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Caught between a Rock and a Hard Place? Africa's Position in the US–China Strategic Rivalry

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The US–China strategic rivalry is affecting investments around the world. Most countries are walking a tightrope, trying to align with both rivals simultaneously while maintaining neutrality. A neutral position is important especially for developing countries that are dependent on China and the US for investments and development aid. The countries of one continent are taking a different path though, aligning their foreign policy with China's. While the African continent is strategically important to both rivals, we currently see that almost all African countries align with China. We discuss the reasons behind this and the implications for practitioners and IB scholars.

INTRODUCTION

Do African countries pick a side in the US–China strategic rivalry? Since 1949, US–China relations have evolved from tense standoffs to a complex mix of intensifying diplomacy, growing rivalry, and increasingly intertwined economies. The recent international business (IB) literature has extensively focused on this rivalry, showing that it had a negative effect on the M&A activity of Chinese firms in the US and in US-allied countries (Li, Shapiro, Ufimtseva, & Zhang, 2024) and decreased revenues for Chinese suppliers from US clients (Fan, Ma, Cui, & Yiu, 2024).

However, recently, this rivalry has spilled over to third-party countries. For instance, when Turkey chose the Chinese firm CPMIEC to co-produce its FD-2000 missile defense system, the US imposed sanctions on technology transfers between US and Turkish firms in defense-related industries (Pamuk & Gumrukcu, 2020). Equally, while China has long been Australia's partner, a recent Australian decision to sign a security contract with the US, that banned Chinese 5G firms from Australia, resulted in large decreases of Chinese investments in Australia (Smyth, 2020).

While we have rich empirical evidence of the impact of this rivalry in the Global North, the Global South has been neglected. Academic articles do not focus on Africa, despite its geostrategic importance for both rivals (Nachum et al., 2023). In contrast, the US Department of Defense highlights the need to collaborate with African countries and acknowledges the threat of China's (and Russia's) growing influence on the continent (Garamone, 2024).

The purpose of this article is to dissect the current political relationship between all African countries and the

US and China to understand the potential impact of the US–China rivalry on the continent. To make this possible, we compare to what extent African countries vote in alignment with either China or the US in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). This is important because voting alignment reflects sociopolitical values and results in increased inward foreign direct investment (FDI) (Adarkwah, Dorobantu, Sabel, & Zilja, 2024; Sinani & Zilja, 2024). By providing an updated account on voting patterns, we give practitioners and scholars of IB a starting point to further inquire about the relation between strategic alignment, trade, FDI, loans, and development aid.

THE EFFECTS OF THE US–CHINA RIVALRY ON AFRICA

The US–China rivalry significantly impacts Africa, even though African countries are not direct participants. It manifests itself across spheres of influence, such as trade, investment, infrastructure development, military operations, and development aid. In the past years, China has established itself as Africa's largest partner for aid, loans, FDI, and trade (Bo, Lawal, & Sakariyahu, 2024), surpassing the US. As a result, when an African country aligns closely with either China or the US, they receive a varying response from the opposing rival based on the strength of alignment and the strategic importance of the country for both rivals.

For instance, the US has initiated significant investments to counter China's influence on the continent. A notable example is the revival of the Lobito Corridor railway project in Angola. First, the project was supported by Chinese financing to enhance regional connectivity and facilitate export. In response, in December 2024, US President

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Joe Biden visited Angola, where he announced a \$600 million investment in the Lobito Corridor as an alternative to Chinese financing (Weissert & Imray, 2024). In contrast, African countries that align closely with the US may see reduced engagement from China in infrastructure projects and FDI. For instance, while Kenya has benefited from US-backed financial initiatives and security cooperation, Chinese investments in key sectors like telecommunications and energy have diminished. This tug of war between China and the US complicates assessing the benefits of African countries' alignment ex-ante.

AFRICA'S UNGA VOTING PATTERNS WITH CHINA AND THE US

To capture which African countries are currently more politically aligned with China or the US, we analyze the UNGA voting patterns of all African countries with China and the US. Higher UNGA voting agreement reflects alignment on foreign policy and signals cooperative relations, while disagreement signals a conflictual relationship (Adarkwah et al., 2024). We compare the voting agreement, on a 0 (complete disagreement) to 1 (complete agreement) scale, for all African countries with the US and China. To do so, we rely on the UN grouping of African countries into sub-regions: Central, East, West, North, South.

Across all sub-regions (Figure 1), we find that the voting agreement with China (red line) is relatively stable and consistently higher than the agreement with the US. Voting agreement with the US (blue line) shows many fluctuations over time in all sub-regions. Maybe not surprisingly, the di-

vergence between China's and the US' alignment appears to have widened in recent decades. Figure 2 provides an overview map which subtracts the US voting agreement of each African country from the Chinese voting agreement in 2023. Higher values indicate greater alignment with China. In general, African countries are more closely aligned with China. Only Liberia has almost equal alignment with both. This is not surprising as Liberia gained independence from the American Colonization Society and was founded to resettle freed African slaves outside of the US (Dennis, 2006). While alignment with the US, a key ally of former colonial powers, remains significant, it is still lower than alignment with China, suggesting that Africa's engagement with China follows a broader pattern of South-South cooperation rather than an isolated geopolitical phenomenon. Interestingly, the 2023 alignment is particularly lopsided in North Africa, which may stem from different factors, such as the US support for Israel after the October 7th attack, increasing Chinese-Arab weapons trade, or Tunisia's, Algeria's, and Egypt's application to join BRICS (Talbot & Ghanem, 2023). Generally, these observed differences raise important questions about the broader geopolitical impact of China's presence on the continent.

Understanding African countries' alignment with China requires historical context, particularly the long-lasting impact of colonialism. European colonial rule in Africa was primarily extractive, with economies designed to serve European interests rather than foster Africa's self-sufficiency. Colonial infrastructures were built to transport raw materials to Europe, leaving African economies dependent on commodity exports (Wegenast & Schneider, 2017). Political structures were also imposed, often exacerbating ethnic

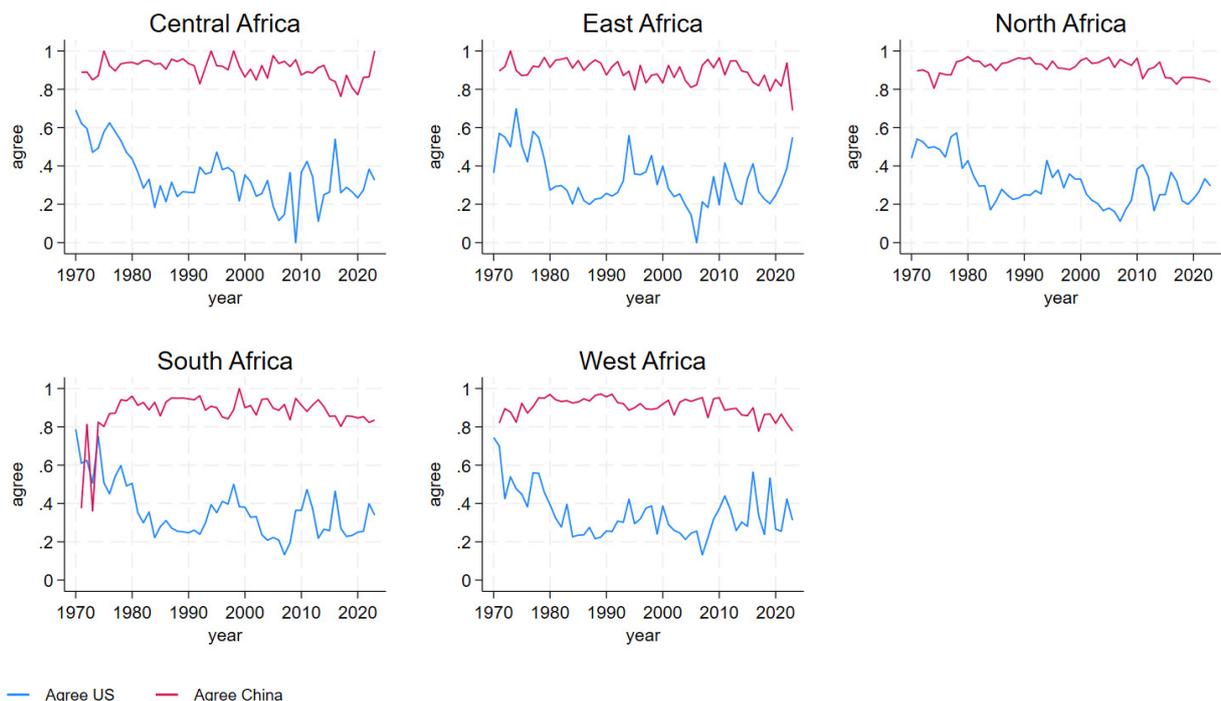


Figure 1. Voting agreement between different African sub-regions and the US and China

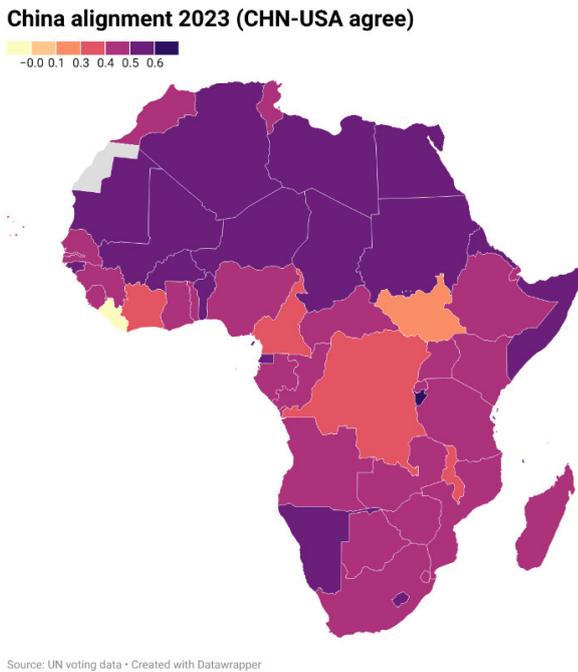


Figure 2. Africa-China voting agreement minus Africa-US voting agreement

and regional divisions that persist today. After gaining independence in the mid-20th century, many African countries sought to assert their sovereignty and economic independence. The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) provided an avenue for these countries to resist Western dominance. China, while not officially a member of NAM, often aligned itself with its principles of resisting Western dominance and fostering solidarity among developing nations. Additionally, the formation of the Group of 77 (G77) in 1964 which later became G77+China, further strengthened Africa-China ties. Thus, China's relationship with Africa has historical roots, with economic and political interests as key pillars. On the contrary, the US (and the West) has historically pursued policies that often conflicted with the interests of African countries, such as imposing conditionalities on aid, and promoting trade liberalization that favored Western countries. This sentiment was highlighted by President Donald Trump in 2017 (Landler, 2017): *"All of these nations that take our money and then they vote against us at the Security Council, or [...] at the Assembly [...] Well, we're watching those votes. [...] Let them vote against us; we'll save a lot. [...]"*

Furthermore, the shared historical experience of colonization and imperialism has fostered a sense of solidarity between most African countries and China, while the US historically rather favored the colonialists, despite their heritage. A recent example of this is the military withdrawal from Niger by both US and French troops, after they condemned a military coup in the country. China avoided a condemnation in order not to jeopardize prior investments of the China National Petroleum Corporation and future investments into uranium mining (Harsono, 2024).

Our empirical observations lay the foundation for several practitioner insights. First, the recent expansion of China's economic and political ties across Africa represents an important opportunity for firms and entrepreneurs in Africa. China's investments in infrastructure improve connectivity within Africa and its link to global markets. While Chinese investments may create dependence, and thereby lead to a potential overreliance on the relationship (Bo et al., 2024), this is by no means different from other regions who have relied extensively on their relationship with Western countries. China itself relied on outsourcing activities from the West to become the manufacturing and export hub of the world. In the current environment, China and almost all African countries seem to share similar views for the global economy, human development, and colonialization, which is reflected in UNGA voting patterns.

Our empirical observations also provide important avenues for IB scholars and students to engage with the African continent. We hope that we can entice scholars and students to see beyond the prevailing narratives and to investigate why African countries have predominantly aligned their foreign policy more closely with China than with Western countries. Given that this is so since the 1970s, a decade in which most of the countries known today gained independence, we would expect that Africa is politically closer to their former colonizers. However, this is not the case, and the gap is increasingly widening since China started to interact with most countries on the African continent. However, African policymakers should note that there is a risk of African countries becoming an arena for proxy competition, which could undermine their sovereignty and long-term development. African leaders must be cognizant of these dynamics and strive to avoid being entangled in this rivalry.

Further, it would be of interest to see how African countries' alignment with China has impacted the FDI and development aid that they have received from the US and other Western countries, given the geostrategic importance of the continent. Beyond anecdotal evidence, there is currently no evidence for a clear Pan-African relationship between alignment to either China or the US and decreased investment of the respective rival.

Finally, our observations should caution policymakers to see beyond the narrative of capitalism being the primary reason for the strong Africa-China alignment. While the US–China strategic rivalry increased Chinese investments to secure a geostrategic position on the continent, this is not the whole story. Part of their alignment dates to many African countries' early years and the continued expropriation of African resources by Western firms, who rely on old postcolonial rules and contracts to underpay African countries for the extraction of resources (Wegenast & Schneider, 2017). The Western world needs to treat African countries as equal partners before Western countries are seen as a reliable partner rather than resource expropriator.

CONCLUSION

We set out to understand the position of African countries in the US–China strategic rivalry by analyzing the UNGA voting patterns of African countries. Our results show that most African countries are more politically aligned with China than with the US. However, despite this alignment, US engagement with Africa is strong. Even though the popular press tends to portray African countries' alignment with China as a recent development based on Chinese investment activities in Africa, we show that Africa and China have been aligned since the 1970s. African countries and China share a long-standing alignment through links in groups like the NAM and the G-77. These platforms fostered solidarity, emphasizing resistance to Western dominance and prioritizing economic cooperation. For practitioners, understanding the historical and deep-rooted alignment between African countries and China is crucial for effective engagement in the region. IB scholars should explore how historical influences have shaped international business relations in Africa. Specifically, investigating how colonial economic structures persist in modern trade and investment flows could provide insights into Africa's increasing strategic alignment with China. Additionally, analyzing how the US–China rivalry has created competition in Africa could help scholars to understand if and how this rivalry provides African countries with leverage in negotiating economic partnerships. By integrating the historical political context into IB research, scholars and students can contribute to a nuanced understanding of the complexities shaping African countries engagement with global powers.

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