

BRIEFING NOTE No. 206

## **Aligning AU-EU interests to reshape global governance on peace and security**

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### **Summary**

The multilateral system is currently facing a rupture, with current institutions, particularly the UN Security Council, suffering from legitimacy deficits and paralysis. Both Africa and Europe depend on effective multilateral rules, yet both face credibility challenges. Africa struggles to translate numerical weight into influence, while the EU's leverage is constrained by internal fragmentation and perceptions of inconsistent application of international norms.

This briefing note examines how the AU and the EU can move beyond rhetorical alignment toward tangible collaboration on multilateral reform. It maps convergence and divergence between the two continents and identifies practical drivers of reform. Our findings highlight that while Africa would like to have immediate structural change, Europe favours gradual procedural reforms. However, there is significant alignment on improving the UN Security Council's working methods, strengthening EU-AU-UN cooperation, and ensuring predictable financing for AU-led peace operations through Resolution 2719.

To restore confidence in multilateralism, the AU and EU must prioritise delivery over declarations. The world is changing more rapidly than ever before. The question is no longer whether multilateralism should be defended in principle, but how both continents can recalibrate their strategies to operate effectively within a fragmented and competitive order.

## 1. Introduction

The multilateral system is not just in a moment of strain and transition – it is in the middle of a rupture, as coined by [Canada's Prime Minister Mark Carney](#), at this year's World Economic Forum in Davos. What has been described as a gradual erosion of rules-based order has accelerated into a far more abrupt and uncertain geopolitical reordering. A succession of complex crises – including the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, conflicts in Gaza, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, as well as escalating climate and debt emergencies and rising global levels of fragility – have tested the capacity and legitimacy of the global governance architecture. These crises have coincided with shifting geopolitical dynamics and deepening domestic political constraints among major powers, complicating collective responses at precisely the moment when coordinated action is most needed.

The United States (US) [has never been a consistent multilateralist](#), but its actions in seizing the president of Venezuela, threats to Greenland and alternative visions for multilateral engagement based on transactional or selective engagement (for example, the [Board of Peace](#), which privileges great-power bargaining over institutional process) under the second Trump administration accelerated the dilution of Western influence within the multilateral system.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the expansion and consolidation of groupings such as BRICS and the rise of 'minilateralism' reflect the increasing difficulty of reaching global consensus and the demand for alternative pathways for cooperation.

**For Africa and Europe, the stakes are high but distinct.** Both continents depend on stable, effective and equitable multilateral rules to safeguard prosperity and security. Arguably, both have (not) benefited from the current multilateral system in different ways. Yet both also face challenges related to credibility and effectively translating and implementing their foreign policy objectives at the global level.

The European Union (EU) has articulated a more assertive defence of rules-based institutions through its [2021 Joint Communication on strengthening contributions to multilateralism](#) and the [2024-2029 Strategic Agenda](#), emphasising tighter EU-UN cooperation on security and crisis management. However, the mounting political priority given to defence (spending), its resource constraints, political fragmentation, and inconsistencies in upholding international norms are leading to growing questions on how the EU can maintain its stated role to be a defender of effective and just multilateralism, particularly while adopting a stronger military logic amidst the growing rearmament of its member states. At the same time, EU member states struggle to present a unified voice in multilateral fora in the

absence of a coherent EU foreign policy, leading them to increasingly pursue independent agendas, sometimes even [voting only partially in line with EU positions](#).

On the African side, there has been increased advocacy for equitable representation and the reform of financing mechanisms. Longstanding demands, such as the 2005 [Ezulwini Consensus](#) on Security Council reform, have been reinforced by initiatives ranging from the 2023 [Nairobi Declaration's call for innovative climate and debt instruments](#) to sustained pressure for overhauling the international financial architecture. Two milestones have opened new avenues: the 2023 [Security Council Resolution 2719](#) on predictable financing for African Union (AU)-led peace operations and the [AU's accession to permanent membership of the G20 in September 2023](#). Despite these developments, the AU faces coordination challenges and struggles to translate its numerical weight into substantive influence in achieving its normative demands.

The world is changing more rapidly than in the past. The question is no longer whether multilateralism should be defended in principle, but how both continents can recalibrate their strategies to operate effectively within a fragmented and competitive order. It is now the time for Europe and Africa to revisit issues that have long been stuck in declaratory statements.

### [This briefing note](#)

This briefing note examines how Africa and Europe can move beyond declaratory convergence toward tangible, practical collaboration on multilateral reform. It anchors the analysis in the [UN Pact for the Future](#), adopted at the September 2024 Summit of the Future, and situates this within the broader [UN80 reform process](#) launched in 2025.

The analysis and recommendations draw on a systematic review of key policy documents and declarations, and semi-structured interviews conducted between August and November 2025 by the European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM) and the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA) with policymakers, diplomats, and analysts from AU representatives and AU member states, European institutions and EU member states, and UN representatives. It also incorporates insights from a [closed-door, invite-only event](#) that ECDPM and SAIIA organised in Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) in November 2025, where initial findings were tested and refined with key interlocutors from the UN, AU and the EU and their respective member states, as well as key experts and thought leaders on multilateral peace and security reforms. Therefore, this briefing note looks beyond rhetoric and proposes concrete pathways for joint

African and European leadership to strengthen the legitimacy, representativeness, and effectiveness of multilateral peace, security, and governance.

This note first examines how Africa and Europe are positioning themselves in response to systemic pressures, identifying their respective priorities for institutional reform, particularly regarding the UN Security Council, and mapping key points of convergence and divergence. It then analyses selected ongoing reform processes in which joint African–European leadership could have the greatest practical impact.

## 2. Adapting the global order to new geopolitical realities

The architecture of global governance emerged from the ruins of the Second World War, embedding the primacy of the five victorious powers<sup>2</sup> in the UN Security Council. The UN Security Council, established by the [UN Charter](#) in 1945, has been the principal forum for promoting multilateral responses to global peace and security challenges. However, interviewees note that the context of its creation warrants acknowledgement and point to several fractures and divergences between the Western-led order and the more multipolar, competitive landscape today. As one interviewee noted, many countries were still colonised at the time of the UN's establishment and the creation of its Security Council, making it virtually impossible for their voices to be heard at the time, and demonstrating how different the world looked in 1945.

For decades, Western governments have supported this framework and a broadly liberal vision of international order, centred on open markets, representative democracy, human rights and cooperation through multilateral institutions. Today, **that structure is under incredible strain** from the unreliability of the US, rising powers demanding greater voice, failures to uphold the values of the multilateral system –including those embedded in the UN Charter– and from the proliferation of challenges that were unimaginable to the system's architects –namely pandemics, climate breakdown, an accelerating digital transformation and increasingly hybrid modes of warfare.

The UN Security Council was [frequently paralysed during the Cold War](#), but the deadlock was mostly bipolar (between the US and the Soviet Union). Its five permanent members (P5) were primarily involved in proxy wars, yet still able to use the Security Council to manage conflicts. In recent years, **cooperation within the UN**, particularly among the P5, [has markedly declined](#). The Council's inability to respond effectively to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and again in 2022,

as well as to the conflict in Gaza following 7 October 2023, has exposed the depth of this institutional paralysis, marked by a rising number of UN member states questioning the legitimacy of an outdated set up, a breakdown of trust and a direct involvement of P5s' interests (and troops), rather than proxy wars. These underscored the limitations of the current Security Council structure and [renewed calls for reform](#) to address the Council's key challenges. The sections below outline these key challenges.

## 2.1 Legitimacy deficits and geopolitical fragmentation

**The legitimacy of the multilateral system – the UN in particular – has become one of its central challenges.** Domestic political shifts in multiple regions have narrowed the space for international engagement. Public spending in Europe has been under significant strain, including [pressure to respond to the continent's demographic shift](#) (characterised by an aging population, lower fertility rates, and a shrinking workforce), which is driving increased public spending on healthcare, pensions, and long-term care services; a weak economic growth; and the need to follow through with [new commitments to spend more on defence](#). Some governments have diverted their Official Development Assistance (ODA) funds [from development to defence spending](#) and support to Ukraine, thereby constraining funding for foreign aid, multilateral institutions and peacekeeping efforts. Across the Global South, dissatisfaction with what many perceive as selective adherence to international norms has grown sharper. **The contrasting global reactions to the wars in Ukraine and Gaza illustrate these tensions.**

The 2022 invasion of Ukraine was swiftly and widely condemned in Western capitals as an [existential threat to the rules-based order](#), prompting enormous financial, political, and military support for Kyiv. This is unsurprising, as Russia's invasion of Ukraine presents the EU and EU member states of NATO with an unprecedented threat. After Russia vetoed a Security Council resolution demanding Russian troops immediately withdraw from Ukraine in 2022, the UN General Assembly invoked the "[Uniting for Peace](#)" procedure (which empowers the UN General Assembly to act on international security threats when a veto deadlocks the Security Council) to vote on Ukraine. [Western countries were strongly in favour of condemning Russia](#), calling for the withdrawal of its troops. By contrast, many states in the Global South, including in Africa, adopted more cautious positions, with numerous abstentions in UN votes and calls for mediation rather than confrontation.<sup>3</sup>

The Gaza conflict saw many of these same Global South governments condemning the humanitarian catastrophe and calling for accountability under

international law. The EU and its member states [swiftly and unequivocally condemned](#) war crimes committed by Hamas on 7 October 2023, but appeared divided and hesitant in the first UN General Assembly's Gaza resolutions (for example, of [27 October 2023](#) and [12 December 2023](#)). The contrast revealed blind spots and raised deeper questions about the consistency and moral credibility of the application of international norms. It also highlighted how perceptions of selective enforcement undermine the legitimacy of the multilateral system, particularly among states that have experienced foreign intervention or unequal partnerships.

**But this legitimacy crisis unfolds within a broader contest for influence among the great powers.** The strategic rivalry between the US and China has reshaped trade, investment, and diplomatic coalitions, turning global governance into an arena of competition rather than cooperation. At the same time, political polarisation in the US has made its multilateral engagement uneven and more volatile, weakening confidence in its reliability and further complicating collective action. For middle powers and smaller states (from both the Global North and the Global South), this rivalry creates opportunities for diversifying partnerships but also poses risks of dependency and fragmentation.

## 2.2 The crisis of credibility and representation: why reform matters

**As the global order rapidly unravels, it becomes more apparent that current global institutions reflect a bygone era and remain ill-equipped to address contemporary crises.** The P5 veto power, once intended to ensure stability, now frequently paralyzes decision-making. Discrepancies in the use of veto exist across the P5. For example, the [UK and France have not used their veto](#) once since the end of the Cold War. But the Council's inability to act decisively on Syria, Ukraine, and Gaza, among other crises, has severely weakened its credibility. More fundamentally, the concentration of formal authority in institutions designed eight decades ago sits uneasily with the diffusion of economic and diplomatic power across a much wider range of states.

The current system is struggling to respond to crises that cut across security, climate, health, and digital governance. **Reforming it is not a matter of principle alone; it is essential for restoring functionality**, ensuring fair representation of emerging powers, and maintaining the legitimacy and effectiveness of global governance.

**African states have long called for fairer representation in global governance**, particularly within the UN Security Council and international financial institutions.

The Common African Position on UN Security Council reform, articulated in the [Ezulwini Consensus](#) and [Sirte Declaration](#), calls for at least two permanent African seats with veto powers and five non-permanent seats. The August 2024 [high-level Security Council debate](#) on African representation reaffirmed this demand. It was echoed at the September 2025 UN General Assembly, where Kenyan President William Ruto challenged the legitimacy of a system that continues to sideline 54 nations despite Africa's central role in global peacekeeping.

The continent contributes substantially to UN peacekeeping missions, with [11 of the top 20 contributing](#) countries being African. In addition, the continent faces myriad challenges that have consistently dominated the UN Security Council's agenda. For example, in 2023, more than half ([51.02%](#)) of the Council's decisions concerned Africa, a figure that increased to [61.54%](#) in 2024. **Yet, the continent remains excluded from permanent membership in the UN Security Council.**

While the Common African Position is clear, **the challenge of selecting which countries would occupy permanent seats remains unresolved**, with proposals for rotating representation still under discussion. In particular, without a clear mechanism for ensuring that the positions of the 54 countries are reflected in the Security Council, fully utilising the permanent membership to advance the continent's priorities may be challenging, especially given rivalries and competing interests among African countries. Over the years, Africa's coordination in the UN Security Council (channelled through three rotating African members of the Security Council, known as the 'A3') has become stronger. Still, the unity (and coordination with the AU Commission, the AU Peace and Security Council (PSC), and, to some extent, within the A3 – their [coordination has clearly increased over the years](#)) has varied by subject. Interviewees highlight that, beyond the actual process of selecting a member state, there continues to be disagreement, especially among larger member states (particularly [Nigeria, South Africa and Egypt](#)), on who would accede to the 'African seats' on a reformed UN Security Council.

**Other powers have supported Africa's call for permanent membership in the UN Security Council.** On the European side, [the EU is committed to reforming the UN Security Council](#) to enhance its representativeness, efficiency, and capacity to address today's multifaceted challenges. In 2024, [Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg jointly endorsed](#) expanding the UN Security Council to strengthen African and broader developing-country representation, while also calling for inclusion of small and medium-sized (island) states. Other EU member states, including [France](#) (which supports the Ezulwini Consensus but also the G4 initiative

seeking to create permanent seats for India, Brazil, Germany and Japan), [Germany](#) and [Italy](#) have also launched concrete reform proposals –but the devil is in the details and how these parallel proposals can be dovetailed.

France has been progressive on Security Council reforms, and has advocated for the responsible use of veto power –in particular during mass atrocities, through the [French-Mexican initiative](#). Germany, together with Brazil, India, and Japan, is seeking [six new permanent members](#) of the Security Council and a seat for itself. However, following Brexit, France is the only EU member state to represent the EU in the Security Council. While European policies and laws – notably the [Common Foreign and Security Policy](#) (CFSP) – prescribe a degree of cooperation in the Security Council between EU member states holding permanent and non-permanent seats, interviews expressed some frustration with [France's representation of the EU's common interests](#).

Experts question whether the UK and France will ever be willing to let go of their veto, whether a permanent seat for Germany is realistic given that it would overrepresent European countries, and whether it is realistic to expect that France (and Germany) will be able to represent an EU common foreign position in the absence of one. Moreover, **the EU's collective influence remains constrained by [internal fragmentation](#)**, a growing emphasis on defence over diplomacy, and perceptions of inconsistency in its application of international norms. Without greater coherence in EU foreign policy, its ability to drive meaningful multilateral reform will remain constrained.

[Others have also questioned](#) whether commitments to reform the UN Security Council expressed by the P5 will never materialise or are principally rhetorical, noting that despite repeated P5 declarations in support of reform and greater representation, the veto structure and lack of agreement on negotiating texts have stalled progress for decades.<sup>4</sup> To change the Security Council, the UN Charter must be amended, a process that requires a favourable two-thirds vote of the General Assembly, ratification by two-thirds of member states, and approval by all five permanent members.

### **3. Towards a renewed Africa–Europe partnership for global reform**

The 7th AU-EU Summit held in Luanda (Angola) in November 2025 affirmed a 'stronger commitment to multilateralism', reiterating an Africa-Europe call for a

[‘more representative, inclusive, transparent, and accountable UN Security Council.’](#) AU-EU Summits have been explicitly committed to UN Security Council reform since [the 5th Summit in 2017](#). The rhetorical commitment has therefore been consistently present, but its tangible follow-up has been minimal, if not nonexistent.

[AU-EU relations have lived turbulent times](#), marked by asymmetries in power and perception, and a persistent gap between political declarations and operational implementation. But they are arguably at a [historical low](#) point. The uncomfortable history of slavery, colonialism and neocolonialism is constantly in the background in this complex relationship. African partners frequently perceive European engagement as paternalistic and reluctant to acknowledge historical responsibility, while, for Europe, African geopolitical interests are at times considered peripheral to the 'top table' of its core foreign policy.

**African governments have deliberately broadened and balanced their external relationships.** While China remains the continent’s most significant single bilateral trading partner, with two-way trade [reaching a record 282 billion dollars in 2023](#), Gulf actors – notably Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and the Arab Coordination Group – have pledged investments in African infrastructure and energy projects. Meanwhile, Türkiye, Brazil, India, and other powers from the Global South have deepened commercial and security ties across the continent. The [BRICS enlargement](#), which took effect in 2024–2025 by adding five new members, including Egypt and Ethiopia, has increased the number of venues where several African states pursue South–South options alongside engagement with OECD countries.

This diversification is less ideological than pragmatic. **It reflects a recognition that the world is increasingly fragmented** and that maintaining momentum for development and protecting sovereignty requires multiple partners and flexible strategies.

The EU’s political and strategic influence in Africa has been challenged in key theatres. The rapid contraction of French political influence and military footprints across the Sahel following coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, alongside the closure of the UN mission in Mali at Bamako’s request, and the freezing of international cooperation budgets with all three Sahel countries, [have exposed a reputational and operational gap](#) that others, including Russia, have exploited. [As Europe’s credibility increasingly depends on its capacity to deliver tangible results](#) rather than declaratory commitments, bridging the gap between rhetoric and implementation has become central to sustaining influence in Africa and beyond.

**A renewed partnership between Africa and Europe will not be built solely on appeals to shared values, joint conferences and lofty declaratory statements with little follow-through.** Interviews and workshop exchanges conducted for this research point to three practical drivers for global reform:

1. The pressure to restore the UN's crisis-solving capacity after a period of paralysis,
2. The need to anchor peace and security cooperation in predictable finance and more transparent political strategies, and
3. A recognition on both continents that credibility now rests on delivery rather than declarations.

The following sections discuss points of convergence and divergence between the two continents and the importance of key actors in driving change.

### 3.1 Points of convergence

Points of convergence between Europe and Africa rest on the pragmatic recognition of the mutual interest in restoring the functionality and legitimacy of the multilateral system. The core areas of alignment focus on: 1. Working methods, transparency and accountability of the Security Council; 2. Sustainable and predictable finance; 3. Strengthened EU-AU-UN cooperation.

#### 1. Working methods, transparency and accountability

Many African and European states explicitly support reforms to the Security Council's procedures, including more open and predictable processes, clearer engagement with regional organisations, improved briefing practices, and tools to enhance Council accountability to the General Assembly. This is an area where the EU has repeatedly framed reform ([effectiveness, transparency, accountability](#)) and where many African delegations have pressed for procedural remedies alongside seat claims. Reforming working methods may be politically easier than changes to the UN Charter, and they send a clear, visible message. There is also convergence around the need to expand elected capacity as a near-term reform avenue. Recently, the ten elected members (E10) of the Security Council have shown a [growing sense of unity and identity](#), demonstrating the ability to cooperate to try and break the impasse on contested issues, such as collectively pen drafting resolutions on Gaza. Expanding the elected capacity can give countries more opportunities to make their voices heard.

From interviews and workshops conducted, it emerges that, on the African side, representation and institutional reforms must be advanced in tandem. There is little appetite to abandon the Common African Position; yet, [officials question](#)

whether a symbolic win (such as accepting permanent seats that fall short of the AU demand for “full representation”, meaning at least two African permanent seats with all the prerogatives and privileges of permanent membership, including the veto) but detached from operational fixes, would improve outcomes for the conflicts that dominate the Security Council’s agenda. Several interviews have proposed packaging claims to permanent seats with near-term steps that raise collective agency now: tighter coordination among African elected members, stronger linkages between the UN Security Council and the AU Peace and Security Council, and disciplined follow-through on financing arrangements that make UN-assessed support to AU-led missions both predictable and compliant with human rights benchmarks.

Concrete steps and clear leadership might also help the African continent further secure its partners’ support. Interviewees shared some concerns about the ability of African countries to form a united consensus on who should represent the continent in the UN Security Council, how the process of sharing the seat(s) should actually unfold, and who has the capacity and legitimacy to take on a stronger leadership role to guide the reforms. According to interviews, this clarification should come from African governments.

Most European actors not only support fairer (African) representation in the UN Security Council, but also favour a more transparent and evidence-based decision-making process. They recognise the value of sharpening the Council’s working methods, expanding the voice of elected members and regional actors, and embedding accountability regarding the veto, even if comprehensive, permanent enlargement of seats remains distant.

## **2. Sustainable and predictable finance**

Both African and European actors view UN Security Council [Resolution 2719](#) – which permits UN-assessed contributions to AU-led peace support operations (PSOs) and provides a mechanism to anchor peace and security cooperation in predictable financing – as a significant, tangible point of convergence. This resolution marked a milestone in transforming how African-led peace operations are financed, breaking decades of practice in which AU missions relied on ad hoc, voluntary, and often unpredictable funding. The EU has been a firm supporter, committing substantial financing and advocating for the implementation of the resolution to ensure that African PSOs have predictable, adequate, and sustainable financing.

The adoption of this resolution shed light on the financial constraints that African countries [faced when deploying peacekeeping operations](#). This is also linked to a

broader, parallel discussion of [Africa's marginal voting power within existing global economic institutions](#), including the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, which undermines their legitimacy and perpetuates inequality. Interviewees stressed that reforming these institutions is sometimes considered more pressing than reforming the UN Security Council (see box 1 for more information).

In the meantime, [Resolution 2719 remains unimplemented](#). Reasons include UN budget cuts, a [deepening liquidity crisis](#), the US disengagement from the multilateral system, and delays in operationalising the resolution due to the absence of an AU-UN roadmap for implementation.

### **Box 1. Reforming international financial institutions is the front line**

At times, interviews and discussions have placed finance ahead of the UN Security Council design as the priority track for African capitals in 2025. One interviewee referred to the "money crisis" in the system, characterised by shrinking aid envelopes and volatile political support from major donors, which all undermine multilateral credibility on the ground. They called for three deliverables: scaling up rechannelling mechanisms through multilateral development banks; moving capital adequacy reforms from communiqués to country-level lending terms, particularly risk premiums for African borrowers; and adopting debt-reduction tools that do not undermine basic services or climate investment.

Several interviewees argued that visible progress here would do more to rebuild trust than abstract debates on Council geometry, and could create momentum for political reform later. As one official put it: "The question is not whether we want a seat at the table. The question is whether the table itself is still serving anyone's interests." The comment reflects a pragmatic calculation that financial architecture reform, with a clearer scope for negotiated gains, may be a more productive entry point for Africa-Europe cooperation than the political gridlock around permanent membership.

*Source: The authors*

### **3. Strengthened EU-AU-UN cooperation**

Both Africa and Europe recognise the practical need to align the Security Council with the realities of where crises occur and who deploys resources. Europe (the EU and many member states) and the AU have demonstrated increasing operational cooperation in African peace operations and conflict prevention; both seek a Security Council that facilitates, rather than obstructs, predictable mission mandates, financing, and rapid responses. European member states also support African counterparts in finding “African solutions to African problems”. Through EU-AU cooperation, European member states see value in strengthening AU-UN links, and support greater institutionalisation of AU-UN dialogue (and by extension, more structured linkages between the AU’s PSC and the UN Security Council). If AU-UN cooperation is better institutionalised, the argument that the UN Security Council should reform to reflect this partnership and the growing (operational) role of the AU is strengthened.

#### **4.1 Points of divergence**

While Africa and Europe share a commitment to multilateralism in principle, the partnership is consistently tested in practice. Key points of divergence include speed, sequencing, and scope of reform, as well as differing views on the international order and instruments.

##### **1. Speed, sequencing and scope of reform**

African countries increasingly emphasise the urgency of comprehensive reform, [calling for accelerated reform](#) to address the “historical injustice” and reflect contemporary realities. Africa’s demands are for structural change (permanent seats, veto rights, etc.) rather than incremental procedural fixes, at times viewing working-method changes as insufficient if representation and power do not change. European states are more cautious and emphasise gradualism, stressing that all under-represented regions (including those in Asia-Pacific, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Small Island Developing States) should be treated equally and afforded the same opportunities for representation.

The sequencing of permanent-seat enlargement is also viewed differently across the continents: African interlocutors stress the need to “have permanent seats first and then figure out how to share them”. According to interviews, granting a seat will prompt African countries to agree on the practical arrangements for its occupancy. At the same time, European counterparts believe that having a clear, continent-wide proposed mechanism for sharing the seat(s) might help persuade other countries of the reform’s viability.

## 2. Differing views on international order and instruments

African actors are sceptical about the "rules-based order" language, preferring explicit anchoring in international law, which they regard as less susceptible to double standards. On the contrary, European actors – notably the EU and member states – [still see value](#) in a 'rules-based banner' as diplomatic shorthand. However, this gap may be narrowing as European governments confront inconsistencies in their own positions. On instruments, Africans tend to favour flexible, region-led responses paired with predictable UN support, while Europeans place greater emphasis on compliance regimes, reporting and budgetary guardrails. Expectations that African states assume greater responsibility for security provision cannot be divorced from access to concessional finance, technology, and market opportunities.

To overcome these differences and revitalise EU-AU relations, the focus should be on enhancing the partnership and 'being united in diversity'. [Disagreements and differences should be acknowledged up front](#), and negotiation should occur *around* them rather than assuming full alignment.

### 4.2 Who drives change

The UN system does not operate in isolation; it is part of a broader ecosystem comprising diverse actors with varying degrees of power and influence. Many of these actors engage with one another outside the formal UN setting (beyond the narrow definition of "inside" as activities taking place in New York), thereby affecting the UN system. This ecosystem includes, for example, institutional actors, regional organisations, coalitions, smaller and medium powers, research institutes and CSOs.

**From the African institutional side, the AU remains a key actor.** A more strategic AU "foreign policy for multilateralism" is required to set priorities, sequence demands, and clarify trade-offs across peace, development and finance. This would help align New York and Addis Ababa, provide A3 and capital-city diplomacy, reduce mixed messages from overlapping group memberships, and give A3 negotiators more explicit mandates at critical moments. The point is not to replace national strategies but to provide a shared playbook that raises African diplomatic coherence.

**European actors can be more than conveners.** The EU and key member states were repeatedly cited by interviewees as able to "de-politicise the technical", especially by supporting compliance frameworks, financing arrangements that meet New York standards, and joint UN-AU workstreams on early warning,

sanctions design and transitions from peacekeeping to peacebuilding. The premise is simple: if Europe helps resolve the bottlenecks that have historically hindered AU-led deployments, confidence and cooperation habits will grow, even when politics are challenging. In particular, interviewees have argued that, in light of the US' disengagement from international cooperation, [Europe should increase its involvement](#). African countries are increasingly gaining leverage, but concrete support from European countries could tip the balance.

Additionally, interviewees shared that using existing fora "outside" of the UN to create space for more concrete and strategic discussions is what is needed, as a proposal to reform the UN system that comes from "outside" the UN might be less contentious, but should still build on three tracks: 1. Addressing structural issues (permanent and non-permanent seats, veto power, representation etc.); 2. Addressing working methods of the UN; 3. Having strategic discussions linked to more substantive and honest questions of what both the AU and the EU want out of this process.

Beyond Brussels and Addis Ababa, **credible change agents include small and medium powers on both continents** that have built reputations for bridge-building **in the General Assembly and on sanctions and protection files in the Security Council**. 'Minilateralism' has emerged as a potential solution to address specific global issues, particularly when the multilateral system struggles to do so. The creation of small coalitions of actors attracts both the state and CSOs. [Strengths range from](#) the ability to form and operate quickly to practical, adaptable working methods and the influence of networked relationships among its members. While minilateralism cannot replace multilateral organisations, and cannot *de facto* fill the gap created by the UN Security Council paralysis – as members don't have a mandate to manage international peace and security, nor the technical capacity, the funding or the know-how to engage as the UN can – it still has a growing geopolitical weight. It could [potentially share the burden with the UN](#).

**Civil society and research institutes play a crucial role** in this ecosystem by translating field insights into actionable options for time-constrained delegations. Private and philanthropic actors also contribute to addressing global challenges, but they provide needed resources amid strained public-sector support.

Finally, several interviewees argued for using salient political moments to organise coalitions. The UN80 process will surface proposals on mandates and management that can either drift or be shaped. The selection of the next Secretary-General presents an opportunity to negotiate concrete reforms in working methods and financing. Linking these calendars would allow Africa and

Europe to sequence wins: deliver finance and operational fixes in the near term, while building political capital for more ambitious institutional change later.

## 5. Conclusion

The overlapping crises of the past decade have not only strained global governance but also revealed deep fractures in the UN's legitimacy, credibility, and representation structure. Recent events have only accelerated this. For Africa and Europe, this is not simply a test of their commitment to multilateralism, but a moment that crystallises what is at stake in their own claims to be champions of a fairer, more effective international order.

Neither Africa nor Europe can assume that their interests will be safeguarded by default. If the coming decades are defined by renewed great-power politics, both continents risk marginalisation unless they find ways to work together selectively on multilateral issues. In this sense, the Pact for the Future (and UN80 reform process) should also be leveraged. If approached strategically, it offers a near-term vehicle through which both continents can translate alignment on principles into measurable institutional and political gains.

The analysis in this note suggests that, beneath rhetorical tensions and differing emphases, **there is a shared recognition that reform can no longer be postponed to a distant horizon.** Yet progress is unlikely to come from grand bargains alone; it will depend on how both continents navigate the trade-offs between representation and functionality, principles and pragmatism, and legal commitments and political realities. Rather than seeking perfect alignment, **an AU-EU partnership that accommodates managed disagreement** while converging on specific reforms and forums may be better positioned to influence the evolving system.

From this perspective, the AU's push for structural change, Europe's focus on working methods and finance, and the growing role of actors such as the A3, regional organisations, and minilateral coalitions **are not competing agendas but somewhat different entry points into the same challenge.** They point to a more networked multilateralism in which African and European actors work across New York, Addis Ababa and Brussels, and increasingly outside formal UN spaces, to shape norms, incentives and practices over time. The unresolved questions that run through this note – how to sequence reforms, how to translate numerical weight into influence, how to anchor "rules" more firmly in law and delivery – are therefore **less a sign of failure than of a system in transition.**

In that sense, this moment calls for less a definitive blueprint than a clearer sense of direction. In this regard, three avenues stand out:

- Africa and Europe should **use the current reform cycle** to align expectations, clarify where their priorities genuinely intersect, and demonstrate that cooperation can yield concrete improvements in peace, security and financing. This will not only strengthen their partnership but also help rebuild confidence that multilateralism can still adapt and perform.
- Africa and Europe should **push for reform of working methods**, particularly in the Security Council, where procedural adjustments can enhance transparency, accountability, and engagement without requiring Charter change.
- **EU–AU–UN cooperation should be institutionalised** to reinforce the operational case for Security Council reform and to create structured pathways for sustained coordination. Priority should be given to implementing UN Resolution 2719 to strengthen AU–UN linkages and enhance predictability in peace operations. However, budget cuts and the liquidity crisis [are seriously jeopardising the UN](#), thereby delaying the implementation of this resolution.

The legitimacy of the system will ultimately be judged not by declarations of shared values, but by whether it becomes more responsive to contemporary crises and more representative of the societies it claims to serve.

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## Endnotes

1. Throughout 2025 and into early 2026, the Trump administration withdrew [from the WHO](#), [Paris Agreement](#), and [UNESCO](#), closed [USAID](#), [rejected](#) the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and on 7 January 2026, announced the US [exit from 66 international organisations](#), including 31 UN entities such as the UNFCCC, Human Rights Council, and Peacebuilding Commission.

2. Namely, the Republic of China (succeeded by the People's Republic of China in 1971), France, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (succeeded by the Russian Federation in 1991), the United Kingdom (UK), and the US.

3. [This is due to different reasons](#), including the close political and economic ties Russia established with some African governing elites; historical factors, including Russian support during the liberation movements of the colonial era; and the perception that Western allies have not adequately supported African partners (for example, during the COVID-19 pandemic and related vaccine rollout).

4. On top of France's position, [Russia backs India and Brazil's application](#) for permanent members; [China supports increasing](#) the representation of small and medium-sized countries, including African seats, but opposes Japan's permanent membership; the [UK supports](#) an expansion in both the permanent and non-permanent membership (for a total of mid-20 countries), and supports a permanent African representation, and permanent seats for Brazil, Germany, India and Japan; [the US supports](#) two permanent African seats but without veto power.

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