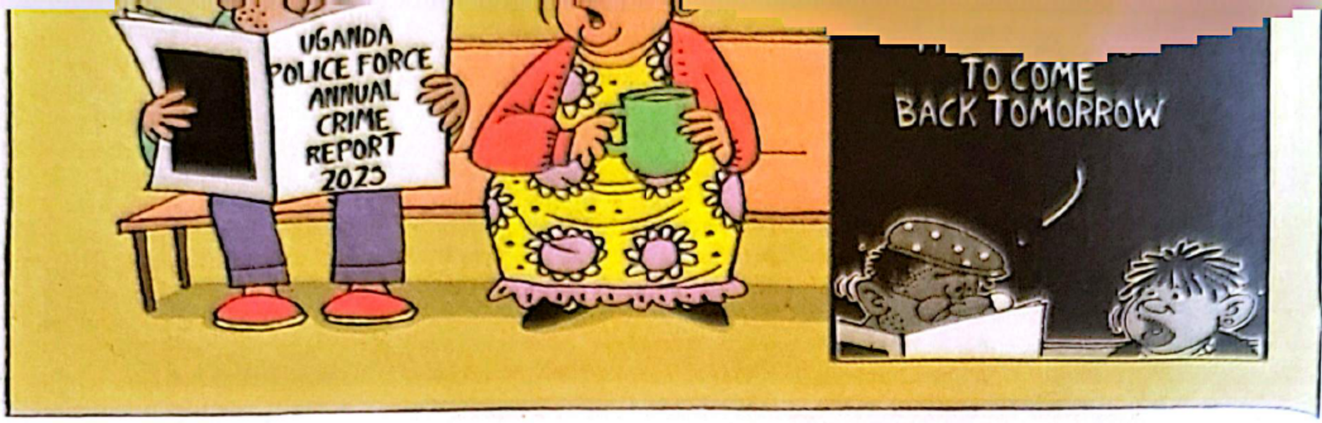

Is Africa set to seize the moment as the global trade order is rewritten?

> Agriculture remains a key test of whether this strategy can deliver.

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Just weeks ago in Maputo, African trade ministers took a step the continent has too often postponed: defining a common position before others define it for them. The February 26, 2026 meeting was a focused effort to consolidate Africa's priorities ahead of the World Trade Organisation 14th Ministerial Conference.

This comes at a time when the global trading system is being reconfigured in ways that are less predictable and less inclusive. For Africa, the question is no longer whether the system is capable of change, but whether the continent is prepared to shape those changes or merely absorb them.

At the centre of this shift is the intensifying rivalry between the United States and China. What began as a dispute over tariffs has broadened into a contest over technology, industrial policy, and geopolitical influence.

This shift is evident in the growing reliance on plurilateral agreements, which are arrangements that include only a subset of WTO members, and in the normalisation of unilateral trade measures. Tariff escalations, particularly those intensified during the Trump Administration, have reinforced a pattern where major economies act first and negotiate later.

It is against this backdrop that the Maputo Ministerial Declaration should be understood. African trade ministers were not simply reacting to a system in crisis; they were repositioning the continent within it.

That collective approach is anchored in existing continental frameworks, notably the African Union's Agenda 2063 and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). These are instruments that are the basis upon which Africa can consolidate its market power, coordinate policy positions, and negotiate from greater strength. Without such coordination, individual countries will continue to engage the global system from positions of relative weakness.

New pressures are also emerging from within the trade agenda itself. Sustainability is rapidly becoming embedded in trade rules through mechanisms such as carbon border adjustments and stricter environmental standards. While these measures respond to legitimate global concerns, they also introduce new barriers. Compliance often requires technological capacity, financing, and institutional infrastructure that many African countries currently lack.

As sustainability and technology become more central to agricultural trade, proposals increasingly emphasise advanced inputs, proprietary technologies, and biotechnology. While such innovations can improve productivity, they also raise concerns about dependence on external suppliers and reduced control over local food systems. The expansion of genetically modified organisms into African markets further complicates the picture, touching on regulation, environmental impact, and long-term resilience.

Africa's response cannot be to reject these shifts outright, but neither can it afford to accept them uncritically. The challenge is to shape emerging rules in ways that preserve policy space thereby allowing countries to support local production, invest in agroecological approaches, and build domestic innovation systems rather than becoming locked into external dependencies.

This is why development remains central to Africa's position. The emphasis on Special and Differential Treatment is not about preserving exceptions, but it is about recognising structural inequalities within the system. Likewise, restoring a functional dispute settlement mechanism is essential if smaller economies are to have any meaningful recourse in an increasingly unilateral environment.

Global trade itself is entering a new phase. The assumption that liberalisation alone drives growth has given way to a more pragmatic reality: major economies are actively shaping markets through industrial policy, subsidies, and strategic investment. If Africa is to compete, it must do the same. It must move beyond market access as an end goal and focus instead on building productive capacity and value addition.

Agriculture remains a key test of whether this strategy can deliver. African ministers have rightly emphasised the distortions created by subsidies in developed economies, which continue to disadvantage African producers. Securing outcomes on public stockholding, safeguard mechanisms, and domestic support is not merely a technical exercise; it is central to food security and economic stability across the continent.

The WTO's 14th Ministerial Conference will test whether the multilateral system can still accommodate these realities. Africa has done the groundwork by articulating common priorities and strengthening coordination. What remains uncertain is whether that unity will translate into sustained negotiating power.

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