Multilateralism: A Pathway to Peace, Security, and Prosperity

By Craig Owen White, Esq.[1]

Mr. President, Mr. Secretary-General, Excellencies, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen:

Thank you for the opportunity to address this distinguished gathering.

We meet at a moment of profound global change. From climate change and migration to cyber threats, public health crises, food insecurity, and artificial intelligence, the defining challenges of our time transcend national borders. No nation, regardless of its size, wealth, or influence, can or should address these challenges alone.

Some argue that the multilateral institutions created in the aftermath of the Second World War have outlived their usefulness and that nations should pursue their interests primarily through unilateral or transactional approaches. I respectfully disagree. Today's challenges are more interconnected and more complex than at any time in modern history. As complexity increases, so does the need for cooperation among nations, notwithstanding differences in history, culture, political systems, and national priorities.

The question before us is not whether a new international order will emerge. It will.

The more important question is whether Africa will help shape that order or merely react to it.

Africa is not simply a participant in this transition. Home to the world's youngest population and some of its fastest-growing economies, Africa possesses the human capital, resources, entrepreneurial spirit, and cultural influence necessary to become a defining voice in the emerging global landscape. The opportunity before Africa is not merely to claim a seat at the table, but to help design the table itself.

To accomplish this, African nations must continue strengthening their collective voice through existing institutions such as the United Nations and

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the African Union, while remaining open to new forms of multilateral cooperation that may emerge.

The path toward common purpose is not easy. Yet history demonstrates that enduring institutions are built upon clearly articulated principles. Consider Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, which provides that an attack against one member is considered an attack against all. Its strength lies not in its complexity but in its clarity. That simple commitment created a foundation of trust that has allowed member nations to collaborate on issues far more complex than the provision itself.

Clear principles reduce confusion, build confidence, and discourage efforts to divide partners against one another.

My perspective is not that of a diplomat, although I have had the privilege of serving in policy advisory roles. Rather, it is the perspective of a deal lawyer.

For more than four decades, I have helped businesses, investors, governments, and institutions complete complex transactions, evaluate risk, and build enduring relationships. In my experience, successful negotiations are rarely won through clever arguments alone. They are built through trust, listening, patience, and a willingness to understand how others view the world.

When I was invited by the Obama Administration to serve on the Trade Advisory Committee on Africa (TACA), I explained that I lacked formal training in trade policy. The response surprised me. That was precisely why I had been selected. The United States Trade Representative wanted the perspective on the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) of someone whose professional focus was not policy theory, but rather bringing parties together to solve difficult problems.

That experience reinforced an important lesson: whether in business, diplomacy or trade, progress is achieved when parties move beyond a zero-sum mindset and begin searching for areas of mutual benefit.

My role when representing clients is not simply to advocate a position. It is to help parties move from disagreement to agreement. That requires identifying shared interests, reducing friction, and creating outcomes in which each side achieves meaningful objectives. Even when negotiations do not immediately produce agreement, a constructive process can build reservoirs of goodwill and trust that facilitate future cooperation.

Over the years, I have learned to search for the similar within the dissimilar and the dissimilar within the similar. Rather than merely hearing competing views, I listen carefully to the experiences that shape them. I challenge clients and counterparties alike to consider voices that may not be represented in the room. While I advocate vigorously for my clients, I also encourage them to understand the perspectives of others because understanding is often the first step toward durable solutions.

The new global paradigm demands that we prioritize shared interests over historical divisions. Nations, like businesses, should be guided less by notions of permanent friends or permanent adversaries and more by the pursuit of enduring common interests.

I ask you to consider the following pillars upon which to present an African perspective to the world community:

Build a Brand Based on Core Principles

African nations must engage amongst themselves in the difficult work of identifying and articulating common principles that all members are prepared to uphold.

These Core Principles should be concise, understandable, and durable.

A strong statement of Core Principles serves as a strong brand that guides decision making, clarifies expectations, and identifies which matters are negotiable and which are not. Just as importantly, notice to the world of these shared Core Principles make it more difficult for external actors to divide members through bilateral negotiations on issues such as tariffs, sanctions, or preferential trade arrangements.

African nations have a historic opportunity not merely to participate in a changing world order, but to shape it through the development and consistent application of clearly defined shared Core Principles.

Build Enduring Relationships Based on Trust

In every successful transaction and every difficult dispute, I have helped resolve, trust has been indispensable.

Commercial agreements and international treaties do not succeed simply because they are signed. They succeed because they create a framework for continued cooperation.

Trust is built when commitments are honored, communication continues during difficult periods, and relationships endure beyond individual administrations and political cycles.

Technology facilitates communication, but it cannot replace personal relationships. There remains immense value in face-to-face engagement, direct conversations, and the simple act of looking a counterpart in the eye and the intimacy of a handshake.

Strong institutions require strong relationships that are rooted in trust. African nations should take advantage of Article 38 of the Vienna Convention and appoint a network of Honorary Consuls throughout the United States specifically charged with building trust in the US business community by dispelling inaccurate perceptions that trading with and investing in Africa present risks that demand unacceptable risk premiums.

Embrace Inclusiveness

Priority must be given to increasing the opportunity for decision makers to hear the voices and concerns of entrepreneurs, small businesses, young professionals, local communities, women leaders and other groups that represent the vibrancy of African culture.

Recently I served as the chairman of a large US nonprofit organization that focuses on building and restoring the health of tree canopies throughout the communities in its region. On the first day I joined the board of that organization, I attended the first of many meetings in its boardroom. I was deeply touched by a prominently displayed sign on the main dais that simply read: ***Nothing About Me, Without Me***. Every project of the organization was structured around this core principle. These five simple words woven into every project the organization undertakes and every interaction with its employees, vendors, counterparties and program beneficiaries.

There are over 2.1 million African immigrants currently residing in the US representing over 51 different African nation this African diaspora is real,

insightful and should be actively engaged as ambassadors, providing contemporary insight into the formation of the Core Principles of which I speak.

Make AGOA Modernization and Extension a Priority

Make the modernization of AGOA on terms that promote truly equitable economic development of African nations a priority. AGOA should evolve beyond preferential tariff treatment and become a catalyst for value-added manufacturing, infrastructure development, technology transfer, workforce development, and regional supply chain integration. Modernization should reflect the realities of today's global economy and Africa's increasing importance within it.

The United States recently extended AGOA through December 2028 with little discussion or media exposure. African nations should develop a strategy to ensure that the modernization of AGOA is a key topic ahead of the 2028 US national elections.

Conclusion

History periodically presents moments when the future appears uncertain. Those moments are also when leadership matters most.

The future will belong to institutions that are inclusive enough to build legitimacy; flexible enough to respond to changing realities on how things get done; and that build wells of goodwill that can be tapped when tackling more complex and vexing challenges.

The nations of Africa stand at such a moment today.

The decisions made by African leaders, institutions, businesses, and citizens in the coming years will help determine not only Africa's future, but the shape of the emerging international order.

Thank you.