

**THUCYDIDES TRAP OR ORDERLY MULTIPOLAR WORLD:
CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR AFRICA
OPENING ADDRESS**

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AFRICA CAN ASSERT ITS INTERESTS IN SHIFTING GEOPOLITICS

I wish to reiterate the words of welcome from the Programme Director and express the gratitude of the Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflection to all the distinguished colleagues who have joined us at this conference.

The organising philosophy of the Mapungubwe Institute revolves around two fundamental questions: how do nations succeed, and how do civilisations sustain themselves? The evolution of human society contains some answers to these questions. But if history were the only guide to future possibilities, we would not be assembled here for these two days.

Our responsibility is to develop a systematic understanding of factors that influence the choices being made today and the determinants of future action. It is to examine, in a transdisciplinary manner, the circumstances that propel humanity to higher levels of social and technological progress. And it is also to appreciate the objective factors and impulses that sow the seeds of failure.

Are such failures in social evolution due to the folly of self-indulgent leaders who in their hubris misdirect nations towards malignant behaviour? Are they due to the inability to predict, adapt to and mitigate natural disasters? Is it because ossified religious beliefs drag communities down the rabbit hole of righteous self-destruction? Is it the inability to tame the wonders of innovation and direct them towards common human benefit; or is it the arrogance of empires that seek to freeze history in the belief of a manifest destiny to lead?

It is in the context of these dynamics that the notion of the Thucydides Trap or its opposite in the form of an orderly multipolar world arises.

During the course of the conference, colleagues will most certainly elaborate on Thucydides' writings about Athens and Sparta (Thucydides: 10th century), and the warning of Graham Allison about their relevance in today's world. Suffice it to note that Allison ominously warns that 'war between the United States and China in the decades ahead is not just possible, but much more likely than recognized at the moment. Indeed, judging by the historical record, war is more likely than not.' (Allison: 2017).

However, scholars such as David Kang and Xinru Ma have critiqued the notion of the Thucydides Trap, characterising it as 'threat inflation' and they bemoan what they regard as 'selection bias'. In a paper with the self-explanatory title, *Power transitions: Thucydides didn't live in East Asia* (Kang and Ma: 218), they argue that regional power transitions in East Asia quite often occurred in a peaceful manner.

What cannot be gainsaid, though, is that conflict during interstate power transitions, can be generated by a variety of interrelated impulses: the perception of threat – real or imagined – on the part of an incumbent; a sense of entitlement to remain master of all that is surveyed; the intentions

and behaviour of a rising power to stake its place in the sun; or multidirectional osmosis between these poles.

As we are already experiencing today, great power competition, defined as involving ‘rival nations with global interests, reach, and influence vying to be the preeminent actor in international politics’ is inevitable (US Space Force). However, such competition does not have to take the form of a hot war. Africa is therefore challenged at this very moment to understand current manifestations of these tensions while at the same time encouraging the emergence of an orderly multipolar world.

In a paper on the future of international relations, Stephen Heinz asserts:

‘What distinguishes this period in human history is the confluence of forces— political, geo-strategic, economic, social, technological, and environmental, as well as interactions among them—that fuel the turbulence that we see today...’ (Heintz: 2024).

To elaborate on some of these attributes...

The political and geostrategic factors play out in a shifting dynamic between unipolarity and multipolarity. It can be argued that because of the dominance of the capitalist system and a global military hyperpower, unipolarity is the primary characteristic of the global system. Multipolarity, as reflected in the emergence of various centres of alignment and co-operation – as in the European Union, ASEAN, BRICS+ and Eurasian partnership – is a secondary element, with China emerging as an important pole. (ANC: 2018)

The economic elements include the reconfiguration of world markets, represented by reshoring, near-shoring and friendshoring, ostensibly aimed at derisking global economic dependencies and encouraging re-industrialisation. Combined with this, is the growing tendency to use economic sanctions and technological restrictions as weapons both of industrial policy and economic competition. However, the entanglement of the two largest economies in terms of trade and financial instruments makes a clean break in relations virtually impossible in the medium-term.

The technological attributes find expression in rapid advances in the application of natural sciences, many of which have helped to improve the human condition. Yet, it is largely better-endowed sections of society or of the global community that have reaped these benefits. Besides, many of these technologies lend themselves to applications in weapons of war, espionage and other malign activities.

Layered across these attributes are threats to the global commons, particularly the Anthropocene – as human activity significantly impacts the earth’s climate and ecosystems – as well as growing incidences of epidemics and pandemics. While these threats have the potential to encourage centripetal tendencies in the behaviour of nation-states; self-interest and inadequate action do generate centrifugalism.

Timothy Heath of Rand Corporation identifies domestic dynamics that he characterises as ‘neo-medievalism’ in many developed countries, which play an important role in undermining global centripetal tendencies. These are reflected, among others, in the decline in state legitimacy; fragmentation in societies across multiple fault-lines including concentration of power and wealth

within a small elite; and imbalanced economic growth (Heath: 2024); and contestations around migration and gender rights.

Of even greater concern in this regard is the danger, identified by US President Dwight Eisenhower, of a 'military-industrial complex' (or what today we can refer to as a Military-Industrial-Intelligence Complex) that exercises 'total influence' and endangers 'liberties or democratic processes'. (Eisenhower: 1961). With geopolitical calculations dominated by this Complex, policy debate among the political elite reflects poor strategic acumen, and it is largely dominated by tactical considerations pertaining to public opinion.

In this context, identity politics increasingly occupies the centre of discourse, as distinct or as a deliberate distraction from the fundamental question of social inequality.

Given all the dynamics that we have described, is a Thucydides Trap avoidable? Africa needs to engage these dynamics strategically, across the continuum between an incumbent's sense of entitlement and the intentions of a rising power.

On that continuum, the posture of the incumbent is of critical importance. The US says it needs to position itself to outmanoeuvre its 'geopolitical competitors' (Biden: 2022), particularly China as 'its most consequential long-term strategic competitor' (Blinken: 2024). This is because, in its calculation, China '...vies to surpass the United States in comprehensive national power and secure deference to its preferences from its neighbors and from countries around the world, while Russia directly threatens the United States in an attempt to assert leverage regionally and globally'. (US Office of the Director of National Intelligence: 2024)

What form is this outmanoeuvring supposed to take? It extends from the depths of the seas and trading currencies to the virtuality of cyberspace: in economics, the military, technology, cyber security and other spheres.

As Paul Krugman argues, one action 'that may best show how all three elements of the empire – control over dollars, control over information, and control of intellectual property – come together is the astonishingly successful takedown of the Chinese company Huawei' (Krugman: 2023). All of this, of course, takes place outside of the institutions that are meant to undergird the international order, such as the United Nations (UN) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

It would seem that, beyond strategic rivals it has identified, any centre across the globe, including the European Union that seeks to assert its 'strategic autonomy', may not be entirely welcome in US policy circles. As Zbigniew Brzezinski once asked: 'Does Washington truly desire a Europe that is a genuinely equal partner in world affairs, or does it prefer an unequal alliance?' (Brzezinski: 1998).

And so, are we about to experience the breakout of war between the US and China? The Rand Corporation research paper cited earlier argues that domestic trends and the danger of nuclear conflagration, would deter both powers from precipitate violent conflict. There may be flashes of clashes from time to time, they argue, but more likely are battles that 'will be fought in cyberspace, in economic arenas, in the "gray zone" just short of war' (Heath: 2024).

Also worthy of note is that the decline of a dominant power and the rise of a new one is usually a protracted process which at times manifests openly and at other times in quiet and insidious ways.

And so, while some signals may suggest some changes in the here and now, what we are dealing with is a trans-generational phenomenon.

In addition, most drivers of China's rise are not within the control of the US and its allies – sanctions, technological restrictions and trade wars notwithstanding.

'Rather than trying to make China poorer or to thwart the country's development', Gideon Rachman of the Financial Times argues, 'western policy should concentrate on the international environment, into which a richer and more powerful China is emerging'. (Rachman: 2023) This would help remove from the strategic equation, attempts at provocation, booby-traps, technological suppression and other activities aimed at stopping the rise of China.

On its part, China seems to have adopted a combination of non-interference in other countries' domestic affairs, incentivisation of partnerships, and ideological influence. 'Non-interference' contrasts somewhat with the approach of the US and some of its allies which purport to emphasise democracy and human rights as well as alignment with their geopolitical positions.

China argues that it is 'committed to building a world of lasting peace through dialogue and consultation, a world of universal security through collaboration and shared benefits, a world of common prosperity through mutually beneficial cooperation, an open and inclusive world through exchanges and mutual learning, and a clean and beautiful world through green and lowcarbon development' (Xinhua News Agency: 2024).

In addition to modernisation and the forging of all-round partnerships in economic, developmental, social, environmental, security and other areas of human endeavour, it also emphasises 'partnership action for mutual learning among civilisations' including 'governance experience sharing' (Xi: 2024). The Belt and Road Initiative forms part of this arsenal and, in relation to South Africa, it extends to co-operation 'in agriculture, education and training, health, transportation, electricity and water resources to support [the country] in creating jobs and improving people's livelihoods' (Chen: 2023).

Areas of concern in terms of possible triggers of conflict pertain to the trajectory towards the mainland's re-unification with Taiwan (with most countries maintaining a 'One China' policy), territorial claims in the South China Sea (involving countries such as the Philippines and Vietnam) as well as historical disputes with India and Japan. These tensions lend themselves to direct confrontation between China and the US which presents itself as defender of freedom of navigation and supports China's neighbours in these tensions. Further China views US military and intelligence pacts with some of these countries as well as Australia further south as encroachment and a threat to its own security.

How should Africa respond to this changing global balance and the tensions that attach to it? As earlier intimated, it is not a given that the tensions between the US global hyperpower and a rising China would lead to a Thucydides Trap of a hot war. But the geopolitical tensions between the two powers and across the alliances they buttress are extant today.

The continent's approach should proceed from the strategic understanding that this competition presents both opportunities and threats, which require deft management across many dimensions.

The first layer is about an Africa that fully appreciates its objective position in the evolving global political economy. The demographic dividend of a youthful population, arable land that is lying fallow, endowments for a low-carbon transition including critical minerals that are in high demand, and its geographic location are among the strategic attributes that Africa commands; and which it should fully take advantage of. Attached to these endowments are opportunities for manufacturing and participation in global value chains.

This means translating the plans contained in Agenda 2063, Africa Mining Vision, the African Continental Free Trade Area, New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and its African Peer Review Mechanism and other instruments into practical action.

Domestic people-centric development should define Africa's posture, and this is what will earn it respect and equitable treatment. In this regard, this is the right moment for Africa collectively to revive the partnerships that it had proactively initiated in past decades around NEPAD with global partners such as the European Union, BRICS, the G7 and other forums.

The second dimension relates to Africa's ability tactically to use great power competition to its own advantage.

This means, on the one hand, challenging global attitudes that present Africa as a hapless object of great power stratagems and a passive theatre of great power competition. In trying to woo the continent, former US National Security Advisor, John Bolton disparages China as seeking to advance 'global dominance' and using 'bribes, opaque agreements, and the strategic use of debt to hold states in Africa captive to Beijing's wishes and demands...' (Bolton: 2018).

Similarly, former French Finance Minister Pierre Moscovici, asserted in 2012 that French companies in Africa 'have to fight' in competition with China (Bavier: 2012).

We have seen in central Africa, the Sahel, Libya and Sudan, how this kind of competition among global and some regional powers not only worsens Africa's security; but tragically reverses the socio-economic development of Africa's people.

On the other hand, it means consciously taking advantage of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), while also harnessing the recently launched Partnership for Global Infrastructure Investment (PGII) of the US and its allies, which has been presented as a counterbalance with projects on electricity, green hydrogen, railway and shipping lines and digital infrastructure (Sacks: 2023). A classical manifestation of how Africa can channel great power competition to its advantage is the US-led projects to construct the Lobito Corridor linking the 'copper-belt' of Zambia and the Democratic Republic of Congo with Angola in the west (Geopolitical Monitor: 2024) and the recent tripartite agreement between China, Zambia and Tanzania to revitalise the TAZARA railway in the east (Reuters: 2024).

The third dimension of how Africa can respond to great power competition relates to the strength of Africa's voice on major global issues such as trade, peace, sovereignty, development, and the fight against pandemics and climate change. In other words, instead of merely accepting evolving geopolitics as an objective phenomenon around which to manoeuvre, Africa should use its collective strength to help shape it. Individually and collectively, African countries should intensify their campaigns at the UN, WTO and other platforms to help resolve these global issues.

Currently, solidarity around issues such as the conflict in the Middle East and pursuing a resolution to the Russia-Ukraine conflict in a manner that takes into account fundamental concerns of both sides, also require Africa's collective voice. Actions such as the ill-conceived U.S.-South Africa Bilateral Relations Review Act (US House of Representatives: 2024) which is meant to punish the country for its non-aligned position on these issues should be collectively resisted. The same applies to negative elements of trade and industrial policies such as the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism and the US Inflation Reduction Act; selfish approaches that have paralysed WTO negotiations, including callous approaches to intellectual property on, and access to, vaccines and other critical medicines; as well as half-hearted approaches on climate change.

At the same time, it is critical to encourage China as a rising power consistently to pursue its professed positions on peace and harmony among 'all under Heaven' (Xinhua News Agency: 2024), fully taking into account the interests of Africa's people in the multifaceted relations it is forging on the continent.

Broadly, African countries should together campaign for the implementation of the Pact for the Future adopted at the UN Summit in September 2024. As the Pact asserts, Africa and the world would be better served by combined global actions, among others, to:

- 'Turbocharge the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Paris Agreement on climate change, two landmark 2015 agreements that have seen halting progress and missed milestones
- 'Listen to young people and include them in decision-making, at the national and global levels
- 'Build stronger partnerships with civil society, the private sector, local and regional authorities and more
- 'Redouble efforts to build and sustain peaceful, inclusive and just societies and address the root causes of conflicts
- 'Protect all civilians in armed conflict
- 'Accelerate the implementation of our commitments on women, peace and security'.

(United Nations: 2024)

In conclusion, all these ideas are posited as an introduction to the more substantive inputs that will be made over the next two days. The essence of the observations is that transitions in global power balances do lead to tensions; but they do not necessarily have to result in a Thucydides Trap of hot war. Africa has the responsibility to contribute to global campaigns against these tensions in pursuit of an orderly multipolar world, while at the same time taking advantage of great power competition to pursue the interests of Africa's people.

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