



INCLUSIVE SOCIETY INSTITUTE

Op-ed

AFRICA'S ALTERNATIVE TO A FRAGMENTING WORLD

By Daryl Swanepoel

The world is becoming increasingly fragmented. Nations that once championed international cooperation are retreating behind narrower conceptions of national interest. Great powers compete with growing intensity for strategic influence. International institutions struggle to command confidence. Political dialogue is increasingly replaced by geopolitical rivalry, while consensus gives way to competing blocs.

Much has been written about the redistribution of global power. Far less attention has been given to the erosion of global legitimacy. Yet it is this crisis of legitimacy, rather than the shifting balance of power itself, that lies at the heart of today's uncertainty.

Power has never been static. Throughout history empires have risen and fallen, economic centres have shifted and new political actors have emerged. None of this is unprecedented. What distinguishes the present moment is that many states and societies no longer believe that the institutions responsible for managing international cooperation adequately represent the realities of the twenty-first century. When institutions cease to adapt, confidence inevitably declines. And when confidence declines, disengagement follows.

That reality framed the discussions at a recent international conference in Dakar under the theme *Disengagement and a Shifting World: Re-reading Mandelaism to Recreate Bonds and Meaning*. One of the panel discussions posed an especially provocative question: should Africa position itself somewhere between the competing forces of de-Westernisation and Americanisation?

It is an understandable question. It is also the wrong one.

Framing Africa's future as a choice between competing centres of global power assumes that the continent's role is simply to align itself with one geopolitical project or another. It accepts that the future of international order will be written elsewhere and that Africa's responsibility is merely to decide where it belongs within it.

That is a profoundly limited vision of Africa's place in the world.

The continent should not be asking whether it prefers Washington or Beijing, nor whether tomorrow's international order should resemble yesterday's Western-led institutions or an emerging alternative. The more important question is whether either approach adequately addresses the deeper crisis confronting multilateralism.

That crisis is not fundamentally about who holds power. It is about whether power is exercised legitimately.

For almost eight decades the post-war multilateral system has provided an indispensable framework for international cooperation. Its achievements should not be dismissed. It has helped prevent wider conflict, facilitated economic development, established international norms and created mechanisms through which states can resolve disputes peacefully.

But the architecture of that system continues to reflect the political realities of 1945 more than those of 2026.

The demographic centre of gravity has shifted. The global economy has been transformed. New regional powers have emerged. Africa's population has grown dramatically and will continue to shape the future of the international system throughout this century. Yet representation within many global institutions has not kept pace with these changes.

As representation has weakened, so too has legitimacy.

That helps explain why some states seek to reform existing institutions while others establish parallel structures and still others increasingly bypass multilateral processes altogether. These developments are often portrayed as evidence of an inevitable contest between East and West. They are better understood as symptoms of institutions struggling to retain the confidence of an increasingly diverse international community.

The danger is that the debate becomes little more than an argument over who should dominate the next international order. Replacing one dominant centre of power with another would not resolve the crisis of legitimacy. It would merely relocate it.

Tomorrow's institutions will fail for precisely the same reasons as today's if they continue to exclude significant voices from meaningful participation. The objective cannot simply be a redistribution of influence. It must be the construction of institutions that command confidence because they are genuinely representative, effective and fair.

That is where Africa has something distinctive to contribute.

For too long the continent has been viewed primarily as a participant in debates shaped elsewhere. But Africa's own historical experience offers important lessons for an international system searching for renewed legitimacy.

Africa understands exclusion, because it has lived through colonialism and marginalisation. It understands liberation, because it has fought for political self-determination. It understands reconciliation, because many of its societies have had to find ways of building common futures after profound conflict. And it understands that lasting peace cannot be sustained through permanent domination by one group over another.

These experiences do not make Africa morally superior. They do, however, provide perspectives that are increasingly relevant to a world struggling with questions of legitimacy, representation and coexistence.

The philosophy that informed Nelson Mandela's political leadership remains especially instructive. Too often Mandelaism is reduced to admiration for an extraordinary individual. In reality, its enduring significance lies elsewhere. It represents a way of practising politics that places legitimacy before

victory, dialogue before domination and service before power. It recognises that institutions derive their authority not simply from legal rules, but from the confidence of the people they exist to serve.

Those principles are no less applicable internationally than they are domestically.

Today's world does not suffer from a shortage of powerful states. It suffers from a shortage of stewardship.

The language of international politics increasingly emphasises competition, spheres of influence and strategic rivalry. Whether expressed by established powers or emerging ones, the temptation remains the same: to view leadership primarily through the lens of dominance rather than responsibility.

Africa should resist that logic.

Not because it lacks influence, but because it has the opportunity to offer something more valuable than alignment with any geopolitical camp. It can help rebuild the idea that international cooperation should rest upon legitimacy, rather than hierarchy, partnership, rather than dependency and dialogue, rather than coercion.

This does not imply neutrality in every dispute, nor does it require disengagement from the world's major powers. Africa's interests will continue to demand productive relationships with the United States, China, Europe, India and others. But productive engagement should never become permanent alignment. The continent's greatest contribution will come from maintaining the intellectual and diplomatic independence necessary to act as a bridge rather than another battleground.

The world does not need another Cold War, nor another unipolar order. It needs institutions capable of earning trust across cultures, civilisations and political systems. Achieving that will require difficult reforms. It will require courage from established and emerging powers alike. Above all, it will require the political imagination to construct a genuinely inclusive multilateralism, rather than merely a differently managed hierarchy.

If that opportunity is missed, fragmentation will deepen. States will retreat further into competing blocs. International institutions will continue to lose authority. Global challenges that require collective action will become increasingly difficult to address.

But if Africa is prepared to contribute its own ideas rather than simply choosing between those of others, this period of uncertainty may yet become the beginning of multilateralism's renewal, rather than its decline.

That is the alternative Africa should offer a fragmenting world.

This article draws on a presentation delivered by Daryl Swanepoel, Chief Executive Officer of the Inclusive Society Institute, during the panel discussion "Between the De-Westernisation and Americanisation of the World: African Alternatives to the Crisis of Multilateralism" at the international conference Disengagement and a Shifting World: Re-reading Mandelalism to Recreate Bonds and Meaning, held in Dakar, Senegal, from 18–20 July 2026.