

Africa on the rise: New power dynamics in a changing world*

In the early decades of the twenty-first century, the international system has entered a period of profound transformation. The once-dominant paradigms of Western hegemony, neoliberal governance, and unipolar power are being recalibrated by a complex and fluid constellation of actors, interests, and ideas. Among the regions redefining this global order, Africa occupies an increasingly strategic position. Long framed as a marginal space of extraction, dependency, and humanitarian concern, the continent is now repositioning itself as a driver of transformation—a space where alternative models of cooperation, sovereignty, and development are being tested and articulated. The expression “Africa on the rise” may evoke an air of triumphalism or economic boosterism, but beneath its surface lies a more fundamental truth: Africa is becoming a central arena for the negotiation of the twenty-first century’s new dynamics of power.

The expression “Africa on the rise” should be understood not as a trium-

phant or uniform ascent but as a gradual repositioning within the international hierarchy—material, institutional, normative, and epistemic—driven by processes of continental integration, diversification of partnerships, and renewed forms of agency. Also, the idea of “new dynamics of power” points to a world moving away from unipolar dominance, and towards negotiated interdependence, where influence is increasingly exercised through networks, norms, and narratives rather than pure material strength. This framing acknowledges that these processes occur unevenly across the continent, marked by simultaneous progress and regression, and by a persistent disconnect between Africa’s growing global visibility and the material depth of its political influence.

Yet, this repositioning is far from homogeneous or uncontested. While some regions and sectors show clear signs of transformation, others face democratic reversals, governance crises, and renewed security fragilities. In

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parts of West and Central Africa, military takeovers and shrinking civic spaces illustrate the fragility of institutional gains, while structural inequalities and external dependencies continue to constrain continental ambitions. These contradictions remind us that Africa's "rise" is not a linear trajectory, but a complex negotiation between aspiration, capacity, and constraint.

FROM THE MARGINS TO THE CENTRE

For centuries, Africa's global image was constructed from the outside. Colonial cartographies reduced the continent to a place of resources and labour, while the Cold War reinforced its role as a periphery for proxy competition. Even after decolonisation, global narratives tended to portray African States as aid-dependent, fragile, or perpetually in need of external guidance. Yet, these representations cast a shadow over the intellectual and political tradition of African agency. From the Casablanca and Monrovia blocs of the 1960s to the foundational vision of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in 1963, African leaders sought to reclaim the continent's future through collective self-reliance and continental solidarity.

The transformation of the OAU into the African Union (AU) in 2002 marked a decisive moment in this trajectory. It represented not merely an institutional upgrade, but a normative shift: from a doctrine of non-interference to one of non-indifference, from political independence to the pursuit of structural

and epistemic sovereignty. The AU's vision of "an integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens" re-centred Africans as subjects rather than objects of history. In this sense, Africa's rise is not a sudden phenomenon of the twenty-first century; it is the unfolding of a long and unfinished project of self-definition within a system that has rarely been neutral to African aspirations.

Beneath this narrative of institutional renewal lies a more complex reality. The transformation of continental structures has often advanced faster in discourse than in practice, constrained by uneven capacities, domestic resistance, and tensions between national sovereignty and collective authority. The shift from non-interference to non-indifference remains an ambitious yet fragile experiment in continental governance.

STRUCTURAL TRANSFORMATION AND CONTINENTAL INTEGRATION

Over the past two decades, African economies have recorded some of the world's fastest growth rates, averaging around 4.3 percent annually between 2000 and 2019, according to World Bank data. This performance has been driven by the expansion of telecommunications, services, renewable energy, and intra-African trade. Yet growth has decelerated in many countries, affected by commodity-price shocks, the COVID-19 pandemic and mounting debt pressures, as shown in studies by

Brookings and McKinsey. Within the framework of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and the African Union's Agenda 2063, African leaders envision a single market of more than 1.4 billion people. By 2025, forty-seven State Parties had ratified the AfCFTA, according to the African Union, giving rise to an area representing a combined GDP of approximately US \$3.4 trillion. Nevertheless, intra-African trade still accounts for less than 20 per cent of the continent's total commerce, a reminder of how far integration must still advance, and of how closely Africa's economic transformation is linked to the wider reconfiguration of global power.

While economic indicators alone cannot capture the depth of these transformations, they signal the emergence of a continental consciousness that transcends national borders. The logic of regional integration is no longer limited to economic convenience; it has become a tool of political assertion. The AU and the Regional Economic Communities (RECs)—ECOWAS, SADC, EAC, IGAD, COMESA, and others—constitute overlapping layers of governance through which Africa exercises agency in global forums. The continent's collective participation in the G20, the expansion of African membership within BRICS, and the negotiation of common positions on climate change, migration, and digital governance show how integration works as both protection and leverage—it protects Africa from the inequalities of global capitalism and

helps push African priorities onto the world stage.

MULTIPOLARITY AND THE RECONFIGURATION OF POWER

The re-emergence of multipolarity has further opened the strategic space for Africa to operate. As the unipolar moment of the post-Cold War era recedes, the continent is courted by an expanding array of partners, old and new, North and South. China, Russia, India, Türkiye, Brazil, Indonesia, South Korea and the Gulf states have joined the European Union and the United States as major interlocutors in Africa's economic and political affairs. This diversification has undoubtedly created new opportunities but also revived familiar patterns of dependence, sometimes bordering on new forms of neo-colonialism. The continent's growing engagement with emerging powers often involves infrastructure-for-resource agreements, questionable debt arrangements, and technology transfers conditioned by strategic leverage. Analysts from the African Development Bank and UNCTAD have noted that, while South-South cooperation broadens Africa's diplomatic room for manoeuvre, it can simultaneously reproduce asymmetries reminiscent of earlier dependency structures.

This phenomenon has revived debates about the "agency of the South." Agency, in this context, does not imply dominance or independence in the traditional sense; rather, it denotes the

ability to negotiate, resist and re-imagine the rules of engagement. African agency shows itself in quiet but meaningful ways, in how countries negotiate together in multilateral spaces, set conditions for accepting foreign investment, and build their own peace and security systems. The African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), with its emphasis on subsidiarity and complementarity between the AU and the Regional Economic Communities, exemplifies how continental institutions can lead in conflict management while collaborating with the United Nations and regional partners. Recent experiences illustrate both the potential and the limits of this strategic hybridity. Chinese and Turkish infrastructure investments have enhanced connectivity yet deepened fiscal exposure; Russian and Gulf security partnerships have provided alternative training and equipment but raised concerns about transparency and accountability. These cases show that diversification does not automatically guarantee autonomy but rather demands regulatory strength, policy coherence and continental oversight to avoid substituting one form of dependency for another.

Such practices mark a shift from the historical paradigm of dependency to a more complex, negotiated interdependence—one in which Africa is simultaneously a site of contestation and a generator of global norms.

KNOWLEDGE, REPRESENTATION AND THE POLITICS OF NARRATIVES

A crucial dimension of Africa's transformation concerns the politics of knowledge. The persistence of Eurocentric epistemologies has long constrained how Africa is studied and understood. Mainstream international relations theory has often relegated the continent to a passive role, framing it as a recipient rather than a producer of theory. In recent years, however, African scholars have challenged this hierarchy by articulating distinctly African frameworks of analysis—rooted in indigenous philosophies such as Ubuntu, the ethic of interdependence and communal humanity. From this perspective, the global order is not a winner-takes-all competition but a network of mutual responsibilities.

This intellectual re-centring forms part of what Achille Mbembe describes as the “decolonisation of the world.” To think Africa as a source of knowledge is to contest the historical division between centre and periphery. The contributions emerging from African universities, think tanks, and regional organisations are increasingly shaping debates on peacebuilding, migration governance, and sustainable development. Moreover, the rise of African diplomacy in digital and cultural spheres—through the creative industries, sports diplomacy, and

the diaspora—expands the terrain on which the continent exercises soft power.

The notion of “Africa rising” therefore cannot be reduced to economic growth or geopolitical positioning; it must also be read as a cognitive and symbolic reassertion of Africa’s place in the world. This intellectual re-centring also speaks directly to the purpose of this special issue. The articles assembled in OASIS 43 reflect this ongoing effort to decolonise knowledge production by foregrounding African and Global South perspectives as legitimate sources of theory and critique. They do not merely describe Africa’s transformation but interpret it from within its own epistemic traditions, demonstrating how African thought, in conversation with Latin American and Asian experiences, contributes to a more plural and inclusive understanding of world politics.

CHALLENGES AND CONTRADICTIONS

Acknowledging Africa’s rise does not mean overlooking its contradictions. The continent remains marked by profound social inequalities, governance crises and recurrent conflicts that test the reach and adaptability of its institutions. The persistence of deep-rooted structural challenges—fragile state capacity, uneven economic diversification and democratic

backsliding—continues to limit the realisation of continental visions such as the Agenda 2063. Recent developments in parts of West and Central Africa have exposed how fragile institutional progress remains, reminding us that political transitions and civic participation are still vulnerable to reversal.

Simultaneously, the effects of climate change, external debt vulnerabilities and global supply-chain disruptions further constrain national and regional development agendas. The so-called “return” of great-power competition on the continent has re-introduced forms of strategic dependency, often masked as partnership. Infrastructure projects tied to extractive industries, non-transparent loan conditions and unequal value chains can replicate the very hierarchies that African integration seeks to dismantle. For this reason, the continent’s engagement with external actors demands critical vigilance: the real measure of African agency lies in the ability to translate collective aspirations into coherent policies that serve the people rather than external interests.

THE GLOBAL SOUTH AND THE SPIRIT OF SOLIDARITY

Africa’s rise cannot be understood in isolation from the broader reawakening of the Global South. Across Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East, States are reclaiming historical projects

of South–South cooperation and demanding reforms in global governance. The expansion of the BRICS to include Egypt and Ethiopia, and the admission of the African Union as a permanent member of the G20, symbolise this collective momentum. These developments represent not merely diplomatic victories but milestones in the quest for a more inclusive and plural world order.

For Africa, the notion of South–South cooperation carries both pragmatic and normative significance. It evokes the solidarity that animated the Bandung Conference (1955) and the Non-Aligned Movement, while adapting it to contemporary realities of trade, finance, and technology. By deepening links with emerging powers and other developing regions, African States seek to diversify their partnerships and reduce vulnerability to Western conditionalities. At the same time, this cooperation offers a laboratory for experimenting with post-Western models of modernity—ones grounded in mutual respect, policy autonomy, and shared development goals. Whether this new South–South axis can overcome its own asymmetries remains an open question, yet its symbolic power is undeniable as it re-imagines global governance from the perspective of those historically excluded from it.

THE DEMOGRAPHIC AND URBAN FUTURES OF POWER

Another dimension of Africa's transformation lies in its demographic

dynamism. With the world's youngest population and an expanding middle class, the continent is projected to host around 2.5 billion people—nearly one quarter of humanity—by 2050, according to estimates from the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. This demographic weight, often framed as a potential dividend, is not automatically an advantage; it depends on the continent's ability to expand opportunities for education, employment and civic participation. Without such expansion, the same youth bulge that promises innovation could become a source of frustration and instability. Yet Africa's young generations are already redefining politics and citizenship through creativity, entrepreneurship, and digital activism. From fintech ecosystems in Lagos and Nairobi to artistic movements in Johannesburg and Accra, the continent's cities are becoming laboratories of a new cosmopolitanism that connects local struggles to global debates.

Urbanisation, once viewed as a symptom of underdevelopment, now constitutes a vector of political and economic energy. Research from UN-Habitat notes that Africa's urban population is expected to surpass 50 percent by 2040, with megacities such as Lagos, Kinshasa and Cairo leading continental growth. Yet this rapid pace of expansion also strains infrastructure, housing, and governance systems, exposing inequalities and environmental risks. African cities have become not only engines of growth but also arenas

where the future of democracy, sustainability and identity is being negotiated. Their networks of knowledge, technology and culture link the continent to the rest of the Global South in tangible ways. This urban turn complements the institutional and diplomatic processes described earlier, showing that Africa's agency is not confined to elite diplomacy but grounded as well in everyday practices of adaptation, innovation, and resistance.

RETHINKING POWER: LESSONS FROM AFRICA

Africa's contemporary trajectory offers not only a story of emergence but also a lens through which to reconsider how power operates in the twenty-first century. The continent's experience shows that influence can be exercised through cooperation as much as competition, through persuasion rather than coercion. African diplomacy increasingly relies on building coalitions, mediating conflicts, and shaping global debates through collective voice. At the same time, the continent's internal diversity and governance challenges remind us that moral authority and practical capacity do not always advance together.

This tension is central to Africa's contribution to global thought. The African philosophy of Ubuntu—"I am because we are"—encapsulates an ethic of interdependence that contrasts with the zero-sum logic of traditional geopolitics. Within international relations, Ubuntu suggests that security and

prosperity are shared endeavours, not individual possessions. Applying this ethic globally calls for a re-humanisation of diplomacy: one that privileges solidarity over confrontation and recognises mutual vulnerability as a foundation for cooperation. Africa's history of navigating diversity, resilience and adaptation thus provides not only a regional perspective but also a set of lessons on how power can be reimagined to serve humanity as a whole.

AFRICA'S FUTURE AND THE FUTURE OF THE WORLD

The idea of an "Africa on the rise" is more than a figure of speech; it reflects an ongoing re-alignment of global power in which the continent increasingly asserts its relevance. From Addis Ababa to Johannesburg, from Lagos to Nairobi, from Cairo to Dakar, new forms of leadership and knowledge production are emerging that challenge the epistemic hierarchies of the past. Africa's engagement with the rest of the world—through the African Union, the Regional Economic Communities, the BRICS and the G20—signals a growing determination to shape rather than simply follow the trajectory of global change. Yet this aspiration will depend on the continent's ability to translate its collective visions into coherent policies and to reconcile its diversity with shared purpose.

Africa's rise must therefore remain grounded in critical self-reflection. The task is not merely to join existing

structures of power but to transform them; not to imitate the paths of others but to chart its own. As the contributions to this special issue demonstrate, African agency manifests across multiple dimensions—economic, diplomatic, cultural, and intellectual—each revealing both progress and paradox. Together, they depict a continent in motion: dynamic, heterogeneous, and indispensable to understanding the world in transformation. The future of Africa and the future of the world are inseparable, for the questions being negotiated on the continent about justice, sustainability, and coexistence are the very questions that will define humanity's collective future.

STRUCTURE OF THE SPECIAL ISSUE

The assembly of this special issue followed a broad and open call that invited contributions from across Africa and the Global South. The resulting dossier brings together diverse voices that collectively interrogate the evolving role of the continent in a transforming world system. The selected works engage both empirically and theoretically with the multiple dimensions of Africa's rise, its challenges, and its redefinition as a global actor.

This issue begins with an introductory article by Adela Beatriz Escobar Cristiani and María del Rayo Ventura Navarrete from Mexico, which frames the debate on Africa's quest for agency in a transforming world. It sets the conceptual tone for the three thematic

sections and concluding review that together examine Africa's agency, governance, and international projection, as follows:

I. Continental Governance and African Multilateralism

This section examines the institutions and strategies that underpin Africa's growing presence in multilateral arenas. It explores how the African Union (AU) and the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) act as vehicles for continental cohesion and as interlocutors in the reconfiguration of global governance.

Lisa Kwaleyela, Yvonne Malambo Kabombwe and Nelly Mwale from Zambia start this section with the article "The African Union in International Peacebuilding: Towards an African (Ubuntu) Agenda for Peace in the Korean Peninsula." Their work expands the discussion by applying the African principle of Ubuntu to global peacebuilding, showing how African philosophical traditions can offer valuable insights for universal approaches to conflict resolution.

Following this, Emmanuel Amoah-Darkwah and Juliana Abena Appiah from Ghana present their article "The African Union in the G20: Navigating Interest in a Declining Multilateral System." The piece examines the AU's accession to the G20 as a landmark achievement in Africa's integration into global decision-making and analyses the broader implications of this

membership for both the continent and the evolving multilateral order.

The section concludes with “African Union Strategies towards Extracontinental Trade Cooperation: Prospects for Symmetric Future Partnerships” by Frederick Boamah from Ghana. This article explores Africa’s evolving approach to economic diplomacy, highlighting how initiatives such as the AfCFTA aim to foster fairer and more balanced partnerships with extra-continental actors while strengthening the continent’s collective bargaining power in global trade.

II. Regional Powers and Africa’s Global Projection

The second section highlights Africa’s regional leaders and their pursuit of international visibility. It brings together analyses of South Africa, Ethiopia, and China–Africa relations, underscoring the intersections between domestic policy, regional leadership, and global diplomacy.

The section opens with “Assimilação, Representação e Seletividade: as estratégias de inserção internacional da África do Sul em 30 anos de pós-apartheid” by Anselmo Otavio from Brazil. This article provides a detailed examination of South Africa’s foreign policy across successive political administrations, analysing how the country balances continental expectations with its broader global ambitions and navigates its dual identity as both an African leader and a global actor.

The next contribution, “Sudáfrica: potencia regional e inserción internacional. Un análisis de su presencia en los BRICS y la denuncia contra Israel” by Adriana Franco Silva and Lilia Nayely Montoya Leal from Mexico, examines South Africa’s role within the BRICS framework and its positioning as both a regional economic power and a political leader in the Global South. The article analyses how South Africa’s foreign policy articulates regional influence with global aspirations, reflecting its search for strategic autonomy in an evolving international order.

Following this, “Sudáfrica, la voz del Sur en el tema palestino (1994–2024)” by Mariana Casanova Roque from Cuba and Marta Tawil Kuri from Mexico analyses South Africa’s sustained diplomatic advocacy for the Palestinian cause and its significance for South–South solidarity and post-apartheid identity politics. The article situates this foreign policy stance within South Africa’s broader moral and historical commitment to decolonisation and global justice.

In “Etiopía y la asociación estratégica con China: entre la geopolítica y la cooperación en el siglo XXI,” Carla Morasso from Argentina examines Ethiopia’s strategic partnership with China as an example of pragmatic diplomacy that mirrors Africa’s broader diversification of alliances. The article analyses how this bilateral relationship combines geopolitical calculation with developmental cooperation, positioning

Ethiopia as a key actor in Africa's engagement with emerging powers.

The section concludes with “Política externa no contexto africano: um estudo exploratório da cooperação internacional para o desenvolvimento da China na África” by Júlio Sani Lopes from Guinea-Bissau. This article investigates the patterns, motivations, and consequences of China's development cooperation across the African continent, emphasising how these interactions reshape traditional North–South hierarchies and contribute to the construction of new models of South–South partnership.

III. New Alliances, Emerging Actors, and Regional Perspectives

The final thematic section explores the continent's widening web of relationships with extra-continental partners and its own regional sub-systems. The articles presented here analyse Africa's engagement in global diplomacy, its evolving security partnerships, and the conceptual frameworks that underpin regional integration.

The section begins with “Africa and the Cooperation Forums with Extra-continental Countries” by Peter Joilah Lambon from Ghana. This article examines the institutional frameworks—such as FOCAC, TICAD, and the EU–AU partnerships—that structure Africa's external engagements and diplomatic outreach. It highlights how these cooperation forums have evolved into strategic platforms for articulating

African priorities, negotiating equitable partnerships, and redefining the continent's role within the shifting landscape of global governance.

Next, “Beyond Guns for Hire: Rethinking African Agency through Security Cooperation with SADAT” by John Ruszkowski from the United States, Isabella Ece Yazıcı from Türkiye, and Floris Gast from the Netherlands examines Africa's expanding security cooperation with Türkiye through non-traditional channels. The article highlights how such partnerships are reshaping the continent's approach to defence and diplomacy, revealing new forms of agency within Africa's evolving security landscape.

The following article, “África entre potências: o papel da União Africana nas relações com Estados Unidos e China,” by Juliana Ribeiro Lobato and Kiara Costa from Brazil, analyses how the African Union navigates the geopolitical tensions between the United States and China, positioning itself as both an interlocutor and an autonomous actor. The authors argue that the AU's diplomatic balancing between these major powers reflects a broader strategy of asserting African agency and promoting a multipolar world order grounded in dialogue and reciprocity.

In “La anatomía del Magreb: retos y oportunidades para su posicionamiento en el sistema internacional,” Gabriela Andrea Ruiz Casseres from Colombia analyses the Maghreb as a critical interface between Africa, Europe, and the Middle East. The article explores

the region's political fragmentation alongside its potential for integration, offering insights into how North Africa can strengthen its strategic positioning within the broader continental and global dynamics.

Finally, the section concludes with "The [I]Liberal Overton Window of the Rules-based International Order and its Counter-Policiescapes in African Regionalism: Patterns of Fusion, Fission and Diffusion" by Nene-Lomotey Kuditchar from Ghana. This article offers a theoretical reflection on how African regionalism interacts with the evolving paradigms of the global liberal order, analysing the continent's responses to shifting norms, competing models of governance, and the diffusion of alternative regional practices.

Book Review

The issue concludes with a review essay by Mariann Tánčzos from Hungary titled "Counterterrorism in Africa – New Approaches to Old Problems," which discusses the edited volume *Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism in Modern Sub-Saharan Africa* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), edited by János Besenyő, M. B. Khanyile, and Dávid Vogel.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The fourteen articles and the review included in OASIS 43 collectively portray a continent in motion—complex, diverse, and indispensable to understanding global transformations. This dossier

emerges as a project from the Global South about the Global South, bringing together voices that interrogate and reinterpret Africa's evolving place in the international system. Conceived and coordinated from Colombia and Latin America, it represents an effort to understand another essential region of the Global South—Africa—as a geopolitical, economic, and intellectual actor in this changing world. Far from reproducing external narratives, the issue amplifies perspectives grounded in shared histories of postcolonial struggle, developmental experimentation, and epistemic resistance. It affirms that Africa's rise is neither accidental nor uniform; it is the outcome of sustained political innovation, institutional creativity, and intellectual production that challenge the inherited hierarchies of global power. By presenting this collection, OASIS seeks to contribute to an ongoing dialogue between Africa, Latin America, and the wider Global South—one that reimagines the world from the South outward and advances the pursuit of a fairer, more inclusive international order.

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the vision, coherence, and analytical depth of this edition, fostering a dialogue that situates Africa at the centre of contemporary debates on power and global transformation. I would also like to warmly thank all the authors who submitted their manuscripts and engaged actively in the debates on Africa's evolving role in the international system. Their contributions, originating from Brazil, Mexico, Cuba, Argentina, Guinea-Bissau, Ghana, the United States, Türkiye, the Netherlands, Colombia, Zambia, and Hungary, underscore the truly international character of this issue and its commitment to plural and decolonial perspectives. OASIS 43 stands as a testament to this collective effort: a space where critical reflection, intellectual diversity, and South-South academic collaboration converge to illuminate Africa's centrality in the reconfiguration of global power.

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