CONCLUSION

Reflections on the Future of Africa's RECs in a Shifting Global Order

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Introduction

At the start of the commissioning, research and writing of the foregoing chapters in early 2024, the world was in a rapid geopolitical flux. Multipolarity was on the rise as traditional powers in the Global North/the West—the United States (US) and the European Union (EU) plus the United Kingdom (UK)—ceded economic and political ground to emerging middle powers, emblematically, China, India, the Middle East, Turkey, the BRICS plus the UK and several East and Southern Asian nations such as Singapore, South Korea, Japan, Vietnam and others. This was largely on account of an accelerating trend following the end of the US-led unipolar world, circa early 2000–2008 (see Lake 2026; Sachs 2023). The notion of a rising Global South, nebulous but observable, was gaining traction. As a collective, the Global South, representing the yearnings of developing nations, was banding together in contestation with the ostensibly declining Global North across imbalanced political and economic relations (Haug et al. 2021). Some countries—such as the US, the UK, Brazil (under Jair Bolsonaro), and Hungary (under Viktor Orbán)—were embracing what came to be labelled populism, neo-nationalism and isolationism (see Cannon 2025). These countries were convinced that globalisation and interdependence in the post-Cold War international system were hurting their sovereign interests. Africa

as a whole and African nations were, as in the Cold War period, caught between the accelerating shifts, emerging alliances and nervous concerns about collective global governance (see Brosig 2021; Lala 2020; Moyo 2021).

At the tail end of the production of this volume, the shifting world order took a decidedly disorderly, chaotic and rapid turn. This was largely in reaction to the second Donald Trump's America First doctrine, unleashed with gusto from 20 January 2025, upending relations between nations and regions (Stephan and Max-Otto 2024). These developments warranted reflection on Africa's place in a world rapturing and seemingly abandoning the normative values that had been codified into the global body politic since the end of the Cold War in 1945 (Jasmin and Hosen 2025). A key pillar of these values was a multilateral global governance ethic steeped in the valorisation of international institutions under the aegis of the United Nations (UN). While analyses focussed on the implications for African nations on one end and the continent on the other, a gap was observed as far as ramifications for Africa's sub-regions were concerned. It was thought that a focus on Africa in the fast-paced flux of global affairs was needed. Evidence from the desk reviews and fieldwork undertaken by the contributors suggests the need for a redesign, reconfiguration and a future-focussed re-engineering of African RECs. Is the decision by the African Union (AU) to use them as building blocks for the continent still relevant today, in the face of a fractious international environment?

This concluding chapter draws discussion points from the substantive chapters in this volume to eclectically envision African RECs in a rapidly shifting world order. As seen in the specific sub-regional analyses in this chapter, African RECs have not been immune to the tectonic re-arrangements in a world order bursting at the seams. As will be seen in the subsequent sections of this chapter, the RECs face significant headwinds in their external engagements. At the same time, all the RECs are international organisations in their own right. They have secretariats at their headquarters which, though limping along, maintain modicums of functionality. They have constitutive structures, organisational structures, organs such as sub-regional parliaments and courts of justice, protocols on trade and security, strategy plans and frequently hold meetings from

heads of state levels to ministerial and sectoral levels. Symbolically, each has its own flag, national anthem and emblem, and other artefacts of sub-regional identity. More significantly for this book, the RECs send and receive diplomatic representations and engage in formal relations with external powers. Thus, the serious credibility deficits that African RECs face should not be treated as testament to their infeasibility. Instead, they should be considered as opportunities for re-engineering to enable them to play more robust roles in a shifting global order. This is the essence of African agency, the idea that African RECs do act as drivers and agenda setters in their relations with global powers (see Links 2021a, 2021b in the case of the South African Development Community [SADC]). Where the African agency is limited, corrective action can be undertaken to boost the capacity of the RECs to act rather than being acted on.

National, sub-regional and continental perspectives

In the chapters, one reads about the inextricable link between individual African nations and their engagements with global powers through the RECs in which they belong. This is the bottom-up perspective in the RECs' ecology, with nations as the lower units of analysis in the formation, operations and future of sub-regionalism. One also sees the upward or top-down linkages, linking sub-regionalism to the macro level of continental unity, the domain of the AU-led governance (see Pearson 2019). The RECs often get short shrift in the shifting global order. Often, global powers see them as less efficient than negotiating any number of deals bilaterally. Global powers are loath to the more arduous approach of negotiating multilaterally with several nations under a sub-regional organisation (see Mulat 1998). It is also patent that African nations get the short end of the stick when they negotiate with global powers by dint of their inherent weaknesses. If a country such as the US or China, or a regional organisation such as the EU enters negotiations with a country such as Burundi, the Central African Republic (CAR) or Eswatini, it brings along an asymmetrical diplomatic capability, economic heft and ideological persuasion (see Bachmann and Sidaway 2010 in the case of the East African Community [EAC]). Massively challenged, African

nations are left in a lurch, often signing on the dotted line without fully comprehending the exploitative implications of the agreements. It is, thus, far better for African nations to negotiate as blocs. This is not because the nations do not possess the sovereignty to negotiate on their own; it is because ceding national sovereignty consolidates greater negotiation power by pooling diplomatic, political, economic and even ideological resources, vis-à-vis the asymmetrical power for which powerful countries have come to be categorised as global powers.

It is even more complex for global powers and African countries to engage substantively with global powers at the 54-nation AU level, the upward linkages dimension (Pearson 2019). Structuring relations at the AU level over specific deals can be incongruous, because there would be too many parties at the negotiating table, pursuing divergent interests (Korantema et al. 2025). For instance, the so-called Africa+1 frameworks, such as the AU-EU, Italy-Africa, the Forum on China-Africa, India-Africa, South Korea-Africa, Indonesia-Africa, Brazil-Africa and Russia-Africa, have not resulted in beneficial deals for the continent as a whole. Critics have long noted the ignominy of the 54 African nations supplicating and prostrating before one global power during the summits that sit at the core of these relations (Soulé 2021; Wekesa 2024). These country + continent frameworks are more of global power, soft power socialisation mechanisms that lay the ground for one-on-one negotiations between individual African countries and global powers. Yet, it is for these reasons that African nations are likely to end up with deals that do not favour them at the national and continental levels that negotiating at the RECs level makes strategic mid-level sense (Fofack 2026).

The RECs were established to serve as the building blocks in the continental brick and mortar construction, leading to a strong African Economic Community (AEC). This pragmatic step was premised on the imponderable impossibilities of the AU handling the nuances of such a large continent in specific localities (Shumba 2023). It would also address the question of the desperation and disparity for a continent with varied social, political and economic features. A paradox that emerges every time Africa's policy positions are discussed, is whether such policies should be developed at the continental, sub-regional or national levels. The position

this author has taken in previous intellectual contributions specific to Africa-US and Africa-China is that there should be no contradiction on this question (Wekesa 2020, 2021a, 2021b). African policies towards external actors are perfectly justifiable at the continental, sub-regional and national levels without one precluding the other (for instance, Mkandawire 2011). In this case, the rationale falls on the sub-regional level of African policy towards global powers.

As perusal of the literature, be it academic, policy or journalistic, shows that relations between Africa and global powers are, for the most part, discussed, debated and analysed at the national or continental level. Just as the relations between global powers and African RECs are at a low ebb, so too is an observable phenomenon indicative of RECs as an understudied area of Africa-global power relations. The upshot is that a gap exists in policy and academic considerations at the midway level of Africa's global engagements. The top-down analytical category of continent-global power relations is useful as it is in comprehending overarching issues, risks and generalising developments in specific regional and national circumstances. On the other hand, studying global power relations at the national level may facilitate comprehension of dynamics in the specific 54 countries. This narrow focus, however, neglects the realities of global powers' involvement in multiple countries at the sub-regional level.

As the chapters in this volume amply demonstrate, there are shared affinities in each of the African sub-regions—whether cooperative or conflictual—that justify focus on them as midway units of analysis in the broader scheme of the AEC and the world. This is the thesis this author leveraged to the study of China in East Africa, findings of which demonstrated optimistic, pessimistic and pragmatic perspectives and perceptions (Wekesa 2023). The continental view of Africa's relations with the global powers is too expansive, such that many sub-regional and national particularities fall through the resultant lacunas. The view from the nation-states is too minuscule, thus, missing the bigger picture. The sub-regional level of analysis helps address the paradox of broadness and narrowness. If the nation-state level of analysis is equivalent to being too close to the mirror, making objects (a global power) too big, the continental view is too far from the mirror to make objectives too small. Analogously,

the sub-regional level, an equidistance viewing level, delivers something akin to life-sized images of an object. The sub-regional level of analysis is helpful for African policy strategists interested in the advancement of Africa, one regional block at a time, in a self-help international system. It is also pragmatically and methodologically neater for researchers who aim to theorise the relations between Africa in/and the world, not as a lumbering 2000-language landmass, nor as a patchwork of small colonial enclaves, but as solid geographic entities that embody close socio-economic proximity. Disaggregating Africa into its sub-regions portends value in managing relations with global powers, as it does with managing research projects that aim to appreciate dynamics holistically.

Asymmetries between RECs and global powers

Even when RECs forge ties to boost their negotiating capacity with global powers, the hard reality is that the imbalances between them are immense. Across comparative statistics in every imaginable area of engagement, the RECs are diminutive against the mammoth juggernauts that the global powers are. Various Gross Domestic Product (GDP) data approximations of the sub-regions are revealing. On the African end: EAC (about US$ 300 billion), SADC (US$ 780 billion), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) (US$ 735 billion), Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) (US$ 540 billion), and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) (US$ 280.05 billion). Compare this with the GDPs of global powers: China (US$ 20 trillion), the US (US$ 30 trillion), Germany (US$ 5.33 trillion), India (US$ 4.18 trillion) and Japan (US$ 4.3 trillion). These are indeed the sobering realities of the asymmetries and imbalances that shape relations between Africa and the global powers that have endured from colonisation, through globalisation, to the present (Dickson 2021).

Sub-regional hegemonies in Africa and the notion of gateway countries or anchor states (Devermont 2025; Hanson 2009), is another cleavage that upsets RECs. Should South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya and Egypt temper down the proclivity to brand themselves as the most internationally connected states in their respective regions? This is because, naturally,

the other countries in the sub-regions bristle at the self-serving influence that the sub-regional powers wield. One such quiet grievance is that the sub-regional powers position themselves as entry points for global powers in the respective regions and sometimes, continentally. For instance, Lagos, Nairobi and Pretoria/Johannesburg serve as the headquarters of multinationals for the global powers in the respective sub-regions. Some of the global powers use the political and commercial capitals of the sub-regional powers as representative diplomatic hubs for the sub-regions. South Africa, for instance, has a strategic partnership with the EU, a designation that the other SADC member states do not enjoy. Analogously, the major diplomatic hubs for the global powers in the sub-regions are concentrated in Kenya, Lagos, Cairo and Pretoria. These and other factors hoist the sub-regional hegemons to beneficial relations with the global powers as compared to the countries with lesser economic status in the same sub-regions. Yet, at the same time, when collective regional economic and political plans do not work, the sub-regional hegemons are tempted to go solo. The sub-regional hegemons can, however, play the role of connectors between the sub-regions and the global powers, mimicking their global hegemon counterparts (McNamee 2016). South Africa, for instance, can project itself as the gateway to Southern Africa, while at the same time providing sub-regional public goods. This is what the US has done on a global scale: presenting itself as the world's leading economy, while also providing foreign aid, facilitating trade and leading on governance matters. This is what China has also increasingly done, positioning itself as an equal partner to the developing world and latching on to this value to structure infrastructure, trade and financial deals in much of East Asia. This is the role that Germany, the largest economy in Europe, is playing in the Eurozone, standing in the gap when broader European interests are under siege. The problem with African sub-regional hegemons, save for South Africa in some respects, is that they want to be recognised as the sub-regional powers without being seen to have earned the titles in terms of connecting countries in their neighbourhood to the rest of the world. The so-called anchor states or gateway countries in the respective sub-regions should be seen by themselves and their neighbours as instrumental drivers in their respective regions. These countries could

play the role of linchpins for the continuation of economic engagement between the global powers and Africa.

It is more strategic for African nations to engage with global powers and sub-regional blocs than as nation-states, because the imbalances are even more stark when you compare any African country's GDP with that of the global powers. For instance, South Africa's GDP, estimated by various sources at between US$ 426.38 billion and US$ 443 billion, is the lowest within BRICS, of which it is a member. South Africa is, therefore, far better off bringing the other SADC member states into its trade and economic engagements within BRICS. On the demographic front, India and China have populations of over 1.4 billion each. Nigeria, the most populous country on the continent, has a population of under 245 million. Nigerians can accentuate their massive population dividend as a major factor in their dominance of ECOWAS. Nigeria would, however, be better strategically negotiating with India or China under the aegis of ECOWAS' population, estimated at between 424 and 435 million. From a landmass perspective, Kenya, the economic and diplomatic power in the EAC, has a geographic size of 582 642 square kilometres, while Russia, the world's largest country by size, is 17 098 442 square kilometres. If Kenya wants to tap the advantages of geography in its relations with Russia, it would be strategic to do so in partnership with the 5.4 million square kilometres.

In a changing global order, the global powers may complain that their economies are under siege. For instance, according to the World Bank, the European economy as a whole, and in specific countries—most of them categorised as global powers—have been on a consistent decline across measurement metrics since 2000 (Cusolito et al. 2026). Global powers will look toward Africa, particularly its natural resources, as a means of boosting their flagging economies. African strategists should, however, not lose sight of the fact that the relative economic decline in nearly all global powers does not mean their sudden economic collapse. This should inform the RECs' engagement with the global powers. African countries are still dealing with comparatively gigantic counterparts, even though their economies are on a downward spiral. Sub-regional strategies can, though imperfectly, help negotiate beneficial agreements.

Competition within and between RECs

Even as this chapter argues for the strengthening, consolidation and operationalisation of the RECs as pragmatic avenues for a semblance of equitable engagements with global powers, one must be wary of the unintended consequences. Highly integrated RECs may end up competing against each other (see Franke 2007; Tambajang 2024) and, therefore, opening themselves up to exploitation by the global powers. Several developments over the years illustrate this challenge. During the election processes for the AU Commission leadership, sub-regions have often voted for candidates more on the strength of the sub-regions from which the candidates come, than on the competencies of the candidates. Over the years, the elections of the AU Commission Chairperson and the commissioners have been split between mostly Anglophone West Africa (ECOWAS) and predominantly Anglophone Eastern and Southern Africa (EAC and SADC) (see Anami 2024; Institute for Security Studies 2015). This is an example of the continued influence of colonial powers roughly forged along sub-regional contours.

Some countries that belong to more than one REC often favour one sub-regional organisation over another, depending on which REC serves their interests at any one time. The hand of external powers can often be seen in the cases where countries pop in and out of RECs at will. Recent developments in the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) are illustrative. The DRC was admitted into the EAC in 2022, ostensibly to manage the civil war in the eastern flanks of the country, where the M23 rebels, backed by Rwanda, had taken control (see Fabricius 2022). This development was analysed as a loss for the SADC, where the DRC had been a member since 1998 (Buchanan-Clarke 2022). Hardly had the ink dried on the DRC's EAC ascension than the DRC scaled down its engagement in the EAC from 2023 onwards over its perception that the EAC was aligned with its nemesis, Rwanda, in the Rwanda-DRC conflict. Instead, the DRC re-elevated engagements in the SADC, while not exactly leaving the EAC. When the SADC support in quelling the conflict failed to yield the DRC's desired results in the Eastern DRC, the country found itself in an intricate situation. It had stopped pursuing the conflict

resolution agenda in the EAC, and the SADC approach was faltering. This served as an opportunity for a joint EAC-SADC initiative in 2025 to resolve the DRC's frictions with Rwanda. This short-lived effort also failed to resolve the differences, particularly as the M23 rebels overran large swathes of Eastern DRC. Ultimately, the DRC decided to engage the global powers of Qatar and the US, bypassing both the EAC and the SADC. To some extent, the competition between the SADC and the EAC in the DRC-Rwanda conflagration is to blame for the loss of relevance by both sub-regional organisations (see Ilunga and Gahigi 2025). During the peace agreement signed by the DRC and Rwanda in Washington DC (US Department of State 2025), Presidents William Ruto of Kenya and João Lourenço of Angola, representing the EAC and the SADC, respectively, were in attendance, as observers rather than parties to the agreement. It can be concluded that the SADC-Angola-led Luanda peace process and the EAC-Kenya-led Nairobi peace process are dead. Evidence has since emerged as to the US and Qatar's interests in the DRC's critical minerals as the economic motivation for their involvement (see Mostert and Field 2025; Savoy 2025; Toto 2026). On the whole, incipient crass competition between the RECs will serve to weaken the notion of the RECs as the building blocks for the African Economic Region. It will also open cracks that global powers can exploit to the detriment of Africa. This saga is a clear example of the need for RECs to forge ties within and between themselves in such a solid manner that they rise to the occasion and fend off the intrusion of global powers into sub-regional affairs. Because the conflict is ongoing, efforts to bring together the three RECs to chart an African-led conflict resolution process are still feasible. This is indeed a case in which the AU can intervene to structure a strategy that brings all the RECs together to address a problem in which multiple RECs have a stake.

The case of the DRC's circulation between RECs is but an example. There are other examples, such as Sudan and Eritrea, which have left and rejoined the Inter-Governmental Authority of Development (IGAD) in recent times. There should be clauses in the REC protocols to allow countries some sovereignty, for instance, regarding the political systems of choice, and some protocols that are firm on the consequences if countries

persistently ignore the common good and act alone. This would indeed give the regional courts the teeth to bite and rein in leaders who habitually disregard collective commitments when negotiating with global powers.

In a brutally self-help international system, Africa's RECs, to borrow Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni's phraseology, are dwarfs competing about who is the taller dwarf (Mwenda 2021), attempting feebly to structure relations with the goliaths that the global powers are. It, however, would be overly pessimistic to dismiss the RECs as utter failures in their engagements with external powers. Such negativity would gloss over some bright spots. Any analyst inclined to see the RECs as worthless sub-regional mechanisms must cut them some slack. Some examples suffice. The SADC was instrumental in the long-drawn global campaign that led to the fall of apartheid in South Africa and the liberation of Namibia from South African colonialism (Temu and Tembe 2019). This was in opposition to the administrations of Ronald Reagan in US and Margaret Thatcher in the UK, the major supporters of the apartheid regime (Little 2020). Under the aegis of the EAC, negotiations were successfully struck between Tanzania and Kenya for the construction of the cross-border Arusha-Holili-Taveta-Voi road with Chinese investors (East African Community [EAC] 2022). In the ECOWAS sub-region, the establishment of the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) in 1990 helped to quell conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leon in the years that followed, with support from the US and the UN. Today, both Liberia and Sierra Leone are far more stable nations, even though post-conflict problems persist.

On balance, however, assessments in all the chapters in this volume suggest that African RECs have underperformed in their relations with global powers. From the foregoing chapters, however, it is evident that the promise with which the RECs were established has not translated into the results anticipated at the time of their establishment. From the viewpoint of the RECs-external powers engagements, there are many gaps, limitations and dereliction of duty. The agency of African RECs is fragmented and therefore, not effective when it comes to their engagements with global powers due to factors such as overlapping membership in the RECs by multiple countries, internal differences between member states and

diverging allegiances.

The intra-RECs schisms may suggest that the sale-by-date for these sub-regional organisations has passed. National patriotism that often overrides the collective good is, in several instances, to blame. For instance, nationalism in Morocco and Algeria is largely to blame as the core cause of the collapse of the AMU (Allouche 2019). This nationalism spills over into differences over the fate of Western Sahara, an issue that has several international dimensions. Are we, therefore, witnessing the atrophy of African RECs? Not quite. Throughout the chapters, we see efforts to resuscitate the RECs when they stumble, even in the case of perhaps the least functional REC, the AMU (Daoudi 2025). One of the reasons adduced by the authors, directly and indirectly, is that the geographical, historical and cultural proclivities that have entangled communities in the sub-regions are too strong to be put asunder in the foreseeable future. This assumption should give assurance to those who appreciate the economies of scale attainable when the RECs negotiate with the global powers collectively.

All the chapters in this volume provide evidence on how global powers have supported African RECs. The withdrawal of donor funding to African countries has also been felt on the wider scale of RECs. What is being discussed, is the impact of reduced or severed aid, not on regions generally, but on the RECs and formal institutions. When the searchlight is focussed on the RECs, a disturbing trend, tied to the downturns in member countries' economic circumstances, emerges. For instance, both ECOWAS and EAC face severe funding crises as several members default on contributions for basic operational costs and staff salaries, let alone funding sub-regional developmental and humanitarian projects. The silver lining in these circumstances is that sub-regions such as ECOWAS are beginning to take self-reliance rather than donor dependency seriously (Habib 2025).

The chapters in this volume show that friction between member states largely arises when individual nation-states and leaders determine that unilateral engagements with global powers are much more beneficial than collective negotiations. This is when leaders, hitherto invoking regional integration, suddenly justify sovereignty as a higher imperative. This,

as seen particularly in the chapters on ECOWAS, ECCAS and AMU, plays into the hands of global powers' self-interested calculations. It is as if the global powers determine that there is no reason to keep pursuing engagements with the RECs that are falling apart, riven by disagreements, or simply dysfunctional. Pose the question whether China or the EU would invest resources in resolving the sub-regional organisations' administrative and management functions at their secretariats, as a prerequisite to negotiating investment partnerships; and the answer would be negative. These global powers may have been interested in integrated RECs as strategic solutions to the diplomatic toll that negotiating with each African country impose. However, factors such as dwindling budgets, thanks to economic downturns globally, as well as the opportunities of dividing the continent to strike lucrative deals, may have persuaded global powers to deal at the national level.

For instance, in the EAC, Kenya is largely seen as an ideologically Western-inclined nation, while Uganda and Tanzania, though relating with the Western world, are perceived to lean towards China and Russia. These differences led to the collapse of the original EAC organisation in 1977 (Arwa and Sabala 2025). In the same region, Somalia, which joined the EAC in 2023, has closer affinities with the Middle East countries by dint of its Islamic culture and religion. Its membership in the EAC competes with its simultaneous belonging to the Arab League, home of the global powers, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (Wekesa 2023). In the SADC sub-region, South Africa has had trying relations with the US, while enjoying warm relations with the BRICS countries. In the ECCAS region, the DRC under President Felix Tshisekedi has embraced the US, igniting potential competition with China, which has a large portfolio of critical mineral assets in the country (see Van Zyl 2025). In the same region, the CAR remains in the Russian orbit. In the ECOWAS sub-region, Cote d'Ivoire maintains close relations with France, while the so-called coup belt nations of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have left ECOWAS to form the Alliance of Sahel States, a newly minted REC, emboldened by support from Russia. The Anglophone-Francophone tensions in the ECOWAS sub-region, a by-product of colonisation, also serve as a sword of Damocles over the region

(Franke 2007). In the AMU, Algeria and Morocco have been in conflict for decades over the question of the full independence of the Sahrawi Arab Republic (Daoudi 2025).

Take the case of the exploitation of critical minerals. In Southern Africa, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Tanzania, Namibia and Mozambique have the same critical minerals profiles. Minerals such as copper, lithium, cobalt, graphite, manganese, nickel and rare earth elements (REEs), transgress national borders in the region. The SADC has several sub-regional plans, strategies and policies for partnership in the minerals sector. These include the 1997 "Protocol on Mining", and "Harmonisation of Mining Policies, Standards, Legislative and Regulatory Framework in Southern Africa", approved in 2006, with an implementation plan launched in 2009 (see United Nations Economic Commission for Africa 2024). SADC member states, however, often prefer negotiating with global powers on their own when they see their national interests as more beneficial than the common sub-regional good. The global powers are driving bargains with countries as critical minerals become key inputs in industrial production to support new economic activities in the digital tech and green transition domains (Moores and Bazilian 2023).

For instance, the US and EU-led Lobito corridor project, which commenced in 2023, has been done through negotiations between these global powers with Angola, the DRC, and Zambia (Mulilo 2026). At the core of the initiative is the exploitation of critical minerals in these countries, seen as pitting the West against China (Karkare and Byiers 2025). It would have been more beneficial for the initiative for the deal to be negotiated sub-region-wide through the SADC. This introduces geopolitical risks and tensions better managed at the entire sub-regional level. For instance, the extraction and transportation of the minerals from the DRC, Zambia and Angola will have a price impact across the region, given that the critical mineral deposits in these countries are also in neighbouring countries. China has also entered into bilateral partnerships with individual countries in the sub-region and beyond, a development that has greatly boosted the East Asian powers' prowess as the leading critical minerals manufacturer and global supplier of a diverse range of

digital technology goods. Indeed, the very reasons global powers are encircling the SADC region for critical minerals are the same reasons that should encourage member states to resist their entreaties. The SADC region can become an industrial powerhouse in the production of finished products from critical minerals rather than the export of raw minerals.

In the EAC, for instance, Kenya, which has a 37 per cent share of the sub-regional GDP, negotiated with the EU for a free trade agreement initially structured as an EAC framework in 2023, leaving out the rest of the member states (Pichon 2023). The deal has since been taken to the East African Court of Justice for flouting the EAC's treaty's customs and common market protocols (East African Court of Justice 2025). In another example, Kenya negotiated with the US for a free trade area with the US during the first administration of Donald Trump administration (Blanchard and Wong 2020). In 2023, the East African Court of Justice ruled against the free trade area, since it violated the EAC treaty. In 2025, the Kenyan government defiantly indicated that it was entering new negotiations for another free trade area with the US. Legal arguments aside, Kenya could have insisted on bringing in all the EAC member states, drawing on its common market protocol, which envisages collective trade and economic decisions. It would have served as a sub-regional power that ensures the interests of its neighbours as a responsible and benign sub-regional hegemon.

Nigeria is even more unique in its ECOWAS sphere of dominance compared to South Africa and Kenya in the EAC and the SADC sub-regions. Abuja, the Nigerian political capital, which hosts the ECOWAS secretariat, known as the Commission, its parliament, and the court of justice. This is unlike the EAC and SADC sub-regions, where the headquarters are located in Arusha, Tanzania, and Gaborone, Botswana, respectively. Nigeria in ECOWAS is different from Morocco in the AMU. This, Nizar Messari explains in his chapter in this volume, is because the AMU has been marked by paralysis and even collapse since its establishment in 1989. Both Tanzania and Botswana are important economies in their respective sub-regions. They are not, however, the largest economies in those sub-regions. By dint of Abuja's status as the ECOWAS sub-regional headquarters, draws significant benefits in

the global powers' engagement with the sub-region through its Abuja headquarters. A conspicuous example of the benefits accruing to Nigeria is China's donation of a UD$ 32 billion building to host the ECOWAS headquarters (see Nyabiage 2025), a development that benefited the Nigerian economy in terms of the economies around the building itself and the hosting of staff from the sub-region.

Essentially, a REC is a sub-regional government comprising member states. As a sub-regional government, it exercises executive functions in international relations and diplomacy. Typically, an ambassador of a global power to the country hosting a REC is also the ambassador to that REC. For instance, the EU ambassador to Nigeria also doubles up as the ambassador to ECOWAS. Moreover, the EU has an elaborate diplomatic engagement mechanism with all the African RECs, through its Directorate-General for International Partnerships, which includes units for engagements with individual RECs. A mismatch is evident in that ECOWAS does not have an ambassador to the EU.

Looking at how the RECs have performed on the diplomatic front; one finds examples that can be enhanced. For instance, African RECs are not formal members of the Forum on China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), although representatives attend its triennial summits. This could be enhanced through more deliberate, structured, predictable agreements between China and other global powers and the RECs. At the same time, RECs have not fully exploited their capacity. The practice has been that the ambassador from a country holding the chairmanship of a REC is the representative of the said REC in a region outside Africa. These functions could do with better coordination; for instance, African nations that do not have diplomatic representation in other regions could use the facilities of African countries that have such representation. Similarly, the ambassadors from the countries holding the rotational chairmanship of a REC should serve the diplomatic role of the REC in the political capital of the global powers. Thus, Equatorial Guinea, holding the chairpersonship for ECCAS in 2025, should coordinate the diplomatic roles of ECCAS in Brussels, Beijing, Washington, London, Moscow and other global power capitals. This would cut down on cost and further help in the economies of scale that integrated REC diplomacy portends.

Conclusion

The divergencies between RECs raise the fundamental question of whether the RECs are themselves integrated, before one considers their configuration as building blocks for the entire continent. The answer is neither fully negative nor positive. Studies by the UN Commission for Africa, the AU, and the African Development Bank on the integration of African RECs have typically only used internal metrics, such as trade and economics, macro-economic convergence, free movement of persons and infrastructure. The internal and continental integration of Africa should be measured using the lenses of global powers. This would drill down to the global powers that help with Africa's integration versus those that fuel sub-regional disintegration.

In recent times, African RECs have faced huge budgetary deficits. An internal problem is that the RECs members are not meeting their membership subscription fee obligations. The other issue is that external funders have cut down on their donations amid dwindling foreign aid, ignited in 2025 by the US's American First foreign policy. This is a case of dependency at the African sub-regional level, mirroring dependency at the continental and country levels. The same proposition of weaning African countries and the AU from aid dependency should be applied at the African sub-regional levels. When looking at the areas where the global powers have funded African RECs, one can begin to see where their interests lie. If the core functions of the RECs are funded by external actors, then the agenda is being set from the outside rather than being based on the core interests of the member states. Correspondingly, African RECs can analyse the project areas where global powers have cut aid and consider how the global powers are re-strategising in those areas. Where aid is being replaced by the new approach of transactional deals, the RECs can make counter offers along the same transactional methods. Additionally, the squeezed aid landscape suggests that it is time for the RECs to put in place their own developmental mechanisms. In the SADC region, for example, initiatives such as the Regional Development Fund should be revived as mechanisms for funding cross-border initiatives, somewhat plugging the gaps.

The changing global order is upending global relations, and the RECs are no exception. Dependency on global powers is no longer tenable. Rather, transactional negotiations are the new normal. Clearly, African countries negotiating at the bilateral level are disadvantaged because of the imbalance in economic and political power. African countries should insist on negotiating deals at the REC level to ensure that they have sufficient power to cut advantageous deals.

In the shifting global order, the same Global North powers that funded the budgets of the RECs are now focusing on their own internal budgetary needs while at the same time increasingly forging pragmatic alliances with China. It is the reason why African RECs should focus inwardly and only pragmatically engage with the global powers. An analysis of the new geopolitical landscape should be undertaken for the RECs to identify programmes for which funding will no longer be available from each of the global powers as a starting point towards raising internal funds to continue the projects—those that still hold relevance. Realignments in the global order also mean that African RECs must change strategies. If the EU, France, Canada, Germany and the UK are now reaching rapprochement with China, then RECs have to reckon with the fact that relations that were based on the competition between the Global North and China and India will taper off or take a more pragmatic detour.

As the contributors to this volume have pointed out, a major problem revolves around membership in more than one REC. Either countries should be limited to one REC membership, or a mechanism should be established where countries that fall in more than one REC choose their primary, secondary and tertiary RECs in terms of membership. Regardless, a situation where countries move between RECs based on the issues they confront should be regulated. The DRC, for instance, effectively suspended membership in the EAC in 2025 when it perceived its interests as being trampled in the organisation. Indications are that it has started re-engaging the bloc, as of early 2026. The departure of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS was even more consequential, because they not only left collectively, but also formed their own REC, the Alliance of Sahel States (AES).

Sovereignty versus collectivism sits at the heart of the failure of sub-

regional integration. How can this difficult problem be addressed? Certain issues internal to a nation are a no-go zone for collective action. For instance, decisions on the political system that a country takes—whether authoritarianism or democracy—are likely to cause rifts for member states. However, countries should agree on areas and issues in which collective RECs' decisions and actions are beneficial. Trade is one area in which countries can agree that no unilateral action should be entertained, and a country should face stiff penalties if it goes ahead to impede trade within the sub-region. Another is infrastructure, where countries should agree that cross-border projects should be seen to benefit the entire region, rather than being framed in competitive terms. For instance, while railway infrastructure from Kenya and Tanzania to Uganda has been framed on competitive terms, it is also feasible that the lines between Mombasa and Kampala, and Dar es Salaam and Kampala, be connected. Infrastructure projects hold the promise for the RECs' engagements with global powers. [Look at the joint RECs strategies on infrastructure]. Ideally, the Lobito Corridor should have been negotiated through the SADC, as would have been the Mombasa–Kampala and Dar es Salaam–Uganda railways through the EAC. The oil pipeline from Uganda to Tanzania caused unease when oil pipelines could have been strategised at the EAC level.

The African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) can serve as an avenue for economic connections within and between regions. The case of Africa's critical minerals is illustrative. No country can process all the minerals. Agreements within and between African countries would be the recommended approach. A mineral mined in one country can be processed in another country. For instance, Botswana could become a major diamond processing country on the continent, given that it has some capacity in this area. The SADC countries could firmly agree that all diamond processing should be done in Botswana, rather than being shipped raw and cut in any of the global power countries. The SADC could also enter negotiations with the other sub-regions of the continent for diamonds processing to be done in Botswana. Such an agreement could include clauses for Botswana to help diamond-producing countries in the other regions of the continent to increase their diamond processing capacity. This would be based on the avoidance of duplication of efforts

and the sharing of the mineral's bounty. This can be done through AfCFTA, promoting intra-African trade, using the RECs as building blocks. This is essential for the development of supply chains.

An important point to make is that Africa is inherently a sub-regional rather than bilateral economy. The proposal that African policymakers and strategists should lay on the table is that bilateral trade relations make sense for economies that are cross-continental in terms of value chains and opportunities. India and China, for instance, are large countries for which bilateral negotiations with the other global powers is feasible. Global powers should be encouraged to see the broader sub-regional pictures, rather than narrow views that lose the sub-regional opportunities.

Between the RECs, the institutional framework of the AU is based on the RECs. The leadership itself, both at the executive AU Commission level and at the political heads of state level, is rotational. For instance, it has been alleged that France has always been stealthily involved in supporting Francophone African states, particularly within the ECOWAS region, when elective positions open in the AU. The same is often discussed as the case with the Arab Maghreb nations' support for Arabic-African candidates in the AU.

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