

# Explaining Rwanda's Strategic Position in the Continental System of Africa

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In recent decades, Rwanda has undergone a remarkable transformation—from a country engulfed in civil war and the 1994 genocide to one of the active players in the political and security landscape of the African continent. This transformation emerged under the leadership of Paul Kagame and his administration, a shift founded upon dynamic diplomacy, the reinforcement of governance institutions, and extensive participation in peacekeeping missions. This article, aiming to examine Rwanda's strategic position within the continental structure of the African Union, seeks to answer the question of how the challenges and consequences of Rwanda's presence in Africa's continental system are assessed and what proposed strategies can strengthen its position. To achieve this objective, the study employs a descriptive-analytical method. The findings indicate that Rwanda's strategic position in the continental system of Africa is a combination of three dimensions: active institutional engagement, a security and peace-building role, and regional economic presence. This combination has enabled Rwanda to act beyond its size and emerge as one of the reputable actors within the African Union. However, significant challenges also exist that, if overlooked, may jeopardize Rwanda's achievements. Therefore, the results show that Rwanda's future strategy must be sustainable, balanced, and transparent in order to preserve its current position.

**Keywords:** strategy, security, Rwanda, continental system, Africa.

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## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, the African continent has witnessed profound transformations in its political, economic, and security spheres—developments that have made the redefinition of power relations and the roles of various actors at the continental level inevitable. Among these, Rwanda, as one of the small and landlocked states of East Africa, has followed a trajectory distinct from many of its neighbors. A country that, in the 1990s, stood at the brink of complete collapse following the ethnic genocide of 1994, has today become a model of national reconstruction, economic development, and active presence in regional and international

institutions. This transformation raises a fundamental question in the study of African international politics: How has Rwanda, despite its limited geopolitical capacity and scarce economic resources, succeeded in defining a strategic position for itself within Africa's continental system?

From a theoretical standpoint, the strategic position of any state is the outcome of interactions between internal and external forces; that is, a combination of the structure of the continental system and state capacity to utilize geopolitical and institutional opportunities (Götz, 2021). Rwanda, through an active foreign policy, effective participation in African peacekeeping operations (Beloff, 2022), investment in technology and



human development (World Bank, 2025a), and engagement in institutions such as the African Union and the East African Community (EAC) (Thema, 2025), has been able to play a role beyond its geographical size in regional dynamics. In effect, Rwanda has redefined the concept of a “small power” by emphasizing governance-related soft instruments, thereby emerging as a new strategic actor within the continental structure.

Examining Rwanda’s position in Africa’s continental system is significant for two reasons: first, from a theoretical perspective, it expands our understanding of power dynamics within African regional structures (Götz, 2020); and second, from a practical perspective, Rwanda’s experience offers a valuable model for other transitional states seeking to combine development, security, and international legitimacy. Accordingly, the present study seeks—drawing upon neoclassical realism and regional integration theory (Ntara & Schutte, 2025)—to explain the mechanisms through which Rwanda has acquired a strategic position among African states and expanded its influence in the continental system. The purpose of this article is to analyze the relationship between structural variables in the African system and internal variables within Rwanda in order to answer the question of what factors and mechanisms have enabled Rwanda to transform from a crisis-ridden state into an active and influential actor in Africa’s continental order.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. Regional Integration

Convergence, conceptually, refers to the movement of individuals toward a specific and acceptable point generally described as a common objective, while divergence refers to separation and the distancing of actors from a shared goal toward individualized aims (Hafeznia, 2006). The concept of regional integration, in practice, broadly represents closer cooperation among sovereign states at the international and national scales, without implying a transfer of sovereignty. It signifies the combination of elements into a collective whole; however, when examined in isolation, the concept may appear ambiguous. Classical scholars such as Lindberg, Schmitter, Mattli, and Wallack have not offered a shared definition, making the comparison of Asian, Latin

American, African, and European integration processes analytically complex.

Ernst Haas, founder of neofunctionalism, defined regional integration—based on its political dimensions—as a process through which political actors in diverse national settings shift their loyalties, expectations, and political activities toward a new center, creating a new and broader political community. Rwanda’s strategic position in Africa’s continental system—previously described as a combination of active institutional participation, a security role, and regional economic presence—is deeply rooted in the foundation of regional integration (Thema, 2025). In theoretical literature, regional integration is understood as the deepening of cooperation among states beyond mere sovereignty transfers, aimed at forming a “shared whole” through persuading actors to pursue common objectives (Ntara & Schutte, 2025). This conceptualization, articulated by thinkers such as Ernst Haas through the idea of transferring political loyalties to a common center, clarifies Rwanda’s strategic trajectory.

Recognizing its geographic and demographic constraints, Rwanda—as explained in neoclassical realist interpretations—has adopted a development-through-integration strategy (Götz, 2021). By actively participating in EAC integration processes, embracing institutional norms, and positioning itself as a reliable partner within regional mechanisms, Kigali has extended its influence. Rwanda not only attends meetings but also plays a pivotal role in drafting and implementing regional protocols (Ntara & Schutte, 2025). This close engagement, reflecting movement toward a common objective (e.g., infrastructure development and free-market expansion within the EAC), has increased Rwanda’s credibility among its neighbors and within the African Union.

In the security dimension, Rwanda’s deployment of peacekeeping forces positions it as an emerging “regional police actor” (Beloff, 2022). Despite geopolitical complexities, Rwanda frames these actions as contributions to regional security convergence. Its involvement in conflict zones has institutionalized its influence within Africa’s security decision-making structures.

In the economic domain, Rwanda’s focus on joint infrastructure initiatives and trade facilitation—key goals of regional integration—has positioned it at the

center of new economic networks (Mendez-Parra & Agarwal, 2023). This regional economic presence, shaped by institutional neoliberalism, has not only contributed to domestic growth but has also linked partner states' economic interests to Rwanda's political stability.

## 2.2. Neoclassical Realism

Unlike much of neorealism, neoclassical realism explicitly analyzes how external stimuli are translated into state behavior. Although neoclassical realism includes significant internal divergence, it can broadly be described as an "outside-in" approach to state behavior and international politics (Meibauer, 2023). Its initial and most well-known contribution is the attempt to explain "changes in foreign policy across time and space" by supplementing neorealism with unit-level variables that mediate the impact of systemic stimuli (Götz, 2020). Some neoclassical realists deviate from neorealist foundations primarily to explain historical "anomalies" in which systemic pressures failed to produce expected behavior ("Type I"). Others have articulated more generalizable statements about the systematic interaction between systemic and domestic factors ("Type II"). More recently, a third group has focused on patterns of international relations as the output of state behavior ("Type III"). All three begin from the assumption that systemic conditions impose less rigid constraints than classical neorealism asserts. Thus, decision-makers possess "considerable freedom of action," and systemic structures merely define parameters rather than predetermined outcomes. Systemic conditions are neither sufficiently clear nor determinant to direct policymakers toward a single course of action. Decision-makers operate with limited information and uncertainty regarding appropriate responses to specific scenarios (Kitchen, 2010). Their choices are shaped by domestic incentives and constraints, treated as intervening variables. Neoclassical realists employ a diverse set of such variables (Götz, 2020).

Rwanda's strategic position can be analyzed through two central types of neoclassical realist propositions. The structure of Africa's continental system—chronic instability, regional rivalries, and the opportunities arising from institutions such as the African Union and the EAC—constitutes systemic stimuli. These conditions

highlight the necessity of regional security cooperation and access to regional markets as opportunities for economic expansion (Thema, 2025). This structure pushes Rwanda toward engagement in order to leverage security and economic gaps.

Intervening domestic variables explain why Rwanda chose integration over isolation or aggression (the traditional neorealist expectation). Rwanda's centralized and determined leadership—a key domestic variable in neoclassical analysis—has opted to transform constraints into opportunities by activating regional institutions (Plänitz, 2025). The state's definition of interests has expanded beyond mere survival to include the pursuit of regional influence. Despite limited resources, Rwanda's governmental institutions have effectively mobilized capabilities for integrationist objectives, such as peacekeeping deployments and investment attraction (World Bank, 2025b). This indicates that Rwanda's internal organization has mediated systemic stimuli positively.

Thus, Rwanda's strategic position is the outcome of a structured interaction: the continental system provides opportunities for participation in security and trade frameworks, and Rwanda's internal leadership, drawing upon strong state capacity, channels these opportunities toward active integration.

Although Rwanda is not a classical case of "systemic anomaly," it can be viewed as a case where expected structural behavior—such as marginalization of small African states—was reshaped by domestic variables. The continental system predicts that small states will lose in regional rivalries, yet Rwanda's strategic use of integration has enhanced its influence. This diverges from traditional neorealist expectations and aligns with the neoclassical realist claim that unit-level variables shape foreign-policy outcomes.

In summary, neoclassical realism explains why Rwanda—despite structural constraints (a small economy, landlocked geography)—has used strategic domestic decision-making to exploit systemic parameters and, through active integration, elevate its strategic position within Africa. Rwanda's foreign policy represents a selective and interpretive response to systemic stimuli rather than a predetermined reaction.

### 2.3. *Regional Dependency Theory*

The definition most frequently cited for dependency was offered by Dos Santos (1970: 231), who views it as “a situation in which the economies of certain countries are conditioned by the development and expansion of others.” At the core of this definition lies the distinction between the center and the periphery, or “peripherality,” indicating that constraints exist for relatively weak economies participating in the global system—an idea first articulated by Prebisch in a 1944 lecture (Love, 1980). Moreover, Dos Santos (1970) emphasized that various forms of dependency correspond not only to the international economy, but also to domestic production structures and political-social systems. Beyond dependency as a form of conditioning, evaluating how an economy is conditioned (e.g., its historical circumstances) and the specific manner in which it is conditioned is essential. This conditioning may relate to ownership of production, technological dependency, uneven effects of foreign investment, consumption patterns, financial constraints, and more. Although dependency theory was long regarded as “a distinctly Latin American analysis” (Sanchez, 2003), parallel branches developed elsewhere. In addition to the neo-Marxist branch emerging from Baran (1957) and Frank (1976), dependency-related ideas appear across global literature over centuries—for example, the colonial drain theory; French scholarship on protecting French industry from Italy in the sixteenth century (Harsin, 1928); Japanese analyses of center-periphery power relations (Ohno, 1998); radical African perspectives (Amin, 2010; Bruszt & Vukov, 2017; Casanova, 1970; Giraudo, 2020; Higginbottom, 2013); and Soviet development theory (Mark & Feygin, 2020).

Furthermore, Cardoso (1977) viewed dependency not as a formal theory but as an ever-evolving discourse. Meanwhile, Kay (1989: 18) limited his analysis to Latin American dependency theories, identifying two defining features: (1) focus on the distinct “economic, social, and political dynamics of Latin America compared to developed capitalist states,” and (2) concern with identifying “external and internal mechanisms of exploitation and domination.” Newer assessments have concentrated on whether certain aspects of dependency theory remain relevant rather than attempting to define a broader agenda (Fischer, 2015; Heller et al., 2009). For

instance, Heller et al. (2009: 287) revisited Cardoso and Faletto’s (1979) approach, interpreting dependency as a set of principles combining analysis of how economies integrate into the global system with “the balance of internal class forces, state institutional capacity, and the conditional choices of political actors” in explaining divergent development outcomes. Fischer (2015: 701) reevaluates dependency through the concept of “peripherality,” defining it as “an assessment of structural modes of integration into the global economy through the diffusion of technological and industrial development.” He argues that this concept reflects persistent structural constraints that continue to shape dependency among peripheral economies.

### 2.4. *Analysis of Rwanda’s Strategic Position Based on Regional Dependency Theory*

Analyzing Rwanda’s strategic position through the lens of regional dependency theory—which Dos Santos defined as a situation in which the economy of one state is conditioned by the development and expansion of others—demonstrates that Rwanda remains exposed to the structural center-periphery forces at regional and global levels. According to this theory, Rwanda is viewed as a state with limited economic capacity, naturally vulnerable to assuming a peripheral economic role. Economic conditioning in Rwanda, via dependence on foreign investment and technological imports, is a clear manifestation of this theory. Mechanisms of exploitation and domination, both regionally and globally, continuously threaten to ensure that regional integration (such as participation in the EAC) may reinforce the interests of the regional “center” unless strategically managed.

However, newer interpretations of dependency—such as the approach of Cardoso and Faletto—emphasize the role of domestic variables. Rwanda has been able to challenge this dependency structure by leveraging its remarkably strong institutional capacity, a significant exception among peripheral countries. Its active participation in regional institutions is not passive acceptance, but a “conditional choice”: Rwanda seeks to shape the rules of engagement, preventing its relegation to a passive periphery. Thus, Rwanda’s strategic position results from an active strategy built on moderating dependency conditions through institutionalism and assuming pivotal roles, particularly in security. The

country aims to transform dependency by acquiring technological spillovers and infrastructure gains through regional integration, moving beyond a purely peripheral role. Nevertheless, structural historical constraints persist, and continuous management of these conditions forms the core of Rwanda's survival strategy.

### 3. Research Method

The present study, entitled "Explaining Rwanda's Strategic Position in the African Continental System," is fundamentally applied in nature and falls within descriptive-analytical studies adopting a qualitative approach. Its primary objective is to explain and analyze the mechanisms through which Rwanda has transitioned from a state with limited economic and political capacity to one of the influential actors at the continental level. This research seeks to provide a scientific and systematic depiction of Rwanda's strategic position by focusing on the internal elements of power, the structure of the continental system, and Rwanda's interaction with regional organizations.

The data collection method in this study is library-based and documentary, meaning that data and evidence were gathered through the review of reputable academic sources, research articles, official documents, and reports from international and regional organizations such as the African Union, the African Development Bank, and the United Nations. Data analysis was conducted using theoretical and explanatory approaches, employing concepts and propositions from "neoclassical realism" (Götz, 2021; Kitchen, 2010) and "regional integration" (Ntara & Schutte, 2025; Thema, 2025) to explain Rwanda's regional behavior and role.

Within this framework, on one side, the structure of Africa's continental system—representing the environment within which Rwanda acts—and on the other, Rwanda's internal capacities, including political leadership, governance efficiency, human capital, and active foreign policy, are analyzed as mediating variables. As a result, the analysis clarifies how Rwanda, drawing upon symbolic authority and institutional strength, has become a decisive state in the security and economic dynamics of East and Central Africa.

The method of data analysis is based on qualitative content analysis and deductive-inferential reasoning, meaning that documentary data were collected and compared with the study's theoretical framework to

extract relational patterns among variables. To enhance the credibility and scientific rigor of the findings, triangulation was employed across academic studies, institutional datasets, and policy reports, thereby ensuring greater stability and reliability of results.

### 4. Findings of the Study

This section analyzes and explains the strategic position of the Republic of Rwanda within the complex constellation of Africa's continental system. The analysis draws on regional dependency theory as its main theoretical framework. Regional dependency theory is based on the assumption that a country's position in the continent's political-economic structure is heavily shaped by center-periphery power relations. Within this framework, peripheral countries (such as Rwanda in the post-genocide historical phase) generally face structural challenges such as economic conditioning, technological dependence, and deep infrastructural gaps, all of which make movement toward autonomous development difficult. Traditionally, Rwanda, because of its limited resources, small population, and landlocked geography, was considered a clear example of a peripheral economy. However, the strategies adopted by the government in Kigali over the past two decades have altered the outlook of this position. The aim of this section is to show how Rwanda has transformed from a potentially vulnerable position into a strategic actor with growing influence.

#### 4.1. Institutional Participation and Governance

Rwanda is counted among the founding members of the Organization of African Unity, and after the formal establishment of the African Union in 2002, it has consistently played an active and influential role in this continental body. Rwanda's participation in the institutional structures of the Union can be examined along several axes.

**Role in Reforming African Union Structures:** Since the beginning of Paul Kagame's leadership, Rwanda has become one of the pioneers of structural reform within the African Union. The government in Kigali, by focusing on efficiency and financial self-reliance of the Union, sought to redefine its institutional mechanisms. In this context, in 2016 the Assembly of Heads of State mandated Kagame to lead the process of institutional and financial reform, with the main objective of building

a more powerful, accountable, and less externally dependent Union. Kagame's reform report, presented to the Executive Council in 2017, contained several key pillars: reducing administrative bureaucracy, concentrating on core continental priorities such as security and trade, and creating a sustainable mechanism for financing the Union through a 0.2 percent levy on member states' imports. This proposal constituted an important step toward the Union's financial self-sufficiency, and Rwanda's persistent follow-up in subsequent summits secured it a special place among the architects of reform. Rwanda also played an active role in restructuring the African Union Commission. One of its proposals was to introduce a more competitive selection system for commissioners and to reduce the number of deputy positions to streamline decision-making. At the 2019 summit of heads of state in Addis Ababa, Kagame again emphasized the importance of "continental institutions' accountability to African citizens," describing the reforms as "an effort by Africans for their own future." Overall, by steering and following through on structural reforms in the African Union, Rwanda not only increased its political influence on the continent but also presented a model of efficient, results-oriented governance that many African regional organizations have since treated as a reference for their own institutional transformation. From 2019 onward, Rwanda has increasingly become the driving force behind reforms in the African Union. These reforms are aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of decision-making bodies, reducing dependence on external funding, and strengthening continental cohesion in the face of global challenges. At the thirty-second Summit of Heads of State in February 2019, Kagame, as the Union's rotating chair, called on member states to act "as a united bloc" in the international system—a stance reflecting Rwanda's long-standing concern about fragmented decision-making within the AU. In 2023, Kigali hosted the Union's institutional reform review meeting. At this meeting, significant progress in implementing reforms was reported, and Rwanda's role as host signaled the trust of African leaders in the country as a coordinating center for the reform agenda. At the same meeting, the Rwandan government stressed the need to strengthen financial independence and enhance the efficiency of the AU

Commission in order to reduce budgetary dependence on the European Union and the World Bank.

In February 2024, the Assembly of Heads of State of the African Union, in "Decision 866-902," commended Kagame's final report and recognized him as one of the pioneers in designing the Union's new decision-making mechanisms. Rwanda subsequently proposed that part of the Union's administrative structure be equipped with an annual performance evaluation system in order to boost the accountability of continental institutions. From 2024 onward, Rwanda also became more active in reforming the Union's technology and digital policies. In an April 2025 meeting between the AU Commission's Chairperson and Paul Kagame, the two sides agreed to integrate digital reforms into the Union's structures and to draw on Rwanda's experience in e-government. This cooperation can be seen as a model for institutional transformation, transparency, and accelerated decision-making across the continent. Overall, Rwanda's engagement in AU reforms can be understood as a deliberate attempt to increase its diplomatic influence in the continental system and to turn Kigali into a hub for steering development and governance policies in Africa. Unlike larger states such as Nigeria or South Africa, which face numerous domestic challenges, Rwanda has been able—by relying on political stability and administrative efficiency—to assume the role of a "facilitator of institutional reforms." This approach has not only elevated Rwanda's regional standing but has also contributed to redefining the internal balance of power within the African Union. During his tenure leading the AU's organizational reform process, President Kagame oversaw, among other achievements, the strengthening of the African Union Peace Fund, which he presented as evidence that the Union is now better prepared to assume responsibility for peace and security. For Rwanda, these reforms constituted an opportunity to play a more active role in setting the continental agenda.

### **Deepening Governance Values, Rule of Law, and Democracy:**

In November 2016, Rwanda hosted a consultative meeting involving parliament, foreign ministries, and civil society to "strengthen legality, the rule of law, and good governance" through AU instruments. This demonstrates that Rwanda has sought to present itself not only at the diplomatic level but also at the normative level as a committed partner to the

Union's values. Since the end of the 1994 genocide, Rwanda has become one of the countries whose institutional and policy reforms are widely regarded as a model of effective governance in Africa. The government of Paul Kagame, through a focus on administrative transparency, accountability, and the efficiency of public institutions, has promoted a developmental state model whose influence extends beyond the country's borders. In the past decade, through continental mechanisms such as the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) and the African Governance Architecture (AGA), Rwanda has played an active role in promoting the principles of good governance, rule of law, and democracy. Its sustained participation in periodic APRM assessments led to Rwanda being named in the 2022 report as one of the top five countries in terms of institutional transparency and public financial integrity. This position has turned Kigali into a consultative center for African policymakers in the field of governance. Since 2019, Rwanda has advanced several important initiatives for strengthening legality at the continental level under the AU framework. One such initiative was the proposal for a "regional anti-corruption framework," presented at the Kigali summit in 2020. The aim of this framework was to harmonize anti-corruption laws across member states and to enhance the AU Commission's oversight capacity. Rwanda has also advocated for the implementation of the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance and has repeatedly called for the development of binding indicators to assess democracy in member states.

However, analysts argue that Rwanda's approach to democracy is more pragmatic and development-oriented than liberal and competitive. The Kagame government has managed to maintain its legitimacy by relying on strong institutional order, sustained economic growth, and a sharp reduction in corruption, while human rights organizations have criticized restrictions in the country's political and media space. This duality has led observers to describe the Rwandan model as a form of "managerial democracy," a model that prioritizes performance, order, and efficiency over purely electoral competition.

At the continental level, Rwanda has sought to export this model to other countries. Through training programs and technical cooperation under the auspices of the Rwanda Governance Board, Rwandan experts

have participated in designing governance monitoring systems for East African states such as Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda. Kigali has also played an active role in expanding continental dialogue on reforming oversight systems and enhancing the accountability of public institutions by hosting several meetings within the framework of Pan-African governance forums. In sum, Rwanda's main influence in deepening governance and rule of law in Africa has been through presenting a model of an "effective and anti-corruption state." Although the Rwandan model still diverges in some respects from participatory democracy standards, it has succeeded in turning the idea of "developmental governance" into one of the core themes of the continental policy discourse. As a result, Rwanda today is not only an active political actor in Africa, but is also becoming an intellectual reference point in the field of public policy on the continent.

#### 4.2. *Economic Role*

Rwanda's economy in 2024 recorded real GDP growth of 8.9 percent, driven by strong performance in services, industry, and an improvement in agriculture. Despite robust export growth, the current account deficit widened due to a decline in official transfers. This required continued reliance on foreign exchange inflows from foreign direct investment and external borrowing. Inflation eased and averaged 4.8 percent in 2024, owing to lower food prices and tight monetary policy, which allowed the central bank to reduce the Central Bank Rate (CBR) from 7.5 percent to 6.5 percent in 2024. The fiscal position improved as a result of higher tax collection that supported fiscal consolidation, although public debt is projected to reach 80 percent of GDP in 2025—despite reduced borrowing needs—before gradually declining due to past deficits and exchange-rate depreciation. Rwanda's agricultural sector remains the cornerstone of the economy, employing 43 percent of the labor force and accounting for 27 percent of GDP. Despite diversification beyond traditional cash crops such as coffee and tea, agricultural productivity remains constrained by land fragmentation, limited mechanization, post-harvest losses, and the effects of climate change. While agricultural exports account for 37 percent of total export earnings, trade remains vulnerable to price volatility and regional market integration is still underdeveloped. The sector has far greater potential to deliver higher growth, better jobs,

and increased foreign-exchange revenues ([World Bank, 2025b](#)). In addition, since March 2024, Rwanda has hosted the USD 1 billion AfCFTA Adjustment Fund, managed by the African Export–Import Bank’s Fund for Export Development in Africa (FEDA). To date, USD 50 million from this fund has been mobilized for transformative investments. Rwanda also continues to attract international financial institutions through initiatives such as the Kigali International Financial Centre, from which further benefits are expected ([African Economic, 2024](#)). Rwanda’s economic pathways can be summarized as follows:

**Participation in the Common Market and Regional Trade:** By embracing frameworks such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), Rwanda has demonstrated its commitment to continental economic integration. Its presence in African Union coordination meetings and in the AU mid-year coordination summit also attests to its active participation in integrated policy processes. As a result, from an institutional and governance perspective, Rwanda has managed to secure the status of a “transformative actor” within Africa’s continental architecture: a demographically small state with a highly visible presence at Union level. Over the past two decades, Rwanda has become one of the active players in Africa’s economic integration projects. Despite its lack of abundant natural resources and its landlocked position, it has managed—through smart policymaking and institutional reforms—to play an important role in the development of a continental common market and in strengthening regional trade in East Africa.

**Rwanda and the East African Community (EAC) Common Market:** The East African Community (EAC) is a regional organization established by the governments of Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi to advance a common agenda of economic, social, and political integration in East Africa. According to the International Development Association’s 2011 report, for a long period the EAC comprised only three countries—Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda—which enjoyed close historical, commercial, industrial, and cultural ties ([Didier et al., 2025](#)). Their structured cooperation began with the construction of the Kenya–Uganda railway (1897–1901) and continued with the establishment of the East African Customs Collection Centre in 1900, the East African Currency Board in 1905, the East African Court of Appeal in 1909, the East African

Governors’ Conference in 1926, the East African Income Tax Board in 1940, and the Joint Economic Council in the same year ([Thema, 2025](#)). Between 1947 and 1961, the East African High Commission operated, followed by the East African Common Services Organization from 1961 to 1966. In 1967, the three states created the first East African Community. Under this agreement, they held joint ownership of several institutions and services, including ports, East African Airways, East African Posts and Telecommunications, the Inter-University Council for East Africa, and the East African Currency Board, and they shared a common legislative assembly. This cooperation continued until 1977, when it collapsed ([Ntara & Schutte, 2025](#)).

The new initiative to revive East African integration emerged from the “Agreement on the Division of Assets and Liabilities of the East African Community” concluded after the 1977 collapse. After nearly a decade-long hiatus, new efforts to restart the process of East African regional integration began in 1992. As a result, on 30 November 1999, the “Treaty for the Establishment of the East African Community” was signed by the three original members, Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania ([Muhirwa et al., 2024](#)). The treaty entered into force in July 2000 and marked a major turning point in reviving the East African union project. Two neighboring states, Rwanda and Burundi, expressed their intention to join and signed the EAC Treaty on 18 June 2007; they became full members on 1 July 2007 ([Mukantwali, 2016](#)). Subsequently, EAC member states established a customs union in 2005 and a common market in 2010. The next stages of integration will be the establishment of the East African Monetary Union and, ultimately, the Political Federation of East African States. According to Dirk Willem te Velde (2006), trade policy reforms generate diverse economic effects on tradable goods prices, production, wages, employment opportunities, and fiscal conditions. Regional integration is a form of policy reform that shapes trade at the regional level, including tradable goods prices, static and dynamic effects on production, and consequences for tax revenues ([Thema, 2025](#)).

Rwanda regards regional economic integration as one of the vital elements of its development, as reflected in the sixth pillar of “Vision 2020,” which emphasizes “regional and international integration.” Consequently, the implementation of an open and liberal trade regime, the

reduction of trade barriers, and the adoption of policies encouraging foreign direct investment were deemed essential (Pascal & Dr, 2021). Rwanda joined the EAC in 2007 and from the outset became one of the strongest supporters of implementing the bloc's Common Market Protocol. The protocol's main objective is to liberalize the movement of goods, services, capital, and labor among member states. From 2019 onward, the Rwandan government aligned its customs and fiscal policies with EAC common market standards and contributed to the reduction of internal tariffs among members. According to the EAC regional commission, Rwanda is one of the few member states that has fully implemented the Single Customs Territory mechanism and has succeeded in reducing cargo clearance times by up to 40 percent. This has enhanced the competitiveness of the Kigali dry port and turned it into a key transit node along the Dar es Salaam–Kinshasa corridor.

**Rwanda's Role in Implementing the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA):** The AfCFTA provides Rwanda with a vital opportunity to strengthen its efforts to drive economic growth through international trade (Mendez-Parra & Agarwal, 2023). Over the past decade, exports have been a central pillar of Rwanda's development agenda; in the National Strategy for Transformation (NST1) 2017–2024, an annual export growth target of 17 percent was set. In the second National Strategy for Transformation, export promotion is again listed among the five principal priorities, with the aim of raising export revenues by at least 13 percent per year, relying on agricultural products and manufactured goods. Since 2010, Rwanda has seen its exports more than double, buoyed by major investments ranging from traditional exports such as minerals, coffee, and tea to more ambitious projects, including the development of a vibrant tourism sector and the establishment of a gold processing industry. However, progress on these fronts has slowed. Export growth has been driven primarily by gold exports and a rise in re-exports to the Democratic Republic of Congo. Non-gold exports have only kept pace with GDP growth, the number of exporters has declined, and Africa's share in Rwanda's export basket has remained stagnant. Service exports have not fully recovered from the collapse triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. By creating a single market for goods and services and deepening regional integration, the AfCFTA has the

potential to stimulate economic growth and reduce poverty by boosting intra-African trade, increasing competition, and accelerating industrial development. For example, the World Bank estimates that tariff reductions under AfCFTA could increase intra-African exports by up to 22 percent, with the largest gains in manufacturing; if the AfCFTA also reduces non-tariff barriers and lowers trade costs through trade facilitation, intra-African exports could rise by 81 percent and manufactured goods exports by 110 percent (World Bank, 2024).

Rwanda has consistently supported broader continental integration, as articulated in its Vision 2020, and this commitment was evident in its accession to COMESA in January 2004 and to the EAC in 2007 (with implementation of the Common External Tariff from 1 July 2009). Rwanda has since extended this vision and assumed a leading role in advancing the AfCFTA agenda. Notably, the AfCFTA founding agreement was signed in Kigali on 21 March 2018, and Rwanda was among the first group of countries to participate in the Guided Trade Initiative, which officially launched trade under the agreement in October 2022. Historically, Rwanda has benefited from regional integration: its merchandise exports to EAC partners more than doubled in the three years following its entry into the customs union in 2009, partly due to lower exporter costs resulting from tariff reductions on imported intermediate inputs under the CET (Frazer, 2012; World Bank, 2025b). However, growth in Rwanda's trade with the EAC has since stagnated, and the region's importance as an export destination has declined (World Bank, 2025b). Regional exports have become increasingly dependent on the Democratic Republic of Congo. The AfCFTA has the potential to reinvigorate Rwanda's trade with Africa and to create more opportunities for economies of scale, learning by exporting, and export diversification. From 2022 to 2025, Rwanda also participated in the AfCFTA "Guided Trade Initiative" pilot project, designed to boost trade in African-made goods among selected member states. According to reports from the African Union Commission, Rwanda's exports to AfCFTA member states increased by about 35 percent between 2020 and 2024, particularly in light manufactured products, processed coffee, and industrial garments.

**Rwanda's Domestic Policies to Strengthen Regional Trade:** Rwanda stands out in East Africa as a commercial

leader and an innovator in digitally delivered services. Its strategic initiatives and regulatory reforms are among the main facilitators of its progress in digital trade. These measures have led to the rapid expansion of Rwanda's digital and financial services across the region (World Bank, 2025b). The country has significantly expanded internet access and continues to pursue better digital infrastructure. Rwanda has steadily increased the number of its internet users year after year. These outcomes are partly the result of digital infrastructure development, particularly through the expansion of international submarine cable connections, a marked increase in mobile network connectivity per capita, and reduced internet usage costs (World, 2019).

Despite these improvements in connectivity, considerable room remains for further technology adoption. Current performance is still constrained by overall affordability, limited broadband uptake, gaps in skills and digital literacy, and restricted access to reliable electricity. Recommended measures to support the development of the digital economy include strengthening digital infrastructure networks—especially in rural areas—supporting a more competitive telecommunications sector, and improving digital literacy and skills. Rwanda's participation in exports of digitally delivered services has followed an overall upward trend and more than doubled between 2016 and 2024. An analysis of Rwanda's digitally delivered services exports shows that since 2016, most of this growth has been driven by telecommunications and financial services, which in 2024 accounted for more than 90 percent of all digitally delivered services exports. Many digitally delivered services constitute key inputs for general economic activity. Imports of such services provide domestic firms with access to a wider range of inputs of higher quality and lower cost, thereby strengthening their competitiveness and improving the overall performance of digital trade. Rwanda's imports of digitally delivered services have also more than doubled since 2016.

Rwanda participates in various international and regional trade forums related to digital trade, yet it has undertaken only very limited commitments to facilitate digital trade within the WTO framework. It has ratified the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement but has not eliminated tariffs on information technology products under the Information Technology Agreement and has

also undertaken no GATS commitments in any of the services sectors that facilitate digital trade. The country did not take part in the negotiations that led to the Investment Facilitation for Development Agreement, both instruments that could support digital trade. Nevertheless, it has signed several regional trade agreements, most notably within COMESA and the African Continental Free Trade Area (World Bank, 2025b).

Overall, Rwanda exhibits varying levels of preparedness across different dimensions of digital trade regulation. It has relatively strong regulatory frameworks in areas such as data protection, but in other domains—particularly cross-border data transfers, electronic signatures, and intermediary liability—substantial improvements are still needed. In all of the regulatory areas mentioned, Rwanda's laws provide a foundation that can be further strengthened. Reform of existing legislation and the adoption of capacity-building programs would support Rwanda's ongoing efforts to maximize gains from digital trade. Current regulations lack measures to limit data-localization requirements, to provide stronger protections against unsolicited communications, and to extend intermediary-liability safeguards to users. A critical point is that any new regulatory framework must be accompanied by awareness-raising campaigns and skills-based training. Capacity development regarding electronic signatures and licensing requirements for small and medium-sized enterprises is also needed. In sum, by relying on active economic diplomacy and a technology-oriented approach to trade, Rwanda has managed to play a role that exceeds the size of its economy in Africa's common market projects. The country has been a frontrunner not only in political participation in the African Continental Free Trade Area, but also in the practical implementation and digitalization of continental trade processes. The Rwandan model represents a form of "bottom-up economic integration" that rests on institutional capacity and domestic reforms rather than merely on geopolitical weight.

#### 4.3. *Rwanda's Role in Africa's Security and Peace Architecture*

One of the most important domains in which Rwanda has a prominent presence is the field of continental security and peacekeeping. This presence is multidimensional.

**Rwanda's Foreign Policy Doctrine and Its Turn to Peacekeeping:** After 2000, the government of Paul Kagame adopted an approach often described as the "responsibility to protect through action," under which participation in peace missions was framed not merely as an international obligation but as an integral part of Rwanda's new post-genocide identity. This doctrine was accompanied by reforms in the structure of the Rwanda Defence Force, which increased the country's capacity to deploy troops to African and United Nations missions. Over time, Rwanda became one of the largest troop-contributing countries to UN and African Union peace operations, with a particularly significant presence in the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA).

For Rwanda, this participation has generated not only political prestige but also economic benefits (through international troop allowances and related financial flows). Analysts argue that peacekeeping is part of Rwanda's long-term strategy to strengthen its "security brand." In fact, over the past two decades Rwanda has emerged as one of the most active African states in peacekeeping and continental security missions. This active role reflects both the painful legacy of the 1994 genocide and the perceived need to build a disciplined, professional army, as well as a foreign policy strategy aimed at consolidating Rwanda's status as a responsible and influential actor in African security.

Since 2004, Rwanda has become one of the pillars of African Union missions in Sudan (AMIS), Darfur (UNAMID), and especially Somalia (AMISOM and subsequently ATMIS). According to the African Union Peace and Security Council's 2024 report, more than 5,500 Rwandan troops serve in active continental missions, making Rwanda the second-largest African contributor to peace operations after Ethiopia. In Somalia, Rwandan forces have played a key role in counterterrorism operations against Al-Shabaab and, due to their high level of discipline, have been described by AU command as a "model unit." In addition, since 2021 Rwanda has also undertaken a security mission in Mozambique, deployed in response to insurgent attacks in Cabo Delgado Province in coordination with the Mozambican government and the African Union. For Rwanda, active participation in such missions is not only a tool for enhancing its international profile but also an

important means of training and upgrading the operational capabilities of its armed forces.

Since 2022, the Rwandan government has sought to transform the country into a regional training hub for peacekeepers by establishing the Kigali Peace Training Centre. Despite these significant achievements, some analysts have expressed doubts about Rwanda's geopolitical motives in certain peace missions. A 2023 report by the UN Security Council notes that Rwandan military presence in eastern Congo has sometimes been intertwined with its own internal security interests and has generated diplomatic tensions with the Congolese government. This situation illustrates how Rwanda's peacebuilding policy functions simultaneously as a tool for expanding regional influence and for managing transboundary threats.

Overall, Rwanda's participation in continental peace missions can be regarded as one of the main pillars of its foreign and security policy. By relying on a disciplined army and its distinctive historical experience, Rwanda has moved from the status of a crisis-ridden country to that of a leading actor in the provision of peace and security in Africa. Although some aspects of this policy are clearly shaped by realist calculations and national interests, Rwanda's role in strengthening the African Union's peacebuilding capacity is undeniable and has contributed to the construction of a new identity for the country within Africa's security architecture.

**Participation in the African Union's Security Architecture:** At the 1,272nd meeting of the African Union Peace and Security Council, issues such as hate crimes and genocide ideology were raised, and Rwanda, as a country deeply affected by genocide, played a special role in this session. In addition, Rwanda has been portrayed in the media as a model country in the field of "African-led peacekeeping." For example, it has been stated that in the domain of regional security, "Rwanda is an alternative to external partners."

In fact, since the end of the bloody Second Congo War in 2003, Rwanda's military capabilities have both declined (Tumwine, 2023) and been reoriented toward new national-security and peacekeeping goals. This shift is largely the result of the need to align rapid reaction forces with the financial constraints created by changing donor political pressures (Prunier, 2008), the reduced threat posed by remaining génocidaire forces (Beloff, 2021), and a growing concern for regional stability. By

2012, Rwanda's demobilization and reintegration program had demobilized more than 26,000 former soldiers. Edmonds, Mills, and McNamee increased this estimate to 60,000 to include the demobilization of the pre-genocide Rwandan army, current rapid reaction forces, and civilian militias such as the Interahamwe (Edmonds et al., 2009). The demobilization process included financial assistance, training programs for acquiring civilian skills, and Ingando civic education courses on post-genocide Rwandan society. The Rwandan army now focuses primarily on participation in multiple peacekeeping operations, mostly in Africa. Its 4,585 military and police personnel currently serve in the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic and in the United Nations Mission in South Sudan. Since the end of the Congo wars, Rwanda has deployed more than 6,500 peacekeepers to several missions that have now concluded in Darfur, Sudan, Haiti, and Mali (Beloff, 2022). The effectiveness of its forces in peacekeeping has been praised by António Guterres, the Secretary-General of the United Nations. The political and security motivations behind Rwanda's participation in peacekeeping remain highly contested.

Daniel Beswick (2014) categorizes Rwanda's contribution to peacekeeping as a strategy to enhance its foreign policy and state representation, given the weak international understanding of its position during the Congo wars (1996–1997 and 1998–2003) (Beswick, 2014). Filip Reyntjens (2011) adopts a more critical approach, describing it as a foreign-policy mechanism for deflecting international criticism (Reyntjens, 2011). This critical view is shared by Jason Stearns and Federico Borello (2011), who argue that Rwanda's peacekeeping role functions as a political tool to divert international criticism of its involvement in the Democratic Republic of Congo or its domestic politics, by threatening to withdraw its highly needed peacekeepers (Stearns & Borello, 2011). Rwanda's promotion of post-genocide norms as part of the government's search for "homegrown solutions" to contemporary challenges is presented as beneficial both to Rwandans themselves and to other societies, such as the Central African Republic. Depicting the successful application of such norms helps consolidate their integration into Rwandan society (Beloff, 2022). Marco Jowell (2014), however, disagrees and suggests that peacekeeping is primarily a

mechanism for enhancing the effectiveness of rapid reaction forces in combat scenarios (Jowell, 2014).

Within Rwanda, multiple explanations for the country's peacekeeping role coexist. At the 2014 U.S.–Africa Leaders Summit, President Paul Kagame described Rwanda's contribution to peacekeeping as follows: "We are very happy to work with our partners across the continent as we confront various challenges, including efforts to preserve and maintain peace on our continent" (Times, 2014). This statement reflects a sense of regional solidarity. Others in the Rwanda Defence Force (RDF), such as Colonel Jill Rutaremara, Director of the Rwanda Peace Academy, and General Patrick Nyamvumba, Rwanda's High Commissioner to Tanzania and former RDF Chief of Staff, portray Rwanda's participation in peacekeeping as a mechanism for enhancing national security. Rwandan security officials have explained that Rwanda primarily joins regional peace missions in Darfur, South Sudan, the Central African Republic, and more recently Mozambique to help create a "secure neighborhood" that serves Rwanda's security interests. Despite the considerable geographical distance between these unstable regions and Rwanda, there is a fear that African institutions may not be strong enough to prevent instability from spreading across Central and East Africa. Colonel Rutaremara captures this logic succinctly: "Rwandan peacekeepers are used to extinguish regional 'fires' in order to protect 'home' rather than to project force" (Fisher, 2013). Rwandan soldiers are deployed on peacekeeping missions to societies that are either on the brink of social collapse and genocide or have recently experienced such conditions. The strategy is to prevent genocide and protect civilians. The argument has been that UNAMIR's failure to stop the 1994 genocide shaped RDF's conviction that its contribution to peacekeeping must be more effective. This includes well-trained and well-equipped soldiers; more importantly, however, it involves designing strategies that are realistically achievable. Rwanda's first peacekeeping operation in Sudan tested its capabilities in terms of operations, military tactics, and the ability to resist international pressure that might compromise its strategic objectives. Use of Proxy Diplomacy and Regional Security: Imperial ambitions in Africa are rarely declared openly, yet they can often be discerned from patterns of behavior. In the Great Lakes region, Rwanda presents a particularly complex case. Internationally celebrated as a post-

genocide success story and praised for its order, development, and leadership, Rwanda simultaneously sustains a quieter and less visible narrative marked by military interventions. These include, as reported by several international agencies and UN Groups of Experts, strategic alliances with rebel groups such as the Rally for Congolese Democracy during the Second Congo War, and more recently the March 23 Movement (M23), as well as a persistent presence in the neighboring Democratic Republic of Congo, particularly in North Kivu and Ituri provinces (Mujuni, 2019). While Rwanda's official stance emphasizes national security and regional stability, growing evidence suggests that these interventions have enabled Kigali to exert disproportionate influence over Congolese affairs, raising concerns about the construction of an informal empire under the guise of defensive policy (Donelli, 2022).

Rwanda's regional influence has evolved over decades under a leadership shaped by exile, war, and an entrenched security mentality, rooted in the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF)—a movement formed by Tutsi refugees in Uganda that later returned in the 1990s to seize power through armed struggle. This historical experience produced a leadership that views regional security through the lens of permanent vigilance and preventive engagement (Plänitz, 2025). As a result, Rwanda's activities often blur the boundary between legitimate defense and expansionary opportunity. For example, Rwanda's involvement in the First and Second Congo Wars—initially justified as necessary to neutralize génocidaire forces hiding in eastern Zaire—soon evolved into sustained support for proxy armed groups such as the Rally for Congolese Democracy, which effectively governed large swaths of eastern Congo under Rwandan influence. Although Rwanda has never formally claimed sovereignty over foreign territory, its practices of creating dependency, supporting proxies, and maintaining influence in fragile areas resemble traditional patterns of informal regional domination. These realities raise critical questions about sovereignty, regional stability, and shifting power balances in Central and East Africa (Donelli, 2022).

The current Rwandan ruling elite, largely drawn from the RPF, originates from a stateless and displaced community shaped over decades of exile and conflict. Many Tutsi refugees formed a politically and militarily disciplined force in Uganda before returning in 1990—

not merely to go home, but to rebuild a nation scarred by violence. This experience forged a national ideology that prioritizes security above all else (Plänitz, 2025). In essence, the post-genocide Rwandan state is a security project. Its military interventions in Zaire/DRC in 1996 and 1998 were justified as pre-emptive actions against Hutu militias perceived as existential threats. The porous border with eastern Congo was seen as a vulnerability requiring extraterritorial measures. This defense doctrine has provided a consistent rationale for Rwanda's regional engagements (Gapa, 2025; Milnes, 2021).

### **Rwanda articulates its regional interventions through three core narratives:**

**First, the legacy of 1994 and preventive security:** The genocide continues to play a central role in Rwanda's national consciousness and political identity. The international community's failure to prevent this crime pushed Rwanda toward a doctrine of permanent vigilance, under which interventions beyond its borders are framed as necessary to avert future genocides. While critics argue that this logic has been stretched to serve other interests, it remains a powerful and broadly accepted narrative domestically. **Second, regional stability as a moral responsibility:** Rwanda presents itself as a stabilizing force and cites its peacekeeping roles across Africa as evidence of its commitment to security. In eastern Congo, Kigali claims to fill a governance vacuum created by the weakness of Kinshasa, asserting that the Congolese government tolerates or collaborates with hostile groups that threaten Rwanda's security and regional peace.

**Third, developmentalism and moral authority:** Rwanda's post-genocide transformation is frequently highlighted as a model of order and progress. Its leadership claims a form of moral authority that legitimizes its regional role. Rebel groups it supports are often portrayed as more disciplined alternatives to chaotic militias, suggesting that Rwanda brings stability and governance capacity to neglected areas.

Although Rwanda's strategic narratives possess internal coherence and logic, they carry serious implications for regional architecture and human lives. Repeated interventions in eastern DRC have strained both the East African Community and the Southern African Development Community, which have each convened multiple high-level summits in Dar es Salaam and Luanda to negotiate ceasefires and seek stability—efforts that

have often ended in failure (Donelli, 2022). The deployment of SADC forces, after ambushes by M23 that killed more than a dozen South African, Tanzanian, and Malawian peacekeepers, was delayed and later withdrawn. The EAC Regional Force (EACRF) was expelled in 2023 for its perceived inaction, underscoring how fragile regional integration becomes when member states pursue conflicting agendas (Donelli, 2022).

Attempts to address the crisis have also extended beyond Africa. High-level meetings in March 2025, mediated by Qatar in Doha, and even a session convened by the President of the United States between the DRC and Rwanda, highlighted both the global recognition of the conflict's gravity and the inability of regional institutions to manage it alone. Rwanda has used active military presence and security diplomacy to expand its influence in the wider Great Lakes and Central Africa. This strategy has inevitably generated accusations and controversies; yet, from Rwanda's perspective, it is part of "African solutions to African problems." In other words, Rwanda has succeeded in presenting itself as a local security actor on which the African Union can rely. The result is that, in the realm of security and peace, Rwanda has not only consolidated its position within the African Union through practical engagement, but has also leveraged that position to enhance its regional and transnational influence.

## 5. Conclusion

The strategic position of Rwanda within Africa's continental system can be understood as the outcome of three complementary components: active institutional participation, a prominent security and peacebuilding role, and an expanding regional economic presence. Together, these dimensions have produced a multilayered structure of influence for a small yet dynamic state such as Rwanda.

Institutionally, Rwanda has achieved a remarkable presence within regional organizations such as the African Union, the East African Community, and continental development initiatives such as NEPAD. Through this engagement, the country has positioned itself as one of the reform-oriented and modernizing actors within Africa's institutional architecture. Rwanda has not only adhered to the decisions of these bodies but has also played an innovative and leading role in designing new managerial and strategic policies.

In the sphere of security and peacebuilding, Rwanda has, over recent decades, become one of Africa's most active contributors of peacekeepers under the auspices of the African Union and the United Nations. This policy has presented a new image of Rwanda as a stabilizing force on the continent, enabling the country to shift from the status of a victim of ethnic violence in the 1990s to a responsible and influential actor in regional crisis management. This transformation reflects an active foreign policy and a strategy of "security-building through regional engagement" pursued by the government in Kigali under the leadership of Paul Kagame.

Economically, Rwanda has demonstrated a presence beyond its material capacity by adopting developmental policies, reforming administrative structures, attracting foreign investment, and participating in regional projects such as the African Continental Free Trade Area. By emphasizing a knowledge-based and innovation-driven economy, Rwanda is increasingly becoming an emerging center of technology and investment in East and Central Africa.

However, despite enhancing Rwanda's legitimacy and prestige at the continental level, this position faces notable challenges. First, the country's economic dependence on external resources and international assistance may weaken the sustainability of its development policies. Second, criticisms regarding political restrictions and a constrained media environment could negatively affect Rwanda's international legitimacy if left unaddressed. Third, rising competition among regional powers such as Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania in economic and security spheres may challenge Rwanda's weight within the East African balance of power. Moreover, Rwanda's relative dependence on the stability of regional institutional structures—and developments within the African Union—makes the durability of its strategic position closely tied to the stability of these bodies.

Therefore, Rwanda's future strategy must rest on three principles: sustainability, balance, and transparency. Sustainability requires consolidating current achievements in economic development and regional security through internal capacities and reduced external dependence. Balance demands that Rwanda's foreign policy maintain equilibrium between regional ambitions and the real limitations of national resources.

Transparency entails greater political openness, institutional accountability, and enhanced domestic legitimacy, serving as a lasting foundation for international influence.

In conclusion, despite its small size and limited population, Rwanda has managed to become a model of “smart strategic power” in Africa—a form of power built not on material resources but on institution-building, security management, and development-oriented governance. The continuation of this status depends on Rwanda’s ability to preserve its current reform trajectory while moving beyond symbolic forms of power. By deepening regional cooperation, diversifying its economy, and strengthening good governance, Rwanda can consolidate the foundations of its influence within the continental system in a way that remains resilient to political and economic shifts across Africa.

### Authors’ Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

### Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

### Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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