



RESEARCH BRIEF 3/2026

Security Institute for Governance and Leadership in Africa

[SIGLA @ Stellenbosch](#)

Author Professor T. Mandrup (SIGLA/RDDC)

Series Editor: Professor F. Vreÿ (SIGLA)

Denmark's Role in Africa under the Emerging Multipolar Order

Introduction

Denmark's foreign policy has long relied on the liberal international order as the foundation of its global engagement. Multilateralism, international law, and the rules-based system have served both as a source of stability and as the framework for Danish influence. Yet, as John Mearsheimer argues, the liberal order was always destined to fail once unipolarity gave way to multipolarity. With the rise of China, the resurgence of Russia, and the assertiveness of regional powers, the world is experiencing a transition toward a more fragmented and competitive system shaped by power competition rather than institutional consensus. On top of that, the world faces an altered US foreign policy and partnership approach under President Trump, which Stephen Walt, in a recent piece, characterised as [predatory hegemony](#). The shutdown of USAID and the stated more kinetic and aggressive approach towards radicalised armed groups are but two very concrete examples of this altered strategy. In addition, central European powers, such as France and the UK, are reducing their development budgets and presence on the continent. These developments occur at a time when conflicts, democratic backsliding, and radicalised movements are spreading just south of Europe's borders.

These shifts challenge Denmark's core foreign policy assumptions. For three decades, Copenhagen could count on American leadership, European unity, and institutional frameworks such as the UN, NATO, and the EU to amplify its influence. Today, those frameworks are strained. The United States' retreat from global leadership, internal fragmentation within the EU, and the crisis of multilateralism have left small states like Denmark searching for new ways to advance their interests. The core challenge for Denmark is not whether to abandon multilateralism, but how to adapt it to an increasingly fragmented and competitive international environment.

Africa has become a key testing ground for this new order. Once a peripheral arena of Western development and peacekeeping efforts, the continent is now a theatre of strategic competition. China, Russia, and regional middle powers have redefined engagement through security partnerships, infrastructure diplomacy, and information influence. Denmark's ability

to shape outcomes in Africa—and to maintain its voice within European and global institutions—will depend on how it adapts to this environment.

The Changing Global Order

The partial erosion of the liberal order marks the end of an era in which Western institutions defined the global agenda. [Mearsheimer's analysis highlights](#) how hyperglobalization, liberal interventionism, and open-border ideals created internal contradictions that ultimately undermined Western unity. The result is a fragmented international system characterised by competing "bounded orders"—regional spheres of influence centred on the United States, China, and Russia.

In this emerging configuration, the Global South has gained strategic leverage. As [Matias Spektor](#) notes in a January 2025 article in *Foreign Affairs*, the Global South has been a net winner in this power transition, building new coalitions such as BRICS and reviving the Non-Aligned Movement's logic of flexible alignment. Many African, Asian, and Latin American states now pursue "strategic autonomy," playing great powers against each other to maximise economic and political benefits.

This fluidity challenges Denmark's traditional reliance on normative leadership. Where Western aid and diplomacy once carried normative weight, today they must compete with Chinese infrastructure loans, Russian security contracts, and regional coalitions that operate outside established institutions. For small states, like Denmark, influence will depend less on moral persuasion and more on credible partnerships and practical contributions.

Africa as an Arena of Strategic Competition

Africa exemplifies the new multipolar dynamic. Over the past two decades, external powers have sought influence through military assistance, counterterrorism, and infrastructure projects. The United States and France, once dominant security actors, have suffered reputational decline amid perceived failures in counterterrorism campaigns in the Sahel. France's withdrawal from Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, and the US loss of its Niger air bases in 2024 symbolised this downturn.

In contrast, China has steadily expanded its security footprint, alongside its economic and developmental approach. As Jason Warner observes, Beijing's growing involvement in African counterterrorism marks a strategic evolution from an "[economics-first](#)" to a "[security-inclusive](#)" approach. Through the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), China now offers military grants, training for thousands of African personnel, and joint exercises—framed as partnerships of equality rather than intervention. This appeals to African governments wary of Western conditionality.

Russia, meanwhile, has used private military companies—first Wagner, now Africa Corps—to build influence through transactional security arrangements. These engagements, though often brutal, resonate with regimes seeking regime protection rather than governance reform. However, the recent, widespread insurgent attacks in Mali and the subsequent Africa Corps withdrawal from Kidal illustrate what has long been known: that the Russian alternative to the West might be attractive for short-term regime survival, but is less effective at creating more permanent solutions.

Amid this competition, African states have become active agents. They invite multiple external partners, selectively accept aid, and form ad hoc coalitions such as the G5 Sahel, SADC Mission in Mozambique, and the East African Community Regional Force. As Brosig and Karlsrud show, such [coalitions bypass traditional multilateral mechanisms](#), enabling rapid action but weakening institutional accountability.

For Denmark, these trends complicate engagement. The continent's security landscape is no longer shaped primarily by UN peacekeeping or Western-led interventions. Instead, it is increasingly fragmented, pragmatic, and power-driven—requiring Denmark to think beyond established multilateral channels.

The Erosion of Multilateralism

The crisis of multilateralism is evident in Africa's peace operations. As the [Danish Institute for International Studies \(DIIS\) notes in a recent study](#), [UN Security Council Resolution 2719](#)—adopted in 2023 to fund African Union missions through assessed UN contributions—was hailed as a breakthrough for equitable burden-sharing. Yet implementation has stalled amid US resistance and political inertia. The AU continues to shoulder the human cost of peace operations without sustainable financial backing.

This episode illustrates a broader pattern: the gap between rhetorical support for African-led solutions and the unwillingness of major powers to fund or empower them. The UN's declining ability to deploy new peacekeeping missions, coupled with donor fatigue and political polarisation, signals an institutional retreat. For Denmark, which has long championed multilateral approaches to peace and security, this poses a strategic dilemma. Continued reliance on UN-centred mechanisms risks diminishing influence as these mechanisms lose traction. Yet abandoning them altogether would undermine the normative foundation of Danish diplomacy. The challenge is therefore to combine principled multilateralism with pragmatic flexibility—working through regional organisations and coalitions where necessary, while upholding accountability and international norms.

Adaptive and Hybrid Peacebuilding

Amid institutional fragmentation, new approaches to peacebuilding have emerged that align with the realities of complex, localised conflict. [Cedric de Coning's](#) concept of adaptive peacebuilding emphasises that sustainable peace cannot be engineered from above but must emerge through local adaptation and self-organisation. Hybrid models blend international support with local agency, moving away from standardised "template" interventions.

This perspective is highly relevant to Denmark's engagement in Africa. Danish stabilisation and development initiatives have traditionally prioritised governance reform, human rights, and capacity building through international institutions. Yet as contexts become more fluid and external competition intensifies, success depends on understanding local dynamics, enabling local actors, and maintaining flexibility in program design.

By adopting adaptive peacebuilding principles—continuous learning, iterative planning, and partnership-driven implementation—Denmark can enhance its credibility and effectiveness. Moreover, by supporting African ownership within peace and security architectures, Denmark reinforces its identity as a trusted partner rather than a moralising donor.

Policy Options for Denmark

In light of these transformations, Denmark faces three broad strategic options for its Africa policy:

Option 1: Preserve a Multilateral Core. Denmark could double down on its traditional strengths — diplomacy within the UN, the EU, and NATO — emphasising international law and collective solutions. This would reaffirm Denmark's identity as a principled small state and help safeguard norms under pressure. However, it risks irrelevance if multilateral mechanisms continue to erode and if larger powers continue to bypass them.

Option 2: Pivot to Strategic Pragmatism. Alternatively, Denmark could adopt a more flexible, interest-based approach—building targeted partnerships with key African states and regional organisations, including participation in ad hoc coalitions or regional initiatives. This would increase agility and visibility but may dilute Denmark’s normative profile and strain resources.

Option 3: Integrate Adaptive Multilateralism. A middle path combines normative consistency with pragmatic engagement. Denmark would remain committed to multilateral principles but adapt them to new realities by supporting hybrid, African-led, and regional initiatives. This approach aligns with European Union efforts to recalibrate its Africa strategy, emphasising partnership, co-ownership, and resilience.

The third option appears most viable. It balances values and interests, recognises power shifts, and leverages Denmark’s reputation for constructive diplomacy.

Conclusion

The emerging multipolar order is reshaping global and regional politics in ways that challenge Denmark’s long-standing foreign policy foundations. The liberal order that once underpinned Danish influence is giving way to a complex landscape of power politics, regional assertiveness, and institutional uncertainty. Africa, at the crossroads of these dynamics, will be a decisive arena for testing Denmark’s ability to adapt.

By embracing adaptive multilateralism—grounded in principles yet responsive to change—Denmark can maintain its relevance and credibility. This requires moving beyond nostalgia for the liberal order toward a pragmatic engagement strategy that recognises African agency and strategic competition as enduring features of the new world order.

Ultimately, Denmark’s influence will depend not on the size of its resources but on its ability to act as a credible, flexible, and principled partner. In a fragmenting world, such qualities are both rare and indispensable.

Recommendations

Denmark should not defend multilateralism as an article of faith, but rather as a strategic mechanism for preserving influence and reducing exposure in a world increasingly dominated by major-power competition. Within that kind of logic, it should:

Recalibrate Danish engagement toward African agency. Denmark should prioritise initiatives that strengthen African-led governance and security mechanisms, particularly within the African Union and regional economic communities. This includes supporting the implementation of Resolution 2719 and advocating for fair burden-sharing in peace operations. However, it should also be noted that, in the current political climate, it is very unlikely that support for 2719 can be found, so alternatives must be developed.

Champion adaptive, context-specific peacebuilding. Move away from one-size-fits-all stabilisation models toward locally grounded, iterative approaches. This means embedding Danish development and peace efforts within local systems of legitimacy and resilience rather than imposing external blueprints.

Enhance strategic coordination within the EU. Denmark should push for a coherent European approach to Africa that integrates security, development, and climate policy. Acting through the EU amplifies Danish influence and balances competition from China, the US and Russia with a credible, collective alternative.

Invest in regional partnerships and knowledge networks. Deepen engagement with African research institutions, civil society, and regional think tanks to inform Danish policy with local insights. Such networks strengthen mutual trust and counterbalance transactional relationships

fostered by other powers.

Strengthen Denmark's diplomatic presence in key regions. Expanding embassies and representation in the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, and southern Africa would improve situational awareness and demonstrate commitment. Danish credibility in Africa depends on sustained presence, not episodic engagement.

Bridge multilateralism and ad hoc cooperation. Denmark should position itself as a facilitator between formal institutions and flexible coalitions—helping to integrate ad hoc security initiatives into broader frameworks of accountability and human rights.

Professor Thomas Mandrup is an Extraordinary Professor with SIGLA, Stellenbosch University.

Email: thomasm@sun.ac.za

