



AFRICAN AGENCY IN A SHIFTING GLOBAL ORDER: AFRICAN PRIORITIES ON THE REFORM OF THE MULTILATERAL SYSTEM

Policy Brief 4/2026

Roundtable Discussion
Concept Note, May 2026

Date: July 2-3, 2026

Venue: University of the Witwatersrand

Introduction

The international governance system is at an inflection point. The United Nations (UN), as the global governing body, faces a multiplicity of challenges to its mandate as spelled out in its Charter. The principles that have informed its authority have been disregarded as global powers unilaterally advance their own interests in the global system. Fierce geopolitical battles mean that consensus is not being garnered on the most critical problems of our times. Africa is on the receiving end of the consequences of the community of nations' failure to chart collective action. If African interests were already severely circumscribed, the current dynamics have further diminished African agendas in the supposedly collective and collaborative international system.

This roundtable discussion is a forum for dialogue, consultation, and brainstorming on Africa's priorities on the status of the UN, the implications of geopolitical rivalries, and the rapidly unfolding global governance architecture. The roundtable will consider pathways to position Africa as a shaper of norms rather than merely a rule-taker on the international stage. It will bring together African stakeholders committed to rethinking global governance through African lenses.

The convening comes at a time when various regions and countries around the world are strategizing to anticipate and respond to a changing governance architecture in their own interest. Africa as a region and African countries have largely lagged in agenda-setting and forward-looking strategy. Lack of preparedness means that the continent is not building scenarios for Africa in an emerging global governance of the future. The failure to plan means that Africa is likely to be a victim of the uncertainties in a world changing at a rapid and continuous pace. This is particularly urgent and critical because changes in international governance systems that we are witnessing in real time are and will be not only revolutionary, but also irreversible. The choices are stark. Africa will be negatively impacted if it fails to take agency to shape the changing global order in its own interests. On the other hand, Africa will reap benefits if it deliberately makes choices and takes actions to secure its interests in the emerging world order.

The question, therefore, is not whether Africa should be involved in the recalibration of the new and emerging world order, but how the continent should go about raising its stake in a process already underway. The shifting global order is such a massive dynamic that a multistakeholder approach is required if a comprehensive strategy is to be achieved. To this end, the African Union's Constitutive Act acknowledges the complementary roles that academia and civil society across the continent can play in promoting its work in conjunction with the political and policymaking stakeholders.

The roundtable is part of other initiatives led by conscientious Africans determined to seize the moment to develop a set of actions to inform policymaking and action. One of these is the “Africa and the United Nations: Shifting Global Order, Multilateralism, and Reforms” conference scheduled for November 22-24, 2026, in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Context: Shifting Global Order and Multilateralism

African agency

There has been no shortage of news, analysis, or political commentary on the increasingly impactful, varied activities, and probable intentions of global powers in Africa. However, the vast majority of what is projected and consumed by the global policy and intellectual community is presented through the perspective of the global powers. By contrast, African standpoints have been muzzled out of global engagements. Global power competition in Africa has reached a point where the continent is pulled in different directions. African actors and stakeholders are prone to valorize the global powers, thereby diminishing African interests. This situation all but ignores the latent agency African actors potentially have in an increasingly polarized global order. It glosses over African aspirations enunciated in the African Union’s (AU) blueprint of Agenda 2063. The goals of regional economic communities (RECs) and national or country-level policies are pushed aside. African states are treated as norm takers rather than norm setters, agenda-takers rather than agenda-setters. African actors and stakeholders have largely become bystanders as the emphasis is directed toward competition between the powers.

Now, more than ever, African agency must be amplified during this moment of global rupture to ensure the region assumes its rightful place as an equal partner alongside major and emerging powers on the global stage. For more than two decades, African leaders through the African Union (AU) have consistently called for reform of global governance institutions. The AU Committee of Ten on the Reform of the United Nations Security Council (AU C-10) has maintained a consistent continental stance on Security Council reform, and the AU C-10 Model adopted in Lusaka, Zambia, in July 2025, advocates for a more democratic and accountable UNSC, which will require a review of the UN Charter. This is in line with the mandate of the African Union, as articulated in its Pan-African vision and aspirations outlined in Agenda 2063, which calls for Africa to become “a global and influential actor.” It is now urgent to amplify African agency to advocate for and build coalitions to design and create new structures for managing and governing the planet.

Geopolitical competition

Currently, several global powers (so-called great and middle powers) are at various stages of implementing strategies toward Africa and planning to entrench their positions. These strategies include structuring self-interested deals, undercutting each other, and persuading Africa to take sides in their spheres of influence. Some commentators have gone as far as arguing that global powers are intent on exploiting African nations. The most visible and vicious manifestation of global power competition in Africa is the ideological and geopolitical battle between Western powers led by the U.S. and the so-called “Global South” powers led by China, India, and a resurgent Russia. In the recent past, these faultlines have been further muddled by the intra-Global North rupture in relations. In this context, Africa’s voices and interests have been at best muffled and at worst completely eviscerated, with the continent being lobbied to choose either side. Even though some of these powers claim to be working toward a multipolar world, Africa’s contributions to this process remain either peripheral or unacknowledged. The ideology-laden divisions pit the Global South versus the Global North; emerging powers versus established powers; socialist countries versus capitalist countries; former Eastern Bloc countries versus former Western Bloc countries, and so forth. Even more intriguing is that former allies in the West/Global North are perceived to be taking diverging paths, while some alliances in the Global South are seen to be ill at ease.

Multilateralism and UN reforms

The global powers engaged in near-zero-sum competition are increasingly and unilaterally bypassing the UN, thereby diminishing the role of multilateralism in global governance. Invoking sovereignty, several powers are opting for unilateral decisions over issues that require universal consensus. Cultural and religious differences and intolerance are increasingly expressed through devastating wars. In tackling these and other problems, Africa faces the stark choice of balancing sovereignty or championing the norms of cooperative interdependence as enshrined in the UN’s founding and operating principles.

Developing countries, of which Africa is part, are trapped in geopolitical battles and have little or no recourse to collective decision-making through global governance as envisaged in the UN Charter. This raises a significant concern about the role that African countries can play in contributing new ways for international cooperation through the UN. At the same time, the UN’s legitimacy and authority have been severely weakened by internal institutional decay, mission creep, and budgetary

constraints. Partly, the internal problems that saddle the UN are because the world has drastically changed since the global body was established eighty-one years ago. These drawbacks have limited the UN's capacity to deliver on its core mandate of international peace and security, equality between nations, and development through dedicated programmes, particularly the Sustainable Development Goals.

Article 109 of the United Nations (UN) Charter provides for the convening of *"a General Conference of the Members of the UN to Review the Charter."* In June 1945, when the UN Charter was drafted in San Francisco, USA, much of the African continent was under the yoke and exploitation of European colonialism; only Egypt, Ethiopia, and Liberia were independent. Consequently, African countries were not adequately represented during the deliberations to establish the UN. Drawing on the theme of the African Union's *Decade of Justice for Africans and People of African Descent through Reparation 2026-2036*, there is a robust case for restitution for Africa's historical exclusion from the establishment of the UN system. This is echoed in the UN Pact for the Future, specifically Action Point 39, which calls for redress for Africa's historical exclusion in the formation of the existing multilateral system. The practical transformation of multilateralism requires the UN General Assembly to invoke Article 109 to convene a United Nations Charter Review Conference, which cannot be vetoed by the Permanent Five members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

Reform of the global financial architecture

Importantly, the UN Charter Review is not limited to reforming the UN Security Council and will also focus on transforming the global financial architecture, notably the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the World Trade Organisation (WTO). In November 2024, Brazil, South Africa, and India (at the IBSA Forum) issued a Joint Leaders Statement calling for a comprehensive UN Charter Review through Article 109.¹ There is an opportunity for Africa to have a seat at the table in shaping broader, more fundamental reforms to make the UN work for the continent.

Response to multiple crises

The issues driving a potential rupture in global relations have a huge impact on Africa. Described as a polycrisis, these issues include climate change, decoupled governance of digital technologies and information wars, rising armed conflict, international and cross-border crime, health and food insecurity, conflict over natural resources, and unemployment. These problems are no longer merely

¹ India, Brazil, South Africa (IBSA), IBSA Forum Leaders Statement, Paragraph 11, available at: <https://thepresidency.gov.za/sites/default/files/2024-11/IBSA%20Leaders%E2%80%99%20media%20statement.pdf> accessed 8th April 2026.

evident in African countries. They are testing domestic and regional governance systems to the limit and fueling socio-economic divisions.

Objectives

This roundtable is a response to the call by African governmental and societal leaders for a fundamental shift in global power dynamics. The objectives are:

- I) Amplifying African voices and advancing African agency by mobilizing African stakeholders to assert and enhance Africa's bargaining power in the unfolding global shifts, with an emphasis on Africa's choices vis-à-vis global powers.
- II) Analyze Africa's interests in the United Nations linked to broader shifts in global governance in an increasingly multipolar world and provide pathways for foreign policy and diplomatic practice in addressing the key problem issues.
- III) Discuss the potential strategic positioning of Africa as a champion of global governance through a reformed United Nations architecture and offer strategic pragmatic recommendations.
- IV) Deliberate on the current state of UN-led multilateralism and propose practical and strategic insights on how Africa can more effectively champion African interests in global governance processes and outcomes.

Roundtable approach

In deliberating the theme and issues, the roundtable will adopt an analytical approach based on interrogating African policy positions against the current UN reform initiatives. The African policy documents and initiatives to be reviewed and analysed include the following:

- The international relations aspects of the African Union's Agenda 2063 and related documents.
- Africa's position on the UN reform framework spelled out in the "Sirte Declaration on the Reform of the United Nations" and the Resolution on the United Nations Reform: Security Council (Ezulwini Consensus (2005)ⁱ.
- The United Nations General Assembly "Declaration of the Trafficking of Enslaved Africans and Racialized Chattel Enslavement of Africans as the Gravest Crime against Humanity"ⁱⁱ.
- The entities responsible for UN reforms, including the Committee of Ten (C10), focused on the Security Council reforms, the African Union Mission to the UN, the New Partnership for Africa's Development and the African Peer Review Mechanism.

The UN policy documents and initiatives to be reviewed and analysed include the following:

- The UN Charter with specific reference to Article 109.
- Agenda 2030, better known as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)ⁱⁱⁱ.
- The Pact for the Future on UN governance reforms^{iv}.
- The UN@80 Initiative^v, with a focus on internal institutional reforms, namely, efficiency, mandate review, and programmatic realignment^{vi}.

Participants

The symposium will be a multistakeholder convening bringing together the following categories of participants:

- Scholars from the relevant international affairs disciplines.
- Think tanks, civil society, and public intellectuals.
- Representatives of the United Nations and other international organizations.
- Government officials and representatives of relevant state agencies.
- Students of international affairs.

Roundtable Outputs

The deliberations and findings will be:

- I) Compiled into a roundtable proceedings document and disseminated to key policymakers at the AU, regional economic communities, and governments.
- II) Recommendations will be packaged and published as a policy brief for African public audiences.
- III) A plan of action for the role of think tanks and civil society in the UN reform agenda.
- IV) Key areas of further research and deliberation will form the basis for the “Africa and the United Nations: Shifting Global Order, Multilateralism, and Reforms” conference scheduled for November 22-24, 2026, in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Programme outline

July 2

- 9.00 am – 10.30 am: Overview of geopolitical competition, shifting global order and African agency.
- 11.00 – 12.30: Multilateralism and geopolitics: African responses to the US, Europe, China, Russia, India.
- 2.00 pm – 3.30 pm: UN-led multilateralism I: African priorities.
- 4.00 pm – 5.30 pm: UN-led multilateralism II: African strategies.

July 3

- 9.00 am – 10.30 am: African Union's preparedness for UN reforms.
- 11.00 am – 1.30 pm: Recommendations and action plan.

To participate, contact the following organizers:

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Dr. Mandira Bagwande, Stellenbosch University, email: mandira@sun.ac.za

ⁱ African Union. 2005. Decisions, Declarations, and Resolutions, https://au.int/sites/default/files/decisions/9552-assembly_en_4_5_july_2005_auc_fifth_ordinary_session_decisions_declarations_and_resolution.pdf

ⁱⁱ United Nations. 2026. Declaration of the Trafficking of Enslaved Africans and Racialized Chattel Enslavement of Africans as the Gravest Crime against Humanity, https://digitallibrary.un.org/search?f1=9911_0&as=1&sf=title&so=a&rm=&m1=e&p1=%28DHLAUTH%29943358&ln=en#

ⁱⁱⁱ United Nations. 2025. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.un.org/ohrlls/sites/www.un.org.ohrlls/files/2030_agenda_for_sustainable_development_web.pdf

^{iv} United Nations. 2024. Pact for the Future, Global Digital Compact and Declaration on Future Generations, accessible at: chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/sites/www.un.org.peacebuilding/files/documents/pact_for_the_future_action_20.pdf

^v United Nations. 2025. What is the UN80 initiative? accessible at: <https://www.un.org/un80-initiative/en/news/what-un80-initiative>

^{vi} United Nations. 2025. UN80 Initiative Action Plan, accessible at: chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.un.org/un80-initiative/sites/default/files/2025-11/UN80_Initiative_Action_Plan.pdf