

Africa as a Contested Continent: China, Russia and the West in the Third Scramble

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Africa has reemerged as a crucial arena for geopolitical competition among the foremost global powers, notably China, Russia, and the Western bloc led by the United States. This paper conceptualizes the phenomenon as a "Third Scramble for Africa," in contrast to the 19th-century colonial rush and the 20th-century Cold War battle. This study examines the positioning of African nations and societies within a fragmented international system defined by ideological, economic, and security alignments, utilizing harmonized global opinion data, geopolitical analysis, and secondary literature. The research argues that governance perspectives, historical memory, elite strategies, and institutional legitimacy all affect Africa's alignment patterns, alongside economic goals. The results indicate that Western influence remains firmly established yet socially nuanced. The study recommends among others that transparency in loan contracts and security collaborations is crucial. Opaque loan agreements, secret collateral provisions, and confidential security arrangements foster public distrust and facilitate elite capture. Disclosing the conditions of significant infrastructure loans, defense cooperation agreements, and resource-backed finance arrangements would enable parliaments, civil society, and oversight organizations to assess long-term consequences. Transparency enhances creditworthiness and government credibility by indicating a commitment to accountability. This is especially significant when large-scale projects or security initiatives have multi-decade consequences for sovereignty and financial stability.

Background to the Study

Analogous to the polarization of the Cold War, the contemporary international system and interactions are experiencing a fundamental reconfiguration. A widening chasm exists between liberal and non-liberal governance models in global public opinion and state alliances. Africa has shown its strategic significance in this region. The nascent Third Scramble is defined by infrastructure diplomacy, regime security alliances, institutional sway, and rivalry for developmental legitimacy, in contrast to the First Scramble (1884–1914), primarily driven by territorial domination and conquest, and the Second Scramble during the Cold War, predominantly motivated by ideological proxy competition. Fasanotti, 2022. Africa's dynamic and youthful demographic, abundant natural and rare-earth resources, and strategic positioning have significantly enhanced the continent's growing strategic importance (Sanny & Selorney, 2021). China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has led to substantial infrastructure projects across the continent, including Nigeria, where a recent accord pertains to nuclear energy development and economic collaboration. The viability of the debt incurred by these initiatives, however, has been questioned. Research indicates that the 75 most impoverished nations will be obligated to repay a substantial amount of debt to China by 2025.

Africa serves as a pivotal arena for external powers because to its expanding population, wealth of natural resources, vital maritime routes, and significant voting influence in global institutions. China cultivates comprehensive trade integration and infrastructural development. Russia augments its political advice services and security alliances. Western nations persist in exercising influence via trade agreements, governance programs, and aid structures. African foreign policy decisions and domestic governance are influenced by these relationships, creating overlapping spheres of influence. This study analyzes the manifestation of these processes in different African nations and the perceptions and responses of African actors to them.

Conceptual Review

A complex transition from traditional dependency frameworks to more intricate partnership arrangements is revealed in the literature on contemporary Africa-global power relations. Previously, academic discussions regarded Africa as a passive recipient of external influence; however, they have now acknowledged the region's increasing agency in international relations. China's Belt and Road Initiative promotes infrastructure-driven engagement, as evidenced by recent research. Chinese investment patterns deviate from Western models by prioritising physical infrastructure over governance conditions, as per Aidoo and Hess (2024). Chellaney (2023) and other critics caution against "debt-trap diplomacy," which involves the accumulation of catastrophic debt burdens as a result of Chinese loans. This apprehension is corroborated by the 2025 report from the Lowy Institute, which documents \$22 billion in debt obligations owed by the 75 most indigent nations. Conversely, African researchers, including Nagao et al. (2024), contend that China-Africa relations are a prime example of genuine South-South cooperation, providing alternatives to development models that are primarily influenced by the West.

The literature on U.S.-African relations emphasises the promotion of democratic governance and security collaboration. Hunt (2025) documents the evolution of AFRICOM from a humanitarian focus to counterterrorism initiatives, thereby illustrating broader strategic shifts. The Council on Foreign Relations (2024) underscores the challenges of balancing security imperatives with developmental needs, suggesting that an excessive emphasis on security could potentially undermine long-term cooperation goals. Academic examination uncovers conflicts between the promotion of American democracy and pragmatic relations with non-democratic friends. Scholarly focus on Russian participation has escalated subsequent to Wagner Group deployments. Akomah and Ramani (2025) examine Russia's employment of private military contractors as instruments of statecraft, allowing Moscow to exert influence while preserving plausible deniability. The Carnegie Endowment's 2024 research characterizes Russian intervention as opportunistic, capitalizing on deficiencies in Western policy and local discontent. Nonetheless, several scholars contend that approach exaggerates Russian capacities while minimizing African autonomy in navigating these interactions.

Modern literature increasingly highlights African autonomy in navigating external ties. Taylor (2024) contends that African leaders adeptly exploit rival powers to optimize advantages and reduce dependency. The Foreign Policy Research Institute's 2024 research emphasizes the coordination of responses to external pressures by regional institutions such as ECOWAS and the African Union. This study questions previous assumptions of dependence theory regarding African passivity. The global involvement of Africa is recognized in recent literature as incorporating novel facets such as climate diplomacy, digital transformation, and diaspora engagement. The 2024 research conducted by UNESCO demonstrates the extent to which cultural diplomacy enhances Africa's soft power, while the digital plan of the African Union suggests the potential for technological advancement. This developing literature illustrates Africa's diverse strategy for global interaction that transcends conventional economic and security paradigms.

Western Liberal Institutional Framework

In recent years, the United States has increased its focus on Africa, recognizing the continent's growing economic and geopolitical importance. The United States was a prominent trading partner for a number of African countries, such as Nigeria and South Africa, with a total of \$85 billion in U.S.-Africa commerce in 2024 (U.S. International Commerce Administration, 2025). This commercial connection is essential to Washington's comprehensive strategy to counteract the influence of China and other global powers, while simultaneously promoting African economic development through initiatives such as Prosper Africa and the AGOA.

In addition to trade, the U.S. has boosted military collaboration with African nations, prioritizing counterterrorism and security alliances. Established in 2008, the U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) has expanded to manage various collaborative exercises and training initiatives designed to enhance regional security against terrorist organizations such as Boko Haram, al-Shabaab, and ISIS affiliates (Department of Defense, 2024). In 2024, the

United States boosted its security aid to Nigeria by supplying advanced surveillance technology to track rebel activities in the northern regions (Defense News, 2024).

The United States has endeavoured to improve bilateral relations by participating in international forums and conducting high-level visits. President Joe Biden organised the U.S.-Africa Leaders' Summit in late 2024, with a focus on governance, climate change, and economic recovery in the wake of COVID-19. In contrast to certain authoritarian pressures from other global entities, this summit reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to the development of Africa and democratic institutions. Additionally, the United States' engagement with Africa is contingent upon energy diplomacy. The United States has consistently supported African nations in their efforts to diversify their energy portfolios, particularly by making substantial investments in the export of liquefied natural gas (LNG). South Africa recommended an agreement to import from the United States in May 2024. LNG will strengthen energy relations between the two nations by reducing energy shortages and promoting the transition to greener energy sources (Reuters, 2024).

Notwithstanding these favorable developments, the United States faces ongoing challenges in preserving its influence in the context of escalating competition. Analysts indicate that the U.S. must reconcile security concerns with economic development and circumvent notions of neo-colonialism to establish authentic partnerships (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024). As African states increasingly express their autonomy in global matters, U.S. strategy is adapting to foster more inclusive and mutually advantageous interactions. Western researchers stress the promotion of democracy, aid conditionality, and soft power as crucial vehicles of influence. Liberal institutionalists contend that a rule-based order, transparency, and governance changes are fundamental to sustainable development partnerships.

Export of China's Developmental State

Over the past two decades, China has markedly strengthened its footprint in Africa, establishing itself as the continent's foremost trading partner. In 2024, trade between China and Africa reached over \$295.5 billion, reflecting a growth of 6.1% from the prior year. China's exports to Africa increased to \$178.76 billion, whilst imports from Africa ascended to \$116.79 billion, indicating a steady shift towards a more balanced trade relationship (Ecofin Agency, 2025). This trade increase highlights Beijing's strategic focus on obtaining access to African markets and resources within its wider global economic objectives.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been instrumental in solidifying China's influence in Africa via infrastructure development. Since the inception of the BRI, China has financed and constructed Exceeding 10,000 kilometers of railway lines, surpassing 100,000 kilometers of highways, and numerous significant ports and bridges throughout the continent (Africa China News, 2024). These initiatives enhance regional connectivity, enable China's sustained access to essential raw supplies and markets, and promote economic progress in Africa.

China's investment policy in Nigeria is illustrated by the China Development Bank's \$254.76 million loan for the Kano-Kaduna railway project in January 2025. The 203-kilometer railway is anticipated to improve transit between northern Nigeria and Abuja, facilitating trade and movement in one of Africa's most populated nations (Reuters, 2025). This infrastructure loan indicates China's emphasis on funding extensive transportation initiatives that enhance connections with pivotal African economies. Nonetheless, China's financial involvement has elicited apprehensions regarding debt sustainability in African countries. A 2025 report by the Lowy Institute cautioned that the 75 poorest countries globally are confronted with an unprecedented \$22 billion in debt repayments to China this year, underscoring the escalating debt burdens resulting from Chinese loans associated with the Belt and Road Initiative (The Guardian, 2025). This has resulted in intensified examination of the dangers associated with "debt-trap diplomacy," wherein Chinese financing may yield augmented geopolitical influence over susceptible African nations.

Notwithstanding these problems, China is altering its investment strategy to prioritize sustainable sectors. During the 2024 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), China declared new objectives emphasizing agriculture, renewable energy, and the development of vital minerals (South China Morning Post, 2024). This strategic shift seeks to synchronize Chinese investment with Africa's developmental requirements while satisfying global sustainability objectives and alleviating criticism regarding prior loan practices. Research on China-Africa relations emphasizes infrastructure-driven collaboration, non-interference in policy, concessional financing, and expedited project implementation. China's strategy is frequently characterized as pragmatic and appealing to states want tangible growth results without political prerequisites.

Russia's Security-Focused Resurgence

Russia has been diligently augmenting its influence in Africa by political, military, and economic initiatives, establishing itself as a strategic rival to Western nations and China. In 2024, Russia entered into several agreements with African countries totaling over \$3 billion, mostly concentrating on military sales, energy initiatives, and mining enterprises (TASS, 2025). This renewed involvement aligns with Russia's overarching foreign policy objective of expanding alliances and securing resources essential for its economic goals. Russia has utilized private military contractors, notably the Wagner Group, to enhance its influence on the continent, especially in war zones. Reports in 2024 verified Wagner's presence in nations like as the Central African Republic (CAR), Mali, and Sudan, where they have offered training, security for government officials, and direct combat assistance against insurgent factions (BBC News, 2024). Although officially refuted by Moscow, Wagner's Operations have significantly augmented Russian influence over pivotal governments, affecting local political and security dynamics.

Russia has intensified collaboration with African countries abundant in oil, gas, and uranium resources. In early 2025, Russia entered into a memorandum of understanding with Angola to advance oil exploration and collaborate on nuclear energy initiatives, therefore augmenting its

position in critical energy sectors (Reuters, 2025). Furthermore, Russia's national nuclear organization, Rosatom, is engaged in projects in South Africa and Egypt focused on advancing nuclear power capabilities, indicating a sustained commitment to energy collaboration in the region (World Nuclear News, 2024). Economic connections are also broadening beyond resource extraction. Russia has endeavored to enhance trade with Africa by advocating agricultural exports and investing in infrastructure, albeit at a more gradual rate than China or the West. In 2024, Russian exports to Africa rose by 8%, encompassing fertilizers, machinery, and guns, thereby bolstering home industries and strengthening political connections (African Business Magazine, 2024).

Nonetheless, Russia's engagement in Africa is fraught with controversy. The international world has condemned Russia for purportedly exacerbating wars and human rights violations via its military assistance and mercenary operations, prompting concerns over stability in multiple African nations (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Moreover, several African governments encounter opposition from civil society organizations concerned about being embroiled in global power conflicts that could jeopardize their sovereignty.

Notwithstanding these obstacles, Russia's African strategy is expected to persist in its evolution, emphasizing the enhancement of security collaboration, the expansion of commercial alliances, and the positioning of itself as an alternative to Western and Chinese dominance. Moscow, under sanctions and geopolitical isolation elsewhere, considers Africa a vital domain for sustaining its global significance (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2024). Recent literature highlights Russia's dependence on arms deliveries, private military contractors, elite security assurances, and political advisory functions in unstable and coup-prone nations, especially in the Sahel and Central Africa.

African Agency and Strategic Negotiation

The African diaspora significantly influences Africa's worldwide political standing. Approximately 150 million individuals of African heritage reside beyond the continent, serving as a vital link between Africa and the global community. Diaspora networks substantially enhance political advocacy, economic investment, and cultural diplomacy, hence augmenting Africa's soft power internationally (World Bank, 2024). African diaspora organizations have advocated for policies that promote development, human rights, and democratic governance in their countries of origin. In 2024, diaspora groups significantly impacted U.S. foreign policy discussions, especially with the renewal. The African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) guarantees sustained preferential trade access for African products (Brookings Institution, 2024). Moreover, diaspora activism has enhanced worldwide awareness initiatives concerning conflict resolution, anti-corruption, and climate change in Africa (African Diaspora Network, 2024).

Remittances from the diaspora are one of the continent's most vital financial lifelines, exceeding \$85 billion in 2024, outpacing foreign direct investment. Official Development Assistance (World Bank, 2025). These funds facilitate household consumption, education,

and entrepreneurship, fostering grassroots growth and economic resilience. Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Ghana are the leading recipients of diaspora remittances, which represent a substantial fraction of their GDP (International Monetary Fund, 2025). The African diaspora culturally promotes African heritage and identity globally through arts, media, and intellectual collaborations. The 2024 African Diaspora Summit in London underscored the significance of cultural diplomacy in enhancing connections between Africa and its diaspora groups, promoting a collective identity and purpose (UNESCO, 2024). These cultural exchanges facilitate the reformation of international narratives on Africa, highlighting its diversity, creativity, and innovation.

Notwithstanding these beneficial contributions, difficulties endure, such as the political marginalization of diaspora perspectives in domestic African policy formulation and the intricacies of dual citizenship legislation in certain nations (Migration Policy Institute, 2024). Resolving these concerns could enhance the diaspora's capacity to impact Africa's developmental path and international prominence. The African diaspora plays a crucial role in global politics by utilizing economic resources, political influence, and cultural capital to enhance Africa's worldwide standing. Enhancing diaspora engagement policies presents significant opportunities for African nations to strengthen global connections and augment their geopolitical power. African political studies posit that African elites are not mere passive beneficiaries but rather strategic agents who utilize external relationships to consolidate regimes, expand fiscal capacity, and negotiate development terms.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a hybrid theoretical framework combining neo-realism, dependency and soft power theories:

Neo-Realism Theory (Power Rivalry and Spheres of Influence)

In International Relations, neoclassical realism is employed not only for its explanatory power regarding a variety of events, but also for its emphasis on multiple levels of analysis and its avoidance of the reductionist dogmatism that ails other theories. Neo-classical realism is a modern interpretation of neo-realism and classical realism. Gideon Rose originated the theory. Neo-classical realism is the result of a foreign policy analysis that analyses the structure of the international system and domestic variables, as well as their complex interactions. Therefore, neo-classical realism posits that the analytical strengths of neo-realists like Waltz and Gilpin, as well as the analytical strengths of unit-level studies conducted by classical realists such as Morgenthau, Kissinger, and Wolfers, must be taken into account when analysing the foreign policy of states within the framework of the international system (Taliaferro, 2009).

Dependency Theory (Structural Economic Relations)

Dependency theory is an approach to development that became prominent in the 1960s mainly as a result of the work of a group of social scientists working in or on Latin America. The idea contested prevailing Western conceptions of development, which posited that the

underdevelopment of global South nations resulted from the enduring presence of traditional structures and institutions within these countries. The modernization strategy posits that the Global South will progress by adopting modern institutions, perspectives, and values, emulating the industrialized, developed West.

Soft Power Theory (Legitimacy and Perception)

In the contemporary global landscape, soft power and public diplomacy have gained prominence as nations maneuver through the intricacies of international relations, striving to fulfill their goals not solely through economic and military might but also by earning public support. The efficacy of soft power and public diplomacy depends on credibility and the capacity to uphold a favorable image; therefore, it necessitates the persistent and purposeful development of cultural and ideological exports. As global interconnectivity increases and international competition intensifies, the soft power and public diplomacy of nations emerge as essential instruments for influencing global dynamics, promoting international collaboration, and furthering national interests in a nuanced and significant manner (Nye, 2008). The combination of these three theories helps us to adequately interpret the complex, inexorably challenging tides Africa as a continent continues to face in the game of power, economic resources and geopolitical supremacy among the tripod of China, Russia and the West.

Methodology

This analysis is based on a comprehensive synthesis of secondary data obtained from peer-reviewed journals, policy briefs, institutional reports, and continental survey instruments. The analysis primarily relies on harmonized datasets from extensive perception surveys like Afrobarometer and governance indicators from the World Bank, offering standardized assessments of public attitudes regarding governance performance, development priorities, and external partnerships across African nations. The datasets are sanitized, standardized, and normalized to facilitate cross-national comparability and longitudinal analysis of trends across time.

The study utilizes geopolitical case comparisons to contextualize quantitative results within particular national contexts. Selected African nations are analyzed as case studies due to their differing levels of engagement with prominent external actors, facilitating a comparative evaluation of how various partnership models influence governance outcomes, infrastructure development, security collaboration, and public perception. This comparative design enables the detection of trends and discrepancies in the interaction between external influences and domestic political and economic frameworks. A comprehensive analysis is conducted through systematic content examination of official communications, bilateral agreements, policy addresses, and project paperwork pertaining to significant foreign interactions in Africa. Documents from principal stakeholders—namely China, Russia, the European Union, and the United States—are thematically coded to discern recurring narratives, strategic priorities, and partnership models (e.g., infrastructure-driven investment, security-oriented collaboration, governance-conditional assistance, or resource-exchange frameworks).

The study integrates quantitative correlation analysis with qualitative interpretive techniques. Statistical methods are utilized to analyze the correlation between citizen satisfaction with domestic governance and articulated geopolitical preferences for external partners. These relationships are subsequently elucidated through qualitative insights obtained from case studies and document analysis to clarify why specific partnership models are more prominent in certain governance environments. This mixed-method approach enables the research to progress from mere descriptive accounts to a deeper explanatory comprehension of how perceptions of governance influence, and are influenced by, Africa's changing geopolitical alliances.

Results and Discussion

China's Perceptual Advantage

In numerous African nations, China's involvement is frequently assessed by the conspicuous presence of its initiatives and the rapidity of their realization. Prominent infrastructure—such as highways, rail routes, ports, power plants, and public buildings—establishes a direct, tangible connection between collaboration and developmental results. Projects associated with the Belt and Road Initiative often result in tangible assets for individuals, bolstering the notion that international collaboration produces concrete advantages rather than merely theoretical policy changes. This prominence influences both public and elite attitudes, as infrastructure symbolizes progress and state capability.

The rapidity of delivery enhances this perceptual benefit. Chinese state-owned firms and financial institutions are designed to expedite the transition from agreement to execution, frequently shortening durations that would be extended in more bureaucratically complex procurement processes. Governments with immediate deficiencies in transportation, energy, or urban infrastructure often prioritize this responsiveness, especially when domestic political constraints necessitate swift, tangible outcomes. The coordinated collaboration of Chinese funders, contractors, and diplomatic entities minimizes administrative delays and augments the perception of efficiency.

China's emphasis on non-conditional engagement is equally crucial. In contrast to numerous Western development frameworks that condition aid on governance reforms, human rights standards, or macroeconomic policy recommendations, China's strategy emphasizes respect for sovereignty and non-interference in internal political matters. This stance significantly appeals to development-oriented governments that wish to maintain policy independence while obtaining external funding and technical expertise. The lack of explicit political conditions is sometimes viewed as a collaboration grounded in shared economic interests rather than ideological congruence.

Entities like the Export-Import Bank of China and major state contractors such as China Railway Construction Corporation implement this strategy by amalgamating financing, engineering, and construction into cohesive packages. This alleviates coordination requirements on host governments and enables projects to advance with diminished

administrative obstacles. This integrated concept provides a viable alternative for numerous African authorities to address infrastructure deficiencies that could persist for decades.

The visibility, rapidity, and unconditional framing of China's contacts collectively generate a perceptual advantage that precisely coincides with the aims of governments pursuing swift socioeconomic progress while preserving political sovereignty. The long-term sustainability of these programs is a subject of ongoing debate; yet, regarding immediate perception and political attractiveness, China's approach frequently resonates powerfully within development-focused policy contexts.

Russia's Enticement of Vulnerable Regimes

In several African environments characterized by internal instability, conflict, or disputed political transitions, Russia's involvement is frequently viewed largely as a means of regime security rather than as development aid. Governments facing armed insurrection, terrorism, or elite disintegration typically prioritize quick stabilization rather than long-term institutional transformation. In this context, Russia's willingness to supply military weapons, training, intelligence collaboration, and diplomatic support—without imposing governance stipulations—establishes a partnership that directly addresses the paramount priority of ruling authorities: survival and control.

This concept is implemented via state channels, including the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, and occasionally through private military networks traditionally linked to the Wagner Group. These entities provide security packages encompassing weaponry transfers, battlefield assistance, protection of critical locations, and advisory functions for national military forces. For governments attempting to suppress insurgencies or coups, such assistance is appealing due to its expediency, political simplicity, and focus on coercive capability rather than institutional transformation. A further aspect of Russia's allure is in its political support on the global stage. Russia, through its role in the United Nations Security Council, might offer diplomatic protection from sanctions, probes, or decisions deemed antagonistic by current governments. The external legitimacy, along with internal security assistance, bolsters the resilience of administrations facing pressure from both local and international entities.

Significantly, Russia's involvement is articulated within a paradigm of non-interference in internal government. There is minimal emphasis on electoral processes, human rights benchmarks, or public sector reforms. For governments confronting legitimacy issues, this lack of oversight diminishes the likelihood that external alliances will exacerbate internal political weaknesses. The partnership is characterized by reciprocal strategic interests: resource access and geopolitical influence for Russia, and regime stabilization for the host government. In precarious political contexts, where the preservation of the state supersedes wider developmental concerns, this security-focused cooperation approach may seem exceedingly rational. It immediately addresses the urgent need of beleaguered authorities and provides an alternative to partners whose support may depend on governance reforms.

Although the long-term consequences for institutional growth and civil-military relations are still contested, Russia's strategy evidently appeals to administrations focused on preserving authority in times of upheaval.

Western Institutional Entrenchment and Societal Skepticism

Western actors possess a longstanding and entrenched institutional presence throughout Africa, seen in aid agencies, financial institutions, diplomatic missions, educational exchanges, and civil society collaborations. Entities including the United States Agency for International Development, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the European Union have functioned on the continent for decades, influencing public sector reforms, governance structures, health systems, educational initiatives, and macroeconomic management. This institutional depth offers continuity, specialized knowledge, and extensive networks that few external entities can emulate.

This established presence exists alongside a continual layer of social and political skepticism within certain segments of African societies and political elites. A source of this skepticism is the historical memory of colonial rule, which persists in shaping perceptions of Western involvement. Contemporary development-oriented partnerships are frequently viewed through a historical perspective that links Western involvement to external domination and exploitative interests. This historical awareness influences the reception of policies, funding initiatives, and diplomatic actions among both elite and general populations. A secondary source of skepticism stems from fatigue regarding aid conditionality. Structural adjustment programs and governance-related assistance, especially in the late 20th century, necessitated extensive reforms that were socially and politically destabilizing. Although designed to stabilize economies and enhance governance, these approaches are frequently associated with austerity, public sector downsizing, and diminished social expenditure. Consequently, modern governance stipulations linked to aid may be perceived not as beneficial improvements but as persistent external mandates that inadequately consider local political contexts.

An impression of inconsistency exists in the promotion of democracy. Western governments often promote democratic principles, election integrity, and human rights; but, their reactions to political crises in various African nations are occasionally perceived as selective or driven by strategic objectives. The inconsistency of Western actors tolerating governance deficiencies in strategically significant states while condemning others undermines the credibility of their normative advocacy. Both citizens and policymakers may inquire whether the promotion of democracy is driven by principle or by pragmatic considerations. Thus, although Western entities maintain a crucial role in institutional development and governance assistance, their impact is moderated by public perceptions influenced by historical context, policy experiences, and observed diplomatic conduct. The outcome is a multifaceted environment where Western institutional robustness is considerable, yet its legitimacy is often examined through a critical societal perspective.

African Pragmatic Sovereignty

Across the continent, African states increasingly practice what can be described as pragmatic sovereignty—a strategic posture in which governments engage multiple external partners simultaneously to preserve policy autonomy, extract maximum developmental value, and avoid overdependence on any single power. Rather than identifying ideologically with one bloc, governments calibrate their foreign relationships issue by issue, sector by sector, based on urgent national interests and long-term development aspirations. This approach is obvious in how governments mix infrastructure finance from China, security cooperation with Russia, trade and regulatory alliances with the European Union, and development or technological collaboration with the United States—often concurrently rather than sequentially. Such diversification is not accidental; it is a deliberate strategy to create negotiating space. By preserving numerous options, governments improve their negotiation position, compare partnership terms, and avoid political pressure that may accompany exclusive alignment.

Pragmatic sovereignty is also evident in diplomatic conduct inside international platforms. African nations often exhibit adaptable voting behaviors in international organizations, avoiding automatic affiliation with any dominant power and instead emphasizing stances that match with their domestic economic or security priorities. This non-aligned stance highlights a preference for strategic independence rather than ideological allegiance. At the continental level, entities like the African Union and the economic integration initiative of the African Continental Free Trade Area bolster this sovereignty by enhancing intra-African collaboration. As regional integration intensifies, African nations acquire enhanced influence in negotiations with external entities from a more unified economic foundation. Importantly, pragmatic sovereignty is not a rejection of foreign collaboration; rather, it is a clever technique of managing it. Governments acknowledge that progress, security, and technological advancement require external interaction, but they aim to arrange these ties in ways that maintain decision-making independence. In doing so, African states transform geopolitical competition into an asset—using it to widen policy choices, secure advantageous terms, and maintain strategic flexibility in a more multipolar world.

Conclusion

Africa today occupies a pivotal position in an evolving geopolitical contest in which influence is pursued less through territorial acquisition and more through the projection of developmental models, governance philosophies, and security partnerships. External entities are vying to showcase the preeminence and appeal of their methodologies regarding infrastructure funding, institutional change, technology transfer, and political collaboration. This competition is articulated through investment frameworks, diplomatic narratives, military cooperation agreements, and long-term economic engagements aimed at influencing the development and sovereignty pursuits of African governments.

In contrast to the 19th-century partition established at the Berlin Conference, the current "Third Scramble" does not entail direct territorial occupation. Rather, it manifests within ideological, economic, and institutional spheres. Ideologically, competing actors advance

different views about the relationship between governance, democracy, state capacity, and development. They provide divergent financing strategies, including infrastructure-led state partnerships, private-sector-driven investment approaches, and conditional development aid. They pursue influence through educational initiatives, regulatory alignment, security collaboration, and integration into global value chains.

This contest is also evident in the strategic engagements of major powers such as China, Russia, the European Union, and the United States, each of which advances distinct partnership models aligned with its geopolitical interests and normative outlook. These interactions affect African decisions about digital infrastructure, energy development, counter-terrorism collaboration, government reform, and trade integration. African states and civilizations are not passive entities in this battle. African agency—manifested through policy decisions, regional diplomacy, domestic political agendas, and public sentiment—significantly influences the reception, negotiation, and adaptation of external partnerships. Governments strategically collaborate with various partners to promote national interests, while citizens assess these collaborations based on perceived developmental results and government efficacy. The direction of this Third Scramble is influenced by both external objectives and the strategic calculations and desires of African actors.

Recommendations

Africa's current foreign interactions transpire within a complex network of development funding, security collaboration, and institutional impact. Navigating this environment requires adaptations not only from overseas partners but also from African countries and regional authorities. Five interrelated priorities stand out: rebalancing partnership models, diversifying external relations, coordinating regional foreign policy, embedding transparency, and strengthening domestic institutions.

First, Western partners should rebalance from conditionality toward co-development. For decades, several interactions between African nations and Western benefactors have been organized around policy stipulations linked to governance reform, macroeconomic restructuring, and institutional standards.

African governments ought to diversify alliances to circumvent dependency traps. Dependence on a singular foreign entity for infrastructure financing, security support, or commercial access heightens susceptibility to political and economic influence. By fostering partnerships with several partners—including China, the European Union, the United States, India, and Turkey—African nations may bargain from a position of strength. Diversification amplifies negotiating leverage, facilitates the evaluation of funding conditions and cooperation frameworks, and mitigates vulnerability to debt, technology, or security dependencies. This strategy converts geopolitical rivalry into a means of strategic advantage instead of a limitation.

Third, regional institutions ought to delineate synchronized foreign policy norms. Disjointed bilateral interactions undermine Africa's collective negotiating power. Regional and continental organizations, such as the African Union and sub-regional entities like ECOWAS, can formulate guiding principles for external relationships, encompassing norms for infrastructure agreements, security collaboration, and digital sovereignty. A coordinated framework does not diminish national sovereignty but establishes a common standard that enhances collective power. It also mitigates the possibility of external entities using policy disparities among adjacent states to get asymmetric benefits.

Fourth, transparency in loan contracts and security collaborations is crucial. Opaque loan agreements, secret collateral provisions, and confidential security arrangements foster public distrust and facilitate elite capture. Disclosing the conditions of significant infrastructure loans, defense cooperation agreements, and resource-backed finance arrangements would enable parliaments, civil society, and oversight organizations to assess long-term consequences. Transparency enhances creditworthiness and government credibility by indicating a commitment to accountability. This is especially significant when large-scale projects or security initiatives have multi-decade consequences for sovereignty and financial stability.

Ultimately, fortifying local institutions mitigates susceptibility to external influence. Strong public financial management systems, autonomous judiciaries, competent civil services, and efficient parliamentary monitoring mitigate the likelihood that external alliances would disrupt domestic governance. Robust institutions enable governments to negotiate more efficiently, enforce contractual obligations, and guarantee that international commitments are consistent with national development strategies. Institutional resilience guarantees continuity during political transitions, thwarting external entities from capitalizing on governance vulnerabilities for strategic gain. Collectively, these priorities redefine Africa's role in the modern geopolitical context. African states, bolstered by cohesive regional frameworks and effective internal institutions, can actively influence foreign interactions to promote sovereignty, prosperity, and enduring stability, rather than merely serving as a passive battleground for contending powers.

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