



**SPEAKING NOTES FOR EXECUTIVE CHAIRPERSON
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**MBALI INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
RICHARDS BAY, KZN**

*Africa Awakens: Reimagining Power, Progress and
Purpose in a Multipolar World*

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**SPEAKING NOTES BY THE EXECUTIVE CHAIRPERSON OF THE NYDA ON THE
OCCASION OF THE MBALI INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE – *Keynote Address***
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*Programme Director;
Vice-Chancellor and leadership of the University of Zululand;
Distinguished academics, policymakers, students
Distinguished guests*

Good morning

AFRICA'S MOMENT IN A CHANGING WORLD

Ten years ago, when the MBALI International Conference was first convened, the global landscape looked markedly different. The world was still largely defined by established centres of economic and political power, artificial intelligence had not yet become a defining force in global development, and conversations about Africa's place in the international system were still too often framed through the language of potential rather than partnership.

Today, as we gather to commemorate a decade of this important intellectual platform, we do so in a world that has fundamentally changed. New centres of influence are emerging. Technological innovation is reshaping economies and societies at an unprecedented pace. Global alliances are evolving, and the international order is becoming increasingly multipolar.

Against this backdrop, the significance of the MBALI Conference extends beyond marking ten years of academic excellence. It reflects ten years of creating a platform where African scholars, policymakers and practitioners have come together not merely to interpret change, but to help shape it. That contribution deserves recognition because Africa's future will be influenced as much by the quality of its ideas as by the strength of its institutions.



Africa has never been more important to the world than it is today.

Our continent possesses many of the critical minerals required for the global energy transition. It is home to the world's youngest population, immense biodiversity, expanding markets and strategic maritime routes. In an era increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence, digital transformation and geopolitical competition, Africa has become indispensable to conversations about the future of the global economy.

Yet, despite this growing importance, Africa continues to confront a profound question: Can a continent be strategically important without being strategically influential? I believe that this is one of the defining questions of our generation.

It is also why the theme of this conference, Africa Awakes: Possibilities, Progress and Partnerships in a Multipolar World, could not be more timely.

Because Africa's awakening should not be measured simply by the attention it receives from the world. It should be measured by its ability to shape the institutions, ideas, technologies and partnerships that will define the world that is emerging.

That, in my view, is the true challenge before us.

FROM AFRICAN THOUGHT TO AFRICAN CAPABILITY

The University of Zululand's aspiration to become 'A Node for African Thought' is therefore both timely and significant. It recognises that Africa cannot continue to be understood principally through theories developed elsewhere, or through narratives constructed by others. A continent seeking to shape its own future must also shape the ideas that inform that future.

But if I may respectfully extend that proposition, I believe our responsibility goes even further. African thought must become African capability. The knowledge we produce must strengthen the institutions we build. The research we undertake must inform the policies we pursue. The innovation we celebrate must create industries, generate employment and improve the lived experiences of our people.



In other words, Africa must not only become a producer of ideas. It must become a producer of solutions. The question before us, therefore, is not whether Africa should engage with an increasingly multipolar world. That reality is already upon us.

The real question is this: How should Africa position itself in a world where influence is no longer concentrated, partnerships are increasingly contested, and global power is being redistributed? I would like us to reflect on this question today.

MULTIPOLARITY: OPPORTUNITY, COMPLEXITY AND CHOICE

The emergence of a multipolar world presents Africa with opportunities that previous generations could scarcely have imagined. Today, Africa has more partners with whom to trade, collaborate, innovate and invest than at any other point in its modern history. Emerging economies are reshaping global trade, new financial institutions are expanding development finance, and technological innovation is no longer confined to a handful of countries.

For a continent long positioned on the margins of global decision-making, this changing landscape creates new possibilities for agency, partnership and growth. Yet, we would be mistaken if we assumed that a multipolar world is, by its very nature, a more equitable one.

The existence of many centres of power does not necessarily translate into a more balanced distribution of power. Rather, it introduces new complexities. Nations are increasingly competing for strategic influence, access to critical minerals, technological dominance, digital infrastructure and emerging markets. Africa, with its abundant natural resources, strategic geography and youthful population, finds itself at the centre of these competing interests.

The question before us, therefore, is not whether Africa should engage with these global powers. Engagement is both inevitable and necessary. The more important question is how Africa engages.

South Africa's foreign policy has consistently advocated for dialogue, multilateralism and mutually beneficial partnerships. This approach recognises that our future does



not lie in choosing one geopolitical bloc over another, nor in replacing one dependency with several. Rather, it lies in preserving our strategic autonomy while building partnerships that advance Africa's own developmental priorities.

For too long, Africa has measured the strength of its international relationships by the number of agreements signed, investments announced or partnerships established. While these remain important, the more meaningful measure is whether those partnerships strengthen Africa's productive capacity, expand our knowledge economy, create sustainable industries and improve the lives of our people.

In other words, Africa should not seek partnerships because powerful nations desire access to our markets or our minerals. Africa should seek partnerships that accelerate industrialisation, strengthen institutions, build technological capability and position our young people to compete confidently in a rapidly changing global economy.

It is here that I believe we must distinguish between being strategically important and being strategically influential. Importance is conferred by circumstance; influence is earned through capability. A continent rich in resources may attract global attention, but only a continent with strong institutions, competitive economies and skilled citizens can shape the terms on which it engages the world.

We need to only look across our own continent to recognise that Africa is already demonstrating what capability can achieve.

Kenya did not transform financial inclusion by replicating traditional banking systems; through innovations such as M-Pesa, it reimaged financial services around African realities and created a model now studied globally.

Rwanda has shown how technology can overcome geographic barriers by integrating drone technology into healthcare delivery, ensuring that life-saving medical supplies reach remote communities with speed and efficiency.

The African Continental Free Trade Area, meanwhile, represents one of the most ambitious economic integration projects of our time, creating the foundation for a



single African market capable of strengthening regional value chains, increasing intra-African trade and enhancing the continent's collective bargaining power.

These examples remind us that Africa's competitive advantage will not lie in imitating the development pathways of others, but in building solutions rooted in our own context and scaling them with confidence. That, in my view, is the responsibility that rests with our generation.

BUILDING AN AFRICA THAT NEGOTIATES FROM STRENGTH

If Africa is to emerge as an influential actor in a multipolar world, then our greatest task is not simply to cultivate stronger international partnerships. It is to strengthen the capabilities that allow us to participate in those partnerships as equals.

History teaches us that no nation has secured lasting prosperity through the export of raw materials alone. Countries transform their economies when they invest in knowledge, industrial capacity, innovation and people. The nations that shape global markets are not necessarily those with the greatest natural endowments, but those with the greatest ability to convert ideas into products, research into industry and talent into competitiveness.

This is where I believe the philosophy of becoming a Node for African Thought finds its fullest expression.

African thought must not end in academic journals or conference proceedings. It must shape public policy. It must influence industrial strategy. It must strengthen governance. It must produce entrepreneurs, scientists, engineers, diplomats and innovators capable of responding to African realities while competing confidently on the global stage.

The mechanisms that will reposition Africa therefore already lie before us. We need universities that produce knowledge relevant to Africa's developmental challenges, while remaining globally competitive in research and innovation. We need industries that add value to the minerals we extract instead of exporting opportunity alongside our raw materials.



We need digital infrastructure that enables Africa not merely to consume technology developed elsewhere, but to contribute meaningfully to its creation. We need stronger regional markets that allow African businesses to scale across the continent through initiatives such as the African Continental Free Trade Area. And perhaps most importantly, we need public institutions that are capable, accountable and trusted, because sustainable development has never been achieved without capable institutions.

These are not separate ambitions. They are mutually reinforcing. Knowledge strengthens institutions. Strong institutions enable investment. Investment supports industrialisation. Industrialisation creates employment. Employment expands opportunity. Opportunity strengthens social cohesion. And together, these create the conditions for Africa to negotiate with confidence in an increasingly complex global environment.

Yet we must also acknowledge that globalisation in the twenty-first century is considerably more complex than it was a generation ago. Competition is no longer confined to trade or investment; it increasingly revolves around data, artificial intelligence, digital infrastructure, critical minerals, supply chains and technological standards. These realities require Africa to think beyond participation and towards strategic positioning.

We must ask not only where our resources are extracted, but where they are processed; not only who finances our infrastructure, but who owns the technology that underpins it; not only who invests in Africa, but whether those investments expand our own productive capacity. These are not questions of isolation or protectionism. They are questions of resilience, strategic foresight and sustainable development in a rapidly changing global order.

For me, therefore, the measure of Africa's awakening will not be the number of summits we attend or the declarations we adopt. It will be whether a young entrepreneur in KwaMashu, a researcher in Springbok, an engineer in Kigali or an innovator in Accra finds that Africa has become the best place to imagine, build and scale ideas capable of changing the world.



That is the Africa we should be building.

THE GENERATION THAT WILL DEFINE AFRICA'S PLACE IN THE WORLD

The conversation about Africa's place in a multipolar world is, at its heart, a conversation about people. More specifically, it is a conversation about whether Africa is preparing its young people not merely to participate in the future, but to shape it.

It is often said that Africa's youthful population is its greatest asset. I would argue that this is only partially true.

A young population, on its own, is neither an asset nor a demographic dividend. It becomes one only when young people possess the knowledge, skills, opportunities and confidence to innovate, to lead, to build enterprises and to contribute meaningfully to society. Without deliberate investment, a demographic dividend can quickly become a demographic burden.

This is why the conversation about youth development cannot be separated from conversations about economic policy, education, industrialisation, digital transformation or international cooperation. And still, these are not parallel discussions; they are part of the same developmental project.

As the National Youth Development Agency, we see this reality every day. Across our country are young people with remarkable ideas, resilience and ambition. They are developing digital solutions to local challenges, building businesses from township economies, creating new opportunities within the creative industries, modernising agriculture through technology, and using innovation to solve problems that affect their own communities. They are not waiting for the future to arrive. They are already building it.

Our responsibility, therefore, is not to convince young people that they have potential. They already know that they do. Our responsibility is to build an enabling environment in which that potential can flourish. That means improving access to quality education and skills development, supporting entrepreneurship and



innovation, expanding pathways into meaningful employment, strengthening research and development, and ensuring that no young person is excluded from opportunity because of where they were born, their gender or their socio-economic circumstances.

If Africa is to negotiate confidently in a changing global order, then our greatest investment cannot be limited to infrastructure or institutions alone. It must also be in human capability.

Because in the end, the continent that will lead in the twenty-first century will not necessarily be the one with the largest reserves of critical minerals. It will be the one with the greatest concentration of critical minds.

That is why investing in young people is not simply a social responsibility. It is Africa's most important strategic investment.

AFRICA MUST LEAD

As I conclude colleagues, I return to the question with which I began. Can Africa be strategically important without becoming strategically influential?

My answer is no. Not if we aspire to shape, rather than simply inhabit, the world that is emerging.

The future of this continent will not be determined solely by the decisions taken in Washington, Beijing, Brussels, Moscow or New Delhi. Nor will it be determined by the number of partnerships we forge or the declarations we adopt. It will be determined by the choices we make here in Africa - about the quality of our institutions, the courage of our leadership, the competitiveness of our economies, the relevance of our universities and the opportunities we create for our people.

Universities are not simply places where knowledge is preserved; they are places where the future is imagined. They shape the ideas that influence public policy, inspire innovation and prepare generations to confront challenges we cannot yet foresee. As government, we have a responsibility to ensure that those ideas do not



remain confined to lecture halls or academic journals, but find expression in policies, industries, technologies and enterprises that transform lives.

Perhaps the greatest measure of Africa's awakening will not be whether the world pays greater attention to us. It will be whether Africa develops the confidence, capability and conviction to define its own future, negotiate on its own terms and contribute solutions to challenges that affect humanity as a whole.

I remain optimistic because I have seen the ingenuity, resilience and ambition of Africa's young people. Across our continent, a new generation is refusing to accept inherited limitations. They are building businesses where others see barriers. They are developing technologies that respond to local realities. They are producing knowledge, creating opportunities and proving, every day, that Africa's greatest resource has never been beneath its soil - it has always been within its people.

If this century is to be remembered as the African Century, it will not be because the world declared it so. It will be because Africans had the courage to build capable institutions, competitive economies, vibrant democracies and knowledge societies that earned the respect of the world.

Perhaps history will not judge our generation by how effectively we described the emergence of a multipolar world. It will judge us by whether we ensured that Africa entered that world with the confidence to shape it. Whether we built universities that generated ideas capable of changing societies. Whether we built economies that created value rather than exported it. Whether we raised a generation of young Africans who saw themselves not as spectators of global transformation, but as its architects.

The task before us, therefore, is not simply to awaken Africa. It is to build an Africa that leads.

I thank you.