

EDITORIAL

Entrepreneurship as Foreign Policy: Reframing Africa's Pragmatic Diplomacy for Structural Transformation

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Introduction

Africa currently has a population of 1.56 billion people, which is approximately 18-19 percent of the world's population (World Bank 2026). This continent is facing a convergence of global and domestic pressures that requires a strategic rethink of its external relations. Rising global protectionism, the growing geopolitical weight of the BRICS+ (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Iran, Ethiopia, and Egypt), the intensification of climate shocks, and persisting sovereign-debt vulnerabilities are all interlinked with deeply rooted internal problems of unemployment, poverty, insecurity, and weak industrial capacity. In this fast-changing global order, Africa risks being marginalised if its foreign policy does not evolve from reactive diplomacy to a pragmatic, development-oriented strategy. This editorial makes a central point: entrepreneurship must be re-positioned as a key instrument of African foreign policy. Trade diplomacy, mineral negotiations, climate finance, security cooperation, and talent mobility should be deliberately aligned to broaden Africa's productive business base. Recent studies show that trade liberalisation, foreign investment, and resource extraction produce sustainable development results only if they are embedded in innovation-led entrepreneurial ecosystems capable of creating jobs, upgrading skills, and retaining value locally (Naudé, 2019; Njotini, 2025).

Entrepreneurship as the Missing Link in Africa's External Engagement

Historically, Africa's participation in the global economy has been largely mediated by states, commodities, and aid structures. This model has delivered episodic growth and foreign financing and technical support, but has failed woefully to create sufficient productive employment, wealth or resilient domestic industries in Africa. What a shame! Evidence from the implementation of the AfCFTA shows that trade liberalisation by itself does not automatically translate into social gains or business expansion, without complementary policies to promote SMEs, innovation and diversification (Shinyekwa et al., 2020). By contrast, business-led development - anchored in regional value chains,

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digital platforms, and clusters of industry - has emerged as a credible route to structural change in Africa (Mafimisebi & Ogunsade, 2021).

To reverse this ugly imbalance in engagement with the world economy, which is largely dominated by developed countries, there is an urgent need to rethink foreign policy not only as a tool for securing access to markets and capital, but also as a strategic mechanism for expanding the productive space occupied by African firms. This editorial proposes six-point agenda for a renewed focus on entrepreneurship as a foreign policy, with the ultimate aim of reframing African pragmatic diplomacy for structural transformation.

1. Trade Diplomacy as Entrepreneurial Enablement: Collective bargaining on trade is imperative, particularly trade relations on AGOA renewal, EU Economic Partnership Agreements, and emerging BRICS trade frameworks. These should be explicitly redesigned to reduce market-entry barriers for African SMEs. They should be explicitly revised to reduce market entry barriers for African SMEs. Research shows that the transformative potential of the AfCFTA depends on harmonised standards, simplified customs regimes and digital trade facilitation, which will allow small companies to expand cross-border (Njotuny, 2025; Noutchie, 2025). Without such deliberate alignment, preferential trade agreements risk reinforcing existing asymmetries in favour of large companies and the foreign sector and reducing their developmental impact (Shinyekwa et al., 2020).

2. BRICS Engagement beyond Finance to Enterprise Embeddedness: Africa's engagement with BRICS countries must move beyond state-to-state financing toward enterprise-embedded cooperation. Recent empirical evidence from African economies shows that foreign investment (especially Chinese private capital) supports industrial upgrading only if it is systematically coupled with local supplier development, technology transfer and the involvement of SMEs (Gambino, 2025). A BRICS strategy geared towards entrepreneurship would give priority to regional value chains, infrastructure that integrates local firms, and innovation partnerships rather than extractive or enclave-style investment.

3. Leveraging Africa's G20 Seat for Entrepreneurship Finance: Opportunity should be taken when it presents itself. Africa's permanent seat in the G20 provides a unique platform for the continent to reposition and strengthen entrepreneurship finance as a priority for global development. Research on knowledge economies highlights that innovation-led growth depends on sustained investment in skills development, enterprise finance, and research–industry linkages (Kulkarni, 2022). Therefore, Africa's debt relief, climate finance, and development finance should be framed not as ends in themselves, but as instruments for expanding Africa's entrepreneurial capacity, wealth creation, and job creation, particularly among youth, women and marginalised communities.

4. Minerals-for-Development Compacts as Entrepreneurship-Driven Industrial Policy: Africa's vast reserves of critical minerals present a strategic opportunity for entrepreneurship-led industrialisation. Future resource agreements with the countries of the Global North must not only include mineral resources but also include SME participation, local processing, innovation hubs, and workforce development in the continent that is plagued by poverty, unemployment, underdevelopment, homelessness, and homelessness. According to comparative industrialisation studies, it has been confirmed that indigenous entrepreneurs in Africa will play a crucial role in driving the future manufacturing growth. These entrepreneurs are primarily based in supportive ecosystems, particularly in the fields of advanced manufacturing, green technologies, and digital-enabled services (Naudé, 2019; Mafimisebi & Ogunsade, 2021).

5. Peace, Stability, and the Entrepreneurial Peace Dividend: Peace has undoubtedly eluded most African countries, but peace and stability are not only political imperatives: they are economic preconditions. Studies affirmed that post-conflict reconstruction is more durable when peace-building is combined with the rehabilitation of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), support for young entrepreneurs and support for innovation (Nel-Sanders & Thomas, 2022). African-led security frameworks should therefore include enterprise development as a key dividend of peace, reducing external dependence and strengthening domestic economic resilience.

6. Mobility, Talent, and Knowledge Diplomacy for Entrepreneurial Scale: Every African nation needs to take advantage of its demographic advantage. Only through intentional investments in mobility, skills, and knowledge diplomacy will the continent's youthful population be realised. Pan-African research collaboration, diaspora involvement, and harmonised visa policies can all greatly improve entrepreneurial scaling and innovation diffusion (Noutchie, 2025; Nganga, 2025). In particular, gig economy models, digital platforms and cross-border networks have been successful in giving SMEs access to technology, markets, and financing across the globe. African economies can learn from this reality (Raimi, 2025).

Conclusion

Africa's geopolitical relevance in the twenty-first century will not be assured by diplomacy alone, or by extractive trade relations that merely prolong vulnerability. The relevance of the continent will be ensured through a foreign policy that systematically expands Africa's entrepreneurial base, integrates entrepreneurship development into global negotiations, and aligns external partnerships with the productive transition envisaged in Agenda 2063. This feat is what China has done successfully! In this context, entrepreneurship is no longer a domestic policy issue. It is a strategic tool of sovereignty, resilience and global clout.

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