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Op-ed

AFRICA, AMERICA AND THE EAST: IN SEARCH OF BALANCE IN A SHIFTING WORLD

Between East and West, a quiet assertion of sovereignty

By Daryl Swanepoel

In the shifting theatre of global geopolitics, Africa often finds itself framed as the prize in a contest of giants, courted, cajoled or overlooked depending on the mood of the hour in foreign capitals. Yet perhaps the time has come to reframe the narrative. What if Africa were not the object of this great power drama, but its most quietly pivotal actor?

With the Trump administration now six months into its term, we are beginning to discern not just a change in tone from Washington, but a potential recalibration in substance. The sharpness of the rhetoric, the transactional language and the clear scepticism towards multilateralism and traditional alliances, these are more than stylistic flourishes. They raise profound questions about how the United States views its role in the world and how it perceives Africa's place within that worldview.

Yet we must be careful not to conflate noise with novelty. The deeper question is whether this administration's approach is a radical departure from past US policy toward Africa or merely a blunter continuation of old patterns, patterns marked by episodic engagement, selective interest and a tendency to speak *at* Africa rather than *with* it. What is new may not be the content, but the candour.

Africa, for its part, must now decide how to engage with this changing landscape. Should it wait, reactively, for signals from Washington? Or should it lean forward, setting the terms of engagement, articulating its own priorities and navigating the shifting alliances with a clear-eyed sense of purpose?

This is not a theoretical exercise. The choices being made now, about trade, diplomacy, infrastructure and digital sovereignty, will reverberate for generations.

One of the most striking shifts in the global economic order today is the growing trend toward *de-dollarization*. It is a term that has quietly entered the lexicon of economists and policymakers and yet its implications are anything but quiet. At a recent event in Johannesburg that I was privy to, the conversation around bypassing the dollar in trade transactions, settling directly from rand to renminbi or some other BRICS country currency, captured this shift with unusual clarity.

This is not simply a matter of convenience or efficiency, because from a business point of view it makes absolute economic sense. But it is also a political and philosophical statement about autonomy. For decades, the dollar has functioned not just as a currency, but as a mechanism of influence, a means through which global power is exercised and, at times, withheld. To move away from dollar dependency is to assert a kind of economic self-determination.

This trend is not confined to currency. Alternative payment systems are being developed to reduce reliance on SWIFT, the interbank messaging system that effectively allows the United States to enforce financial sanctions across borders. Such innovations challenge not just institutions, but so too the very architecture of global finance.

How might the United States respond to such shifts, especially under an administration that views both BRICS and Chinese influence with deep suspicion? Would it resort to even greater punitive tariffs or even secondary sanctions to dissuade countries from participating in what it sees as rival systems? Moreover, these are not hypothetical concerns, they are the questions African policymakers must weigh with urgency and care.

But amidst this complexity lies a remarkable opportunity, Africa need not be a passive participant in a game of titans. It can, and must, be a strategic actor in its own right. The binary of “East versus West” is a false choice, because what Africa should seek is not alignment, but balance. Not dependence, but diversified partnerships rooted in mutual respect and shared benefit.

That requires not only a shift in diplomacy, but also in mindset, because for too long, Africa has been spoken about in terms of charity, aid or crisis, but today’s realities demand a different frame, one of investment, innovation and intellectual engagement. Africa is not merely catching up to the world; in many ways, it is reimagining the world anew.

Consider the digital economy, where African startups are leapfrogging legacy infrastructure with mobile-based solutions or the energy sector, where decentralised solar power is redefining access in rural communities, which are not stories of marginal progress, they are signals of a continent thinking for itself, building for itself and increasingly, financing itself.

That said, we should not romanticise the challenges, because the road ahead is uneven and the risks are real. Global power remains asymmetric and navigating that terrain requires more than idealism, it demands strategy, unity and an unflinching appraisal of our own vulnerabilities.

But nor should we underestimate our leverage. In a multipolar world, Africa’s 54 votes at the UN, its vast natural resources, its youthful population, its mineral deposits and its growing markets make it a partner no global power can afford to ignore.

So the question becomes: how do we use this leverage? Do we trade it cheaply for short-term gains or do we invest it wisely in long-term sovereignty?

And perhaps even more fundamentally: What kind of global future does Africa wish to help shape?

If we can answer that, not with slogans, but with substance, we may find that Africa's most powerful position is not as a swing state in someone else's game, but as a steward of its own destiny.

This is the moment to step into that role, with clarity, courage and quiet confidence. Not to choose sides, but to choose ourselves.

Daryl Swanepoel is the Chief Executive Officer of the Inclusive Society Institute. The article draws on his opening remarks of a webinar hosted by the Institute on Africa – US relations, and its nexus with China.