 p.m. – 1:30 p.m. *Lunch and Free Time* *Lounge Area*

1:30 p.m. – 2:30 p.m. *Session Seven (Public Session)* *Seminar Room*
Security Cooperation in the Age of Strategic Autonomy

Guiding questions: Does "strategic autonomy" mean different things in different regions? What are the key factors contributing to the rise of strategic autonomy? What is the future of alliances in the age of strategic autonomy?

Speakers:
Fonteh Akum, Executive Director, Institute for Security Studies (South Africa)
Tighisti Amare, Director of the Africa Programme, Chatham House (United Kingdom)
Michael Froman, President, Council on Foreign Relations (United States)

Presider:
Ottilia Anna Maunganidze, Head of Special Projects, Institute for Security Studies (South Africa)

Participant Biographies

Fonteh Akum

Fonteh Akum is the executive director of the Institute for Security Studies (ISS). He previously worked in research, research management, and policy communication at the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa, at the Africa Programme of the UN University for Peace, and at the International Monetary Fund headquarters in Washington, DC. Akum's research covers geopolitics, violent conflicts, and peacebuilding. He also previously headed the Lake Chad Basin Programme at the ISS. He holds a PhD in politics and international studies from the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies.

Tighisti Amare

Tighisti Amare is the director of the Africa Programme at Chatham House. She assumed this position in August 2025 after more than fifteen years at the institute, including her most recent position as deputy director. She is responsible for overseeing the programme's research quality and impact, strategic direction, and fundraising. She also leads efforts to deepen engagement with a wide network of stakeholders across Africa and globally. Her work includes directing high-impact research initiatives and convening policy dialogues with senior African and international decision-makers on issues related to political economy, security, governance, and Africa's international relations. Her research interests include Africa's evolving role in global governance, multilateralism, Africa-Europe relations, geopolitical realignments, and regional integration.

Avishay Ben Sasson-Gordis

Avishay Ben Sasson-Gordis is a senior researcher and Ruderman family foundation scholar in residence at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), where he works in the Israel-United States Research Program and leads the institute's North American research dialogue. His work examines how domestic political developments in the United States affect Israel, with a focus on the ways U.S. political dynamics shape Israel's strategic environment. Ben Sasson-Gordis's academic work has appeared in leading journals, and he has taught courses on democratic theory, political institutions, and civil-military relations. In addition to his scholarly research, he contributes commentary on democracy, U.S.-Israel relations, and Israeli politics to both Israeli and international media. His writing has appeared in outlets such as *Foreign Affairs*, *Haaretz*, and *World Politics Review*, reflecting his commitment to bridging academic analysis with policy and public debate. He received his PhD in political science from Harvard University in 2023, where his dissertation explored normative questions of civil-military relations in democratic contexts, focusing on the challenges militaries face when elected leaders undermine democratic norms. He also holds a postdoctoral fellowship with the Liberalism Rekindled program at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

Isabel Bosman-Burnett

Isabel Bosman-Burnett is a researcher in the African Governance and Diplomacy Programme at South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA), where she works on issues pertaining to democratic governance, elections, and the politics of technology. She also previously worked on SAIIA's Atoms for Development Project, studying nuclear governance and peaceful uses of nuclear energy. She is a PhD candidate at the University of the Witwatersrand.

Esther Brimmer

Esther Brimmer is the James H. Binger senior fellow in global governance at the Council of Foreign Relations. Her main areas of interest are international organizations, transatlantic relations, and competition in the global commons. At CFR, she is writing a book on the need for better governance mechanisms to manage expanding human activities in outer space, and she served as project director for CFR's most recent Task Force Report, *Securing Space: A Plan for U.S. Action*. In 2017, she served as project director for the CFR Task Force Report *Arctic Imperatives: Reinforcing U.S. Strategy on America's Fourth Coast*. From 2017 to 2022, she was executive director and CEO of NAFSA: Association of International Educators. She served as the U.S. assistant secretary of state for international organization affairs from 2009 to 2013 and was on the department's policy planning staff from 1999 to 2001. Brimmer was a professor at George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs and at Johns Hopkins University's Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies. Brimmer has served in the private sector as a senior advisor at McLarty Associates, and earlier as an associate at McKinsey & Company. Early in her career, she was a senior associate at the Carnegie commission on preventing deadly conflict. She holds a bachelor's degree from Pomona College and a master's degree and doctorate from Oxford University.

Mely Caballero-Anthony

Mely Caballero-Anthony holds the president's chair in international relations and security studies at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) at Nanyang Technological University, where she also serves as head of the Centre for Non-Traditional Security Studies and associate dean for external engagement. Caballero-Anthony's research focuses on regionalism and multilateralism in the Asia-Pacific, nontraditional security, human security, nuclear security, peacebuilding, and global governance. She has led several global and regional research projects on international security and global governance and has held key leadership roles in major international networks and institutions. She has served as secretary-general of the Consortium on Non-Traditional Security Studies in Asia since 2008 and is currently a member of the World Economic Forum's Global Council on Nature and Security and the International Climate Security Expert Network. Her past roles include vice president-at-large of the International Studies Association (ISA) and member of ISA's Global South Task Force from 2018 to 2021. She was a member of the UN secretary-general's Advisory Board on Disarmament Matters from 2013 to 2017, serving as chair in 2016, and was formerly director of external relations at the ASEAN Secretariat from 2011 to 2012. Caballero-Anthony has published extensively on security issues in the Asia-Pacific. Her recent works include "Climate Security in Southeast Asia: Navigating Concepts, Approaches and Practices," *Human Security and Empowerment in Asia*, and "Conflict Management and Atrocity Prevention in Southeast Asia: Making ASEAN 'Fit for Purpose.'"

Martin Ewi

Martin Ewi is the technical coordinator for the Enhancing Africa's Response to Transnational Organised Crime Project at the Institute for Security Studies (ISS). He was previously a senior researcher and project leader for ISS counterterrorism capacity-building for West Africa and the

Sahel. Ewi also served as a political affairs officer at the headquarters of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, based in The Hague, from 2005 to 2010. From 2002 to 2005, he was in charge of the African Union Commission's counterterrorism programme and strategic security issues, including disarmament and arms control. In those various capacities, Ewi was responsible for operationalising partnership arrangements with a wide range of stakeholders including international development partners, civil society organisations, the private sector, and national authorities. He has published extensively and worked with over forty-five countries and Pan-African institutions on capacity-building, designing regional instruments, and creating strategies to strengthen collective security responses to terrorism, violent extremism, and transnational organised crime. Ewi holds a BA in peace studies and international politics from Juniata College and an MA in international peace studies from the University of Notre Dame.

Michael Froman

Michael Froman is president of the Council on Foreign Relations. He previously served as vice chairman and president, Strategic Growth, at Mastercard; chairman of the Mastercard Center for Inclusive Growth; and as a distinguished fellow at CFR. From June 2013 to January 2017, Ambassador Froman served in President Barack Obama's Cabinet as U.S. trade representative. Major initiatives under his leadership included the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, the Trade Promotion Authority, the African Growth and Opportunity Act, the Generalized System of Preferences program, and the Trade Facilitation and Trade Enforcement Act. From January 2009 to June 2013, Ambassador Froman served as assistant to the president and deputy national security advisor for international economic affairs, Sherpa for the Group of Twenty (G20), Group of Eight, and APEC summits, and chair of the Major Economies Forum on Energy and Climate, the Transatlantic Economic Council, the U.S.-India CEO Forum, and the U.S.-Brazil CEO Forum. Prior to the Obama administration, Ambassador Froman worked at Citigroup, including as CEO of its international insurance business, COO of its alternative investments business, and head of its infrastructure investment business. During the Clinton administration, Ambassador Froman served as a senior official in the Department of the Treasury, National Security Council, and National Economic Council. Ambassador Froman received a bachelor's degree in public and international affairs from Princeton University, a doctorate in international relations from Oxford University, and a law degree from Harvard Law School, where he was an editor of the *Harvard Law Review*.

Amy L. Glover Drake

Amy L. Glover Drake is the CEO and cofounder of Agil(e), a public affairs and strategic communication firm based in Mexico City. From 2012 to 2017, she was the director of the Mexico practice at McLarty Associates in Washington, DC, a leading government affairs firm known for its Latin America expertise. Glover has also served as the national director of external relations at the American Chamber of Commerce of Mexico, and as a risk manager at Citibank, where she focused on both industrial and financial risk. Glover is a thought leader on issues related to the U.S.-Mexico bilateral relationship, with expertise in political economy and geopolitics. She has written regularly as a columnist in Mexico over the past twenty years and currently has a monthly column in Opinión

51. Glover is a member of the International Women's Forum and has served on the board of Mexico's Council on Foreign Relations since 2022 and is a dual citizen of Mexico and the United States. Glover has a bachelor's degree in political science from Georgetown University and a master's degree in economics and Latin American studies from the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies.

Steven Gruzd

Steven Gruzd is head of the African Governance and Diplomacy Programme and the Africa-Russia Project at the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA) in Johannesburg. He has worked at SAIIA since 2003, except from 2011 to 2013, when he joined the South African Jewish Board of Deputies. From 1999 to 2023, he was a researcher at the Centre for Development and Enterprise. Gruzd's interests include African politics and governance, geopolitics and African responses, Russia-Africa relations, and South African foreign policy. He writes frequently for the media. Gruzd holds a BA with distinction in international relations from the University of the Witwatersrand and an MS in international relations from the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Marc Hecker

Marc Hecker is executive director of the French Institute of International Relations (IFRI) and editor in chief of the quarterly journal *Politique étrangère*. He has published several books including *La Guerre de vingt ans*, *Intifada française?* and *War 2.0: Irregular Warfare in the Information Age*. His articles appeared in various journals. He holds a PhD in political science from University Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne and taught for many years at Sciences Po.

Memduh Karakullukçu

Memduh Karakullukçu is the founding president (from 2009 to 2019) and board member (from 2009 to 2023) of the Global Relations Forum. He is the venture partner at D4 Ventures, a United Kingdom–based technology investment platform; chairs the international advisory firm Kroton Consulting, advising tech companies on global, legal, and political challenges; and serves as the founding partner of the Turkish online legal informatics initiative Kanunum. Karakullukçu is the senior advisor at Vuslat Foundation, a Switzerland-based international nongovernmental organization focused on rebuilding social cohesion through innovative communication practices. His policy work includes technology and economic development, technology and security, global energy dynamics, and global economic and financial governance. Previously, Karakullukçu served as the founding managing director of the Istanbul Technical University (ITU) ARI science park, Istanbul's leading technology entrepreneurship community. During his tenure at ITU, Karakullukçu was senior advisor to the president; coordinator of the law, technology, and policy graduate program; and strategic advisor at the university's Center for Satellite Communications.

Marlos Lima

Marlos Lima is the director for international affairs at Fundação Getulio Vargas (FGV). He teaches strategic planning, public policy, prospective scenarios, and decision-making in uncertain

environments. He is also a visiting professor at several Latin American universities and has led international projects in the public and private sectors. Lima is a founding member of the Latin American Group for Public Administration and a member of the American Academy of Management. He holds a degree in economics from Rio de Janeiro State University, a master's degree in public administration from FGV, and is currently a doctoral candidate in administration at the São Paulo School of Business Administration.

Stefan Mair

Stefan Mair has been director and executive chairman of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) since 2020. He joined SWP in 1992 as a research associate on sub-Saharan Africa, eventually serving as research director on the institute's executive board from 2002 to 2010. From 2010 to 2020, he was a member of the executive board of the Federation of German Industries in charge of international and European affairs. His areas of expertise are German and EU foreign and security policy, geopolitical and geoeconomic dynamics, and trade and foreign economic policy. He earned his PhD from the Ludwig Maximilians University of Munich and was a PhD scholar at the Ifo Institute for Economic Research's developing countries department.

Ottilia Anna Maunganidze

Ottilia Anna Maunganidze joined the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) in February 2009 and has served as the head of special projects in the office of the executive director since January 2017. An international law and human rights expert, Ottilia Anna promotes human security in Africa by advancing peace, accountability, the rule of law, and justice. She explores new areas of work for the ISS and informs institutional strategy. Her areas of interest include emerging security threats, international criminal justice, international human rights law, and migration trends and policy. Maunganidze previously worked on the legal and sociopolitical situations in countries in southern Africa focusing on the Indian Ocean islands. Before joining the ISS in 2009, she worked as a junior legal advisor in Grahamstown (now Makhanda) and as a human rights education coordinator for Amnesty International. Among other task force, board, and committee positions, she serves on the Munich Security Conference High-Level Food Security Task Force, the World Economic Forum (WEF) Global Future Council on the Future of Good Governance, the WEF Global Cooperation Barometer advisory board, and the International Law Association's Alternative Dispute Resolution in International Law Committee. Maunganidze has a master of laws in fundamental rights litigation and international human rights law from the University of South Africa, a post-graduate certificate on the convergence and conflicts of human rights and international humanitarian law in military operations from the University of Pretoria's Institute for International and Comparative Law in Africa, and a postgraduate diploma in international studies (peacekeeping and diplomacy) and a bachelor of laws with sociology from Rhodes University.

Sanusha Naidu

Sanusha Naidu is a political analyst and foreign policy expert based in Cape Town. She is an associate at the Nelson Mandela School of Public Governance and a senior research fellow at the Institute for Global Dialogue at the University of South Africa. Her work centres on African

democratisation, political economy, and South Africa's foreign policy. She has previously worked at the Centre for Conflict Resolution and managed the Open Society Fountain's South African Foreign Policy Initiative. From 2008 to 2010, she analysed Africa's relations with China and other emerging powers. She has edited two volumes on Africa-China relations, has an extensive publications record, and provides commentary for major outlets including eNCA, SABC, CGTN, Al Jazeera, BBC, and the *New York Times*. Naidu holds a master's in international relations from the University of Staffordshire.

Adivhaho Ramaite

Adivhaho Ramaite is a research officer in the executive director's office in Pretoria. Her work spans key development areas, including human security, youth development, AI policy governance, diplomacy, and mediation. She is a 2025 Mandela Washington fellow and a GIBSA fellow. Ramaite holds a master's degree in political and international relations from Rhodes University in South Africa.

Carola Ramón

Carola Ramón is the vice president of the Argentine Council for International Relations (CARI), the first female to hold this position in forty-five years. She has a wide experience as a graduate and postgraduate lecturer in several universities, primarily teaching international economic relations as well as Chinese and Asian economic development. Ramón actively participates in publications, conferences, courses, and interviews in Argentina and abroad. Between 2019 and 2022, she was undersecretary for multilateral and bilateral economic negotiations at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs overseeing bilateral economic negotiations with Africa, the Middle East, Europe, Asia, Oceania, and North America, as well as twenty-four multilateral organisations. She also held the position of undersecretary for federal planning at the Ministry of the Economy between 2022 and 2023. Ramón holds a bachelor's in economics from the University of El Salvador; a master of economics from the University of the Center for Macroeconomic Studies of Argentina; and a master of sciences in Latin American economics and a doctorate in economics from the University of London.

Andrea Renda

Andrea Renda is director of research at Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS), based in Brussels. He is also a professor of regulation of emerging technologies and AI policy and governance at the European University Institute in Florence and at the College of Europe in Bruges. He specialises in technology policy, industrial policy, and regulatory reform.

Paul Samson

Paul Samson is president of the Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI), an independent Canadian think tank working on international governance with a focus on policy solutions in an era of transformative technologies. Samson served over twenty years with the Canadian government, including at the deputy minister level. He worked in the Privy Council Office during the time of three different prime ministers. At Finance Canada, he served as Canada's deputy

for finance at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, was cochair of the G20 Framework Working Group on the global economy and served on the board of directors for the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Samson completed his undergraduate degree at the University of British Columbia and a doctorate in international relations at the Graduate Institute, Geneva. He completed postdoctoral studies in global environmental assessment at Harvard University and was a research associate at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs.

Priyal Singh

Priyal Singh is a senior researcher at the Institute for Security Studies (ISS), responsible for coordinating the institute's Africa in the World strategic priority area. His areas of interest include multilateralism and global geopolitical developments, particularly as they relate to Africa's security landscape. Before joining the ISS, he worked as a researcher at the African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes in Durban. He is an international relations PhD candidate at the University of the Witwatersrand, focusing on ad hoc security coalitions and the deinstitutionalisation of conflict response in Africa.

Chris Tuttle

Chris Tuttle is a senior fellow and deputy director of Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, where he focuses on the politics and process behind U.S. foreign policy. He most recently directed CFR's Renewing America Initiative, a project to examine the domestic foundations underpinning U.S. power internationally. From 2019 to 2024, Tuttle was managing director in the Council's Corporate Affairs Program, leading CFR's relationships with a select group of its corporate members. Between 2015 to 2019, he served as policy director of the majority staff of the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations under Chairman Bob Corker (R-TN), and from 2008 to 2015, Tuttle was director of CFR's Washington Program and Independent Task Force Program. He first joined CFR from the U.S. Department of State, where he served from 2006 to 2008. From 1999 to 2006, Tuttle worked in the U.S. House of Representatives, serving as chief of staff and senior policy advisor to Representative Mark Green (R-WI), then an assistant majority whip. He also sat on the International Relations and Financial Services Committees. His legislative experience also includes several years as a senior leadership staff member in two state legislatures. Tuttle holds a bachelor's degree from the University of Wisconsin, a master's degree in national security and strategic studies from the U.S. Naval War College, and a diploma from the College of Naval Command and Staff. He has also done graduate study at Georgetown University, Johns Hopkins University, and the National Defense University.

Michele Valensise

Michele Valensise is president of the Institute of International Affairs (IAI). From 2017 to 2024, he was president of the German-Italian Center for European Dialogue housed at Villa Vigoni, at the joint proposal of the Italian and German governments. A career diplomat, he began his service in 1975 at the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the Farnesina. He was later posted to the Italian Embassy in Brasilia and then to the Italian Embassy in Bonn. From 1984 to 1987, during the civil war in Lebanon, Valensise was a counselor and chargé d'affaires in Beirut. In 1991, he was in

Brussels as the first counselor at the Permanent Representation of Italy to the European Union. In 1997, he became ambassador to Sarajevo. He returned to the Farnesina in 1999, where he became director of relations with Parliament and then of the press service. He has been ambassador to Brasilia since 2004, to Berlin since 2009, and secretary-general of the Farnesina from 2012 to 2016. Valensise is a board member of several joint-stock companies and the Italian Environmental Fund and a member of the board of directors of the Italian Society for International Organization. He contributes to newspapers and magazines on international politics.

Yao Le

Yao Le is an assistant research fellow of the Center for West Asian and African Studies at the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies (SIIS). Her research focuses on China-EU-Africa relations, international political economy, and sustainable development cooperation. Yao has published several articles in leading academic journals and has presided over and participated in several China National Social Science Fund Projects. She received a BA in international politics and a PhD in diplomacy from Fudan University's School of International Relations and Public Affairs. She was involved in the Sciences Po-Fudan dual degree master programme and received an MA in European affairs.

Selim Yenel

Selim Yenel has served as the president of the Global Relations Forum since January 2020. Prior to this role, he served as the first deputy secretary-general at the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization (BSEC) in 2019. Yenel served as undersecretary at the Ministry of European Union Affairs from 2017 to 2018, ambassador and permanent delegate of Turkey to the European Union from 2011 to 2017, deputy undersecretary for bilateral political affairs and public diplomacy from 2009 to 2011, and ambassador to Vienna from 2005 to 2009. He also worked on EU affairs in Ankara until the opening of accession negotiations from 1999 to 2005 and served as a member of the Turkish delegation to the European Union in Brussels from 1994 to 1999, the United Nations in New York from 1988 to 1992, the Turkish Embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan, from 1984 to 1986, and the Organization for Cooperation and Development from 1981 to 1984. He has published *The European Union's Turkey Challenge* in Turkish.

Zhou Yuyuan

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An Initiative of the Council on Foreign Relations

The 2025 Council of Councils Annual Conference *Background Memos*

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Session One

Framing Possible Pathways to a Safe, Secure, and Stable World

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Background Memo

Multilateral Silver Linings for Sustainability and Human Dignity in a Divided World

Council of Councils Regional Conference
October 26–28, 2025
Institute for Security Studies (ISS), Pretoria, South Africa

Fonteh Akum, Institute for Security Studies (ISS)

The United Nations celebrated its eightieth anniversary this year against the backdrop of low expectations, despite the growing need for the organisation to live up to its charter and save succeeding generations from the scourge of war. From Ukraine to Sudan, Libya to the Gaza Strip, civilians continue to bear the brunt of intractable wars that stress test existing global norms and institutions. Meanwhile, the humanitarian burden in the Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin continues to grow, even as development aid undergoes its most significant deterioration since its inception in the shadow of the Bretton Woods Institutions.

Beyond the complex security issues and their normative underpinnings that divide the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, the world has demonstrated a willingness to reach consensus on addressing the most significant human security issues of our time. The successful adoption of the Agreement Under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdictions in 2023, as well as the Pact for the Future in 2024, are high points in an increasingly fractious world. The Pact for the Future advances a comprehensive framework for states and societies, public- and private-sector entities, to drive humanity toward greater collaboration and a more sustainable and inclusive world.

However, despite the transnational nature of human security challenges exacerbated by climate threat multipliers, pandemics, and technologically amplified influences, states differ regarding whether and how international cooperation can best address those issues systematically and concertedly. Technology is a key driver of many global political, economic, and social shifts, but it does not often get treated with the degree of importance that it deserves.

While there is broad consensus on the very essence of the UN Charter, the normative basis for its operationalization is increasingly challenged by the same members of the Security Council who are meant to be its custodians. Even consensual voting on important security matters on the UN (General Assembly) agenda hardly generates the impetus for action through a resolution. At the core of that dissonance are three critical and interconnected factors—power, trust, and positionality—in a changing global context. States use trust and project hard, soft, and smart power in pursuit of their national interests.

Centrally managed states in the Security Council seek to capitalise on the domestic political fractures within liberal democratic states by mobilizing the countries of the amorphous Global South to advance an alternative approach to liberal internationalism. However, the missing piece of that puzzle rests in the question of responsibility and capacity to develop a collective system for underwriting global peace and security amid changing polarities.

Three fundamental shifts are driving uncertainty: the return of great power rivalry, the quest for global economic hegemony, and the global crisis of state polities and politics.

Firstly, as great power rivalry returns, the effectiveness of hard power is being operationally redefined in international relations. Over at least two decades, the limits of hard military power in achieving both national security and foreign policy outcomes have been demonstrated in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Ukraine. Those are stark exemplars of how war planning clashes with operational complexities and delivers unwanted outcomes—in intractability, financial cost, and global standing. Depending on how strategic autonomy devolves between the United States and the EU member states, bipolarity could feature the United States and China as polar leaders with differentiated perceptions of their responsibility for underwriting peace and security.

However, the rise of smart and soft power actors introduces what Amitav Acharya, in *The Once and Future World Order: Why Global Civilization Will Survive the Decline of the West*, calls a "multiplex world." Middle powers who wield historical and cultural narratives of global exclusion and marginalisation are building trusting relationships with Global South countries.

Nowhere is that more evident than in Africa's Sahel regions. Narratives of victimisation, developed through well-crafted influence campaigns, in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger have provided the ideational basis for strategic realignment toward Russian, Chinese, and other partners in the East, at the expense of the West. The realignment has provided those countries with the impetus to flout regional and continental norms by setting the stage for protracted post-coup transitions. In the process, their splintering from the regional economic community—the Economic Community for West African States—demonstrates multilateral fragility at the regional level.

The drastic cuts in development aid and differentiated responses to conflicts in Gaza, Ukraine, and Sudan have diminished the soft power potential of many global players vis-à-vis Africa, leading many on the continent to call for reform of the global system to prevent such double standards.

Furthermore, middle powers, aware of their ability to rapidly build trust and credibility by negotiating new partnerships, have increasingly stepped in to both compete with and fill the vacuum left by Western global players.

Meanwhile, states that have traditionally underwritten multilateral arrangements at regional and global levels have progressively turned insular—shrinking their foreign policy footprints in favor of political consolidation at home—even if both are not often mutually exclusive. That is as much the case for the regional anchor states, which have often driven regional consensus in Africa, as much as for the United States and its America First foreign policy.

Secondly, the quest for global economic hegemony is driving a trade war between China and the United States. Shifting economic power does not align with the responsibility for underwriting global economic stability. In a context where technologies, chips, and talent are transforming economic outcomes, the ability to foster economic innovation will largely determine power dynamics, even as states face growing internal revenue generation crunches.

Thirdly, a global crisis of state polities and politics is leading to questions about whether democratic governance is the ideal form of organisation of states and societies and to extraverted views of the problems that countries face. The current status of multilateralism is therefore a reflection of states in crisis.

This has implications for the interrogation of the normative basis of the current multilateral system, invariably eroding the ability to arrive at consensual and collective solutions.

Such dynamics provide opportunities for different forms of leadership on specific global issues with a sense of shared and differentiated responsibility. The necessity for the reform of multilateral spaces—deriving from the material conditions of an interconnected yet fragmented world—should be driven by inclusive structural reform, shared and differentiated responsibilities, and regionalism as the building blocks for an interdependent global system.

Since 1945, the United Nations has grown from its founding 51 countries to 195 member states. During this period of growth, the configuration of the Security Council has changed little, growing from five permanent and six elected members to its current configuration of five permanent and ten elected members in 1965. Thus, the composition of the Security Council has been frozen for the last sixty years. Current global reconfigurations amid uncertainty provide the opportunity for a more representative, inclusive, and participatory system.

Mutual, shared, and differentiated responsibilities are crucial for addressing the greatest transnational threats of our time. Building that norm into multilateral reform is predicated on a common understanding of state capacities and capabilities, including the appreciation of shared risks needing collective action from both strong and weak states.

Regionalism remains a fundamental contributor to renewed multilateralism. Despite the strengthening of global interconnections through information flows and supply chains, humans largely remain prisoners of geography, as initial approaches to both risks and opportunities are regionalised. Regional blocs provide a robust space for political, economic, security, and diplomatic cooperation, based on both comparative advantage and shared risks and opportunities, while also acknowledging the capacity of strong regional players to attenuate growing interstate conflicts. That approach need not be read through the prism of minilateralism but as a means to build multilateral partnerships that could snowball into globalism.

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How Can We Achieve the Ideals of the UN Charter Despite Gridlock at the UN Security Council?

It will be almost impossible to achieve the ideals of the UN Charter on a global scale in the foreseeable future. Decisive actions to ensure peace and stability, guarantee territorial integrity and national sovereignty, and facilitate peaceful conflict resolution are regularly blocked by the UN Security Council, and some of its permanent members have radically breached the principles of the charter.

Since the late 1990s, three of the five permanent members have repeatedly used their veto power to prevent effective conflict resolution efforts. The last Chapter VII mission to enforce peace was mandated in 2017 in response to a civil war in the small island state of Haiti. It would be too simplistic to attribute that gridlock solely to present-day rivalries between great powers or the autocratic idiosyncrasies of their leaders. In fact, President Donald Trump was right when he recently accused the institution of being unable to fulfil its role. The United Nations has long suffered from an inability to reform itself, bureaucratic inertia, and, more importantly, the indifference of most of its members. That disfunction is also reflected in the inability or unwillingness of member states that are not permanent Security Council members to take action when the Security Council fails to act. Since the instrument was introduced in 1950, the General Assembly has only passed a Uniting for Peace resolution thirteen times. The last time was in 2022, when Russia started a full-scale war against Ukraine—a war with dire consequences.

If the United Nations cannot achieve the ideals set out in the UN Charter, it is unclear what institutions can. The greatest hope lies with regional organisations and coalitions of like-minded countries. The European Union (EU), for example, has proved rather effective in implementing UN ideals among its members. The same can be said of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations

(ASEAN). The African Union (AU) strives to prevent cross-border conflicts and settle civil wars. Interregional, plurilateral, and mini-lateral coalitions of countries and organisations committed to the principles of the UN Charter can uphold those principles in certain parts of the world.

What Factors Should Shape Global Stability, and Who Are the Leading Actors Shaping Global Security Futures?

The questions of what factors should shape global stability and who are the leading actors shaping global security futures are contradictory. Global stability should be shaped by UN members adhering to the basic principles of the UN Charter—including territorial integrity, national sovereignty, and peaceful conflict resolution—and by their willingness to contribute to essential global public goods, such as sustainable development, humanitarian assistance, and the achievement of climate goals.

Unfortunately, those countries that are shaping the future of global security do not feel obliged to obey those principles and are increasingly unwilling to provide global public goods. Russia invaded Ukraine and Georgia, China ignored the Permanent Court of Arbitration's ruling on maritime sovereignty rights in the South China Sea, and the United States invaded Iraq, withdrew from the Paris Agreement, and dissolved the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). However, those violations of UN ideals are not exclusive to permanent members of the Security Council. Israel occupies large parts of the West Bank and violates humanitarian law on a massive scale in Gaza; Rwanda usurps territory and resources in the Democratic Republic of Congo; Gulf monarchies support warring parties in the Horn of Africa and Libya; and Turkey exerts control over parts of Syria and frequently attacks Kurdish facilities in Iraq.

Those violations of UN principles are not new, but they have intensified over the past twenty years, partly due to the rise of autocracy that has taken place in many countries. Autocratic leaders feel free to pursue their ambitions for power and wealth. They are encouraged to use foreign military adventures to stabilise their domestic power base and prove their image as strong leaders. Again, that is nothing new. What is new is that those trends have also captured established democracies. Rising political polarisation, frustration with the slowness of democratic decision-making processes, political lethargy and indifference, and the echo chambers of social media have accelerated domestic autocratic processes. Those factors are now affecting international affairs. Leaders who hardly accept internal limits to their power and break rules can be hardly expected to act differently internationally—at least when their actions remain without consequences.

The most probable outcome of that trend is a global security future shaped by rivalries—not only between great powers but also between middle and regional powers. The question is whether such rivalries will merely follow the right of the might and end in exclusive spheres of influence or whether the great power rivalry can be controlled and limited to nonmilitary conflict arenas.

Is the Future of Global Cooperation Shifting Toward Greater Informality, Regionalism, and Clubs?

The answer to that question is an unequivocal yes. Some regions will attempt to establish security orders that are free from great power rivalry and in accordance with the principles of international law. The EU and ASEAN are prime examples. The biggest challenge for those organisations is how to protect their regional security orders from the diplomatic pressure, economic coercion, and military interference of malevolent great powers. For the EU, that is Russia, and for ASEAN that is, to a certain degree, China.

There is an ongoing discussion in Europe about its future security architecture, but no conclusion has yet been reached. However, there is a widespread consensus that its security architecture needs to be established without Russia. Most European countries would insist on an "against Russia" posture (deterrence and containment), and it would require reducing dependence on its increasingly unreliable big ally.

The EU and its member states have also intensified their efforts to reach out to other potential partners and form coalitions of like-minded countries. So far, those efforts have had only limited success, partly because European offers to potential partners have not been attractive enough, and partly because others outbid them (e.g., Russia with arms and mercenaries, and China with infrastructure projects and loans). Europe's hard power capabilities are also limited, and its credibility as a defender of international norms, and consequently its appeal as a partner, was undermined by its repeated application of double standards.

Nevertheless, it would be unwise for other countries interested in maintaining the basic principles of international law to reject Europe's offer of partnership. Firstly, there are few viable alternatives. Secondly, the European Union and its member states have proven to be consistent in their partnerships, at least compared to other great powers. Partnerships and cooperation between the EU and other regional organisations could lay the foundations for a brighter, more positive international order than the existing one, or at least help to preserve some of the current standards of international relations. The free trade agreement (FTA) between the EU and Southern Common Market (Mercosur) could be an important first step in this direction.

Who Are Some Other Players in the Global Landscape, and What Is Their Role Going Forward?

One group of individuals has attracted as much attention recently as autocrats and illiberal democrats: the so-called tech oligarchs. Their engagement in politics is a relatively recent phenomenon and appears to be motivated by a desire to expand business opportunities by limiting the domestic and international role of the state, particularly regarding its regulatory powers. American tech oligarchs have petitioned the U.S. president to put pressure on his European partners to reduce digital privacy rights and lift restrictions on their operations.

Civil society organisations (CSOs) have proven ineffective in countering the growing influence of tech oligarchs on international affairs. They lack the necessary resources, and states are increasingly reluctant to protect and support them. It could be time for those groups to seek new alliances. One potential ally, albeit an unusual one, could be established multinational corporations (MNCs). Unlike tech oligarchs, MNCs shy away from disruption as a business model. Much of their cross-border investment is long term and depends on the reliability of domestic and international law. So far, neither MNCs nor CSOs have viewed each other as preferred partners—quite the opposite. However, they could be forced into partnerships by the common pressure exerted on them by autocrats, illiberal democrats, and tech oligarchs—partnerships that seem anomalous at first but could be indispensable in view of the upcoming challenges.

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Institute for Security Studies (ISS), Pretoria, South Africa

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Whither Global Governance

To say global governance is under severe stress is an understatement, given the profound changes in the international environment. Since World War II, global governance has been anchored in a rules-based order, largely shaped and defended by the United States. Although Washington occasionally deviated from its own standards, it nevertheless promoted liberal norms, multilateralism, and free trade. That order is now severely challenged.

From Russia's military aggression in Ukraine and Israel's unrelenting attack on Gaza to multiple climate risks, pandemics, technological disruptions, and rising inequality, the second Trump administration's retreat from global leadership has eroded the postwar system. Within months, the United States has withdrawn from major multilateral commitments it previously played a pivotal role in, including the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the World Health Organisation (WHO), while near-global invocations of tariffs have reversed the United States's traditionally strong emphasis on free trade principles. Those actions, with profound global implications, were ultimately cemented with President Donald Trump's polarising address at the eightieth UNGA, where his statist worldview and rejection of globalism highlighted a decisive U.S. retreat from the global order it had once built.[1]

The rejection of liberal order has left U.S. allies like the European Union an increasingly isolated actor of the West in defending a liberal, rules-based order. Europe's normative power is increasingly vulnerable to the resurgence of realpolitik principles and to challenges from both the East and West.[2] Meanwhile, China, with increasing capabilities, has gained by filling in the space left by the United States. It has advanced its own vision of global governance with its introduction of the

Global Governance Initiative, Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global Security Initiative (GSI), and Global Civilisational Initiative.[3] Those developments have intensified debates about the future of the rules-based order and what this means for global cooperation.

The Future of Global Institutions

A foundational component of the post-1945 international order, global institutions have a played a central role in establishing rules, shaping normative behaviour, and enabling multilateral cooperation. Their effectiveness, however, depends on the multilateral commitment of powerful states. Recently, geopolitical changes have threatened to erode their authority, as illiberal actors emphasising sovereignty and security increasingly undermine the liberal multilateral system, reviving a might makes right ethos that leaves powerful states less constrained by institutions.[4]

The United States, once a leading defender of multilateralism, now poses a major threat to the system. Under Trump, Washington has rejected or withdrawn from international agreements like the Paris Agreement and the WHO, weakening climate commitments and damaging the legitimacy of global frameworks. Similarly, U.S. and European support for Israel, despite humanitarian crises in Gaza and their rejection of International Criminal Court arrest warrants for Israeli leaders, has fueled perceptions of hypocrisy, especially in the Global South.[5]

Meanwhile, illiberal actors in the East also undermine institutions. Russia's war in Ukraine violated the principles of nonaggression and noninterference, which Moscow then inverted by accusing the West of interfering in its affairs. On the other hand, China's expansive nine-dash line in the South China Sea directly breaches the UN Conference on the Law of the Sea, to which it is a signatory. Those examples illustrate major powers selectively violating rules while prioritising state interests, which gravely threatens global stability.

For the Global South, those developments exacerbate long-standing grievances with global institutions, which it views as exclusionary and Western dominated. The Global South, distinct from China, remains without permanent representation at the UN Security Council, leaving it with no voice nor space for influence. Calls for reforms of the Security Council, World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have grown louder.[6] The recently launched UN80 Initiative is aimed at reforms, but doubts have been raised about its ability to strengthen inclusivity amid severe budget cuts. As dissatisfied states seek new ways to change the status quo, other actors articulate their visions of global governance.

A Global Reordering?

Once excluded from major Western-led platforms for global governance, China now actively provides leadership in the international arena. Arguably benefitting from U.S. retrenchment, Beijing has offered alternative visions and expanded its influence within existing institutions and through new initiatives.

Within existing institutions, China has deepened its engagement with the World Trade Organization (WTO) and expanded its participation in peacekeeping and climate governance. More recently, its influence has grown within the World Bank, IMF, and the WHO, which has strengthened China's legitimacy and allowed it to challenge Western initiatives from within.[7] At the same time, China has advanced new institutions.

The BRICS group (whose membership has grown from Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa to also include Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates), founded in 2009, embodies many of its aspirations: promoting sovereignty, noninterference, and an alternative economic development model that avoids political conditionalities. With its rapid expansion since 2014, BRICS has become a powerful framework for economic cooperation, bolstered by China's resources. Moreover, its suite of global initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative and Asian Infrastructure Bank, together with the GDI and GSI that emphasise economic development and security, positions China as a leader in tackling inequality and poverty while rejecting Western emphases on democracy and human rights. The GSI, in particular, elevates China's central ideological emphasis on comprehensive and indivisible security and attacks exclusive Western alliance blocs.[8]

For many countries in the Global South, China's rise creates new opportunities for participation and influence over the wider system. Its global initiatives allow all forms of government to participate, presenting a viable option for actors across Asia, Africa, and the Middle East—all targets of China—for economic development without liberalising. Yet the growing multipolarity in the system grants the Global South more leverage, allowing states to hedge selectively, aligning with the East or West, and thereby choosing and shaping which norms prevail. As a result, the Global South is no longer merely a passive recipient but an active player shaping the trajectory of global governance.

Thus, despite shifts, elements of continuity remain strong. The United Nations and its charter continue to anchor the system, and sovereignty retains wide legitimacy across both the East and the Global South. The Global South's calls for reform of the international system also reflect demands for more inclusion rather than dismantlement, suggesting a preference for adaptation rather than wholesale change. Yet continuity is coupled with reprioritisation. Liberal dominance has eroded with China's rise and Russia's disruption. Even the EU, reliant on normative influence, was forced to adapt by strengthening material capabilities.

What we are seeing is the coexistence of new and old frameworks reflective of competing pluralism rather than outright change.[9] The Global South, while critical of Western hypocrisy, remains wary of fully embracing China, particularly in security matters. That hedging, arguably, fosters competition between Western- and Eastern-led institutions, potentially generating move responsive solutions to global challenges.

Charting New Pathways for a Safe and Secure World: The Role of Other Powers

Regional actors have the choice and flexibility to focus on the issues of critical importance to their regional community. In Southeast Asia and the wider East Asian area, regional frameworks like the ASEAN's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, and the ASEAN Strategy for Carbon Neutrality will go a long way in supporting the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Those frameworks outline pathways to safeguard economic security, enhance social protection, bolster health security, and prepare education systems to meet the challenges of digitalisation and artificial intelligence (AI). They can also help many developing states integrate sustainability and green transitions into regional economic strategies, which include mobilising climate finance and technology transfer for low-carbon growth.

While a heightened U.S.-China rivalry exemplifies the risk of weaponised interdependence, middle powers and regional actors can play stabilising roles by mediating competition and fostering cooperative frameworks such as ASEAN's East Asia Summit and the EU's Indo-Pacific Outlook.

Regional arrangements provide useful platforms in promoting dialogue in AI safety, cybersecurity, and safeguarding biosecurity and arms control, as well as reframing interdependence from vulnerability to cooperative security and shared responsibility. *In the face of mounting global and regional challenges, the case for multilateralism cooperation has never been stronger. For ASEAN, its commitment to comprehensive and cooperative security remains central to helping its members navigate complex and cross-border risk. Thus, working with its dialogue and development partners, and by forming broader coalitions of the willing, smaller regional states can more effectively exercise their collective agency and take the lead in shaping a more resilient and cooperative regional order.*

Ultimately, the ability of regional and middle powers to deepen those cooperative norms will determine whether multilateralism and interdependence become a source of strategic vulnerability or collective resilience. The task ahead is clear: claim back multilateralism, turn interdependence into a stabilising force, and build a multipolar global order anchored in cooperation, not coercion.

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Is Consensus Possible on Global AI/Tech Governance?

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Is Consensus Possible on Global AI Governance?

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Introduction

Reaching consensus on a way forward for international artificial intelligence governance should be approached as a major priority, but it needs to be done pragmatically in today's geopolitical environment.

In basic terms, governments want safety, security, and competitiveness; firms want predictable market access; and civil society wants rights preserved. Building international consensus around those goals is a real challenge and will likely depend not on a single agreement or agreements between governments. A way forward could require several pathways where governments and companies can agree on a basic framework that includes common methods to assess AI models, document capabilities and limits, and learn from incidents—so that assurance and best practices operate across borders.

Movement can build from a classic soft law approach, as has been taken with many international issues where there is a definable common interest and a need to build greater consensus through informal mechanisms before a more formal regime is even contemplated.

A limited, modular consensus is feasible if states (and large companies) align on a lightly institutionalized exchange mechanism for transparent analysis and information sharing on best practices for testing, deployment, assurance systems, and interoperability.

How Do We Govern AI?

The first core question relates to governance for AI. Many AI governance issues require domestic action to promote the development and adoption of reliable productivity-enhancing AI tools for the benefit of their economies and societies, as well as putting the necessary regulations in place to protect citizens from the most severe present and future risks. However, some national interests and objectives related to AI will likely be only possible to achieve through international policy coordination. For example, regulations to protect citizens from the development or deployment of high-risk AI systems could be ineffective if competing AI powers do not enact similar restraints.

History is full of examples of what could work (or not) at the international level, including governance relating to aviation standards and safety, nuclear and chemical weapons, and the global financial system. Broadly speaking, cooperation works most effectively when problems are measurable, monitoring is feasible, benefits can be standardized, and some elements of fairness can be addressed. Against those criteria, AI is a mixed case:

- **Shared vulnerability is high:** election integrity, cyber/bio-misuse, and critical infrastructure can be compromised, creating a clear case for international cooperation.
- **Measurability and verification are moderate:** evaluations and red-teaming exist, but thresholds for dangerous capabilities, training-data provenance, and online misuse are not sufficiently addressed.
- **Distributional fairness is weak:** compute, data, and IP concentration means winner-takes-most among firms, and many countries are relegated to be rule-takers.
- **Standardization dividends are strong:** interoperable testing, safety cases, and incident formats reduce costs that can be helpful to the whole collaborating network.

AI has some of the characteristics to build effective international cooperation, but not all. The state of existing AI governance initiatives at international and regional levels reflects the positives and the limitations, including principles (e.g., the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development), resolutions (e.g., UNGA, the Group of Seven Hiroshima AI Process (Group of Seven), the AI Act (EU), and a binding convention (Council of Europe). Large companies created the Partnership on AI and the Frontier Model Forum, among other initiatives, but they appear to have faded in ambition, replaced by individual companies outlining views on governance, such as Open AI's proposal to establish a body modeled on the International Atomic Energy Agency. To date, the various initiatives and ideas have tended to fall victim to lowest-common-denominator levels of ambition or remain unimplemented ideas.

Further rapid development in AI capabilities could give rise to emerging global scale challenges that can only be managed effectively with significant international cooperation. Faced with uncertainty about the future pace and direction of AI development, governments should take action now to design the kinds of mechanisms for international cooperation that would be needed to manage the most challenging AI scenarios. The following nine building blocks for future international

agreements should be further developed in preparation to address future global AI challenges, if needed: shared global objectives, prohibitions, safety standards, technical cooperation, emergency response, benefit sharing, decision-making, compliance mechanisms, and institutional arrangements.

The Implications (Positive and Negative) Relating to AI Governance

Positive implications

- **Standardization dividend for cooperation**. Unlike some cross-border risks, AI can offer immediate gains from interoperable testing as evidence generated in one jurisdiction can be reused elsewhere, reducing compliance and accelerating safe deployment. That creates natural incentives for international cooperation (e.g., Group of Seven's Hiroshima Process reporting framework).
- **Strong shared-risk incentives**. Election or political interference, cyber defence, and potential bio-misuse are shared vulnerabilities that raise the payoff to coordination (e.g., threat intelligence about model-enabled deception or intrusion). That shared-risk profile makes incident exchange and joint evaluations politically saleable even when legal philosophies diverge.
- **Modular convergence is possible**. AI governance is decomposable in so far that states can agree on testing and transparency even if they disagree on freedom of speech rules or military uses.
- **Evaluation science, red-teaming, and audit methods are technical spaces well suited to cooperation**. The 2024 U.S.-United Kingdom memorandum of understanding on AI safety testing could be a model.
- **New tools for monitoring and compliance can improve governance of other domains** (climate, finance, health) and lower the cost of international monitoring and improving response.

Negative implications

- **Verification and attribution**. Unlike hard assets such as nuclear materials, AI's core assets—model weights, data, and code—are replicable and movable, making it difficult to verify dangerous capabilities, trace training data provenance at scale, or attribute misuse online with evidentiary quality that stands up in multilateral settings.
- **Inequality**. Compute, data, and capital are concentrated; benefits accrue to a small set of firms and countries, while harms (such as labour dislocation and disinformation) are diffuse. Without capacity-building, many states will be rule-takers rather than coauthors—undermining regime durability.
- **Regulatory fragmentation and trade friction**. Divergent models can generate compliance patchworks that raise costs and complicate cross-border operations.
- **Information integrity pressures**. Generative systems amplify influence operations and fraud at scale, straining election management or broad messaging needed in areas like public health.

- **Dual-use and securitization**. Military and intelligence uses (targeting, cyber ops, and autonomous functions) are accelerating and there are limited incentives for international cooperation.
- **Speed of change and diffusion**. Tech advances measured in months outstrip regulatory or international coordination timelines measured in years.

Implications for Think Tanks

Think tanks are simultaneously subjects of AI governance and shapers of it. On the operational side, AI expands research capacity—faster basic literature reviews, multilingual drafting, customized charts and graphics, data cleaning and analysis, and quick research assistants—yet it also introduces new risk vectors. Those include quality and validity (errors and AI hallucinations), originality and IP (derivative outputs and unclear training-data provenance), and attribution and accountability (who owns an AI-generated product). Reputational exposure rises if AI content is not clearly disclosed or information is not transparent for auditing. Emerging rules—such as transparency and labelling of synthetic media under the EU's AI Act—could touch think tanks that publish in European markets or operate public-facing chat tools. Donors and other partners increasingly expect a new basic risk management, including disclosure standards, and safeguards for personal and confidential data.

Think tanks have a valuable role in converting practice into policy; they have a comparative advantage in policy innovation, convening cross-jurisdictional communities of practice (legal, technical, diplomatic), and potentially in translating emerging standards into implementable guidance. Hosting neutral roundtables can help surface what works best internationally.

Think tanks have the opportunity to model the credible and transparent internal use of AI and, at the same time, to facilitate consensus on best practices across borders.

Policy Options and Pathways

Building international consensus is possible—but likely in layers, rather than on everything at once. The current international regime is piecemeal and ad hoc. One idea would be to establish a new AI Transparency Forum (AITF)—a voluntary, multi-stakeholder forum that could facilitate voluntary best practices for testing, deployment, and incident learning to make AI assurance portable across borders and improve interoperability. The AITF would borrow from the Financial Stability Board playbook as an informal and nimble (and nonpermanent) body that produces public dashboards, peer reviews, and regular reporting to the Group of Twenty (G20) finance ministers, while leaving law-making and formal standard-setting to existing bodies.

Core membership would be G20 and EU membership, allowing for different observer groups and, consequently, for the active involvement of industry. To ensure greater fairness and legitimacy, the forum should also ensure involvement of small and medium enterprises and emerging economies.

COUNCIL OF COUNCILS

An Initiative of the Council on Foreign Relations

Background Memo

Is Consensus Possible on Global AI/Tech Governance?

Council of Councils Regional Conference
October 26–28, 2025
Institute for Security Studies (ISS), Pretoria, South Africa

Andrea Renda, Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS)

The short answer to the question in the title is no. Achieving consensus on how to govern artificial intelligence has never been more difficult, for many overlapping reasons.

The first is a lack of willingness to cooperate. Over the past few months, the United States—a leading power in the AI domain—has withdrawn both its intentions to govern AI and its support for most international organizations that were fostering cooperation on AI governance. That decision affects bodies such as the UN Advisory Body on AI; UN agencies such as UNESCO, which in recent years brought 193 countries to agree on a Recommendation on the Ethics of AI; and even the OECD, where the network of AI experts carried out valuable work on AI risk and accountability until support suddenly began to wane.[1] Even U.S.-favored initiatives have lost momentum: the Safety Summit, originally launched at Bletchley Park in November 2023 with China's participation, gradually lost traction.

The result became visible with China's de facto exclusion from the subsequent summit in Seoul in May 2024. The situation reached a climax at the Paris AI Action Summit in February 2025, where the United States and United Kingdom refused to sign the final declaration and showed unprecedented hostility toward governance, regulation, or approaches oriented towards deploying AI in the public interest.

What remains today is the so-called Hiroshima AI process, governed by the Group of Seven (G7) and supported by the OECD, which so far has developed only a light-touch monitoring system for frontier AI models, based on self-assessment. That mechanism gradually extended beyond the G7 through a network of "friends of the Hiroshima AI process" comprising fifty-six countries as of May 2025. However, it appears too weak to address the power and information asymmetry between

powerful AI companies and policymakers, and it is also limited to frontier AI models, which have monopolized policymakers' attention since late 2022.

Second, national approaches to AI governance are starkly diverging: the European Union and South Korea have adopted comprehensive binding legislation on AI, while China regulates specific aspects of concern (e.g., recommender systems and large language models); most other countries rely on sectoral approaches or on either self- or coregulation. Even countries that once debated comprehensive laws, such as Brazil, seem to have lost interest.

The future could shift again, as the EU has announced plans to postpone and simplify compliance with its 2024 AI Act and has withdrawn its proposal on AI and liability. At the same time, implementing the AI Act will require EU legislators to work with sectoral regulators on specific applications, defining risks and mitigation measures that vary widely across sectors. The result will be a gradually expanding regulatory regime that, in its horizontal form, is difficult to apply for both supervisory authorities and regulated entities.

Third, consensus on AI governance is undermined by the intensifying rivalry between the United States and China over dominance in AI. The so-called (and arguably over-hyped) race to artificial general intelligence (AGI) has driven the United States to unprecedented levels of investment in infrastructure, compute, and talent. The Stargate project—with an investment of $500 billion—was followed by massive transactions involving OpenAI, Nvidia, Oracle and now also Broadcom, CoreWeave, and Advanced Micro Devices, Inc (AMD). The AGI race diverts the attention of policymakers and investors away from AI uses in the public interest and toward energy-, water-, and data-hungry generative AI. While that trend dominates in the United States, China appears more focused on industrial applications of AI, including robotics. Tensions escalated further when the United States required TikTok's algorithm to be managed domestically under Oracle's supervision, and China, having proven with DeepSeek R1 that it can develop AI without advanced U.S. chips, responded by banning the purchase of Nvidia chips by Chinese firms.

Fourth, the bifurcation of technology stacks and evolving foreign policy strategies in the United States and China is reverberating worldwide. The term sovereign AI, once niche, is now widespread, encompassing diverse approaches from developing national large language models to offering public AI solutions. Tech giants such as Nvidia and Microsoft now market sovereign AI services, promising to keep data within national borders. A broader push for technology sovereignty targets the entire digital stack, including identity, payments, and data governance, such as IndiaStack, or seeks open-source alternatives to reduce dependence on American or Chinese vendors, as with Europe's EuroStack movement.

That technological schism affects the global majority: China is the only superpower with a global AI strategy explicitly linked to sustainable development and the Global South; the EU's new Tech Offer remains transactional; and the United States has only recently resumed promoting its technology

stack abroad. In reality, only China is close to self-sufficiency, while the EU, United States, and others remain heavily dependent on foreign solutions.

Fifth, as the world struggles to agree on AI governance—or even on the need for it—the technology itself advances rapidly. AI agents, for instance, pose almost insurmountable governance challenges and require deeper exchanges between experts, providers, civil society, and policymakers. Similarly, personalized AI assistants raise new risks such as overdependence, loss of agency, and hyper-nudging. Governing AI use cases will require stronger cooperation within countries (among AI supervisors, horizontal regulators such as data protection authorities, and sector-specific regulators in health and finance) and internationally. The recent UNESCO proposal for a network of AI supervisors could provide much-needed standardization and mutual learning. Otherwise, AI governance risks being monopolized by large private hyper-scalers.

Against that gloomy background, possible solutions can be explored through three leading questions.

How Do We Govern AI?

AI should be governed in an agile, multi-stakeholder way. Nationally, that requires foresight and horizon scanning, co-regulatory solutions, mandatory access to AI systems for authorities and certified independent researchers, real-time auditing, and transparency and accountability measures. Internationally, frontier AI monitoring needs to be made stricter, with provisions allowing civil society and experts to test and audit those systems. A global network of supervisory authorities, such as the one recently launched by UNESCO, could provide a platform for lesson-sharing and coordination. The upcoming UN Independent International Scientific Panel on AI can also enhance foresight and awareness. Finally, empowering civil society and promoting AI literacy and sovereignty can help counterbalance the dominance of a few powerful players.

What Are the Implications (Positive and Negative)?

On the positive side, fragmentation compels policymakers to update their knowledge and adopt innovative, agile, and adaptive governance tools. AI requires anticipatory governance, multi-stakeholder involvement, and even new institutional designs. The negatives are clear: most countries lack the capacity to establish such frameworks, making global collaboration essential. More broadly, getting AI governance right means refocusing international efforts on using AI for good, rather than pursuing ill-defined AGI ambitions.

How Does This Issue Affect Think Tanks?

Think tanks need to develop expertise in AI and produce long-term scenarios on its influence across public policy, the economy, society, and the environment. The economic impact of AI is dramatic, requiring process reengineering, new business models, and redefined market structures and supply

chains. Societal impacts are equally profound, reshaping how humans learn, socialize, and access information. Environmental costs are rising, as governments invest in nuclear plants and cooling technologies to sustain the AI race.

In that context, think tanks play a vital role in fostering multidisciplinary, forward-looking thinking to support human-centric AI policy, and in sustaining international research cooperation to prevent darker times ahead.

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[1] The author is cochair of the OECD AI Risk and Accountability group.

COUNCIL OF COUNCILS

An Initiative of the Council on Foreign Relations

Session Four

Trade, Tariffs, and Power: The Future of Global Economic Cooperation

COUNCIL OF COUNCILS

An Initiative of the Council on Foreign Relations

Background Memo

Trade, Tariffs, and Power: The Future of Global Economic Cooperation

Council of Councils Regional Conference
October 26–28, 2025
Institute for Security Studies (ISS), Pretoria, South Africa

Carola Ramón, Argentine Council for International Relations (CARI)

Trade tariffs are not mere fiscal tools—they express power, sovereignty, and strategic rivalry. Amid rapid geopolitical and technological change, they will continue to shape competition and cooperation. The future of global economic cooperation hinges on whether tariffs are weaponized for transactional, zero-sum aims or repurposed for collective governance. If used responsibly, they can align with climate action, fair development, transparent rules, and can catalyze a more sustainable global market; if misused, they can fragment the global economy, embed rivalries, and erode cooperation. The trajectory of tariffs will therefore translate into future contention between power and cooperation, between peril and promise.

Trade, Tariffs, and Power—Leaders vs. Latecomers

Import taxation has long been an instrument of economic policy, serving industrial protection, fiscal needs, and, increasingly, geopolitical competition. Tariffs sit at the intersection of power politics, interdependence, and cooperation. Tensions between established industrial leaders and late industrializers have historically hinged on how tariffs are deployed, contested, and negotiated. History shows that a country's stance on free trade versus protectionism largely reflects its position in the global hierarchy: leading powers typically promote openness, while latecomers rely on protection and state-led industrial policies to catch up. Inevitably, those latecomers clash with the reigning hegemons.

When Adam Smith and David Ricardo articulated the case for free trade in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Britain was already the manufacturing hegemon, the so-called workshop of the world. Smith criticized mercantilism, colonial monopolies, protective tariffs, and bullionist policies, arguing that free trade encouraged specialization and market expansion.

For a dominant Britain, that meant more markets for selling its manufactured goods and cheaper access to raw materials. Ricardo, writing in the context of protected agriculture under the Corn Laws, introduced the principle of comparative advantage: even the most efficient nation benefits by specializing and trading. His framework armed Britain's industrialists against the Corn Laws, paving the way for their repeal in 1846 and the consolidation of Britain's free-trade order. Adam Smith supplied the philosophical break with mercantilism, David Ricardo provided the economic rationale that aligned with Britain's global leadership.

While Britain embraced free trade as the leading industrial power, by contrast, the United States and Germany relied heavily on protectionism during their industrial takeoff. Both countries shielded their emerging industries from established British competition. By the early twentieth century, the United States had overtaken Britain in steel and manufacturing output, which fostered wider friction, including disputes over shipping, finance, and influence in Latin America. In the case of Germany, its rapid rise in chemicals, steel, and machinery—combined with its naval buildup—made it Britain's primary challenger in Europe, both economically and strategically.

Japan's development after the Meiji Restoration provides another example of trade friction and challenges to the hegemon. After 1868, Japan pursued a state-led catch-up strategy, deploying subsidies, tariffs, and strategic investment in railways, shipbuilding, textiles, and armaments. Heavy industry and chemicals thrived under protection and state planning, while imperial expansion secured resources and markets. Following World War II, the Ministry of International Trade and Industry directed quotas, subsidies, and selective protection to build competitive sectors such as steel, automobiles, and electronics. Japan kept its home market relatively closed, while exporting aggressively, fueling its economic miracle.

By the 1970s and 1980s, huge trade surpluses with the United States in cars and electronics created sharp frictions. Washington accused Tokyo of unfair competition through nontariff barriers, keiretsu corporate structures, and an undervalued yen. The conflict was partially defused through negotiated measures including the Voluntary Export Restraints and the 1985 Plaza Accord, which appreciated the yen and opened Japanese markets. Those slowed, but did not reverse, Japan's export dominance, which lasted until the economic stagnation of the 1990s. Here again, a latecomer strategy of protectionism and industrial policy produced frictions with the global leader.

China followed a similar trajectory, though on an even larger scale and with more expansive global implications. After 1949, the People's Republic pursued autarky—central planning, high tariffs, and limited trade—with poor results. By 1978, China remained predominantly rural, with low productivity and limited industrialization. Under Deng Xiaoping, reforms gradually opened state-controlled Special Economic Zones that welcomed foreign capital while most sectors stayed protected. Tariffs of around 40 percent in the early 1980s were reduced to below 10 percent by the time of China's World Trade Organization accession in 2001. Yet strategic protection persisted through nontariff barriers, joint-venture requirements, weak intellectual property enforcement, and subsidies that facilitated technology transfer and industrial catch-up. Joint ventures in autos, state-

backed telecom giants, and heavy support for steel, shipbuilding, solar panels, and semiconductors accelerated China's rise. After WTO entry, exports surged, earning China the title of the "world's factory," even as complaints of hidden protectionism mounted.

Since 2018, the Unites States' trade war has laid bare those tensions. Beijing's Made in China 2025 strategy targeted advanced sectors such as artificial intelligence, robotics, semiconductors, and green energy, while digital protectionism and controls on critical minerals underscore its state-capitalist model. Those measures have enabled rapid scaling and innovation, especially in electric vehicles (EVs), 5G, and renewables, but also created overcapacity and fueled a global backlash.

The rapid development of China since 1978 has demonstrated that protectionism, combined with long-term industrial policy and export orientation, can deliver extraordinary development success. Yet, as with the United States, Germany, and Japan before it, that very success has triggered friction with the reigning hegemon—in this case, the United States. A main difference from previous cases in history is not only the size of the Chinese market but also that the world is much more interconnected into global value chains. Any moves within that trade ecosystem have implications for the rest of the world.

Given the mounting trade tensions worldwide after U.S. President Donald Trump's Liberation Day tariff blitz and the continuing negotiations, uncertainty is rife. The future of global cooperation could depend on whether such protectionist strategies can evolve into new trade frameworks, or whether they continue spiraling into escalating conflict.

Tariffs and Geopolitics—The Future of Global Cooperation

Tariffs have reemerged as central instruments of geopolitical economy. The ongoing confrontation between the United States and China is not only about rebalancing trade. It is about reconfiguring global value chains, which signals a break from the multilateral era shaped by the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and later the WTO that institutionalized tariff reductions within a rules-based system. The WTO was designed to discipline tariffs through binding commitments and adjudication. Across advanced economies, tariffs steadily declined and were gradually replaced by nontariff measures.

Over the last few years, however, the WTO's capacity has eroded. Its appellate body, a key body for the organization, has been paralyzed since 2019, with many economies progressively pursuing bilateral or plurilateral arrangements as consensus has been increasingly difficult to reach. New issues such as climate funding, digital services, and state subsidies were introduced into agendas, sometimes to the detriment of reaching consensus on more traditional or long-pending issues such as agriculture and fisheries. The EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) epitomizes those shifts, linking trade and climate by pricing carbon at the border. Advocates frame it as fair competition and a shared responsibility; critics denounce it as green protectionism. The implementation of CBAM has raised concerns about potential conflicts with WTO principles,

particularly regarding nondiscrimination and the risk of acting as a disguised restriction on trade, leading to ongoing debate and scrutiny within the WTO framework.

The erosion of multilateralism and the rules-based system poses many questions for the future and whether tariffs can be reimagined as instruments of the global public good or whether they will deepen conflicts. That affects not only the big powers and brings uncertainty to the world markets but also disrupts supply chains and redirects trade toward other countries. Tariffs now function as weapons of economic statecraft: they influence alliances, redirect supply chains, and redefine the boundaries of cooperation. Friend-shoring, the process of moving supply chains from competitors to friendly states, raises critical questions about middle-power agency, finding balances, and who qualifies as a "friend."

Tariffs also expose asymmetries of power. Large economies that command markets and supply chains can weaponize them effectively, while smaller, export-dependent states have limited capacity to retaliate. As the world's largest consumer market, tariffs from the United States send global shockwaves. In the case of China, with its manufacturing dominance, agricultural and commodity flows can be redirected through countermeasures. In addition, the EU exercises tariff power through its common external tariff and regulatory reach—the so-called Brussels effect—shaping global standards in trade, environment, and labor.

For developing economies in Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia, the risk of retaliation, exclusion from profitable markets, and marginalization from global value chains is a concern. Regional initiatives such as the African Continental Free Trade Area aim to reduce intraregional tariffs to build scale and resilience while preserving some policy space. Furthermore, swing countries and groupings such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and BRICS while serving as platforms for cooperation, also entail the risk of fragmentation into competing blocs.

With those variables at play, several trajectories are possible for the global economy:

- **More fragmentation and ensuing tariff wars**. Great-power rivalries intensify. In this scenario, blocs weaponize tariffs to discipline supply chains, deepen spheres of influence, and erode multilateral rules, undermining cooperation on shared challenges such as climate and global health and placing middle powers and small economies in difficult positions.
- **Selective cooperation with strategic tariffs**. States impose targeted protection in critical sectors such as semiconductors and clean energy, while negotiating cooperative frameworks in others, thus creating niches of multilateralism.
- **Reform and integration**. WTO and regional reforms harmonize tariff rules, with tariffs repurposed to support global public goods such as climate, labor, and sustainable development. This path, however, requires strong leadership and sustained commitment from major powers, as well as understanding and accommodation for new economic hegemonies in the world.

To conclude, history offers yet another cautionary tale in the often-cited Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act of 1930. One of the most far-reaching and controversial pieces of U.S. trade legislation of the twentieth century, its original intent was to protect American farmers from foreign competition in the context of economic depression. It then expanded to cover a wide range of manufactured goods after intense lobbying from industrial sectors. The act raised U.S. tariffs to historically high levels covering more than twenty thousand imported goods. That triggered global retaliation, slashed global trade by more than half, and damaged U.S. international standing. It stands as a reminder that excessive reliance on tariffs can destabilize not only economies but also the international system. With global value chains currently deeply integrated and multilateral organizations with weak enforcement capacity, the threat of escalation into a systemic breakdown remains.

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An Initiative of the Council on Foreign Relations

Background Memo

The Future of the Global Trading System and the Case for Open Plurilateralism

Council of Councils Regional Conference
October 26–28, 2025
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Michael Froman, Council on Foreign Relations (CFR)

The days of a fully multilateral trading system are over. The World Trade Organization (WTO) has run aground, failing to negotiate, monitor, and enforce members' trade practices as it was intended to, with recent multilateral agreements only marginal in scope. The United States has demonstrated a willingness to violate, ignore, or withdraw from agreements to maximize the scope for unilateral action—more than tripling the effective tariff rate since the start of the year. And China has pursued economic policies that undermine the fairness of the global trading system to which it owes much of its success. What is to become of the global trading system as the United States pursues a grand experiment in unilateralism while China feigns fealty to the multilateral, rules-based system but in practice undermines its integrity?

We are witnessing the death of the rules-based trading system. The road to how we got here is long and winding, paved with good intentions, overpromises, and fatal design flaws. And while the system has been broken, what is to replace it is not yet clear. No trade policy is free. This is a moment that demands clear thinking about a new paradigm grounded in the current political reality.

A Broken System

Since the establishment of multilateral trade organizations—first in the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and eventually in the WTO—there were high hopes for a rules-based trading system that would encompass all the major trading countries from the biggest economies such as the European Union to emerging markets such as China. The rules were to enhance stability, promote openness and integration, and provide a peaceful process for resolving disputes. As the world's leading economy, the United States benefitted enormously (strategically and economically) from this system, but that did not mean it lacked serious criticism, dating back to the debate over the

North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the establishment of the WTO, and ultimately, peaking with the China shock.

The existence of a multilateral system of enforceable rules, whatever its limitations, has been a unique achievement of the global trading system. No such comparable regime exists for nonproliferation or environmental protection. The multilateral trading system was the result of a massive diplomatic effort over decades that incentivized countries to accede to certain constraints on unilateral action in exchange for the advantages that came with implementing a common set of predictable rules. At the end of the day, most of the countries followed most of the rules most of the time—which is about as much as one can ask of a system composed of sovereign countries. It is a strength of the global trading system, but it is also a source of its undoing, as opposition arose to what was perceived to be the sacrifice of sovereignty and unfettered capacity to act unilaterally.

The Present Risks

The retreat from the rules-based system risks an escalatory spiral of new trade barriers erected with all of the ramifications for growth, productivity, costs, and competitiveness.

The first risk in such an order where power rules is that of imitation and contagion. The United States does not operate in a vacuum, nor does China, and trade has a way of spurring on domestic politics because of the direct and indirect effects it has on particular constituencies. Other countries could respond by imposing tariffs and trade restrictions in the short-term and diversifying their trading relationships away from the United States in the long-term. For example, Canada has openly sought new trading partnerships without the United States, and has started pursuing a Buy Canadian policy at home.

We could see a world where protectionist spats proliferate with other countries imitating the United States and China by pursuing their own policies of unilateral transactionalism. That could well lead to a world that is similar to the pre–World War II period, when trade was wielded as a weapon between states.

The second risk is the economic impact of these actions. Swimming upstream against the forces of comparative advantage does not mean that it is possible to defy the laws of economics. Although it is unlikely to bring economic Armageddon, the consequences of this rupture in the global trading system will be material, with the full impact of tariffs likely to show only months or even years from now.

The third risk of replacing a rules-based system with a power-based one is the peril it poses to developing countries and small states. They do not have the market power or economic leverage to influence major trading partners on their own, and they have relied on the system of the last eighty years to level the playing field between them and bigger economies. The loss of those tools means

having to rely on the goodwill of others to treat them fairly in trade, which is not a comfortable position for them to resume.

Going Forward

As countries move away from the fully multilateral rules-based system, there is a risk of a certain amount of anarchy or chaos in the international economic system. The key question is whether we can create and live by a new set of rules absent a fully multilateral rules-based system. There is a need to preserve some rules outside the system of old—if for no other reason than to create the degree of stability and predictability that is so important to trade, investment, and economic growth.

The best way forward for policymakers is to start again, and for like-minded countries to come together to establish a set of rules to govern trade among themselves and supplant the multilateral system as it exists. As I argued in the pages of *Foreign Affairs*, such arrangements could be as much a vehicle for limiting trade and investment as much as they are for promoting it. They can and should deal with trade restrictions, such as export controls or investment restrictions among countries with similar perspectives on national security, as well as access to critical minerals, trusted telecommunications infrastructure, and secure supply chains.

Importantly, open plurilateralism suggests countries that come together and agree upon a set of rules could invite others who are prepared to accept those standards. There is precedent for this framing—the Trans-Pacific Partnership was designed with this consideration in mind. The agreement started with twelve countries, but at the time, there was a long list of additional countries who expressed interest in joining. Now known as the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership, the agreement was finalized without the United States, adding the United Kingdom. Now, there is talk of the European Union having some relationship with it as well.

A system of open plurilateralism is likely to be less efficient and less optimal from a purely economic point-of-view, but it might well be the most politically sustainable outcome.

COUNCIL OF COUNCILS

An Initiative of the Council on Foreign Relations

Background Memo

Trade, Tariffs, and Power: The Future of Global Economic Cooperation

Council of Councils Regional Conference
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Since the beginning of 2025, there has been increased uncertainty surrounding global trade. The central question is whether U.S. President Donald Trump's policies on trade and tariffs are merely a symptom of the faltering rules-based system once championed by the United States, or whether they represent the latest stage in its deliberate unraveling. Just as the UN Security Council has often been helpless in preventing conflicts from spreading, the World Trade Organization has been struggling to uphold established commercial norms.

The COVID-19 pandemic compounded that weakness, driving countries into a new wave of economic nationalism. The scramble to secure essential goods and reconfigure supply chains revealed a shift toward regional and proximity-based arrangements. In that climate, competition has increasingly displaced cooperation, even among traditional allies. Trade, once heralded as the great unifying force of globalization, is now being wielded as a strategic weapon.

Power Beyond Armies: Trade as a Strategic Tool

Power has always been the principal currency of international affairs. Traditionally exercised through military force, it also manifests in coercion, inducement, persuasion, and rulemaking. When expedient, the tools of power have shifted to subtler instruments such as sanctions, blockades, and trade restrictions, often supported by latent military strength.

Commerce has become an extension of foreign policy, used alternately to compel, reward, or punish. The history of trade contains ample examples of markets being pried open by force. In the nineteenth century, Britain's Opium Wars against China epitomized how gunboat diplomacy could secure commercial advantage. The United States similarly projected its influence to gain access to

closed markets in Asia and Latin America. In those cases, trade was never neutral—it was a tool to advance geopolitical objectives.

For a brief period in the late twentieth century, optimism grew around the notion that trade could serve as a pacifying force. The liberal thesis suggested that nations immersed in economic interdependence would be less likely to wage war on one another. That idea was dramatically disproven during the First World War, when Germany and Britain—despite their extensive trade links—plunged into one of history's deadliest conflicts. Today, the question looms whether that analogy will hold for the United States and China.

A direct conflict between the two would devastate the global economy. Yet their mutual dependence does not guarantee peace, especially in a world where political and even personal rivalry increasingly overrides economic logic.

From GATT to WTO: A Liberal Order in Decline

The liberal order of the post–World War II era was designed to avoid precisely those kinds of destructive confrontations. The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), established in 1947, sought to reduce trade barriers such as tariffs, quotas, and subsidies, encouraging a cooperative system of open markets. GATT later evolved into the World Trade Organization in 1995, reflecting the ambition to create a truly global framework for commerce.

Ironically, it was the United States that championed China's accession to the WTO in 2001, expecting that greater integration would produce a more open and liberal China. Instead, the WTO stalled in the early 2000s as negotiations collapsed and many countries shifted toward regional or bilateral trade deals. Meanwhile, Washington grew disillusioned, particularly with the WTO's dispute settlement mechanism, which often ruled against U.S. practices. In recent years, Washington effectively paralyzed the system by blocking new judicial appointments.

That erosion of institutional authority created fertile ground for unilateral measures. Where once the United States had been the architect of multilateral rules, it increasingly chose to act outside them.

Tariffs as Policy: The Trump Effect

Trump's trade policies have marked a watershed. Tariffs—once used sparingly to protect specific sectors—have been expanded to an unprecedented scale. Although past administrations occasionally targeted imports for strategic reasons, average tariffs on goods entering the United States hovered around 3 percent. By September 2025, average tariffs had risen to over 20 percent.

Those new tariffs are not uniform and vary depending on the political relationship between Washington and the exporting country. Allies are not exempt; rather, they face the implicit threat of

higher tariffs unless they align with U.S. positions. Beyond trade balances, the Trump administration uses tariffs to pressure countries on broader policy issues, including relations with other nations, as well as global issues such as climate change. States that resist are punished with punitive rates, while those that concede are granted relief.

This shift underscores a new reality: tariffs are no longer primarily about economics but about enforcing compliance.

The European Union: Between Accommodation and Resistance

The European Union, long a champion of multilateralism, has found itself caught in the crosscurrents. The EU's global strength lies in its role as a trading bloc: it accounts for around 14 percent of global goods trade. The United States remains the EU's largest export destination outside the bloc, while China is its primary source of imports.

Despite that leverage, the EU has shown caution in confronting Washington. Faced with Trump's aggressive tariffs, Brussels has often sought compromise rather than escalation. That pragmatism reflects a recognition of asymmetry: the EU is a trading power, but it lacks the capacity to impose costs on the United States without risking damage to itself.

That said, the EU has also used trade as a political tool, incorporating human rights clauses into its bilateral agreements. For example, the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism was introduced as an environmental measure to ensure fair carbon pricing, but critics argue that it could function as a disguised tariff.

China's Approach: Trade as Leverage

China, too, has shown little hesitation in weaponizing trade. When states challenge Beijing's stance on sensitive issues such as Taiwan or its treatment of the Uyghur minority, China has retaliated by restricting imports or threatening to withhold rare earth exports.

Beijing also leverages its control over strategic supply chains. For instance, its Belt and Road Initiative not only builds infrastructure abroad but also secures influence over trade routes and chokepoints. That power extends beyond tariffs to the ability to block or redirect flows of goods.

Such actions highlight that trade wars are not confined to the economies of China, the EU, or the United States. States located at strategic points along vital trade corridors—from the Strait of Hormuz to the South China Sea—can exert disproportionate influence by threatening disruption.

The Risk of Retaliation and Escalation

Yet trade coercion is a double-edged sword. Policies designed to compel often provoke retaliation. Tit-for-tat tariffs escalate quickly, with ripple effects across global markets. Consumers face higher prices, exporters lose access to markets, and supply chains are disrupted.

The U.S.-China trade war of the late 2010s demonstrated how quickly such measures can spiral. Farmers in the American Midwest suffered significant losses when China retaliated with tariffs on soybeans and other agricultural products. At the same time, U.S. manufacturers reliant on Chinese components faced rising costs.

The lesson is clear: trade wars rarely produce clear winners. Instead, they inject volatility into an already fragile global economy.

Economic Nationalism and the Retreat of Multilateralism

The current environment reflects a broader political shift. Across many democracies, economic downturns and rising inequality have fueled populist and nationalist backlashes. Those movements often advocate protectionist policies, portraying globalization as the source of domestic hardship.

Uncontrolled immigration and stagnant wages have further eroded public trust in liberal trade policies. Even in countries that once championed open markets, skepticism toward globalization now dominates political discourse. As a result, leaders feel pressured to prioritize short-term national gains over long-term collective prosperity.

The weakening of international organizations mirrors that retreat. Where once states accepted certain constraints in exchange for predictability, today many act unilaterally. Rules and institutions are increasingly seen as optional.

The Path Forward: Restoring Trust

If nations do not believe in institutions, failure becomes inevitable. Yet history also shows that cooperation remains possible when common interests are strong enough. Specialized institutions such as the IMF, the World Bank, and others continue to function because their work is rooted in shared needs that transcend national politics.

The challenge before us is to rebuild trust, which requires the following:

- Revitalizing the WTO or creating new mechanisms that can enforce compliance fairly and transparently would require leadership, which is currently lacking. The United States, traditionally the driver of such efforts, has turned inward, leaving a vacuum. China does not have the same clout or interest in leadership.

- In the absence of global consensus, smaller groups of like-minded countries can form agreements that are open, flexible, and transparent, such as interim arbitration. Rather than create barriers, incentives such as market access can be reinstated. Those arrangements, while imperfect, could serve as building blocks toward a new rules-based system.

What is proposed is nothing new and only a stopgap solution. The key lies in inclusivity and enforceability.

Conclusion: A Vacuum Waiting to Be Filled

The world has entered a period where trade and tariffs are no longer primarily about economics, but about power. They have become tools of coercion, inducement, and punishment. Although such tactics can deliver short-term advantages, they risk triggering cycles of retaliation and instability that harm everyone.

Politics abhors a vacuum. If the United States continues to retreat from global leadership, other actors—China, the EU, or regional coalitions—will step in to shape the new order. The question is not whether or when a system will emerge but what kind it will be: one of cooperative engagement, or one dominated by fragmented blocs using trade as a weapon.

The stakes could not be higher. A century ago, failure to manage trade rivalries contributed to global catastrophe. Today, the challenge is to avoid repeating that mistake. The world needs leaders willing to prioritize shared prosperity over short-term gain and to rebuild institutions capable of managing an interdependent global economy. Until then, trade will remain less a bridge than a battlefield—an arena where power is contested, and the future of cooperation hangs in the balance.

COUNCIL OF COUNCILS

An Initiative of the Council on Foreign Relations

Session Six

Africa and the World: The World in Africa

COUNCIL OF COUNCILS

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Background Memo

Africa and the World: The World in Africa

Council of Councils Regional Conference
October 26–28, 2025
Institute for Security Studies (ISS), Pretoria, South Africa

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In an era of geopolitical fragmentation, climate imperatives, and shifting economic power, Africa's global role is being fundamentally redefined. Home to 1.5 billion people and projected to account for more than a quarter of the world's population by 2050, the continent is no longer a passive recipient of external decisions but an active architect of its own future.

Far removed from the post–Cold War marginalization of the 1990s, Africa has become a central arena of global competition—with the Arab Gulf states, China, the EU, India, the United States, and others vying for partnerships and influence. Yet that contest is not merely a struggle among external powers for political influence and access to resources. It is also an opportunity that many African governments are keen to leverage to secure investment, technology, and favourable terms that advance their own strategic priorities.

That approach reflects both necessity and ambition: the understanding that no single partnership can fully address Africa's diverse developmental and security needs, and the determination to shape external relationships in ways that deliver tangible results. That outward engagement is also closely tied to Africa's push for stronger representation within global governance institutions such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, and the IMF. By asserting agency in both bilateral partnerships and multilateral forums, African states aim to ensure that decisions impacting the continent are informed by African perspectives and advance collective interests rather than those of a narrow set of powerful actors.

The Challenge of Financial Dependency

African states' imperative to diversify partnerships has become more urgent amid a sharp decline in global official development assistance (ODA). The U.S. decision in early 2025 to suspend most of its foreign aid, including 83 percent of USAID programs, has compounded the retrenchment of

major European partners, with France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and others cutting billions from ODA budgets. Increasingly, donor funding is being redirected to strategic priorities such as migration control and defence, leaving Africa with reduced liquidity and mounting uncertainty.

Many African states have long relied on external assistance to finance education, health, and social protection programmes. The sharp reduction in ODA has widened fiscal deficits and placed hard-won gains at risk in areas such as immunization, HIV treatment, and pandemic preparedness. For countries already contending with climate shocks, conflict, or commodity dependence, the withdrawal of concessional finance threatens to unravel decades of progress.

Those cuts have coincided with a particularly difficult economic moment. Households across the continent are grappling with rising costs of food, energy, and transport, sparking protests in major cities over price hikes, subsidy reductions, and new tax measures. Such unrest underlines the limited room for governments to raise domestic revenue without igniting further social tensions, even as external aid contracts.

Elevated debt burdens, high interest rates, and shrinking fiscal space intensify those pressures. The combination of declining aid, constrained borrowing, and difficulty mobilizing sufficient internal revenue has severely weakened governments' ability to shield citizens from economic shocks and sustain investment in long-term development.

Several governments are accelerating efforts to close their fiscal deficits through domestic means. Rwanda, for example, is preparing to roll out expanded digital tax collection in 2026, a reform expected to generate significant new resources, while Kenya has sought to capture more revenue from its rapidly growing digital economy.

The external financing landscape is also evolving, with African states able to turn to a wider contingent of potential investment partners. China's financing to the continent has fallen significantly from its peak in 2016 as it seeks to adopt a more targeted and cautious model. In its place, other non-traditional partners are stepping up their lending—a trend exemplified by the rapidly increasing engagement of Gulf states in strategic projects. Still, that funding picture remains uneven in terms of scale and transparency, and new investments could also come with conditions around energy security, market access, or political alignment.

Ultimately, the aid crisis exposes a deeper structural vulnerability: Africa's failure to think and act collectively on funding development. Although African states have coordinated diplomatically through the African Union (AU) and regional blocs, financing strategies remain largely fragmented. African-centred multilateral financial institutions (excluding larger multilateral development banks such as the African Development Bank) account for under 3 percent of external debt; adherence to collective levies such as the AU's Peace Fund has been patchy; and projects with clear regional implications, such as railway and energy infrastructure, are more often pursued unilaterally. Without greater policy coherence, Africa risks substituting one form of dependency for another.

Building Enduring Economic Sovereignty

The shift toward trade-centred development models—long advocated by African scholars and policymakers wary of aid dependency—is gaining momentum. Mechanisms such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) provide a framework for deeper integration into regional and global value chains, including in critical growth areas such as agricultural processing, renewable energy, pharmaceuticals, and manufactured goods. By integrating a continental market of 1.5 billion people, AfCFTA has the potential to expand opportunities for producers, promote industrial diversification, and strengthen Africa's bargaining position in the global economy. However, realising this vision will require sustained investment in infrastructure, policy coherence, and institutional capacity.

Trade-focused strategies also attract foreign direct investment and technology transfer, fostering entrepreneurship and value addition across the continent. Several global initiatives reflect that trend. The U.S. Prosper Africa Initiative has pivoted toward supporting private-sector partnerships and facilitating U.S. investment in African markets. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has delivered large-scale infrastructure financing, connecting African economies to global value chains. The EU's Global Gateway program, launched as a strategic counterweight to the BRI, has committed significant resources to digital, transport, and energy projects across Africa. Meanwhile, Gulf states—particularly Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates—have stepped up investment in infrastructure, energy, logistics, and agribusiness. Collectively, those initiatives highlight the competitive environment African states are navigating.

However, trade liberalization is not a panacea. Without careful design, it risks exacerbating inequalities and marginalizing smallholder and informal actors who lack the capacity to compete with upscaled imports or larger corporate players. Equitable development requires complementary policies: targeted support for small- and medium-sized enterprises, skills training, and access to financing for local producers are essential to ensure that trade integration produces broad-based growth.

Multilateral Influence and the Imperative of Global Governance Reform

While coordination and implementation challenges persist, Africa's pursuit of shared initiatives is helping increase the continent's diplomatic and economic weight on the world stage. The AU has led this shift, most notably through the AfCFTA, ratified by forty-seven states, which the World Bank estimates could boost intra-African trade by $450 billion by 2035. Regional economic communities are complementing that effort by championing regional infrastructure projects that facilitate intra-African trade links and access to global markets.

The AU's elevation to a permanent G20 seat in 2023 further consolidated Africa's global role, while strategic partnerships reinforce the continent's leverage. For example, recent EU declarations

supporting local mineral processing and value addition in Africa, and the UN Global Compact's Africa Strategy 2024–25 aims to mobilize private-sector investment in renewable energy and other Sustainable Development Goals priorities. Yet persistent challenges, including intra-state and regional rivalries, fragmented governance structures, lack of coherence in policy and strategy, and financial dependency among African institutions, continue to undermine progress.

Reforming global governance is existential for Africa. It is a necessity for increasing the continent's ability to address systemic inequities and assert agency in international decision-making. Africa's fifty-four states hold 28 percent of UNGA votes, yet the continent remains the only one without a permanent seat on the Security Council—a body created while most African countries were still under colonial rule. That structural imbalance limits timely and effective responses to continent-specific crises, despite around half of Security Council deliberations concerning conflicts in Africa. Veto-wielding powers often prioritize geostrategic interests over urgent humanitarian needs, leaving African states without a decisive voice on matters that most directly affect them. The Ezulwini Consensus, adopted by the AU in 2005, demands at least two permanent African seats on the Security Council. That demand has gained urgency as geopolitical fragmentation heightens paralysis in the Security Council.

The stakes are also economic. Enhancing the continent's voice in global financial governance is more critical than ever as structural challenges intersect with global ODA cuts. Global governance reform matters because it can unlock liquidity at lower cost— facilitating investment in green transitions, industrialization, and higher-productivity sectors—and empower African states to pursue nationally defined priorities, free from externally imposed conditionalities.

Conclusion

Africa's trajectory in the decades ahead will be shaped less by the scale of external competition for influence and more by the continent's ability to harness that competition strategically. Diversification of partnerships, the rebalancing of aid and trade, and collective efforts to secure meaningful reform of global institutions all point to a continent determined to actively shape the international system. Yet sustaining that momentum requires addressing internal weaknesses, from fiscal dependency and fragmented strategies to the political frictions that dilute common positions. The more unified, coordinated, and strategically autonomous Africa becomes, the greater its capacity to transform global governance.

Ultimately, Africa's growing agency is not simply a continental concern but a defining test for the world order. Whether global governance becomes more representative, whether development financing supports structural transformation rather than dependency, and whether the energy transition yields equitable growth will depend in no small part on Africa's success in carving out an enduring, sovereign role. For both Africa and its partners, the task is clear: to move beyond transactional engagement toward a system where Africa's voice is not peripheral but central, shaping a more balanced and sustainable global future.

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An Initiative of the Council on Foreign Relations

Background Memo

Is Aid Over?

Council of Councils Regional Conference
October 26–28, 2025
Institute for Security Studies (ISS), Pretoria, South Africa

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Africa is facing what could be its most serious development and security challenges yet. Major powers are abandoning foreign aid, historically the most stable source of development financing, and while their leaders have outwardly opposed aid, developing countries in Africa are accepting the moment with equanimity. Mirroring other major changes happening in the global multilateral agenda, both donors and recipient countries are signaling a farewell to aid.

A Farewell to Aid?

Traditional donors' long-standing dissatisfaction with aid has morphed into revolutionary action. Following the 2020 pandemic, the need to bolster global health led to a surge in official development aid, but that appears to have been the end of such sweeping assistance. In 2025, the United States under the second Trump administration is undergoing a self-revolutionary approach, shutting down the USAID and drastically cutting foreign aid. Other leading donors such as France, Germany, and the United Kingdom are also cutting their assistance budgets. While Africa remains the primary recipient of global ODA, its share has declined from 37.6 percent in 2013 to 26.7 percent in 2023, primarily due to the diversion of aid to Europe caused by the Russia-Ukraine war.

Africa has long been prepared for the retreat of traditional donors. The development crisis in the last twentieth century spurred large-scale international development aid to Africa, with net official aid exceeding 20 percent of national income in many countries in the 1990s, and approached 100 percent in Somalia, 80 percent in Liberia, and 60 percent in Zambia. However, that large amount of aid also provided the opportunity for external policy intervention. Conditional aid, in the view of many, does far more harm to developing countries than good. When recalling Africa's "lost decade," the negative consequences of economic structural adjustment programs are widely criticized. That dissatisfaction is reflected in Dambisa Moyo's book *Dead Aid: Why Aid Is Not Working and How There*

Is a Better Way for Africa, in which the author recognizes trade and investment as alternatives to aid, and the need to enhance Africa's self-reliance.

Currently, net aid flows average only 3 percent of Africa's GDP, and ODA accounts for 10 percent of Africa's major funding sources, less than annual remittances. African countries view the decline in aid flows not as a dark moment but rather as a historic opportunity. The Mo Ibrahim Foundation report clearly articulates Africa's perspective on aid: "So, let us not waste time mourning the end of aid and hoping that international generosity might one day return. Let us rather see this current acceleration of history as a useful wake-up call and build solutions from within."[1] Faced with the new reality, Africa's focus has shifted to debt treatment, special drawing rights allocations, and risk assessment, with the focus on reforming international development financing mechanisms.

Aid in the New Landscape of International Development Cooperation

The transformation of foreign aid has never been more intense, as the argument that aid is useless overshadows the debate over aid effectiveness. Whether 2025 will mark the "end of aid" remains to be seen, but the era of radical change has arrived.

Decentralization is driving that transformation in this new geopolitical era. The diversification of global development paradigms, the fragmentation of global governance, and the reorganization of strategic priority partnerships are redefining international development cooperation. The willingness, commitment, and influence of developed countries in international development is declining, and realism is replacing idealism.

The role of aid as an independent policy tool of donor countries is fading. National priorities, not humanitarianism, have become the fundamental driving force behind the transformation of international development cooperation. The agenda, norms, and standards of international aid established by traditional donors no longer serve as the sole standard for the development community, and the soft power effect of aid has been significantly reduced.

Those changes to foreign aid manifest in three key areas. First is the end of the grand narrative. The international community had constructed a long-term, ambitious development vision and action plan, but that plan is easily swayed by the will of major powers and geopolitical conditions. Thus, the implementation of a global development narrative at the national level is significantly compromised.

Second, transactional cooperation is replacing normative cooperation. As a resource, aid was given excessive political expectations of good governance, but the outcomes were doubted. While aid will not end, it will be available in a lightweight, demand-driven, and transactional manner. That, to a certain extent, highlights the value of aid practices by non-Development Assistance Committee (DAC) donors.

Third, the process of international aid learning has been interrupted. Non-DAC donors can no longer view aid from developed Western countries as a model for learning and emulation. China, the Gulf states, and others will continue to provide or even increase aid, but not in the DAC style or in the way traditional donors desire it.

A new understanding and definition of international development is necessary to standardize a system for international development cooperation. First, economic and trade cooperation guided by growth and development is undoubtedly the foundation of international development cooperation. "Trade not aid" is not just a policy change for the United States—it is also a long-standing call from African countries. Aid alone does not bring growth and development. Real growth relies on trade and investment, policy planning, and market nurturing.

Second, there needs to be dialogue and integration between the Global North and the Global South. The Global North still adheres to an aid- and governance-oriented paradigm, while the Global South promotes one centered on economic and trade cooperation. Embracing different paradigms, rather than simply demarcating them based on geopolitical thinking, could be more important to achieving development outcomes.

Third, countries should seek a new equilibrium in a world in disorder. The reform of international development cooperation mechanisms is a new consensus among developed and developing countries. In development financing, the focus is often on leveraging more resources while ignoring Africa's financing paradox: the more countries need development financing, the less likely they are to receive it. Even when external funds are available, they come at higher costs and greater debt risk. Breaking that paradox requires reforming international financial mechanisms while simultaneously enhancing Africa's internal financing capabilities. That is a core demand of African countries today.

In essence, future international development cooperation is a systemic reconstruction for the post-aid era. International development cooperation is being redefined as a decentralized, diversified, and transactional cooperation system based on demand and supply: not a top-down governance framework but a blockchain-based resource adaptation process. Of course, aid remains necessary, especially in responding to humanitarian disasters and urgent development challenges. To increase its relevance, the transformation of aid into customized, privatized, and transactional forms is foreseeable.

What Is China's Role?

In the early twenty-first century, as China's relations with developing countries in Africa expanded, it was often seen as a destroyer of the traditional development aid system and became a scapegoat for its ineffectiveness. In the current era of transition, China is viewed as a revisionist, not only challenging the Western-dominated international order but also aiming to establish a China-led order. When the United States closed USAID, a natural reaction was to wonder whether China would seize the opportunity to fill the vacuum.

Those debates overlook the fact that China once studied and emulated traditional donors. After the Millennium Development Goals were introduced in 2000, China began providing classic development aid. Every Forum on China-Africa Cooperation summit has prioritized aid, including commitment to debt relief. The later-established China State International Development Cooperation Agency was, in fact, an imitation of the major donors. For a period, China and Western countries engaged in close cooperation on international development, including exploring trilateral and multilateral cooperation in Africa. Despite that collaboration, differences between China and the West became increasingly pronounced and ultimately evolved into two distinct development models.

Classical explanations often attribute that separation to differences in political systems and values, but that reasoning overlooks the underlying logic behind China's cooperation with Africa, or South-South cooperation, which can be summarized in two points: first, it is driven by African needs, rather than great power competition, and second, it depends on China's actual supply capacity. The former enables China's resource investment to be more targeted and have a greater impact on the local community. For example, China's investment in African infrastructure, energy, power, ICT, and mining benefits China and Africa both, and has undoubtedly been a significant source of China's growing influence. The latter has in fact shaped China's approach to cooperation with Africa, with win-win being the core logic behind it.

China's own economic conditions and political culture have dictated that it not strictly accept the OECD's definition of aid but instead explore tools tailored to its national conditions. China's policy-based development finance, such as the Export-Import Bank of China and the China Development Bank, draws on international practices, like concessional credit, while also actively exploring commercial cooperation, offering preferential treatment whenever possible.

That hybrid model distinguishes itself from traditional development finance: while traditional donors are aid-led, China is development finance–led, which ensures the purpose and effectiveness of the funds used. In recent years, the Gulf states' investment and financing in Africa closely resemble China's approach, and their rapid progress demonstrates African countries' acceptance of that model. China's approach is fundamentally a manifestation of the country's adherence to pragmatism. When China realized that the economic development impact of aid was limited, it began to view economic and trade cooperation as the cornerstone of China-Africa cooperation. Although China established the State International Development Cooperation Agency, its responsibilities are limited to humanitarian aid, while economic planning departments drive the international development cooperation China champions and reflects in the BRI.

The world is in an era of profound transformation in international development cooperation, which calls for a new comprehensive paradigm based on trade, investment, industry, and technology transfer. As the saying goes, "When elephants fight, the grass suffers." For countries on the margins of the global political, economic, and financial system, a stable and harmonious international

environment is far more important than resource mobilization and investment. A crisis can easily undo the gains of international development cooperation. If we truly care about Africa's development and security, a crisis management and stabilization mechanism based on global development is particularly important. That requires not only strategic foresight from leaders of all countries but also pragmatic strategic communication and action.

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[1] Mo Ibrahim Foundation, *Financing the Africa We Want*, Forum Report, July 2025, https://mo.ibrahim.foundation/sites/default/files/2025-07/2025-forum-report.pdf.