

**The Inter Region Economic Network (IREN Kenya) discussion paper for
the 21st East Africa Media Forum**

The Artificial Intelligence Driven Shifts in Geopolitics: Implications for the Future of the United Nations

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This discussion paper is part of the preparatory materials for *the 21st IREN East Africa Media Forum* hosted by Inter Region Economic Network (IREN Kenya). It synthesizes key points from Prof. Macharia Munene (USIU-Africa) and Mr. James Shikwati (Founder Director IREN Kenya).

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Summary

Artificial intelligence technologies, shifting geopolitical landscape, rising nationalism, and erosion of trust in international institutions are likely to reshape global governance mechanisms. The rise of both state and non-state consequential powers with the capability to project their national interests globally are likely to disrupt the United States of America-led international order. The stimulation of new multilateral agencies and institutions keen to redistribute power, and decision-making processes is likely to redefine the United Nations systems. The geopolitical shifts call for Africans to mount deliberate and conscious effort to ensure participation in shaping new normative frameworks.

Introduction

The post-World War II period started with the creation of the United Nations Organisation, UN, aiming at promoting global peace, security, and cooperation. Four African countries, namely Egypt, Ethiopia, Liberia, and apartheid South Africa participated in its founding and formulation of policies. Its relationship with Africa often oscillated between paternalism and partnership (Murithi, T.; 2007). On attaining independence, the majority of the current independent African states aligned themselves to the UN Charter on the maintenance of international peace and security; equal rights and self-determination of a people; international cooperation and solving international problems; and serving as a center for harmonizing the actions of nations in attaining common ends (Article 1; UN Charter).

The international landscape is undergoing structural shifts partly due to technology such as advances in Artificial Intelligence, AI, and geopolitical dynamics. As a result, there is loss of legitimacy in the current institutions of governance, the UN systems and Bretton Woods institutions appear incapable of solving global challenges have put multilateralism in crisis (Jaldi, A.; 2023). Progress in AI allow governments to monitor and control their citizens more than ever before and is thus reshaping the world order (Wright, N.; 2023). There is also increased challenge to American unilateralism and rising Western nationalism that transform the geopolitical environment (Moreland, W.; 2019).

The Artificial Intelligence and Geopolitics

Artificial Intelligence refers to systems that use technologies such as text mining, computer vision, speech recognition, natural language generation, machine learning, deep learning to gather data to predict, recommend or decide, with varying levels of autonomy, the best action

to achieve specific goals (Samoili, S., López Cobo, M., Gómez, E., De Prato, G., Martínez-Plumed, F., and Delipetrev, B.; 2020). Political observers have for decades believed that liberal democracy offered the only plausible future pathways for big, industrially sophisticated countries to make their citizens rich. Now, by allowing governments to monitor, understand, and control their citizens far more effectively than ever before, AI offers a way for big, economically advanced countries to make their citizens rich while maintaining control over them—the first since the end of the Cold War (Wright, D.N.; 2019).

AI is a power multiplier, enabling the management, processing, and application of vast amounts of information. A country or government that can effectively use, manage, and control AI will possess the power to rule and govern the world (Tilovska-Kechedji, E.; 2023). AI joins the list of innovations such as the steam engine, electricity and oil mining technologies, nuclear weapons technology, and advances in electronics that historically helped shape international power dynamics and geopolitics. The rise and fall of great powers in modern era are arguably followed by a techno-economic logic (Vijayakumar, A.; 2023). Major geopolitical rivals, namely U.S.A, China and Russia have put AI at the center of their national strategies. A huge gap exists between developed and developing countries when it comes to AI development and deployment which if not closed will lead to further inequalities between the Global North and Global South (Arkpogun, O.E.; Elsahn, Z.; Olan, F.; Elsahn, F.; 2020).

AI has a big impact on democracy through information or disinformation. The deceptively realistic false content — such as “deepfakes,” which are manipulated media that depict people doing or saying things they didn’t say or do, or events that didn’t really occur — to mislead the public about what candidates are asserting, their positions on issues, and even whether certain events actually happened, if left unchecked, has a great impact on voting patterns and perceptions. AI could be used to manipulate the administration of elections, including by spreading disinformation to suppress voter turnout (Noti, 2024).

The Hegemon and the United Nations

The foundations of international law and systems have historically been shaped by hegemonic powers. Spain redefined basic concepts of justice and universality to justify conquests of indigenous Americans in the sixteenth century. France, in the eighteenth century, developed the modern concept of borders, and the balance of power to suit its continental strengths. Britain in the nineteenth century forged new rules on piracy, neutrality, and colonialism to suit its interests as a dominant power (Byers, M. & Nolte, G.; 2003). When the hegemony’s power wanes, the entire world order is unhinged, as the cohesive strength of widely accepted values systems and established economic relations decrease. This was exemplified by the Roman Empire, the Spanish Empire, the Ottoman Empire, and the British Empire (Kappel, R.; 2014)

The World has been dominated by a western liberal order, which was built by the United States of America (U.S.A) and its partners after the Second World War (Ikenberry, J.G.;2018). By virtue of its status as the “world’s only remaining superpower” and in recognition of its military, economic and political power, U.S.A was considered the post-Cold War hegemon (Puchala, D.J.; 2005). The UN promotes norms and values of its founder country, the U.S.A. such as economic

liberalism in the form of relatively free trade and open markets; political liberalism in the form of representative government and human rights; and other liberal concepts, such as nonaggression, self-determination, and the peaceful settlement of disputes anchored on the U.S.A. (The RAND Corporation; 2016). The cornerstone of the current western liberal order, U.S.A, is shifting and Europe is experiencing rise in nationalism. This combination is transforming the post-Cold War international environment (Moreland, W.; 2019).

The New Multilateralism

Multilateralism has become a cornerstone of the unfolding multipolar world to challenge unilateralism and unipolarity. Organizations such as the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) are poised to become the world's principal engine of new demand and spending power (Dutta, A.; 2019). Multilateralism is created and maintained through specific forms of leadership, norms, and international power configurations. The relationship between the distribution of power, the nature of challenges and problems and the international institutions that emerge to deal with the collective challenges is constantly changing (Newman, E., Thakur, R., and John Tirman.; 2006).

The expansion and growing influence of BRICS is contributing significantly to the shifts in the world order in terms of economics, politics, military, and cultural dynamics. The BRICS economies oppose what they view as a US-dominated order that is propped up by the Dollar and global governance institutions formed after the Second World War (EFSAS; 2023). The expansion in BRICS membership and the quest to decouple from the U.S.A dollar through growing trade in national currencies symbolizes a shift in the global landscape (Optenhogel, U.; 2024). The five BRICS nations have a combined gross domestic product (GDP) larger than that of the G7 in purchasing power parity terms and are nominally responsible for 26 percent of the global GDP. Despite this, they get only 15 percent of the voting power at the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Will the BRICS emerge as an alternative economic and geopolitical pillar to the US and its allies? (Adler, 2023)

Why and How Africa Must Prepare

Historically, African countries have been forced to choose between competing global powers, for instance during the Cold War period. It follows that tensions between global powers will have implications for the African continent through the channels of technology, global supply chains and trade (Mzukisi, Q. & Mjumo M.; 2023) The African continent is practically virgin in terms of digital infrastructure oriented towards AI (Mialhe, N.; 2018). In the absence of significant AI Research and Development in Africa, the AI deployed in Africa tend to originate from outside the continent. In most cases foreign companies use false African identities to raise capital and then cash out limiting Africa's participation in the new technology (Gwagwa, A., Kraemer-Mbula, E., Rizk, N., Rutenberg, I., & De Beer, J. (2020).

Conclusion

The AI technology is shaping the unfolding geopolitical environment and the fact that Africa's AI ecosystem is still at its embryonic stage both in investments and policy is alarming. In-depth

research and analysis are urgently needed to provide an enlightened strategy and way forward on how AI will impact Africa's standing in the global community. Africa must urgently invest in its youthful population, in situational awareness tools on how geopolitical competitions constrain developmental aspiration, in its diplomatic skills to evolve a win-win collaboration with both the emerging and old global actors. To rely on reform of the UN system will not alter the current paternalistic order the continent finds itself in.

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Inter Region Economic Network (IREN Kenya)

The Inter Region Economic Network is a leading think tank providing strategic insight and policy solutions tailored to spur prosperity in Africa through organized enterprises. IREN has for the last 21 years researched and hosted a series of think tank discussions on themes around Africa's economic cooperation and development. IREN Kenya thanks Prof. Macharia Munene and Mr. James Shikwati for providing this discussion paper for the 21st IREN East Africa Media Forum.