

# COUNCIL OF COUNCILS

An Initiative of the Council on Foreign Relations



## Council of Councils Sixteenth Regional Conference Report

*From October 26 to 28, 2025, the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) and the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) cohosted the sixteenth regional conference of the Council of Councils (CoC) in Pretoria, South Africa. The conference was made possible by the generous support of the Rene Kern Family Foundation. The views described in this report are those of workshop participants only and are not CFR, ISS, or Rene Kern Family Foundation positions. CFR takes no institutional positions on policy issues and has no affiliation with the U.S. government. In addition, the suggested policy prescriptions are the views of individual participants and do not necessarily represent a consensus of the attending members or their home institutions.*

### Introduction

The postwar order, which has guided international relations for the past eighty years, faces profound questions about its continued relevance, as great power rivalry has reemerged and conflicts span multiple continents. The Donald Trump administration has intensified uncertainty about the future of alliances, diplomatic norms, and development policy frameworks that have underpinned global governance for decades.

Against this backdrop of disruption, the Council of Councils convened its sixteenth regional conference in Africa, marking the first time the council has held a regional meeting on the continent. Hosted in partnership with the Institute for Security Studies in Pretoria, South Africa, the meeting brought together foreign policy experts to examine pathways toward a safe, secure, and stable world amid extraordinary change.

An African institute's role as host reflects the fundamental recognition that contemporary global challenges cannot be adequately addressed through Western-centric frameworks alone. The continent's perspectives on development, security, governance, and international cooperation offer essential insights for a world grappling with shifting power dynamics. With twenty-four African countries facing debt distress, regional conflicts from Sudan to the Sahel testing security architectures, and the African Continental Free Trade Area promising new development pathways, Africa's experience with navigating disruption provides valuable lessons for global governance reform.

Informed by those international changes, the conference included sessions on the future of world order after disruption, transnational organized crime and terrorism, global AI governance, trade and tariffs in a fragmented system, diplomatic voids and sustainable peace efforts, Africa's engagement with the world, and security cooperation in an age of strategic autonomy. Participants from Council of Councils member institutes representing diverse regions explored how the return of great power competition, the reinvigoration of the Global South, and demands for strategic autonomy are reshaping international cooperation.

### **Plenary Session:**

The opening session welcomed participants to the first Council of Councils regional conference held in Africa, examining the network's role in fostering global dialogue amid extraordinary geopolitical shifts. Speakers emphasized that collaborative, inclusive discussion spaces carry different meanings depending on regional vantage points, with Africa's perspectives offering critical insights that are often underrepresented in global policy forums.

Participants identified achievements despite challenging global conditions, but acknowledged that the changing nature of international affairs, including the Trump administration's questioning of longstanding governance frameworks, creates uncertainty across alliances, diplomacy, and development policy.

The session highlighted Africa's emergence as a vital voice in reshaping international dialogue, the value of geographic diversity within the CoC network, and the need for new formulations of collaboration. Speakers called for strengthening cross-regional research partnerships, incorporating comparative global perspectives into policy assessments, and expanding the network's collaborative mechanisms through future regional conferences.

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

The first session examined possible pathways toward a safe, secure, and stable world amid extraordinary global change, exploring how international order evolves and whether current institutions remain fit for purpose. Participants emphasized that “safe,” “secure,” and “stable” are perspective-dependent, as one state’s security can translate into insecurity for others. The discussion highlighted resurgent great power rivalry, reaffirmation of sovereignty, and the growing influence of the Global South.

Participants identified silver linings despite bleak multilateral outcomes, citing the Agreement on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction ratification and the Pact for the Future as examples of what remains possible. However, they acknowledged that the raw nature of current affairs permeates decision-making, as intentionally rash comments erode longstanding commitments. Global institutions strain and stretch, prompting experts to explore new formulations including minilateralism, regional anchor state dynamics, and what scholars term a “multiplex of options.”

Five overarching issues emerged as critical to the African continent. First, achieving consensus on addressing major conflicts, particularly in Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo, as well as other conflicts and outbreaks of violence that result in regional instability across the Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin. Second, reforming the global financial system is crucial: approximately twenty-four African countries face debt distress. In the absence of Bretton Woods reform, the African Development Bank, Afrexim Bank, and BRICS alternatives are gaining prominence. Third, securing access to finance for infrastructure, energy, and industrialization investment. Fourth, fully operationalizing the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), which provides the greatest potential to advance development outcomes. Fifth, making Africa a competitive, participatory partner through inclusive reform of the global system.

Participants noted that challenges facing other world regions (particularly climate and water security) receive insufficient attention when discourse remains dominated by geopolitical rivalries between major powers. The growing paralysis of global governance, from UN Security Council gridlock to UN agencies struggling to respond amid a breakdown in multilateralism and a retreat in U.S. leadership, underlines the erosion of collective action. That reality drives an urgent need to strengthen regional efforts, though questions persist about whether existing frameworks remain fit for purpose.

The question of global reordering generated substantial discussion. China has positioned itself through initiatives, including the Global Development Initiative and Global Security Initiative, which emphasize the indivisibility of security, and the Global Governance Initiative, which appears to champion the interests of the Global South while providing the necessary resources for infrastructure and development. However,

debate continues whether those initiatives replace the foundations of the UN-based order. Despite shifts, participants agreed that continuity remains, as the UN Charter continues to anchor the system, and sovereignty retains wide legitimacy across regions.

Insularity at both regional and global levels manifests through different mechanisms in great powers and middle powers. Context-specific reasons drive those patterns. In West Africa, for example, changing power dynamics and power vacuums have allowed some states to play peacemaker in some situations and spoiler in others. The undercurrent driving those dynamics represents a crisis of the state that participants characterized as a global rather than merely African phenomenon.

Participants debated whether the same countries need to play roles across political, economic, and security domains, or whether specialization is more useful. In practice, the boundaries between those areas blur. Economic foundations remain primary, given that economics underpins security and a consistent regional approach.

Speakers stressed that the universal foundation provided by the UN Charter and multilateral norms remains essential for regional structure-building. Myanmar was discussed as an example of both the potential and the limits of regional action, prompting reflection on whether existing frameworks remain fit for purpose and whether norms, such as noninterference, which have historically maintained regional peace are still relevant. However, insufficient attention is paid to how regions collaborate beyond their own strategic spaces, given that many challenges are shared across geographical boundaries.

Africa hosts the highest concentration of UN stabilization missions globally, with differentiated yet shared responsibility among regional economic communities, the African Union, and the United Nations. However, alignment challenges persist. Those alignment failures reflect not normative construction problems but operationalization difficulties regarding subsidiarity and complementarity.

The role of nonstate actors generated substantial discussion, with participants noting fundamental power asymmetries between civil society organizations and multinational corporations. In 2025, Nvidia's capitalization exceeded Africa's entire projected GDP. Those types of imbalances make treating those actors similarly problematic. Where global norms face challenges, civil spaces become the first victims, as both civil space and humanitarian access shrink. It was noted that think tanks face particular challenges when governments attack empiricism or resort to misinformation campaigns.

However, despite persistent asymmetries, state capacity challenges regarding transnational issues necessitate multilevel "state-plus" responses. Expert communities in universities monitoring climate disruptions, health practitioners working on pandemic preparedness, and faith-based groups addressing vaccine hesitancy all

provide capacities that some states lack. Multinational corporations, including logistics companies, provide capabilities for humanitarian relief. The question becomes not whether asymmetries exist but how to structure engagement, enabling contributions addressing problems that states cannot solve independently.

Participants debated whether the transition from global public goods to "club goods" represents a paradigm shift. Whereas public goods were pursued through rules-based multilateral order for universal benefit, today many are pursued for specific communities, creating externalities on others and potentially excluding them. Additionally, economic tools underlying multilateral system design contained fatal flaws, particularly imposing similar agendas regardless of how policies affect individual communities differently. That suggests future order should empower local communities, though pathways toward such empowerment remain unclear.

The concept of a "Global South," which traces back to Bandung in 1955 and the Group of 77 in 1964, gains resonance in contexts where a growing consensus holds that the current global system doesn't work for many Southern Hemisphere countries regarding security outcomes, economic outcomes, or access to development financing. Countries seek complementary club mechanisms to address those issues rather than wholesale rejection of the existing system, materializing through strategic autonomy, partnership diversification, and forum shopping to achieve the lowest-cost solutions.

### **Recommendations discussed:**

- Regional economic communities, including the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Southern African Development Community (SADC), and Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), should better align with regional, African Union, and UN approaches to prevent duplication and competition. Cooperation should be based on economic interdependencies and comparative advantage, rather than purely political pacts, and clear power configurations should be developed to assign responsibilities based on capacity.
- The African Union should operationalize the African Standby Force for rapid deployment when non-indifference norms warrant intervention, develop templates for the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 2719 on assessed contributions to peace enforcement, and strengthen coordination between the AU Peace and Security Council and the UN Security Council to reduce competing mediation in crises like Sudan.
- African states should fully operationalize the AfCFTA, to advance development outcomes and limit dependence on global frameworks. This can be achieved by pursuing strategic autonomy through partnership diversification and forum shopping, and exercising agency in implementing universal norms through

subsidiarity, while addressing insecurities before they become international concerns.

- The United Nations and its member states should increase their reliance on the General Assembly when the Security Council is gridlocked, operationalize subsidiarity and complementarity principles, clarify the division of labor between actors, and reform financing structures to reduce disproportionate dependence on single contributors while ensuring adequate resources.
- Major powers, including the United States and China, should recognize that domestic policies create global externalities requiring consultation with affected regions, ensure rhetoric matches action, and accept that other countries will pursue strategic autonomy through partnership diversification rather than exclusive alignment.
- Regional organizations should collaborate across regions to address shared challenges, build frameworks based on common interests, and assess whether existing structures remain fit for purpose while upholding universal values.
- Think tanks, research institutes, and civil society organizations should maintain analytical rigor while demonstrating policy relevance in shrinking civic space. This balance can be achieved by developing multilevel engagement strategies and building coalitions with private-sector actors where interests align on pandemic preparedness, climate adaptation, and humanitarian response.

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

This session examined the growing convergence between transnational organized crime and terrorism, exploring how technological advances and weakening global cooperation have reshaped the threat landscape. Participants debated whether conceptual distinctions between criminal and terrorist actors remain analytically useful, assessed the drivers of crime-terror convergence, and considered policy responses that balance security imperatives with human rights protections.

Participants agreed that while organized crime and terrorism retain distinct core objectives—economic profit versus political goals—operational convergence is accelerating through transactional and organizational links. Criminal networks provide terrorists with logistical support, weapons procurement, and forged documents, while terrorist organizations increasingly adopt the financing models of organized crime. Examples include ISIS recruitment from European prison populations, Hamas reportedly using petty criminal networks for weapons acquisition, and African terrorist groups selling narcotics opportunistically.

The scope of transnational crime has reached historic proportions, representing an estimated 3 to 7 percent of global GDP. France alone hosts a €3.5 billion drug market involving 250,000 people, while global cocaine production approaches 4,000 tons annually. In Africa, the Organised Crime Index reveals crime increasing in scale and reach, with human trafficking being the most prevalent offence. State complicity emerged as the most significant driver, with “state-embedded actors” representing the largest category of criminal activity and corruption, facilitating network expansion.

Technological advances have transformed the operational capabilities of both criminal and terrorist organizations. Drones are now deployed by groups including Boko Haram and ISIS affiliates, while cyber-enabled crime expands rapidly. Latin American cartels and some terrorist groups operate semi-military capabilities, including tanks, submarines, and sophisticated communications systems that challenge traditional law enforcement approaches. The shift toward synthetic opioids, particularly following Taliban suppression of traditional opium cultivation, has created new markets for lethal substances.

Participants expressed concern about the militarization of responses to organized crime, particularly where cartels are increasingly labeled as terrorist organizations, which risks normalizing extrajudicial killings, eroding civil liberties, and expanding executive authority beyond democratic constraints. Recent U.S. actions, including drone strikes and naval interdictions, resulting in dozens of deaths, raise sovereignty and human rights concerns, especially regarding potential escalation in Mexico. The collapse of conceptual boundaries between “criminal,” “terrorist,” and “foreigner” threatens centuries of legal frameworks underpinning liberal democratic governance.

The panel noted that militarized approaches have failed to produce sustainable outcomes. French military withdrawal from the Sahel preceded regional collapse, while the Taliban’s return demonstrated the limits of military counterterrorism. Criminal networks adapt rapidly to enforcement pressure by rerouting operations and exploiting areas with weak governance. U.S. demand for synthetic opioids drives Mexican cartel production, while American weapons fuel violence south of the border – systemic factors that kinetic operations cannot address.

Europe faces budget constraints and shifting strategic priorities toward Russia, risking weakened counterterrorism capacity despite sustained threats. France experienced a surge in attempted jihadist plots, including during the Olympics, while Africa confronts escalating crises in the Sahel, Lake Chad Basin, and Horn of Africa. Syria’s transition remains uncertain—ISIS fighters are still present, Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham’s ideological trajectory is unclear, and drug networks persist despite regime change. Iran’s role in illicit oil markets and state-directed use of criminal networks abroad illustrates how state actors increasingly blur crime-terror boundaries.

Participants debated three potential frameworks for addressing the convergence of crime and terrorism. A “grey wall” approach maintaining strict separation between law enforcement and security agencies fails to reflect operational realities. Full integration, as practiced in some U.S. policies toward Venezuela, risks civil liberties erosion and inappropriate securitization of immigration and drug policy. A hybrid model, balancing legal frameworks, cooperation mechanisms, and intervention strategies, has emerged as the preferred approach, although implementation remains challenging.

Multilateral cooperation has weakened precisely when coordination is most needed. International conventions exist, but implementation remains inadequate, and cross border cooperation has deteriorated. African multilateral frameworks require strengthening, while institutions like Interpol need to enhance compliance monitoring. The erosion of the liberal international order has compounded institutional weakness at a moment when technological change and network sophistication demand more robust cooperation.

Recommendations discussed:

- States should maintain clear legal distinctions between terrorism and organized crime to prevent unchecked executive authority and protect civil liberties, while developing hybrid operational models that enable coordination without full militarization.
- The United States and partner nations should reassess militarized counternarcotics policies that risk escalation, address domestic demand for synthetic opioids as a core driver of production, strengthen judicial oversight over cross-border military operations, and ensure parliamentary checks on extraterritorial force.
- African governments should prioritize state reform targeting corruption, intelligence capacity, and border control, while focusing enforcement on state-embedded criminal actors rather than exclusively targeting nonstate groups. Operational cooperation within African multilateral frameworks requires strengthening and adequate resource allocation.
- International organizations, including the United Nations, the African Union, and Interpol, should enhance human rights monitoring as counterterrorism authorities expand, increase enforcement of existing conventions like the Palermo Convention, and provide technical support to rebuild intelligence services in states affected by corruption and institutional capture.
- All governments should increase person-to-person intelligence cooperation with vulnerable states, improve coordination between law enforcement and security agencies within legal frameworks, and invest in addressing root causes, including inequality, resource scarcity, and weak governance, rather than relying solely on kinetic operations.

## **Is Consensus Possible on Global Artificial Intelligence/Tech Governance?**

This session explored whether meaningful global governance of artificial intelligence (AI) remains feasible amid geopolitical rivalry, rapid technological change, and institutional fragmentation. Participants assessed major power strategies, the viability of multilateral mechanisms, and realistic pathways for cooperation. The discussion revealed fundamental disagreements over the feasibility and sustainability of current development trajectories.

Two critical tensions shaping contemporary AI debates were highlighted. First, the growing divide between risk-averse experts and U.S. officials who argue that excessive caution undermines the transformational benefits of AI and could cede a competitive advantage raises questions about whether think tanks should maintain their traditional risk-focused orientation or become brokers between optimistic and pessimistic perspectives.

Second, AI increasingly functions as geopolitical infrastructure, with the United States attempting to shape global systems as a basis for influence. Whether AI consolidates into a dominant architecture, competing blocs, or fragmented sovereign ecosystems remains unresolved.

Participants were split on whether global AI governance is currently possible. Optimists argued that AI enhances state capacity while creating shared vulnerabilities that incentivize cooperation. Standardization offers economic gains; shared risks (cyber, biological, systemic) create alignment incentives; and modular transparency mechanisms allow limited convergence even amid value divergence. Pessimists argued that global governance is currently not feasible, pointing to stalled EU-U.S. Trade and Technology Council terminology efforts, declining Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and UNESCO momentum, plateauing influence of the EU AI Act, and weakening Group of Twenty (G20) and UN processes. Major powers lack both shared interests and mutual trust, and multilateral mechanisms, including AI Safety Summits, G20 processes, OECD initiatives, and the Global Partnership on AI, are losing political support and resources.

Assessments of major power strategies diverged amongst conference participants. One speaker characterized the U.S. approach as an “Icarus flight”: massive investments, concentrated ownership, and artificial general intelligence (AGI) framed as a geopolitical race with unclear use cases and significant energy costs. Participants questioned whether American infrastructure dominance guarantees lasting geopolitical control.

China has shifted focus toward physical AI, emphasizing robotics and industrial transformation through more efficiency-oriented innovation. Alternative models such as DeepSeek R1 suggest frontier capabilities may not require U.S.-scale investment. Technological trajectories may therefore fragment along economic and strategic lines rather than converge.

Europe remains caught between regulation and competitiveness, and is now pivoting from its earlier emphasis on comprehensive legal frameworks toward infrastructure building. Dependence on the U.S. GPU supply reinforces technological vulnerability and limits strategic autonomy. European efforts to balance innovation promotion with risk management face persistent challenges as the continent lacks both the computational resources of American hyperscalers and China's manufacturing integration advantages.

One proposal was establishing a voluntary AI Transparency Forum modeled on the Financial Stability Board. That soft law mechanism would facilitate best practices for testing and red teaming, establish deployment standards, create incident reporting systems, and build predictability through confidence-building measures. The forum's voluntary nature and focus on transparency rather than binding constraints could enable participation even from rivals who reject comprehensive governance frameworks.

Structural barriers extend beyond politics. Verification and attribution difficulties create persistent uncertainty about whether parties are complying with their commitments or which actors are responsible for harmful incidents. Winner-takes-most market dynamics incentivize unilateral advantage-seeking over collaborative risk management. Regulatory fragmentation increases costs without improving safety, and information integrity risks undermine coordination. Those technical and economic barriers compound political obstacles.

Think tanks face a strategic choice. As both users and analysts of AI, they need to adopt generative tools responsibly while preserving credibility. Their comparative advantage lies in facilitating Track 1.5 and Track 2 international dialogues when formal diplomacy stalls. Institutions have to decide whether to emphasize risk, opportunity, or brokered balance, choices that affect their influence with different stakeholder communities.

All participants agreed that AI creates governance stressors across political systems in every state, and delegated autonomy raises fundamental questions about whether humans can maintain meaningful control over increasingly autonomous systems and make consequential decisions. Those shared vulnerabilities have not translated into cooperation due to strategic rivalry and divergent values. The session revealed that even when there is agreement on the desirability of AI governance, there is profound disagreement about its feasibility under current conditions. Those maintaining that cooperation remains possible emphasize functional incentives and technical

opportunities for modular collaboration. Those who assert that governance is currently impossible point to repeated institutional failures and the absence of political will. That divide shapes whether efforts should focus on global frameworks or narrower, issue-specific and regional mechanisms.

Recommendations discussed:

- Governments should create a voluntary AI Transparency Forum focused on testing standards, deployment practices, and incident reporting as a soft-law mechanism that could expand incrementally as trust develops, while prioritizing modular cooperation on specific technical issues rather than comprehensive governance frameworks.
- The United States should temper infrastructure-dominance rhetoric, reengage constructively in multilateral processes, and reassess investment models to avoid strategic overreach.
- China should participate in transparency and testing standards as areas where cooperation serves mutual interests, recognizing that monitoring capabilities and best practices offer benefits beyond zero-sum competition.
- The European Union should reduce GPU dependence through infrastructure investment, clarify the balance between regulation and competitiveness, and leverage its regulatory experience to shape international standards even as comprehensive frameworks stall.
- Think tanks should clarify their positioning between risk and opportunity narratives, adopt generative AI responsibly as both users and analysts of the technology, lead Track 1.5 and Track 2 dialogues that create unofficial space for governance exploration, and continue developing global supervisory concepts even when near-term consensus appears unlikely.

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

This session examined how trade and tariffs function as instruments of power amid intensifying U.S.-China rivalry and the weakening of multilateral institutions, particularly the World Trade Organization (WTO). Participants explored whether international organizations retain relevance in an era of trade wars, how rules can be reestablished without a functioning rules-based system, and whether trade conflicts now serve as the primary determinant of global power distribution.

It was emphasized that although states remain central to trade governance, most commerce flows through private entities, some with capital exceeding multiple countries' GDPs. That raises questions about the private sector's role in coercive statecraft and economic leverage. African trade patterns illustrated regional disparities,

although the adoption of the African Continental Free Trade Area offers potential for developing intra-regional value chains and reducing vulnerability to external shocks.

Participants agreed that trade and tariffs increasingly symbolize power, strategic rivalry, and sovereignty rather than purely economic optimization. Escalating rhetoric around reshoring, supply chain weaponization, and economic security predates the current U.S. administration and reflects deeper structural shifts in how major powers conceive of economic statecraft. Global fragmentation, retaliatory cycles, and erosion of cooperation mechanisms create persistent uncertainty that complicates long-term planning for businesses and governments alike. The United States' retreat from multilateral leadership exposes systemic fragility built into institutions designed for a different geopolitical era.

The WTO emerged as a focal point of disagreement about institutional viability. Most participants acknowledged significant weakening, with structural flaws predating recent stressors. The rise of populism and protectionism globally contributed to undermining multilateral trade governance. However, participants diverged on whether the organization remains salvageable. Some argued the WTO is not dead but dormant, capable of being rebuilt through ad hoc mechanisms and voluntary compliance by participating countries. Others contended that for countries without significant power, multilateralism has died in practice, forcing them to rely on alternative arrangements.

Plurilateral and mini-lateral approaches emerged as the pragmatic second-best solution for maintaining some degree of trade coordination. Coalitions of the willing can establish sector-specific rules where a comprehensive multilateral agreement proves impossible. Examples include Africa's implementation of the AfCFTA and bilateral agreements, such as the U.S.-Malaysia trade deal. However, those arrangements require strong leadership, genuine inclusivity, and enforceable dispute resolution mechanisms to avoid becoming merely rhetorical commitments. The resulting "spaghetti bowl" of overlapping regional and bilateral agreements creates complexity but offers flexibility.

China's role in the global trading system generated substantial discussion. Participants contrasted China's development trajectory with Japan's post-World War II integration, noting that China achieved independent industrial growth on an unprecedented scale while lifting eight hundred million people from poverty. That success provides a compelling model for countries in the Global South seeking alternatives to Western-prescribed development paths.

For developing countries, vulnerability to great power trade conflicts has intensified dramatically. Latin America exemplifies that challenge, with low interregional trade increasing exposure to external shocks. Mexico faces particular constraints, with 80 percent of exports directed to the United States. Near-shoring and friend-shoring pressures complicate competitiveness, forcing uncomfortable choices between

compliance with U.S. demands and the exploration of alternatives. Brazil demonstrates adaptive strategies through increased trade with nontraditional partners while maintaining U.S. engagement.

The European Union is pursuing a strategy of establishing extensive free trade agreements with Australia, India, Indonesia, Japan, Mexico, South Korea, and African states to partially replace the WTO system. However, the EU's agreement to what some termed a "fair deal" with the United States reflected optimism, a weak negotiating position, and security concerns ahead of the NATO summit rather than strategic preference. European dependence on the transatlantic security architecture constrains trade policy autonomy, limiting the ability to resist U.S. pressure on economic issues.

Tariff impacts are distributed unevenly across economic actors, with effects concentrated in goods rather than services. Policy unpredictability compounds these challenges, with decisions influenced by growth statistics, artificial intelligence investments, dollar valuations, political optics, and personal factors rather than consistent strategic frameworks.

The United States and China both function as disruptive powers, weaponizing tariffs and export controls to achieve geopolitical objectives, which creates cascading uncertainty throughout the global trading system as firms and governments struggle to anticipate policy shifts. Selective decoupling in strategic sectors appears inevitable, but maintaining liberalization of nonstrategic trade offers opportunities for stabilizing global markets and preserving welfare gains from specialization. Coalition-building around supply chain resilience in critical sectors offers an alternative to comprehensive decoupling, which would impose massive economic costs.

Participants outlined three possible future scenarios for the global trading system. First, intensified great-power rivalry could produce escalating conflicts and zero-sum competition. Second, selective cooperation through mini-lateral arrangements may emerge as the dominant pattern, characterized by issue-specific coordination but lacking a comprehensive framework. Third, meaningful reform and integration remain theoretically possible, but they would require strong leadership, currently absent from the international system.

Historical context informed the discussion, and participants noted that protectionism supported early industrializers and continues to serve developmental purposes. However, China represents unprecedented scale in combining state-led industrial policy with global market integration. The challenge for contemporary policymakers is to distinguish legitimate development strategies from predatory practices without reverting to blanket protectionism, which undermines efficiency and consumer welfare.

Trade has become inseparable from geopolitics and enforcement mechanisms, requiring governments to develop sophisticated dual-track strategies. For middle powers and developing countries, the ability to pivot between partners, diversify export markets, and participate selectively in multiple arrangements will be essential for maintaining policy autonomy and economic resilience.

Recommendations discussed:

- The African Union should implement the AfCFTA comprehensively, including harmonized rules of origin, customs procedures, and dispute resolution mechanisms. It should also diversify trade partnerships and strengthen regional value chains in manufacturing and agriculture to reduce vulnerability to external shocks.
- Developing countries in Latin America, Africa, and Asia should enhance institutional adaptability to respond rapidly to shifting trade conditions, develop dual-track strategies that maintain engagement with multiple major powers simultaneously, and prioritize efficiency gains and net profitability over production volume to maintain competitiveness amid subsidy competition.
- The United States and China should pursue sector-specific decoupling limited to genuine national security concerns rather than broad economic spheres, maintain liberalization of nonstrategic trade to stabilize global markets and preserve welfare gains, establish clear criteria for security-relevant technologies to reduce uncertainty for businesses and trading partners, and consider moderate responses that avoid escalatory cycles damaging to all parties.
- Global actors and coalition participants should establish inclusive, enforceable mini-lateral agreements in specific sectors where cooperation serves mutual interests, ensure dispute resolution mechanisms have genuine authority and resources to function effectively, prioritize transparency in trade policies to reduce uncertainty, and maintain open participation structures that allow countries to join arrangements when political conditions permit.
- Mexico and other middle-power countries should accelerate development of alternative trade partnerships to reduce dependence on single dominant partners, invest in competitive advantages including skilled labor, logistics infrastructure, and regulatory quality that make diversification commercially viable, strengthen domestic industries serving regional markets to complement export-oriented sectors, and coordinate with other middle powers facing similar challenges to increase collective bargaining leverage in negotiations with great powers.

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

This session examined international peace and security in an increasingly complex, multi-actor environment, with a focus on the evolving nature of conflict in Africa, Europe, and globally. Participants explored the interplay between African-led solutions and external actors and global inconsistencies in conflict response, as well as cultural, demographic, and technological factors that influence peace dynamics. The discussion addressed why traditional conflict resolution mechanisms struggle to respond effectively and what institutional adaptations could improve outcomes.

Fundamental questions were posed about how wars are evolving, the role of African-led mediation and solutions, and the critical need for consistency and legitimacy in international responses. One speaker opened with a pointed observation that peace is not the objective for all actors, framing the discussion in realist terms that challenge idealistic assumptions underlying many diplomatic efforts. The recognition that actors could have strategic interests in perpetuating conflict shapes realistic assessments of what mediation can achieve.

Participants criticized the inconsistent global response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, noting that political calculations frequently outweigh adherence to UN principles regarding territorial integrity and sovereignty. The selective application of international law creates dangerous precedents, particularly in Africa, where colonial-era borders remain politically sensitive despite their artificial nature. Failure to uphold the principle of sovereignty consistently undermines the entire framework of international law and emboldens potential aggressors.

African solutions to conflict emerged as a central theme, with Mozambique serving as a case study illustrating multiple intervention layers. Holistic approaches that engage a variety of stakeholders are necessary to address the complexity of contemporary African conflicts.

However, participants stressed that characterizing interventions as purely "African solutions" oversimplifies reality, given substantial external involvement from the United Nations, EU, and non-African economic actors with stakes in stability. Effective African-led approaches need to acknowledge this external dimension while maintaining African guidance over strategic direction and implementation. The question becomes not whether external actors participate but rather who sets priorities, controls decision-making processes, and ultimately owns outcomes both politically and practically.

The debate over institutionalizing African mediation capacity revealed tensions between flexibility and predictability. Some argued that ad hoc approaches allow for flexible responses and avoid bureaucratic rigidity. Others contended that institutionalized

mechanisms with proper staffing, planning, and funding prove more effective than improvised arrangements. Institutionalization enables integration between early-warning systems and post-conflict reconstruction structures that consolidate peace gains. Without such integration, mediation risks becoming episodic interventions disconnected from broader conflict cycles.

Participants emphasized that peace is fundamentally cultural rather than purely legal or political. Some societies are culturally averse to war, while others view military force as a legitimate form of statecraft. How conflicts are framed profoundly affect the intensity of global responses and can weaken timely interventions. Those framing effects interact with double standards in international responses and undermine the legitimacy of global governance institutions while fueling perceptions of Western hypocrisy, particularly among populations in the Global South.

Three structural forces affecting African conflict trajectories received substantial attention. First, youth bulges create demographic pressures requiring inclusive political and economic systems to prevent recruitment into armed groups and manipulation by political entrepreneurs. Second, the competition for technology and resources driven by global interest in critical minerals creates both incentives for stability and potential flashpoints for violence. Third, the consequences of climate change exacerbate resource conflicts and result in forced displacement that further destabilizes fragile regions. Addressing those structural drivers requires long-term strategies beyond immediate crisis response.

The nature of contemporary conflicts complicates traditional mediation approaches, which are often designed for simpler bilateral disputes or clear rebel-government dynamics. Modern African conflicts often involve multiple state and nonstate actors with transnational dimensions. The Great Lakes region and the Sahel exemplify that complexity, with overlapping insurgencies, regional power rivalries, international counterterrorism operations, and criminal networks all interacting simultaneously. Existing diplomatic tools prove inadequate for such multilevel, fluid situations.

Participants called for agile, adaptive mediation mechanisms capable of responding to rapid shifts in complex conflicts, and the use of more sophisticated approaches to managing multiple stakeholders with diverse and sometimes contradictory interests. Intelligence-driven anticipatory diplomacy, which identifies emerging crises before they escalate, could supplement or eventually replace purely reactive mediation.

The question of European leverage in Ukraine ceasefire negotiations sparked discussion about the broader challenges facing external mediators. Europe's economic interdependence with Russia, dependence on U.S. security guarantees, and internal divisions limit its ability to impose terms or guarantee implementation. More broadly, ensuring fairness in multiparty mediation becomes difficult when power asymmetries

exist, and participants pursue unilateral interests rather than collective solutions. Transparency and coordination among mediating actors emerge as essential but insufficient conditions for legitimate processes.

Narratives about double standards have a profound impact on conflict responses and the legitimacy of international institutions. When African conflicts receive minimal attention while European wars generate large mobilization, or when territorial integrity applies selectively based on geopolitical alignment, populations question whether international law represents genuine principles or merely Western interests. That perception undermines cooperation with international institutions and strengthens appeals to alternative arrangements, including those led by China, Russia, or regional bodies explicitly rejecting Western leadership.

The debate over colonial borders revealed complexity in African positions. Although these boundaries artificially divide ethnic groups and create governance challenges, wholesale border revision risks opening Pandora's box of irredentist claims that could destabilize the entire continent. Most African governments, therefore, defend existing borders despite their colonial origins, though that position coexists with recognition that borders require long-term political evolution reflecting African rather than European logic. Any change requires extensive multilevel engagement rather than unilateral action or external imposition.

Youth inclusion emerged as critical for sustainable peace in the panel discussion. Young populations need to see pathways to meaningful political participation, economic opportunity, and social mobility to resist recruitment by armed groups or manipulation by ethnic entrepreneurs. Their engagement with technology offers opportunities for innovation, communication, and organization that can either stabilize or destabilize, depending on how systems channel those energies. Similarly, youth activism on climate change can drive adaptive responses that reduce environmental stress as a conflict driver.

Resource competition creates paradoxical dynamics where global interest in African minerals generates both stability incentives and conflict risks. International actors who want secure supply chains have reasons to support peaceful governance, yet competition for access can fuel proxy conflicts or entrench authoritarian regimes that maintain order through repression. Managing that tension requires transparency in resource contracts, equitable distribution of revenues, and governance structures that prevent elite capture while ensuring benefits reach broader populations.

Participants acknowledged that fragmentation appears more likely than collective action under current conditions, though outcomes vary by context and depend partly on whether institutions adapt effectively. The trajectory of democratic institutions is mixed, with some populations viewing them as legitimate while others perceive them as

vehicles for ethnic domination or elite enrichment. Those differing perceptions reflect lived experiences rather than abstract preferences, meaning democracy promotion requires addressing substantive governance failures, not merely procedural reforms.

Recommendations discussed:

- The United Nations and other global institutions should ensure consistent enforcement of territorial integrity regardless of geopolitical alignment, improve intelligence-sharing and coordination in peace negotiations while maintaining appropriate oversight, actively engage in early-warning systems that identify emerging crises before they escalate, and commit resources to post-conflict reconstruction that consolidates peace gains.
- The African Union and regional bodies, including SADC, should institutionalize mediation teams with proper staffing, advance planning, and sustainable funding rather than relying on improvised responses. Additionally, they should integrate mediation capacity with early-warning systems and post-conflict reconstruction mechanisms to address complete conflict cycles, maintain African leadership over strategic direction in mediation while coordinating with necessary external actors, and develop specialized capacity for managing multi-actor transnational conflicts that transcend traditional bilateral frameworks.
- Individual African states should include youth in political decision-making, technological development initiatives, and climate adaptation strategies to channel demographic energy toward constructive rather than destabilizing activities; monitor resource exploitation to ensure equitable benefit distribution and prevent elite capture; enhance local legitimacy of mediation mechanisms through inclusive processes rather than elite bargains that exclude affected populations; and invest in governance capacity that addresses root causes of conflict, including inequality, exclusion, and resource scarcity.
- External mediators and global powers should respect African ownership in mediation processes by supporting rather than directing initiatives, ensure fairness in multiparty negotiations by avoiding pursuit of narrow unilateral interests, support capacity-building and provide technical expertise where requested by African institutions rather than imposing external models, and maintain consistency in applying international law principles to avoid double standards that undermine legitimacy.
- Policy research and academic institutions should study multi-actor conflict dynamics to develop mediation practices suited to contemporary complexity rather than Cold War–era bilateral models, promote cultural awareness and public diplomacy that addresses narrative dimensions of conflict and peace, foster global education about interdependence and shared interests to build

constituencies for cooperation, and analyze how technology, demographics, and climate change interact as conflict drivers requiring integrated responses.

### **Africa and the World: The World in Africa**

This session examined Africa's evolving role in global affairs, exploring how African states and regional organizations are enhancing continental agency amid shifting geopolitical dynamics. Participants assessed why global governance reform matters for Africa, what the transition from aid to trade means for development outcomes, implications of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) closure and donor reductions, and how African states have responded to those structural changes.

In the discussion, Africa was characterized as a "crowded space" of competing geopolitical actors, including the United States, Europe, China, Gulf states, India, Russia, Turkey, Iran, and South Korea. However, Africans are increasingly rejecting the framing of Africa as "competition terrain" where external powers vie for influence, instead asserting its role as an active, rather than passive, actor. Recent USAID withdrawals have produced dramatic consequences, particularly in health sectors where HIV treatment access faces disruption. European aid budgets are undergoing increasing securitization, with resources being redirected to support domestic defense spending rather than development priorities. Traditional development models that rely on aid flows are no longer viable, forcing a fundamental reconsideration of financing approaches.

Africa's strategic diversification of external partnerships as it leverages its workforce, market size, and resources exhibits the continent's growing agency. However, significant constraints remain. High borrowing costs and accumulated debt burdens restrict fiscal space for development investment. Chinese lending to Africa has declined substantially since 2016, resulting in financing gaps that alternative sources have not been able to fill, and fragmented continental and regional cooperation undermines collective bargaining power.

The state of international aid and development generated nuanced responses. One participant characterized aid as "not dead but dying," in acknowledgement of diminished aid flows. Future aid is likely to involve multiple scenarios coexisting rather than a single replacement model. Declining development financing from traditional sources means that domestic resource mobilization becomes increasingly critical, requiring improvements in tax collection, a reduction in illicit financial flows, and the development of local capital markets. Emphasis on coexistence and cofinancing between the Global North and South reflects the recognition that neither can unilaterally address Africa's financing needs at the required scale.

China cannot simply replace Western aid, despite its substantial engagement in Africa. Chinese financial institutions face their own debt exposure constraints and internal pressures regarding the quality of assets in overseas loans. Chinese exploration of innovations, such as Kenya's renminbi-dollar debt swap, represents creative approaches to managing obligations. Still, such mechanisms provide relief rather than new capital at the scale previously available. Comprehensive, multitiered financing solutions that draw on diverse sources, including bilateral, multilateral, regional, and domestic sources, prove necessary rather than relying on any single external partner.

African agency operates across three distinct but interconnected layers. Continental institutions, including the AU and the AfCFTA, provide frameworks for collective action and norm-setting. Subregional organizations, such as SADC, ECOWAS, and IGAD, enable coordination among countries that share geographic proximity and often face similar challenges. Bilateral diplomacy allows individual states to pursue specific national interests and forge tailored partnerships. However, fragmentation across and within those layers represents a substantial challenge, as external actors exploit divisions by engaging in forum shopping and playing African states against each other.

The geometry of African agency reveals a complexity that resists simplification into a single, unified voice. Only a handful of countries export goods (not resources), while other countries access global markets through those neighbors. Regional anchor states operate on geopolitical tracks while multilateral engagement flows through the AU and regional bodies. That complex structure means that African agency is expressed through various channels simultaneously, rather than following clear hierarchies.

Africa has not developed effective minilateral coalitions comparable to European groupings, such as the E3 (France, Germany, and Italy), despite potential benefits from smaller, more cohesive formations. African diplomatic culture emphasizes inclusivity, with regional neighbors resisting any country claiming to "represent" them. If Egypt, Nigeria, or South Africa assert leadership roles, pushback follows from states unwilling to accept subordinate positions. The preference for comprehensive participation reflects both solidarity principles and practical concerns that excluded states could undermine initiatives they did not help shape.

Global governance reform emerged in the conference discussion as existential for Africa rather than merely desirable. Current institutions, designed in the mid-twentieth century, reflect the power configurations and priorities of that era, and systematically disadvantage late-developing regions. An example of this inherent power imbalance is the EU's transformation of the African Peace Facility into the European Peace Facility with limited consultation from African stakeholders— showing Africa as a rule-taker rather than a rule-maker. Without meaningful reform of decision-making structures, resource allocation mechanisms, and representation in institutions such as the UN

Security Council, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank, Africa cannot secure outcomes aligned with its continental priorities.

The question of whether new partners are welcomed because they lack colonial pasts generated context-specific responses. Colonial legacies shape the reception of former colonizers, and resentments perpetuate over CFA franc arrangements, military interventions, and continuing patterns of extraction. This is particularly true of how France is viewed in Francophone Africa.

However, new actors, including Gulf states, Turkey, and Asian powers, bring their own complications. Gulf investment reflects diversification strategies for oil-dependent economies seeking agricultural land and food security rather than purely developmental motivations. Those partnerships risk reproducing extractive dependencies through various mechanisms, including land grabs, one-sided concession agreements, and infrastructure deals that create debt burdens without corresponding local capacity development.

Debt profiles vary significantly across African countries, but commercial debt has become a particularly pressing issue. Unlike concessional bilateral or multilateral loans with favorable terms and restructuring mechanisms, commercial creditors demand market rates and resist negotiations during crises. High borrowing costs driven by credit ratings that systematically overestimate African risk create self-fulfilling dynamics where expensive debt service crowds out development spending. That weakens growth prospects and validates pessimistic risk assessments. Establishing an African credit rating agency could provide alternative assessments that account for factors standard agencies ignore.

Africa's financing channels lack diversification, with excessive concentration in traditional dollar and euro-denominated borrowing. Expanding into alternative bond markets, such as China's panda bonds, as Egypt has done, diversifies currency exposure and accesses different investor bases. However, such innovations reach only the largest, most creditworthy African economies, while smaller states, lacking sophisticated debt-management capacity, face continued exclusion from capital markets. Regional financial markets and bond issuance platforms could aggregate the borrowing needs of smaller economies, achieving a scale that individual countries cannot, although the infrastructure for such arrangements remains underdeveloped.

European and Italian investment plans, including the Mattei Plan and Global Gateway, target only select African countries, raising concerns about widening disparities within the continent. Although alignment with African priorities in energy, agriculture, and digital infrastructure represents a positive framing, those initiatives also reflect European migration politics that seek to address the root causes of displacement. Without mechanisms ensuring balanced investment across regions and explicit links to

continental frameworks, such as the AfCFTA, selective engagement could exacerbate inequalities and undermine regional integration by creating privileged corridors while leaving other areas further behind.

The African Union's G20 membership holds symbolic importance but lacks substantive impact without a clear agenda that articulates continental priorities and negotiating positions. Simply having a seat at the table proves insufficient if African representatives cannot speak with a unified voice or translate participation into concrete outcomes on debt restructuring, climate finance, trade access, or technology transfer. Building this capacity requires coordination across AU institutions, regional bodies, and national governments.

Trans-border corridor projects represent practical approaches to reducing financing gaps while delivering tangible infrastructure connectivity. Those initiatives combine transportation, energy, and digital infrastructure across multiple countries, creating economies of scale that justify investment while facilitating regional trade and value chain integration. Success requires that benefits are distributed across participating countries rather than concentrating in terminal points, and that financing structures avoid creating unsustainable debt burdens that mortgage future revenues.

Participants emphasized that Africa needs to define its own financing models rather than accepting frameworks designed by external actors. That includes determining the appropriate balance between grants, concessional loans, commercial borrowing, and domestic resource mobilization; establishing priorities for infrastructure, human capital, and institutional development; and creating mechanisms to ensure that financing serves developmental rather than extractive purposes. Without such agency over financing architectures, Africa risks exchanging formal colonial relationships for neocolonial dependencies that extract value while limiting autonomous development pathways.

Regional mobilization for collective financing and trade expansion exists but remains insufficient. Breaking the patterns that perpetuate market shortcomings requires sustained investment in physical connectivity, harmonization of regulatory frameworks, development of regional value chains that enable specialization and complementarity, and a political commitment to prioritize regional integration over competing individually for external partnerships.

Recommendations discussed:

- The AU should build a clear, consolidated G20 agenda articulating continental priorities for debt restructuring, climate finance, trade access, and technology transfer, support multilateral cooperation among subsets of member states, and enhance effectiveness without undermining inclusive processes.

- The AU should establish a continental credit rating system that provides alternative risk assessments accounting for factors standard agencies ignore, and develop African financial markets including regional bond platforms that enable smaller economies to access capital.
- Regional organizations should strengthen financing mechanisms for regional corridor projects combining transportation, energy, and digital infrastructure across multiple countries, improve coordination among anchor states to present unified positions in negotiations with external partners, harmonize regulatory frameworks for trade and investment to reduce transaction costs and facilitate regional value chain development, and establish burden-sharing mechanisms ensuring infrastructure projects distribute benefits equitably across participating countries.
- African governments should improve creditworthiness through enhanced transparency in public finance management, predictable policy frameworks that reduce investor uncertainty, and professional debt management capacity that optimizes borrowing strategies; expand domestic financing tools including local currency bond markets that reduce foreign exchange exposure and develop domestic investor bases; build technical negotiation capacity for effective participation in rule-making institutions where decisions affecting Africa occur; and reduce illicit financial flows that deprive governments of resources for development investment.
- International partners should prioritize cofinancing arrangements that pool resources from multiple sources rather than fragmenting efforts through competing initiatives, reduce securitization of aid budgets by differentiating between development assistance and defense spending, support comprehensive debt restructuring including commercial creditors who currently resist meaningful relief, align investment strategies with African priorities articulated through continental and regional frameworks rather than imposing external agendas, and reform credit rating methodologies that systematically overestimate African risk through biases and incomplete analysis.

### **Security Cooperation in the Age of Strategic Autonomy**

This session examined how strategic autonomy manifests differently across regions, the factors driving its emergence, and implications for future alliance structures amid global fragmentation. Participants explored whether the pursuit of autonomy strengthens or undermines collective security arrangements, how ad hoc coalitions relate to enduring institutional frameworks, and what balance between sovereignty and interdependence best serves the diverse interests of national and regional entities.

The discussion considered the fragmented and uncertain global environment marked by overlapping crises, including geopolitical tensions, economic protectionism, and intensifying competition over Africa's critical minerals. That context creates tension among desires for strategic autonomy, the capacity to pursue independent policy choices without external coercion, and persistent needs for security cooperation. Resolving this tension proves particularly challenging for African states as they navigate multipolar competition while building continental institutions.

Strategic autonomy emerged as a fundamentally context-specific concept rather than a universal one with a uniform meaning. For African states, autonomy links closely to what one speaker termed "concave strategic interdependence," balancing the development of internal capabilities with the cultivation of diversified external partnerships that prevent overdependence on any single actor. That approach differs substantially from European conceptions of strategic autonomy, which emphasize reducing reliance on the United States for defense while maintaining Atlantic alliance structures, or Asian approaches that focused on hedging between U.S. security guarantees and Chinese economic integration.

The African perspective highlights diversity among continental actors, who have vastly different threat environments, resource endowments, and historical experiences that shape their autonomy priorities. Landlocked Sahel states facing jihadist insurgencies require different security arrangements than coastal West African nations dealing with maritime piracy, or Southern African countries managing spillover from regional conflicts. That diversity necessitates flexible approaches allowing tailored responses while maintaining sufficient coordination to address transnational threats that respect no boundaries.

Regional collaboration through institutions, including the AU and the AfCFTA, as well as subregional organizations, provides frameworks for collective autonomy that individual states cannot achieve alone. The AfCFTA particularly represents foundational infrastructure for economic interdependence that builds trust and creates mutual in stability, extending beyond narrowly defined security cooperation. When countries integrate through trade, investment, and value chains, disruptions from conflict impose costs that incentivize peaceful dispute resolution and coordinated responses to external pressures.

Ad hoc security arrangements, including the Multinational Joint Task Force against Boko Haram and the now-defunct Group of Five for the Sahel, demonstrate both the necessity and efficacy of flexible alliances in addressing specific threats. Those coalitions form when existing institutional mechanisms prove inadequate for addressing urgent challenges that require rapid responses. While sometimes criticized as insufficiently institutionalized or overly dependent on external support, such arrangements reflect a pragmatic adaptation to security environments where threats evolve more rapidly than

formal treaty organizations can respond. The question becomes not whether ad hoc initiatives should exist but how they relate to longer-term institutional development.

Participants debated whether ad hoc arrangements undermine or complement enduring security architectures. One view holds that temporary coalitions fragment efforts, create coordination problems, and hinder the development of sustainable capacity within permanent institutions. The alternative perspective views ad hoc initiatives as necessary mechanisms for flexibility that eventually inform institutional evolution—today's improvised coalition becomes tomorrow's formalized structure. Both dynamics operate simultaneously, with outcomes depending on whether states view ad hoc arrangements as expedient substitutes for institutional reform or as laboratories testing approaches that might merit permanence.

Historical lessons from Europe and Africa suggest that strategic autonomy combines sovereignty and freedom from external coercion with influence and the capacity to shape regional and global environments according to national interests. Pure sovereignty without influence leaves states vulnerable to decisions made elsewhere affecting their security and prosperity. Conversely, influence without sovereignty means serving as instruments of others' strategies rather than pursuing independent objectives. Effective strategic autonomy requires both dimensions, though the appropriate balance varies by country size, capabilities, and geopolitical position.

Trade-offs inherent in pursuing autonomy within alliance contexts received substantial attention. Strategic autonomy can strengthen partners by encouraging defense investment, diversifying capabilities, and establishing mature foreign policy institutions capable of independent analysis and decision-making. Allies who contribute meaningfully rather than free-riding enhance collective capacity while reducing burdens on dominant powers. However, autonomy also creates risks, including policy divergence on critical issues, nuclear proliferation when security guarantees become uncertain, and coordination failures during crises when a rapid, unified response proves essential.

The U.S.-Europe relationship illustrates those tensions. U.S. calls for greater European defense spending and capability development encourage autonomy, which reduces U.S. burdens and creates more balanced partnerships. Yet as Europeans develop autonomous capacities, policy preferences sometimes diverge on key issues and relationships. Similar dynamics emerge in U.S.-Asian alliances where partners like South Korea and Japan balance the desire for autonomy against continued dependence on American extended deterrence.

South Africa's positioning exemplifies the challenge of balancing relations across Western partners, BRICS membership, and African regional alliances. Maintaining constructive relationships across that array of partners requires sophisticated diplomatic management of competing expectations. Western partners press for

positions on Russia and China that align with their preferences; BRICS partners expect solidarity in challenging Western dominance; African neighbors seek leadership on continental priorities that may conflict with both. Navigating those cross-pressures without sacrificing core interests or credibility demands clarity about nonnegotiable principles and flexibility on matters where accommodation proves possible.

Military cooperation and trust-building through exercises, training partnerships, and regional collaborations remain robust, despite ongoing political debates about the future of alliances. Professional military relationships often prove more durable than political alignments, with officers who trained together, conducted joint operations, and built personal networks maintaining cooperation even when civilian leaders clash. That operational-level resilience provides a foundation for preserving security cooperation during political turbulence, although it cannot indefinitely substitute for a clear strategic direction from civilian leadership.

Tensions without clear resolutions were apparent regarding the question of whether individual countries' pursuit of autonomy enhances or undermines collective African strategic autonomy. One perspective holds that, strong individual states with genuine policy independence form building blocks for practical continental cooperation; weak, dependent states cannot contribute meaningfully to collective autonomy. The alternative view warns that the uncoordinated pursuit of national autonomy fragments African positions, enables external actors to exploit divisions through forum shopping, and prevents achieving the scale necessary for genuine independence from great power influence.

Those positions raise deeper questions about sequencing: should continental institutions be developed first to channel national autonomy toward collective objectives, or should national capacity be developed first to enable states to contribute meaningfully to continental frameworks? Likely, both processes should advance simultaneously with continuous adjustment of their relationship.

Participants emphasized that bridging the aspirations articulated in frameworks like Agenda 2063 with the practical realities of limited funding, immediate security threats, and contested political will remains essential for effective policy implementation. Grand visions prove meaningless without concrete steps translating goals into actionable programs with assigned responsibilities, dedicated resources, and accountability mechanisms. Yet purely tactical responses to immediate crises without a guiding strategic vision risk reactive policies that accumulate into incoherent patterns, undermining long-term interests.

The challenge of sustaining long-term development visions amid global distrust and transactionalism reflects broader erosion of the liberal internationalist assumption that economic interdependence automatically produces peace and cooperation. As

geopolitical competition intensifies, relationships once conceived as win-win partnerships increasingly appear to be zero-sum competitions. African states seeking partners for development often face interlocutors whose primary concerns involve securing access to critical minerals, countering the influence of rival powers, or managing migration flows, rather than genuinely supporting African development objectives.

Nuclear proliferation risks associated with uncertain security guarantees illustrate high-stakes consequences of autonomy-alliance trade-offs. When states doubt whether allies will honor defense commitments during crises, indigenous nuclear weapons development becomes attractive, despite the enormous costs and pressures from the nonproliferation regime. Japan and South Korea periodically debate that option as confidence in American extended deterrence fluctuates. Similar dynamics could emerge in other regions if security architectures collapse, with profound implications for global stability extending far beyond bilateral relationships where guarantees first weakened.

Data-driven analysis—identifying dependencies, vulnerabilities, and collaboration opportunities—has emerged as essential for informed decision-making about autonomy-cooperation balances. Without a rigorous assessment of where genuine interdependence exists versus where dependencies can be reduced, policies risk either pursuing excessive autonomy that sacrifices beneficial cooperation or insufficient autonomy, leaving critical vulnerabilities. Mapping trade flows, technology dependencies, financial exposure, and security relationships provides an empirical foundation for strategic choices currently made through intuition or ideology.

The integration of security and development planning reflects the recognition that peace and stability constitute prerequisites for economic growth and meaningful autonomy, rather than separate policy domains. Insecurity diverts resources to immediate survival, disrupts productive activity, destroys infrastructure, and generates displacement that undermines human capital development. Conversely, poverty and inequality fuel grievances that armed groups exploit for recruitment. Breaking those cycles requires comprehensive approaches that address security and development simultaneously, rather than sequentially, because neither can succeed without progress on the other.

Recommendations discussed:

- African states should strengthen continental and regional mechanisms including the African Union, Multinational Joint Task Force, and reconstituted Sahel security arrangements to ensure coordinated responses to transnational threats while maintaining strategic autonomy.
- African states should invest in permanent institutional capacity rather than relying exclusively on ad hoc coalitions that create dependency on external facilitation, develop shared early warning systems and intelligence-sharing

protocols that enable rapid collective response without requiring case-by-case negotiation, and establish burden-sharing frameworks that distribute security costs equitably based on capacity and threat exposure.

- African governments should leverage the AfCFTA to build trust through economic interdependence that creates mutual interests in stability extending beyond security cooperation narrowly defined, prioritize infrastructure connectivity that enables rapid force deployment for collective security operations and facilitates trade flows supporting economic integration, harmonize defense procurement and capability development to achieve economies of scale while ensuring interoperability for joint operations, and establish continental defense industrial capacity reducing dependence on external suppliers for critical equipment and technology.
- Continental and international actors should support data-driven analysis through funding for research identifying dependencies, vulnerabilities, and collaboration opportunities that inform strategic autonomy decisions, and provide technical assistance for mapping trade flows, technology dependencies, financial exposure, and security relationships as empirical foundation for policy choices.
- Continental and international actors should facilitate Track 1.5 and Track 2 dialogues where officials, experts, and stakeholders can explore sensitive autonomy-cooperation trade-offs in less formal settings, and respect African strategic choices rather than attempting to coerce alignment with external preferences that could conflict with continental interests.
- South Africa and similar regional powers should actively balance partnerships across Western allies, BRICS partners, and African regional frameworks by clearly articulating nonnegotiable principles while demonstrating flexibility on matters where accommodation proves possible, develop sophisticated diplomatic capacity for managing competing expectations without sacrificing core interests or credibility, use convening power to facilitate dialogue among African states on collective approaches to great power competition that prevent fragmentation, and invest in capabilities that enable leadership contributions to African security challenges rather than merely mediating between external actors.
- All stakeholders should integrate security and development planning by establishing institutional mechanisms ensuring defense ministries, finance ministries, and development agencies coordinate rather than operating in silos; allocate resources reflecting the recognition that peace and stability constitute prerequisites for economic growth rather than competing priorities; design development programs explicitly addressing conflict drivers including inequality, exclusion, youth unemployment, and resource scarcity; and build monitoring systems tracking how security conditions affect development outcomes and vice versa to enable adaptive management.