



*Centre for Geopolitical
Security and Strategy*

**THE CENTRE FOR GEOPOLITICAL SECURITY AND STRATEGY
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES**

**SADC at the crossroads: Transactional bargains or human security
commitments?**

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Series editor: Prof. Barend L. Prinsloo

4 May 2026

Website URL: <https://humanities.nwu.ac.za/centre-geopolitical-security-and-strategy-cgss/strategic-insights>

Keywords: Transactionalism, SADC, human security

1. Introduction

At Davos¹ in 2026 the Canadian Prime Minister stated: *“We live in an era of great power rivalry, that the rules-based order is fading, that the strong can do what they can and the weak must suffer”* (Carney, 2026). For International Relations scholars, the statement became a stimulus for

¹ Refers to the World Economic Forum annual meeting held in Davos, Switzerland. At this meeting, world leaders from governments, business, civil society and academia convene to discuss global issues.

ontological reinvention. This provocation sparked debate among leaders: Swiss President Guy Parmelin stated: “*Society, science, economics and politics must work together hand in hand, in a spirit of partnership, ... otherwise, problems can only be addressed in a partial and imperfect manner*” (Bridges & Feingold, 2026). While some European voices defended liberal institutions, African leaders warned of marginalisation in great-power competition. For instance, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa has repeatedly warned that the global system is becoming increasingly fragmented and disproportionately shaped by powerful states, thereby placing developing countries at risk of marginalisation (Ramaphosa, 2026). Frequent breaches of international law and the growing reliance on coercive measures, including the use of force to advance national interests, have consequences for all states, but weaker states tend to be disproportionately affected (Amani Africa, 2026). This is because they lack comparable power, meaning that when rules weaken, their vulnerability increases.

2. Discussion

In this context, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) stands at a pivotal crossroads, confronting whether their engagements will devolve into transactional bargains or evolve into robust commitments to human security. This article argues that a new era of security transactionalism replicates Cold War-era thinking, reducing Africa to a bargaining chip in great-power rivalry. Drawing on Ken Booth’s critical International Relations scholarship, it proposes human security as the normative anchor for Africa and the future of the SADC (Booth, 1994). Booth’s emancipatory vision remains relevant because it addresses enduring dilemmas of state-centric bargains versus human dignity, offering a timeless framework for resisting transactionalism.

The 2025 US National Security Strategy (NSS) emphasises “mutually beneficial trade” and partnerships with “capable, reliable states” (The White House, 2025). While the NSS does not explicitly frame security in emancipatory terms, this article interprets its transactional emphasis as a continuation of Cold War strategic logic. For example, peace deals between the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Rwanda have embedded mining concessions and cross-border trade arrangements, often compromising human security (International Crisis Group, 2025). The remarks by the President of the United States, Donald Trump, on 5 December 2025 at the White House: “*And we are going to take out the rare earth, take out some of the assets and pay,*

everybody's going to make money,” reflect this economic agenda (Makumeno, Cyuzuzo, Booty & Debusmann Jr, 2025). This may not only risk leaving complex African issues unresolved, but also disrupt possibilities for synergy and collaboration, as states or leaders may compete for transactional gains. Importantly, the US is not alone: the European Union (EU) has pursued transactional migration-control deals with North African states (Global Institute Development, 2025), while the ‘Belt and Road’ investments by China prioritise resource access over governance reforms (Singh & Gopaldas, 2026).

3. Re-emerging Cold War patterns: Transactionalism, geoeconomics and geopolitical impact

Transactionalism mirrors the narrow, statist, militarised version of security that dominated strategic studies from the 1950s to the 1980s (Buzan & Hansen, 2009). Today, it re-emerges in Africa through short-term deals: counterterrorism cooperation in Mali and Niger tied to basing rights, EU migration-control agreements with Libya and Tunisia, and resource concessions in Central Africa (Global Institute Development, 2025). These bargains recast Africa as a “price tag” (Singh & Gopaldas, 2026), undermining multilateralism and neglecting human development.

While transactionalism may deliver quick wins for external powers, it entrenches vulnerabilities. UNDP (2024) links resource-driven deals to corruption, poverty and climate fragility. Interventions illustrate the short-term focus: the SADC Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM) deployment by the SADC in Mozambique (ACCORD, 2024), African Union (AU) mediation in Sudan (Mohammed, 2026), and US-French counterterrorism operations in the Sahel (International Crisis Group, 2025). These provide immediate security but lack long-term institution-building. Africa is positioned as a commodity in US–China rivalry, particularly over rare earths, sidelining multilateralism and human development.

Ken Booth’s *Security and Self: Reflections of a Fallen Realist* (Booth, 1994) offers a lens for navigating this transitional dilemma. Writing after the Cold War, Booth challenged the moral and practical status of realism, proposing security as a global moral science. For Africa, this means rejecting transactional policies favouring resource extraction and instead upholding human dignity through collective humanity.

4. Human security as the normative alternative

Modern conflicts transcend borders – climate change, pandemics and disasters affect entire regions. Transactionalism cannot deliver sustainable solutions. Human security reframes peace arrangements by centring people rather than states. Regional Economic Communities (RECs) can resist fragmentation by shifting from transactional deals to cooperative problem-solving. As Hampson (2012:14) notes: *“The safety of the individual is the key to global security; when the safety of the individual is threatened, so too is international security.”*

5. The security dilemma of the SADC and possible futures

Focusing on the SADC clarifies the analysis. The current transactional geopolitics raises fundamental questions: will multilateral efforts give way to bilateral deals or reliance on private military companies, as seen in Cabo Delgado? SAMIM marked baby steps toward self-funded interventions, carving out a regional identity (Chidzanja, 2024). The next step is to move from statist focus to human security-centred interventions.

It could be understood that transactional bargains may offer short-term guarantees, but they risk reducing Africa to being a pawn in external rivalry. Thus, a human security approach empowers the SADC to redefine regional security in emancipatory terms. Booth’s framework suggests embedding human security in national strategies, aligning development plans with education, health and climate resilience, and strengthening institutions. Ubuntu ethical diplomacy, *“an approach to international relations that respects all nations and cultures ... it champions collaboration, cooperation and building partnerships over conflicts”* (Department of International Relations and Cooperation, 2011), offers a moral compass. Recent threats by the President of Rwanda to withdraw Rwandan forces from Mozambique highlight the fragility of current arrangements (Africanews, 2026). If the SADC fails to prioritise human security, Mozambique may rely on private military companies, while external powers like the US could exploit the vacuum with transactional deals.

6. Conclusion

In a fractured transitional world order, Africa faces a choice: transactional dependency or emancipatory human security. Just like during the Cold War, transactionalism perpetuates insecurity. Booth’s framework provides a way to reclaim security as emancipation, advancing dignity, justice and resilience across the region. Bypassing the SADC in favour of bilateral deals

erodes collective bargaining power, replacing multilateral leverage with dependency (Mohammed, 2026). African leaders must consult policymakers, civil society, experts and the public to prioritise continent-centred approaches. By embracing ubuntu and human security, the SADC can lead by example, carving out a regional identity that resists transactionalism and advances justice and resilience.

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