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CDRC Digest Team:

Abdeta Dribssa Beyene, Ph.D (Executive Director)
Amb. Kasahun Dender (Deputy Executive Director)
Wegene Mengistu (Senior Researcher)
Yidnekachew Mitiku Ph.D (Senior Researcher)

Centre for Dialogue, Research and Cooperation
Ethio-China Friendship Avenue
Medina Tower 5th floor
Tel: +251 11 470 0370/73
Fax: +251 11 470 0359
Email: cdrc@cdrcethiopia.com
<http://www.cdrcethiopia.org>

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Africa's Future Amidst Global Rupture: Agency, Sovereignty, and Transformation

Introduction

International relations are profoundly shaped by economic structures that are deeply intertwined with the interests of political, corporate, and security elites. These interests are sustained through a dense architecture of institutions, organizations, formal rules, and informal practices that collectively reproduce asymmetric power relations between advanced economies at the core of the global system and peripheral states in the Global South. Over decades, the governing logics surrounding capital mobility, resource extraction, production, and trade have entrenched structural inequalities, yielding a global economic order that systematically privileges advanced economies while severely constraining the developmental trajectories of Africa and much of the developing world. Far from being accidental, these imbalances are embedded in the very design of global markets and governance frameworks.

Mounting frustration with these inequities has intensified as global institutions increasingly appear paralyzed in the face of shifting power balances and diverging interests among major and middle powers. Specifically, the rise of China and other emerging powers has fundamentally unsettled the long-standing U.S.-led balance of power, accelerating a profound transformation in global dynamics. Institutions once portrayed as neutral arbiters of global stability—financial, trade, and security regimes alike—now struggle to adapt to rapid geopolitical change. For actors with limited influence, especially in Africa, this institutional paralysis compounds longstanding vulnerabilities, exposing them to external shocks, coercive pressures, and cascading crises over which they exercise little control. What is often described as “global disorder” is, for much of the Global South, an amplification of enduring structural

marginalization rather than a sudden rupture.

The so-called rules-based international order—long anchored in U.S.-dominated economic, security, and institutional frameworks—is rapidly eroding, with the United States itself at the center of this rupture. This decline is driven not only by China's expanding global influence and the growing assertiveness of middle powers seeking greater strategic autonomy, but also by Washington's own recalibration of global strategy. Increasingly, the United States has moved away from multilateral constraints, prioritizing bilateral, asymmetric, and transactional approaches that allow it to pursue national objectives with greater flexibility and less accountability.

This shift raises a fundamental question: what explains the progressive U.S. disengagement from the very multilateral institutions it once constructed and championed? While multiple factors contribute—including domestic political polarization, economic recalibration toward competitive advantage, and strategic prioritization of immediate security interests—the cumulative effect has been a signaling, and in some cases acceleration, of the decline of the order the U.S. has long championed as the foundation of global cooperation. The implications of this transition are profound: it not only reshapes power dynamics among major and middle powers but also exposes vulnerabilities and might offer opportunities for regions such as Africa, which have long navigated global systems designed largely without their input. Understanding this recalibration is essential for framing Africa's strategies in a world where old rules no longer reliably constrain the exercise of power.

Particularly during Donald Trump's second term, the United States has increasingly embraced unilateralism, transactional diplomacy, and blatant power projection, upending its commitment to

multilateral norms, collective restraint, and institutional governance. Through tariff coercion, withdrawals from multilateral agreements, territorial assertions, and the explicit privileging of sovereign power over institutional constraints, Washington has actively undermined core elements of the very order it once championed—transforming itself from the principal guarantor of that order into one of its primary agents of erosion. This reality is captured powerfully in Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney’s address at the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2026, where he characterized the present moment as a “rupture, not a transition.” Carney’s framing stands out for its intellectual rigor and unflinching realism. Rather than offering comforting narratives of gradual adjustment, he identifies the current era as a decisive and irreversible break from the assumptions that long underpinned the global order. Central to his analysis is the recognition that the age of “innocent” globalization has ended: economic interdependence is no longer a neutral engine of shared prosperity but has become a core instrument of coercion, as great powers weaponize trade, finance, technology, data, and supply chains to advance strategic objectives.

Yet Carney’s argument has drawn pointed criticism for its narrow vantage point. His diagnosis is framed largely from the perspective of middle powers that benefited disproportionately from the rules-based international order—an order that provided them with security guarantees, institutional predictability, and policy space to focus on domestic economic transformation. What remains conspicuously absent is an acknowledgment that this same order systematically marginalized the Global South, constraining its development, enforcing asymmetric openness, and excluding it from meaningful rule-making. For much of Africa and the developing world, vulnerability, coercion, and constrained sovereignty are not new conditions triggered by the current rupture; they are long-standing structural realities.

This omission is particularly striking given Canada’s own recent policy behavior. Even as Carney warns against weaponized

interdependence, Canada has pursued pragmatic bilateral engagement with China, underscoring a continued willingness to negotiate selectively and secure national advantage within the very system he critiques. In effect, Canada—like many middle powers—is adapting by shifting toward alternative economic “green pastures” created by China’s rise, while failing to confront the deeper historical inequities that shaped the global order in the first place. By not explicitly recognizing how the rules-based order has sidelined the Global South, Carney’s otherwise incisive diagnosis remains incomplete. The rupture he describes is not merely a breakdown of fairness for middle powers; it is a delayed reckoning with an international system whose exclusions and asymmetries were long normalized at the expense of Africa and the broader developing world.

Although that remains the case, Carney’s remarks illuminate how systemic fragility now allows crises to cascade rapidly across borders, while sovereignty is eroded not only through conventional territorial threats but through more subtle and pervasive mechanisms. Financial leverage, technological dependency, control over supply-chain choke points, data dominance, sanctions regimes, and coercive economic statecraft have become primary tools of power. Integration, once promised as a pathway to security and mutual benefit, increasingly amplifies asymmetries and exposes weaker actors to subordination and control. By confronting these realities with precision and candor, Carney cuts through comforting platitudes and demands a clear-eyed reckoning with a world in which interdependence no longer guarantees stability.

Yet the anxieties now being voiced by middle powers—the fear of lost autonomy, exposure to coercion, and the erosion of predictability—closely mirror the conditions that African states have endured for decades, often without voice, leverage, or meaningful recourse. The declining legitimacy of global governance reflects not only the shifting balance of power but also the accumulation of long-standing grievances stemming from systemic inequality, selective enforcement of rules, and persistent marginalization. In many respects, the

rupture now confronting the global North is a belated encounter with realities long normalized in the South. For Africa, which has repeatedly sought justice within hierarchies deliberately structured to constrain its agency, Carney's narrative highlights a critical gap: the perspectives and interests of the Global South remain largely absent from high-level conversations about reimagining global order. Closing this gap will require genuinely inclusive dialogues that place African and broader Southern experiences at the center, rather than treating them as peripheral concerns, or selectively engage with those that are in a position to compete globally.

As the global order fractures at an accelerating pace, power continues to reside with those who control essential resources, capital, maritime routes, trade arteries, and frontier technologies. In this intensifying contest, Africa faces familiar dangers under far more volatile and unpredictable conditions. Without coordinated action, the continent risks permanent marginality, reduced to a theatre of great-power rivalry and a passive recipient of externally driven strategies. Yet Africa possesses latent capacities—demographic depth, abundant natural resources, growing technological potential, and strategic geographic positioning—that, if mobilized collectively, could be transformed into genuine agency. The intertwined imperatives of agency, sovereignty, and structural transformation now define the continent's future in this era of rupture. Understanding, operationalizing, and strategically aligning these imperatives must become the central focus of African leadership if the continent is to avoid repeating historical patterns of marginalization and to claim an active role in shaping the emerging global order.

Echoing the realism of Carney's address, the article imagines a parallel moment of reckoning at the African Union Summit in mid-February 2026, where African leaders confront the same stark realities: intensifying major- and middle-power rivalry, the weaponization of economic interdependence, and cascading crises that expose deep structural vulnerabilities. Against this backdrop, the analysis explores how Africa can

navigate intensifying global competition, recalibrate Agenda 2063 to align with emerging realities, and move decisively from being "on the menu" to claiming a seat at the table—transforming patterns of extraction into equitable partnerships and dependency into strategic autonomy.

Africa's Exposure in a Fractured World

Mark Carney's January 2026 address in Davos laid bare a stark and uncomfortable truth: the global order has experienced a rupture, not a gentle transition. What has collapsed is the "pleasant fiction" that deep economic integration would naturally yield mutual benefit, stability, and shared prosperity. In its place has emerged a harsher reality defined by unconstrained great-power competition, the erosion of institutional restraint, and the systematic weaponization of interdependence. For Africa and much of the Global South, however, this diagnosis is less a revelation than an intensification of a long-standing condition. Structural exposure to shocks not of the continent's making, chronic vulnerability to externally driven crises, punitive access to capital even for productive investments, and perpetual positioning as a geopolitical arena rather than an autonomous actor have been defining features of Africa's engagement with the global system for decades.

Africa's experience of the current global rupture differs fundamentally from that of advanced and middle powers. While others are grappling with the sudden erosion of predictability, Africa has long operated in an international environment defined by uncertainty and external control. Logistics chains, currencies, standards, capital flows, and regulatory frameworks have largely been shaped elsewhere, often with little sensitivity to local realities or developmental priorities. African states have been compelled to function within rules they did not write, absorb shocks they did not create, and manage volatility generated far beyond their borders—through financial crises, commodity price swings, sanctions regimes, and geopolitical rivalries that repeatedly spill onto the continent.

From this perspective, today's fractured order does not introduce entirely new risks; it magnifies long-standing ones, stripping away any remaining illusions about the neutrality or benevolence of the postwar system.

Any serious reckoning must therefore begin with unvarnished honesty about Africa's structural position in the global system and the true nature of the fading postwar order. This clarity is not an exercise in grievance peddling, but a prerequisite for crafting strategy. Mitigating Africa's vulnerabilities requires a disciplined and clearly prioritized set of African-led responses, anchored in self-reliance, political legitimacy, and long-term resilience rather than reactive adaptation to external pressures.

Africa enters this rupture burdened by deep structural weaknesses that the shifting power landscape now exposes more sharply. Energy poverty remains one of the most binding constraints. Hundreds of millions of Africans still lack access to electricity, and unreliable power supplies continue to suffocate industrial growth, innovation, and competitiveness. Chronic energy shortages inflate production costs, undermine value addition, and weaken household resilience. Continued dependence on outdated or externally financed energy systems also risks locking African economies into technological dependency and future stranded assets, further eroding continental agency.

Yet these vulnerabilities coexist with extraordinary potential. Africa possesses unparalleled renewable energy resources, including vast solar capacity alongside significant hydropower, wind, and geothermal potential. It is also endowed with large reserves of critical minerals essential for clean technologies and energy storage. If harnessed strategically, these assets can underpin energy independence and position Africa as a central player in emerging green value chains. Achieving this, however, depends on moving beyond extractive arrangements toward local manufacturing, innovation ecosystems, and partnerships that embed technology transfer and skills development within African economies.

Realizing this transformation demands sustained investment in renewable energy infrastructure, transmission networks, and human capital, particularly in science, engineering, and vocational skills. Such investments carry the potential to unlock substantial economic growth, generate millions of jobs, and build climate resilience. The decisive challenge is not the absence of opportunity, but the difficulty of mobilizing finance at scale, strengthening institutional capacity, developing skilled manpower, and cultivating leadership capable of aligning domestic investors, external partners, and non-state actors around shared long-term objectives.

Energy deficits, moreover, are inseparable from a broader cycle of structural weakness. Infrastructure gaps fragment markets and isolate economies, while limited fiscal space pushes governments toward unsustainable debt. At the same time, Africa's rapidly growing youth population faces persistent unemployment and underemployment, feeding social unrest, political instability, coups, and the expansion of violent extremist groups in fragile regions. Demographics thus present a double-edged reality: a vast potential workforce that could drive growth, or—if neglected—a source of deepening instability.

The stakes of the current rupture are therefore existential as well as strategic. Africa's vulnerabilities are not merely economic; they shape security, governance, and sovereignty itself. Whether the continent emerges weakened or empowered will depend less on shifts in global power than on Africa's ability to confront its structural constraints honestly and to act collectively in converting long-standing exposure into durable strength.

Moreover, automation, artificial intelligence, and machine learning threaten to displace low-skill jobs across Africa, while existing infrastructural weaknesses—such as frequent power outages—already reduce employment by 5–14% in many countries, according to World Bank estimates. Yet the continent's youthful population represents an extraordinary opportunity: a potential engine of productivity, innovation, and competitiveness.

Reports by the World Economic Forum and Microsoft indicate that integrating AI and Fourth Industrial Revolution technologies into agriculture, healthcare, energy, and digital services could dramatically enhance productivity, raise incomes, and expand economic participation. Realizing this potential requires strategic investments at scale, including approximately \$1.3 billion to expand technical and vocational education and training institutions and innovation centers, reliable electricity access through initiatives such as Mission 300, and widespread digital broadband coverage. Modeling by the World Bank and African Development Bank suggests that these investments could lift GDP by around 9% by 2035, create millions of jobs in green and digital sectors, and reduce poverty for tens of millions—transforming demographic pressure from a source of risk into a lever of agency and global competitiveness. Achieving this will require effective coordination among African leaders, national governments, the private sector, and continental institutions, as well as careful management of external partners and development actors.

These challenges are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Chronic energy and infrastructure deficits, fragmented markets, and regulatory gaps lock Africa into dependence, undercut growth, and expose the continent to external leverage. Energy and infrastructure sovereignty are therefore foundational: without reliable power, modern transport, and robust connectivity, productivity remains low, markets remain fragmented, and Africa's strategic position continues to weaken. Targeted, disciplined investment in these sectors offers the clearest pathway to breaking the cycle of vulnerability—unlocking inclusive growth, reducing geopolitical exposure, and insulating African economies from future global shocks.

At the same time, persistent regulatory fragmentation, weak digital infrastructure, restricted professional mobility, and low intra-African services trade further compound vulnerabilities. Services already account for over 55% of GDP and roughly 40% of formal employment, yet the continent remains dependent

on external actors in emerging domains, including Gulf-backed ports, farmland leases, data corridors, and fintech ecosystems. Many of these arrangements replicate extractive patterns under the guise of innovation and green transition. Short-termist elites and fragmented bargaining exacerbate these risks, allowing external actors to position themselves as gatekeepers in Africa's digital and renewable frontiers, while value creation and rule-making remain offshore.

Overcoming these structural gaps requires deliberate strategies to reclaim agency. African states must co-author digital, data, and green-finance frameworks, accelerate AfCFTA implementation across priority services sectors—business, communications, finance, transport, tourism, ICT—and insist on co-ownership, technology transfer, and local content rules in joint ventures. Pooling sovereign wealth funds to match foreign investment and enforcing mutual recognition agreements can further strengthen collective leverage. When executed with disciplined, coordinated action, these measures transform vulnerability into strategic positioning, allowing Africa to negotiate from strength rather than fragmentation. This agency can catalyze a broader transformation, enabling the continent to evolve from a reactive, shock-absorbing periphery into a resilient innovation hub that redefines global interdependence on African terms.

Yet the central truth remains: no external partnership or investment can substitute for strong intra-African cooperation. The quality, seriousness, and depth of collaboration among African states, institutions, and societies will determine whether the continent can achieve real agency, break cycles of dependency, and realize the shared ambitions of Agenda 2063. While headlines and diplomatic attention focus on relations with major and middle powers, Africa's strategic future ultimately hinges on its ability to act in concert, uphold collective rules, and leverage shared resources effectively. Without this, the continent risks remaining a fragmented arena, vulnerable to exploitation and external competition, rather than emerging as a unified actor capable of shaping its own destiny.

Within this context, Africa's path forward lies in accelerated regional integration and deliberate diversification—but stripped of naive assumptions. Over-reliance on any single country, corporation, trade route, technology, or currency invites fragility and coercion. Strategic diversification and hedging, by contrast, can transform shocks into sources of resilience and bargaining power. Yet diversification must be paired with discipline. It demands three aligned refusals and assertions: rejecting partnerships that conceal profound asymmetries; demanding full transparency from creditors, investors, and trading partners; and enforcing equivalent accountability on African governments themselves. Without internal discipline, external leverage remains hollow. Leadership becomes the key here.

Equally vital to Africa's pursuit of sovereignty, greater agency, and structural transformation are locally rooted security solutions that reassert state authority and reduce dependence on external military intervention. Durable security cannot be imported; it must be rooted in nationally owned institutions, regionally coordinated mechanisms, and social contracts that command public trust. This, in turn, requires institutional strengthening that is equitable and inclusive, ensuring that state capacity serves citizens fairly rather than reinforcing exclusion or elite capture. Where institutions are weak or contested, external actors readily exploit internal divisions.

Moreover, agricultural transformation and food sovereignty are non-negotiable. Africa cannot remain immune from global market volatility, supply disruptions, and external political pressures for something as fundamental as food. Producing food domestically, at scale and sustainably, is essential for social stability, economic independence, and strategic autonomy. Africa must feed itself—fully and reliably—if it is to secure its future. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) provides a critical framework through which food produced in surplus regions of the continent can be efficiently redistributed to deficit areas. If effectively implemented, AfCFTA can reduce structural food insecurity by enabling intra-African trade supported by reliable infrastructure,

transport corridors, logistics hubs, and market connectivity. This would help stabilize prices, minimize post-harvest losses, and lessen Africa's dependence on extra-continental food imports.

Realizing this potential ultimately hinges on strong, sustained political commitment from African states and their leadership. The African Continental Free Trade Area cannot function as a declaratory project or a legal framework alone. It requires deliberate and coordinated investments in cross-border infrastructure, the harmonization of standards and customs procedures, and the systematic removal of non-tariff barriers that continue to fragment African markets. Most critically, it demands that leaders treat food trade, logistics, and connectivity as strategic imperatives directly tied to sovereignty, political stability, and societal resilience—not as narrow technical trade issues delegated to bureaucracies. Without this shift in mindset, Africa will continue to produce food in isolation while importing vulnerability and insecurity.

Africa's broader wealth-creation strategy must confront its vulnerabilities with equal realism. High levels of debt distress across many African economies constrain fiscal space, while heavy dependence on commodity exports leaves countries exposed to volatile global prices and limits growth potential. These structural weaknesses are not abstract macroeconomic concerns; they directly shape political stability, social cohesion, and state capacity. Left unaddressed, they will continue to reinforce cycles of dependency and crisis management rather than long-term development.

At the same time, Africa's strategic opportunities are substantial and underutilized. Continental integration through AfCFTA offers a pathway to significantly expand intra-African trade, deepen industrialization, and build regional value chains that retain more value on the continent. Africa's endowment of critical minerals, combined with its vast renewable energy potential, positions it to play a central role in emerging green value chains—if it negotiates from a position of coordination rather than fragmentation. This

requires moving beyond extractive arrangements toward partnerships that embed processing, skills transfer, and technological upgrading within African economies.

Shifting from aid dependence to domestic resource mobilization is equally essential. Unlocking local capital through financial reforms, green bonds, and credible regulatory frameworks can reduce exposure to external shocks and conditionalities. Coupled with smarter engagement with major and middle powers—focused on terms, reciprocity, and long-term value rather than short-term inflows—this approach can expand policy space and strategic autonomy. Wealth creation must also be anchored in enabling entrepreneurship, raising productivity in the informal sector where most Africans work, and expanding social protection to reduce vulnerability and unlock human potential.

When these efforts are aligned with sustained investment in digital infrastructure and skills development, they can support a transition toward more diversified, resilient, and inclusive growth. This is not a promise of rapid transformation, but of steady rebalancing—away from fragility and toward capacity. The decisive factor will not be the availability of ideas or external financing, but whether African leaders are willing to act collectively, consistently, and strategically. Without that discipline, Africa's vulnerabilities will persist. With it, the continent can convert integration into leverage and growth into genuine sovereignty.

Absent sustained political commitment, institutional capacity, and strategic clarity, external engagements will continue to deepen rather than alleviate fragility. Rising debt burdens—despite net capital flows, including illicit outflows, remaining unfavorable to Africa—shrinking concessional finance, imbalanced trade regimes, conditional interventions, and the fact that African countries capture only a fraction of the value generated from their mineral wealth all reinforce structural dependence. Without African-owned strategies, debt remains consumptive rather than productive, conditionality remains coercive rather than collaborative, and external interventions

undermine rather than strengthen local agency. With disciplined realism and collective resolve, the continent can begin to reverse this pattern. Debt can be reoriented toward productive investment, partnerships reshaped into vehicles for reciprocal value creation, and external support aligned to reinforce African priorities rather than substitute for them. Such a pivot would allow Africa to engage the fractured global order from a position of agency rather than vulnerability. Absent this shift, global fragmentation will continue to amplify Africa's exposure, turning the continent into a primary arena where external rivalries are played out, often at immense social and political cost. With it, however, Africa can begin the long transition from serving as the world's perpetual shock absorber to becoming an active shaper of outcomes in an age defined more by rupture than reassurance. This responsibility cannot be externalized. The decisive choices lie with African governments and their leadership, who must place African interests—collectively and consistently—at the center of policy, strategy, and engagement with the world.

Africa's Contested Terrain: Navigating Major- and Middle-Power Rivalries

Africa now stands at the intersection of overlapping rivalries among major powers—most notably the United States, China, and Russia—as well as an expanding circle of increasingly assertive middle powers, including the Gulf states, Turkey, India, and others. Additional middle powers that benefited from the rules-based order are also actively advancing their interests on the continent. In the immediate post-Cold War period, Africa was largely sidelined in global strategic calculations and left to manage its crises with limited external attention. That phase has ended. The continent has re-emerged as a central arena in global competition.

These actors are now competing across multiple, intersecting domains: access to strategic minerals and energy resources; rapidly expanding consumer markets; control over critical infrastructure and supply chains in production and logistics; dominance of key maritime corridors;

and growing influence over AI-driven data ecosystems, digital platforms, and surveillance architectures. Together, these dynamics are transforming Africa from a peripheral space into a strategic prize—heightening both its geopolitical significance and its exposure to external rivalry.

Major powers bring unmatched economic scale, military reach, institutional leverage, and global corporate networks that shape trade flows, capital allocation, technological standards, and even knowledge production, thereby exerting profound influence over both state policy and societal trajectories across the continent. Middle powers, by contrast, advance through highly targeted bilateral engagements—resource-for-infrastructure deals, security cooperation, logistics hubs, port acquisitions, and project-based financing—that often translate into durable control over supply chains and strategic nodes.

These external engagements frequently diverge from the objectives articulated in Agenda 2063, particularly its emphasis on continental integration, shared prosperity, and long-term self-reliance. The African Union has limited capacity to steer or discipline such relationships, and alignment between bilateral agreements and continental priorities remains weak and inconsistent. Most African states continue to negotiate individually from positions of structural disadvantage, lacking the institutional depth, policy coherence, legal sophistication, and intergovernmental coordination necessary to engage external partners on equal terms. When deals are misaligned or extractive, political and economic elites rarely bear the costs; these are instead transferred to citizens through debt burdens, weakened public services, environmental degradation, and foregone developmental opportunities.

Weak intra-African cooperation and the absence of rules-based competition among African states have created fertile ground for external actors to exploit divisions for their own strategic and resource-driven gains. This fragmentation steadily undermines collective leadership, continental institutions, and Africa's ability to act with agency.

Rivalry is not inherently harmful; competition can be productive when governed by shared rules and mutual restraint. The problem arises when zero-sum logic dominates—when one country's advancement is pursued through the deliberate weakening of others. This pattern has proven deeply corrosive to trust, stability, and long-term development.

Persistent, unresolved resource-based disputes illustrate how African states can themselves erode the foundational principles of the African Union. Contentious issues around shared waters, cross-border extractive activities, and contested resource zones have too often been managed through unilateral pressure rather than negotiated compromise. Instead of solutions grounded in mutual respect and shared benefit, these rivalries frequently harden positions and internationalize disputes. In doing so, they open doors for external actors to embed their interests within African divisions, extracting maximum advantage from discord while local costs accumulate.

Genuine progress toward shared prosperity and structural resilience depends on shifting from zero-sum confrontation to rules-based, transparent competition embedded within frameworks of interdependence. Disciplined competition—anchored in agreed norms, credible dispute-resolution mechanisms, and reciprocal restraint—can coexist with robust cooperation. Together, they are essential for building mutual trust, developing joint capacities, and strengthening collective leverage. Without this balance, Africa will struggle to navigate an increasingly competitive global order without fragmenting from within.

Actions that contradict this cooperative logic steadily weaken continental cohesion. When African governments fail to resolve disputes internally, or at times allow them to persist for short-term advantage, they unintentionally invite prolonged external involvement. Intra-African differences are then transformed into arenas for competition among middle and major powers. The result is a vicious cycle: resource vulnerability deepens, continental institutions are hollowed out,

rival spheres of influence emerge, and long-term economic, political, and security costs are borne overwhelmingly by ordinary citizens—while narrow elites extract immediate gains from asymmetric external arrangements.

These dynamics are further compounded by corruption, elite capture, and fragile governance structures. Patronage networks and exclusionary practices distort national development priorities, weaken regulatory capacity, and undermine effective oversight. They discourage productive investment, fuel instability, and diminish Africa's credibility and agency on the global stage. While extractive engagements may generate short-term revenue or tactical leverage, they rarely produce the deeper, reciprocal interdependence envisioned in continental frameworks, nor do they meaningfully strengthen the institutions meant to embody Africa's collective aspirations.

Reversing this trajectory requires deliberate institutional reform. Transparent, merit-based recruitment and promotion in public administration and strategic sectors can significantly strengthen state capacity. By prioritizing skills, performance, and integrity, governments can boost productivity, attract investment, and open pathways for innovation among underrepresented groups. Strong anti-corruption frameworks and professional civil services are not technocratic luxuries; they are strategic assets in a world defined by competition and leverage.

Africa can adapt these principles to its own context—strengthening effective ones and building new capable institutions, investing in high-potential sectors, and aligning governance reform with long-term continental goals. Without such changes, persistent structural weaknesses will remain open to exploitation by domestic elites pursuing private or factional interests, as well as by external powers leveraging predatory finance and imbalanced trade arrangements. Ultimately, strengthening rules-based cooperation, disciplined competition, and institutional integrity is not only a governance imperative—it is the foundation of Africa's collective sovereignty and its ability to shape, rather than absorb, the pressures of a

turbulent global order. This raises a fundamental question: from what position does Africa negotiate? Without aligned elite interests anchored in national development strategies and backed by credible economic, political, diplomatic, and technological capacity, genuine leverage remains elusive. The role of leadership is very critical here. Without it, Africa's role in global competition continues to be defined by supplying raw materials, hosting transit routes, opening domestic markets, and surrendering data and regulatory space—rather than shaping value chains, setting standards, or capturing downstream benefits.

These engagements rarely address Africa's core challenges: jobless growth, weak industrialization, failing public services, fragile institutions, autonomous technological development, or the peaceful management of political contestation. Nor do they meaningfully enhance negotiating power at either the national or continental level.

This moment demands a level of synchronized strategy, foresight, and political discipline that matches the scale of the risks confronting the continent. Unchecked bilateralism, widening asymmetries of power, deep structural fragilities, and the renewed contestation of great and middle powers are steadily reasserting themselves on African soil. Without a coordinated response, these dynamics threaten to hollow out continental cohesion, weaken collective bargaining power, and lock African states into reactive and fragmented engagements that serve external interests more than their own.

At this critical crossroads, recalibration is not optional—it is urgent. Agenda 2063 was conceived in a period marked by greater confidence in multilateralism, predictability, and rule-based cooperation. That context no longer exists. The global environment today is defined by fragmentation, strategic rivalry, coercive economic tools, and increasingly transactional forms of engagement.

For Agenda 2063 to remain relevant, it must be adapted to these realities, translating its long-term aspirations into operational strategies that can

withstand pressure, manage competition, and convert uncertainty into leverage rather than vulnerability.

In this environment, reviving a pragmatic form of Pan-Africanism is not a retreat into isolationism but a strategic necessity. Such nationalism would be anchored in shared narratives, coherent aspirations, and resilient institutions capable of defending collective interests while remaining open to engagement. Without this foundation, Africa risks becoming a theater for destructive competition among external powers, with internal divisions amplified and long-term development subordinated to short-term geopolitical calculations.

The path forward is conceptually clear but politically demanding: Africa must as already indicated move from being “on the menu” to claiming a seat at the table. This requires the establishment of continental guardrails that align bilateral agreements with shared economic, political, security, and institutional goals, alongside mechanisms to identify and mitigate member states’ vulnerabilities. To play this role effectively, the African Union must evolve into a financially autonomous, politically respected, and operationally capable institution—able to advance collective interests proactively rather than reacting symbolically to external pressures.

With deliberate and sustained action—clear strategic priorities, principled positions, genuine institutional commitment, longer-term planning horizons, and a recalibration of elite incentives to reflect citizen welfare—Africa can build the collective capacity needed to extract greater value from external engagements and consolidate a shared continental vision. Absent such a shift, fragmentation will deepen, external actors will continue carving spheres of influence, and the African Union risks sliding into irrelevance. With it, Africa can harness its latent strengths—natural resources, expanding markets, youthful populations, and strategic geography—to redefine its global relationships and secure a more equitable footing in an increasingly contested international order.

Can African Leaders Achieve Their Own Davos Moment at the 2026 Annual AU Summit?

Mark Carney’s January 20, 2026, address in Davos offered a rare example of contemporary leadership that chose candor over comfort. Rather than rehearsing familiar narratives of gradual transition and inevitable convergence, Carney named the present moment for what it is: a rupture in the global order. He dismantled the “pleasant fiction” that deep integration would automatically deliver shared prosperity, exposing instead an era defined by weaponized interdependence, systemic fragility, democratic fatigue, and the hard limits of existing institutions. Crucially, he did not indulge nostalgia for a fading order, nor did he posture with empty defiance. His argument was disciplined and forward-looking: middle powers must build resilience through diversification, domestic capability, and pragmatic coalitions. This kind of intellectual seriousness and moral clarity is precisely what has been missing from many multilateral forums—and it is what African leaders could choose to bring to the February 2026 African Union Summit.

An African “Davos moment” would begin by situating the rupture not as an abstract global shock, but as an intensification of Africa’s long-standing condition. For much of the continent, exposure to external volatility is not new; it is structural. African economies have long absorbed shocks they did not create, from commodity price swings and capital flight to geopolitical contestation and climate stress. The difference today is scale and speed: financial coercion, technological dependency, and geopolitical instrumentalization are now sharper, more deliberate, and more punitive. A credible summit statement would therefore reject any pretense that Africa is merely entering uncertainty alongside others. It would assert, with honesty, that Africa has lived with uncertainty for decades—and that the current rupture simply makes old asymmetries more visible and more dangerous.

Such a moment of candor would also require African leaders to confront internal vulnerabilities

without defensiveness. Political instability, legitimacy crises, elite capture, governance deficits, and institutional weakness are not external impositions; they are domestic realities that external actors learn to exploit. Weaponized interdependence is effective precisely because it latches onto these fractures—using debt, security assistance, data access, and diplomatic pressure to amplify existing weaknesses. Redefining sovereignty under these conditions is essential. Sovereignty cannot remain a purely juridical concept tied to flags and borders; it must be understood as effective capacity. The capacity to feed populations, generate energy, finance development without perpetual emergency borrowing, secure territory without permanent external arbitration, and negotiate internationally without fear of reprisal is the true measure of independence in a fractured world.

Drawing inspiration from Ursula von der Leyen's Davos emphasis on de-risking, African leaders could articulate a doctrine of defensive realism tailored to African conditions. This would not mean isolation or bloc politics, but deliberate diversification across trade, finance, security partnerships, and technology ecosystems in order to reclaim policy space. Accelerating meaningful implementation of the AfCFTA, coordinating debt restructuring and borrowing strategies, investing in digital and energy infrastructure that reduces external choke points, and building climate-resilient regional supply chains would form the backbone of such an approach. At the same time, African leaders could legitimately critique the selective memory of many middle and major powers—now lamenting the erosion of a rules-based order from which they long extracted asymmetric benefits while tolerating exclusion, double standards, and underdevelopment in the Global South.

A serious AU Summit intervention would also reframe Africa's political aspirations. Rather than positioning the continent as a perpetual victim of global dynamics, African leaders could assert Africa's role as a co-architect of an emerging multipolar order. Africa's leverage—its resources, markets, strategic geography, and youthful

population—remains substantial but underutilized because it is rarely mobilized collectively. On democracy, the tone would matter deeply. Instead of rejecting democratic norms or defensively mimicking external models, leaders could address democratic fatigue head-on, arguing for legitimacy grounded in lived outcomes: security, dignity, inclusion, and economic opportunity. Democracy, in this framing, is not a template imported from elsewhere, but a co-authored practice shaped by scarcity, diversity, and historical experience.

No such moment would be credible without a blunt self-assessment of the African Union itself. Chronic underfunding, dependence on external donors, weak enforcement mechanisms, and a culture of summitry that prioritizes declarations over delivery have hollowed out continental ambition. A Davos-level intervention would acknowledge these failures openly and pivot toward ownership: fewer symbolic initiatives, more shared risk-taking; fewer statements, more binding commitments. The AU would be recast not as a ceremonial platform, but as an instrument of collective bargaining power—financially autonomous, politically respected, and strategically focused on advancing shared interests in a hostile global environment.

The deeper challenge lies in bridging Africa's internal divides. Elite opportunism continues to clash with citizen priorities; short-term bilateral gains undermine long-term continental interests; national survival strategies often trump regional solidarity. Addressing these tensions requires reviving Pan-Africanism not as romantic rhetoric, but as a hard political project—one that aligns elite incentives with public goods and treats integration as a source of power rather than constraint. Agenda 2063, conceived in a more stable multilateral era, must be recalibrated to operate under conditions of rivalry, fragmentation, and transactional diplomacy.

Leaders must begin by openly acknowledging how structural vulnerabilities amplify external leverage and weaken Africa's collective bargaining power. Without such candor, strategic responses remain fragmented and reactive. A more coherent approach would prioritize the use of existing

continental and regional platforms to secure co-ownership in engagements with external actors, rather than passive participation. Accelerating the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area across the five priority services sectors—while expanding decisively into ICT, education, and energy—would help anchor integration in future-facing industries. At the same time, harmonizing digital and green-finance regulations would allow African states to monetize governance capacity, while institutionalizing African sovereign wealth funds could enable matched investments in renewables, logistics, and digital corridors critical to long-term competitiveness.

Agency must also be built from the ground up. By prioritizing skills development, export readiness, and the inclusion of women and youth in digitally deliverable sectors, leaders can shift citizens from being passive recipients of external platforms to active co-authors of value chains. This form of agency—rooted in collective risk-taking, shared norms, and enforceable continental guardrails—can serve as a catalyst for transformation. If embraced seriously, it would allow major continental gatherings to become genuine inflection points, where Africa redefines sovereignty as effective capacity and positions itself not as a victim of global disorder, but as a proactive architect of equitable, innovation-driven prosperity in an increasingly post-multilateral world.

Serious intra-African cooperation must move beyond declarations and commit to concrete action. Fully implementing and defending the African Continental Free Trade Area in practice—by dismantling non-tariff barriers, investing in cross-border infrastructure, and resisting the temptation to sacrifice collective gains for short-term bilateral deals—is essential. Enforcing the Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons in good faith, rather than obstructing it for domestic political convenience, would further strengthen integration. Equally important is the establishment of reliable, African-led financing mechanisms for African Union operations and flagship projects, reducing

dependence on external donors and strengthening institutional credibility.

Strategic autonomy also requires joint continental frameworks in technology, digital infrastructure, data governance, and critical minerals policy. These must be complemented by sustained investment in Pan-African education, media, youth exchanges, cultural production, and shared historical narratives that deepen continental identity and cohesion. In parallel, Africa must consistently engage governance challenges through innovative and credible frameworks, rather than relying on rigid or selectively applied principles when responding to unconstitutional changes of government and democratic backsliding. Upholding normative commitments must be both principled and practical to retain legitimacy.

Africa cannot afford to treat intra-continental rivalry as a license to destabilize fellow member states. Such behavior fractures the political and institutional foundations required to realize Agenda 2063 and accelerates the very external penetration and dependency the continent seeks to escape. The African Union must be treated as an institution whose decisions carry real weight and consequences, not merely as a symbolic forum. An AU lacking the financial, legal, and normative tools to resolve conflicts cannot be dismissed as weak when those capacities have never been fully endowed by its own members.

Ultimately, the strength of the African Union reflects the seriousness of the collective political choices made by its member states. Restoring the AU's principles in practice—through effective dispute-resolution mechanisms, enforceable commitments to non-aggression in economic and resource domains, and a shared understanding that one state's gain must not come at the expense of another's sovereignty—is a precondition for any credible claim to continental agency. Africa's destiny will be shaped far more by the depth of its internal cooperation than by the generosity, pressure, or strategic calculations of external actors. The world will accord Africa respect and partnership only to the extent that Africa

demonstrates sustained commitment to itself, even as it remains clear-eyed about the immense power global economic, security, and technological networks continue to wield.

If African leaders seize this moment, the 2026 AU Summit could become more than another entry in a long calendar of meetings. It could mark an inflection point: a collective declaration that Africa understands the world as it is, recognizes its own constraints without denial, and is prepared to act strategically within them. If they do not, the alternative is familiar and costly—continued resource extraction without transformation, geopolitical rivalry without agency, and eloquent communiqués that mask structural drift.

The rupture in the global order has opened a narrow but real renegotiation window. Whether Africa remains on the menu or claims a seat at the table will depend not on speeches alone, but on whether leaders are willing to match honesty with discipline, ambition with institutional reform, and rhetoric with power-building. A true African “Davos moment” would not be performative. It would be intellectually serious, politically consequential, and unmistakably grounded in Africa’s interests.

Africa’s strategy in a fractured, rivalry-driven world must begin with clear-eyed realism about power, not aspiration alone. The global system is no longer governed primarily by rules, norms, or multilateral goodwill, but by leverage, asymmetry, and selective enforcement. Africa should therefore stop organizing its external relations around expectations of fairness or benevolence and instead around how power is accumulated, exercised, and constrained. This requires treating geopolitics, finance, technology, security, and climate not as separate policy silos but as interlocking arenas in which Africa must deliberately build bargaining strength. Strategy starts with abandoning illusion—about partners, about institutions, and about Africa’s own internal weaknesses—and replacing it with disciplined prioritization.

At the core of this strategy must be collective leverage through selective integration. Africa

cannot negotiate effectively as 55 atomized states in a world of continental-scale actors. Yet integration must be pragmatic, not rhetorical. The priority is not universal harmonization but strategic pooling of sovereignty in areas that directly enhance bargaining power: trade policy under AfCFTA, debt negotiation frameworks, standards-setting for critical minerals, data governance, and regional energy and infrastructure corridors. Integration should be designed to reduce external dependency and internal fragmentation simultaneously. Where continental consensus is impossible, Africa should normalize variable geometry—coalitions of capable and willing states that move first, establish precedents, and pull others along.

Economic strategy must shift from extraction to leverage maximization. Africa’s resources—minerals, energy potential, land, and markets—are already integrated into global value chains, but on terms that cap value capture and entrench dependency. The strategic objective should not be autarky, but control over chokepoints: processing, logistics, standards, and data. This means coordinated policies on local beneficiation of minerals, shared infrastructure for refining and transport, and common positions on export controls and pricing. Africa should also leverage global competition—between China, the West, Gulf states, and others—not by choosing sides, but by forcing competition on African terms, extracting technology transfer, skills, and long-term industrial capacity rather than one-off rents.

On finance and debt, Africa must move from reactive crisis management to collective financial statecraft. Individually, African countries face punitive borrowing costs and opaque creditor structures; collectively, they represent a systemic risk that creditors cannot ignore. A continental or sub-regional debt coordination mechanism—backed by transparent data, shared legal expertise, and unified negotiation positions—would significantly rebalance power. Equally critical is reducing structural exposure by deepening domestic capital markets, mobilizing pension and sovereign funds for infrastructure, and prioritizing projects that directly enhance productivity rather

than prestige. Debt must be reframed as a tool for transformation, not survival.

Security strategy must be localized and political, not outsourced and militarized. External security partnerships have too often substituted for domestic legitimacy and institutional capacity, creating cycles of dependency and backlash. Africa's strategy should prioritize regional security architectures, intelligence cooperation, and conflict prevention rooted in political settlements rather than perpetual counterterrorism campaigns. This requires confronting governance failures, exclusion, and elite predation that fuel insecurity in the first place. Reducing reliance on foreign military actors is not ideological—it is strategic. External forces pursue their own interests; sustainable security comes from states that command domestic legitimacy and regional cooperation.

Technologically, Africa must pursue strategic digital sovereignty without isolation. AI, data, surveillance, and digital infrastructure are becoming central arenas of power. Africa's current trajectory—opening data, markets, and regulatory space to foreign platforms without reciprocal control—risks long-term dependency. A continental strategy on data governance, digital public infrastructure, and AI deployment is essential, particularly in finance, health, agriculture, and security. Africa does not need to dominate technology; it needs to avoid being structurally subordinated by it, ensuring that digital transformation serves productivity, inclusion, and state capacity rather than external extraction.

Finally, none of this is possible without elite realignment and political discipline. Africa's greatest vulnerability is not external rivalry but internal fragmentation—where elites benefit from asymmetric deals while societies bear the costs. A credible strategy requires narrowing the gap between elite incentives and citizen outcomes: jobs, services, food security, and dignity. This is where Pan-Africanism must be revived as a governing logic, not a slogan—linking legitimacy to delivery, sovereignty to capacity, and integration

to tangible gains. Without this alignment, Africa will remain strategically exposed regardless of how favorable the global environment becomes.

In sum, Africa's strategy must be to convert exposure into leverage: fragmentation into coordination, dependency into optionality, and attractiveness into bargaining power. The goal is not to escape the fractured world, but to operate within it on firmer footing—less reactive, more selective, and increasingly consequential.

Conclusion

The question, therefore, is whether Africa is ready to engage in a genuinely collective and strategic manner. Are African countries prepared to subordinate short-term national or sectoral gains to a broader continental interest? Are they willing to pool aspects of sovereignty—particularly in trade, investment, and regulatory frameworks—to negotiate as a bloc, rather than as fragmented actors vulnerable to external leverage? And, crucially, do African states possess the political maturity, institutional capacity, and disciplined coordination necessary to make such collective action credible?

The challenges to this vision are substantial. First, entrenched short-termism and domestic political pressures often push leaders to prioritize immediate economic or electoral gains over long-term strategic planning. Second, competing national interests—particularly in resource allocation, infrastructure investment, and cross-border trade—create friction and mistrust, making it difficult to agree on shared priorities. Third, institutional capacity at both the continental and sub-regional levels remains uneven. While frameworks such as the African Union and AfCFTA exist, enforcement mechanisms are weak, compliance is uneven, and coordination is often ad hoc. Fourth, elite capture and patronage networks can distort decision-making, incentivizing actors to pursue narrow benefits rather than collective value creation. Finally, external actors frequently exploit these divisions, offering short-term incentives to individual countries that undermine continental solidarity and weaken coordinated bargaining power.

Despite these obstacles, the potential benefits of overcoming them are transformative. Coordinated engagement could amplify Africa's negotiating power, protect strategic resources, accelerate industrialization, and give the continent a credible voice in shaping global rules. Achieving this requires visionary leadership, disciplined cooperation, robust continental institutions, and a willingness to place long-term collective interests above narrow, immediate gains. The real question is not whether Africa has challenges—it does—but whether it can summon the political will, institutional capacity, and social cohesion necessary to overcome them and assert agency in a rapidly changing global order.

Africa stands at a decisive historical turning point. The African Union must confront an uncomfortable truth: the so-called rules-based global order—and many of the middle powers now lamenting its erosion—was constructed through the systematic exclusion and disciplining of the Global South. For decades, Africa was not simply sidelined from rule-making; it was subjected to rules it did not write, institutions it did not control, and shocks it did not cause. The order now described as “unraveling” never delivered protection, predictability, or equitable participation for the continent. Its erosion does not mark the loss of a golden age—it exposes a hierarchy long sustained at Africa's expense.

Mark Carney's warning to middle powers—his question of whether they will remain “at the table or end up on the menu?”—reveals a striking irony. Many of these actors benefited for decades from a system that externalized risk onto weaker states, enforced asymmetric openness, and applied rules selectively. Their present anxiety mirrors conditions Africa has endured for generations, usually without voice or leverage. This shared vulnerability should not inspire nostalgia or sympathy; it demands strategic clarity. The lesson is not to defend a fading order that never served the continent, but to seize the current rupture as a rare opportunity for renegotiation—provided Africa acts with unity and purpose.

The imperative is to convert exposure into agency. This requires reviving Pan-Africanism not as rhetoric, but as a governing logic rooted in power, capacity, and coordination. Agenda 2063 must be recalibrated for a fractured, competitive world, rather than an assumed march toward multilateralism. Accelerating AfCFTA implementation is essential—not merely as a trade agreement, but as the foundation for industrial scale, policy alignment, and collective bargaining strength. Equally vital are African-controlled digital leapfrogging, coordinated approaches to debt restructuring and climate finance, and resilient regional supply chains in energy, food, and critical minerals. Sovereignty must be measured not by formal independence or diplomatic visibility, but by effective capacity: the ability to feed populations, generate energy, secure territory, finance development, manage technology, and negotiate from strength.

Africa's leverage lies in what the world increasingly demands: critical minerals for the energy transition, a fast-growing digital market and consumer base, and strategic geography. These assets must be deployed to build short- and long-term national and continental capabilities. If the continent fails to seize this window to convert latent potential into structural power, it risks permanent marginality, unable to close the widening development gap.

In this environment, hedging must evolve from ad hoc survival into a deliberate continental strategy. African states should avoid exclusive alignments and resist pressure to pick sides in great- or middle-power rivalries. Strategic non-alignment today means diversified partnerships, redundant trade and finance routes, and optionality across security, technology, and energy systems. Hedging preserves policy space and reduces exposure to coercion, sanctions, or sudden abandonment—but only if pursued in a coordinated manner. Uncoordinated hedging fragments; harmonized hedging strengthens collective autonomy.

Africa cannot anchor its future to a system that marginalized it, nor align uncritically with middle powers now hedging their own vulnerability.

Instead, the continent must articulate and pursue its own vision of order—grounded in Agenda 2063 but adapted to an era of fragmentation, rivalry, and coercive interdependence. Central to this shift is ending intra-African competition that allows external actors to play states against one another. Africa’s power lies not in choosing sides, but in harmonizing positions, establishing continental guardrails, and leveraging its indispensability—minerals, markets, geography, demographics—on its own terms. Only through unity can dependence be transformed into negotiated interdependence and exposure into influence.

The 2026 AU Summit carries historic weight. It can either recycle familiar, power-disconnected declarations or become Africa’s own “Davos moment”: a display of radical honesty about past exclusion, internal weaknesses, and hard trade-

offs ahead; a clear rejection of nostalgia for an order that failed the continent; and a concrete commitment to build sovereign capacity through deeper integration, institutional reform, financial autonomy, stronger AU enforcement mechanisms, and proactive rule-shaping rather than reactive adjustment.

The stakes are existential. Without continental guardrails, Africa risks deeper fragmentation, intensified external spheres of influence, and permanent strategic followership. With them, rupture can become renewal. In an age when even middle powers fear slipping from table to menu, Africa must ensure it is neither—by becoming a rule-shaper rather than a rule-taker. The choice is stark and the window narrow: claim the table through coordinated agency, or remain on it.