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Strategic Coexistence or Cautious Competition? Understanding China–Russia Engagement in Africa

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Abstract

This paper examines involvement of China and Russia in Africa and discusses whether their presence on the continent is better understood in terms of cooperation, competition, or pragmatic coexistence. The paper contends that although both actors express support for a multipolar international order and seek to limit Western—particularly U.S. and European—dominance in Africa, their engagement follows distinct trajectories. While China employs an approach largely shaped by economic considerations, most notably infrastructure development, expanding trade relations, and access to natural resources, Russia's approach, by contrast, dominantly focuses on security and geopolitical objectives, with an emphasis on military cooperation and defense partnerships with African governments dissatisfied with Western security frameworks. The paper contends that China often presents its activities in Africa as mutually beneficial, framing cooperation as a shared project aligned with the development priorities of African states. This framing is supported not only by material interests but also by ideational narratives, including references to South–South solidarity and shared historical experiences of Western domination. Russia, on the other hand, adopts a different posture, relying less on such ideational appeals and instead prioritizing concrete strategic interests and security-related benefits. In the light of these differing modes of engagement, the paper argues that China–Russia relations in Africa are best characterized as a hybrid pattern combining elements of strategic coexistence with cautious competition. This coexistence, not only reshapes Africa's geopolitical landscape but also reflects broader shifts associated with the transition toward a more multipolar global order.

Keywords: China, Russia, Africa, coexistence, multipolar order

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Stratejik Bir Birlikte Varoluş Mu Yoksa Temkinli Bir Rekabet mi? Çin ve Rusya'nın Afrika'daki Etkileşimini Anlamak

Özet

Bu çalışma Çin ve Rusya'nın Afrika kıtasındaki girişimlerini bu ülkelerin ulusal çıkarları üzerinden değerlendirirken, bu iki büyük gücün kıtada bir işbirliği mi, çatışma mı, yoksa stratejik bir birlikte varoluş mu sergilediklerini tartışmaktadır. Çalışma, hem Çin'in hem Rusya'nın çok kutuplu bir dünya düzeni hedefi doğrultusunda kıtadaki Batılı aktörlerin, özellikle Amerika ve Avrupa'nın, etkisini azaltmayı amaçladıklarını ancak bu amaç doğrultusunda farklı yaklaşım ve araçlar kullandıklarını ileri sürmektedir. Çalışma, Çin'in kıtada özellikle yatırım, ticaret ve yeraltı kaynaklarına yönelik ekonomik varlığını

vurgularken, Rusya'nın daha ziyade Afrika'daki devletlerle askeri, güvenlik ve savunma alanlarında işbirliği yaptığını savunmaktadır. Bu doğrultuda, çalışma, kıta devletleriyle ilişkisinde Çin'in sadece ortak çıkarlara vurgu yapmakla kalmadığını, aynı zamanda söylem bazında bir ortaklık geliştirdiğini ve hedeflerini Güney-Güney işbirliği ve Batı emperyalizmine karşı bir ortak duruş olarak sergilemeyi seçtiğini savunmaktadır. Rusya'nın ise çoğunlukla stratejik ve güvenlik odaklı hareket ettiğini ve söylemden ziyade ortak çıkarlara vurgu yaptığını ileri sürmektedir. Son olarak, çalışma, bu iki büyük devletin Afrika'daki etkileşimlerine dayanarak, birbiri ile ilişkilerinin en iyi stratejik bir birlikte varoluş ve temkinli bir rekabet olarak görülmesi gerektiğini ele almaktadır. Bu durumun sadece Afrika'nın jeopolitiğini değil küresel bağlamda güç değişimini ve oluşmakta olan çok kutuplu dünya düzenini de etkilediği vurgusu ile çalışma sonlandırılmaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Rusya, Çin, Afrika, birlikte varoluş, çok kutuplu dünya

Introduction

How can great powers' involvement in regions beyond their borders be understood? And consequently, does their concurrent involvement produce cooperation, competition, or a hybrid pattern of strategic coexistence combining elements of collaboration and competition? This study aims to examine the mechanisms through which great powers project influence and advance their interests beyond their immediate regions, and assess whether such outward power projection generates rivalry or accommodation among them by focusing on China's and Russia's expanding engagement in Africa. In light of this aim, the study seeks to address the following questions: What characterizes China's and Russia' current interests in Africa? What instruments and modes of engagement do they employ to extend influence and pursue their interests on the continent? And finally, how do differing engagement strategies shape patterns of interaction—cooperation, competition or a strategic coexistence—between China and Russia in Africa?

The study argues that while both powers advocate for a multipolar international order and seek to reduce Western—particularly U.S. and European—influence in Africa, their approaches and instruments diverge in important ways. While China's engagement in Africa is dominantly economy-driven and it combines material incentives, such as trade, investment, and aid, with ideational narratives centered on South–South solidarity and historical victimization by Western imperialism, Russia, in contrast, adopts a primarily strategic and security-driven posture, focusing on converging material interests rather than the use of ideational rhetoric. The difference in instruments and approaches between the two actors results in coordination, despite

the absence of formalized institutional frameworks governing their interaction. The study contends that although both powers' engagement with Africa is primarily driven by material interests and characterized by a flexible, opportunity-oriented approach, their activities on the continent seldom interfere with one another. However, in this resource-rich region divergent objectives can generate competitive dynamics that reflect the broader logic of great-power competition and expose the limits of a strategic coexistence.

By unpacking the political reasoning behind the approaches and instruments that China and Russia employ in Africa, this study relates to the international relations literature on the roles of great powers in promotion of relations with far-away states with which they develop affinities. In theoretical terms, the paper argues from a realist perspective and contends that China-Russia relations in Africa are best understood as an outcome of interest-based calculations rather than as a product of a genuine cooperation or as a result of a common altruistic standing.

In methodological terms, this study employs qualitative approach, using case study and secondary data. In its attempt to address the questions outlined above, the study supports its arguments by recent empirical data and figures, alongside selected examples from political leaders' speeches.

The paper is structured as follows. The first section examines China's role in Africa, with particular emphasis on its economic interests. The section also discusses how China employs ideational instruments—such as appeals to South–South solidarity and narratives of shared victimization under Western imperialism—to strengthen its relations with the continent in pursuit of economic gains. The second section delineates Russia's expanding role in Africa over the past two decades, highlighting Moscow's strategic interests. It unpacks the dynamics of military cooperation under Russian leadership, situating these efforts within Russia's broader strategy to mitigate the Western-backed encirclement that has deepened in the aftermath of the war in Ukraine. The final section examines the parameters of cooperation and conflict between Russia and China in Africa in light of their respective interests and actions. The paper concludes by arguing that the Russia–China relationship in Africa is best understood as a hybrid model of strategic coexistence and cautious competition. Their coexistence, although not devoid of

tension, continues to reshape Africa's geopolitical landscape and carries broader implications for the evolving structure of a multipolar international order.

1. China in Africa: Strategy, Discourse and Practice

As an external power, it is long debated whether China is the new "imperialist" in Africa (Melber, 2008; Jauch, 2011; Hairong and Sautman, 2013). Although China has its own strategic considerations- particularly with regard to its energy and mineral needs and the natural resources that Africa can supply, China's interests alone cannot be used as an index to classify it as an empire. After all, it is the *means* employed in the exercise of power, namely coercion and imposition that makes a state an empire. If coercion is understood as "credible threats to which the target might or might not acquiesce, or unilateral actions that undermine the bargaining position of the weaker state," and imposition as situations in which "the target state is so weak that it has no option but to comply with the preferences of the stronger state" (Krasner, 2001: 17), then it is reasonable to argue that China refrains from employing either strategy. Also, since imperial strategy is mostly associated with a highly aggressive and intimidating policy and rhetoric, it leads to a great dissatisfaction in subordinate states and as the following pages will demonstrate, China's involvement has not triggered such a dissatisfaction among the African counterparts. On the contrary, while it is true that China has pursued its national interests and strategic objectives in Africa from the outset, it has consistently emphasized the existence of common interests and shared objectives with weaker partner states. In this context, the compliance of African states derives from rational cost–benefit calculations as well as, to some extent, shared values.

While China's presence in Africa goes back to the early days of independence movements in the 1960s and 1970s, when China provided moral and material support for liberation struggles in Africa, China's ties with the region remained limited in scope and importance till the late 1990s (Tull, 2006: 461). With the end of the Cold War, China's ascendancy as a global power through its dynamic economic growth increased its need for energy (mainly oil), and minerals, such as iron core, titanium, copper and timber that Africa offered aplenty[1]. In 1993, China

[1] In the late 1990s Middle East accounted for half of China's imports. By the early 2000s, Africa was already an important destination for China to import oil. Angola, Equator, Guinea, Nigeria, Algeria, Chad, the Republic of Congo, South Africa and Sudan provided oil to China. While Zimbabwe, Zambia, Ghana and Namibia provided minerals to China, Gabon, Cameroon and Liberia were supplier of timber (Shinn, 2007).

became, for the first time, a net importer of oil. In order to reduce its dependence on Middle Eastern oil, China decided to diversify its import sources by bolstering ties with Africa in the late 1990s. In 2003, China was importing18 per cent of its total oil from Africa and in 2014, Africa's share rose to 22 per cent (Vasquez, 2019). After almost a decade, in 2023, however, Africa accounted for only approximately 10 per cent of China's total oil imports, a notable decline from around 30 per cent in the 2010s (Gtai Council, 2025). Nonetheless, African oil continues to remain an important component of China's energy resources today.

As part of its strategy to deepen the economic engagement with Africa, China rapidly became the continent's third-largest trading partner in the early 2000s, after the United States and Europe. In an effort to secure access to energy and mineral resources, China offered trade, investment, and aid to the region without "strings attached." As opposed to the EU, the International Monetary Fund, and other international institutions that link development aid to the promotion of human rights and good governance in African countries, Chinese aid came with no political or economic conditions attached—other than the Taiwan clause. (Edolho, 2011:108). The "no strings attached" form of development aid has led many to argue that China is promoting a new world order in opposition to Western values (Jianbo & Xiaomin, 2011; Nantulya, 2019). By repudiating the increasingly influential norm that external interference in the domestic affairs of states can be legitimate, China's policies have remained anchored in the state-centered orthodoxy of non-interference and respect for state sovereignty. This approach has enabled China to frame its engagement as supportive of African states' development priorities, thereby responding to criticisms from Western actors.

Chinese investments in Africa took mostly the form of infrastructure projects, such as railway networks in Nigeria and between Tanzania and Zambia, road construction in Kenya and Rwanda, and airport construction in Juba in South Sudan. China has also played a significant role in port development along key maritime trade routes, including projects in Djibouti (Nantulya, 2019). These infrastructure initiatives demonstrate the close link between China's investment activities in Africa and its broader strategic objectives, particularly in relation to resource access, trade facilitation, and the expansion of its economic presence on the continent.

Current data indicates that Chinese firms are involved in the construction of approximately one-third of major infrastructure projects in Africa and provide financing for nearly one-fifth of such projects (Nantulya, 2025). In terms of lending, China committed an estimated amount of 182.28 billion US dollars in loans to African governments and regional institutions between 2000 and 2023, with countries such as Angola, Ethiopia, and Kenya ranking among the principal recipients (Baobab Africa Online, 2024).

In contemporary global economy, demand for critical minerals, such as nickel, graphite, manganese, cobalt, and lithium, has risen sharply due to their growing use in sectors such as defense and aerospace, electric vehicles, semiconductors, artificial intelligence, and medical technologies. Given that a significant proportion of global reserves of these minerals is located in Africa, the continent has become increasingly central to China's strategic calculations. As Nantulya (2025) notes, China aims to preserve its leading position in critical mineral refining by limiting exports to rival states and restricting the overseas transfer of materials with potential military applications. Against this backdrop, China has established a strong presence in Africa's critical mineral infrastructure[2]. Through the Belt and Road Initiative, China has secured ownership in key transportation and energy networks—including railways, ports, and power grids—that facilitate the integration of Africa's mineral resources into global supply chains under its control (Nantulya, 2025).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to account for every aspect of trade, infrastructure, and economic interactions between African states and China as these activities continue to expand and diversify. It therefore suffices to note that China's strategy in Africa has been predominantly economically oriented[3]. As for its approach towards Africa, China portrayed itself as a developing nation, at least to African audiences, to underline the common interests and objectives with African states. China employed anti-colonial affinities with the continent

[2] Nantulya (2025) argues that from 40 mines in 1999, Chinese overseas mine ownership increased from 40 mines in 1999 to 1,250 by 2022. Between 2000 and 2021, Beijing provided $57 billion in aid and credit for "transition minerals" (key inputs for renewable energy technologies) in developing countries. Roughly $24 billion of this went to Africa, making China Africa's largest financier of mineral projects and granting China resource access and political influence.

[3] Although China has expanded its security engagement with Africa over time through participation in United Nations peacekeeping operations, small arms exports, and technology-sharing with African partners. See Krukowska (2024) for a detailed account), economic interests nevertheless remain central to Beijing's relations with Africa.

as a basis for "working towards the establishment of a new international political and economic order in the 21st century" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2003). After all, China's attraction for Africa lies in its approach to Africa that sees the continent not a 'hopeless continent' (The Economist, 2000), but an underdeveloped one that is not only a place of deprivation and economic hardship, but one which is a 'strategically significant region', desperate for opportunities to develop its potential (Schoeman, 2008:410). As stated by the then Chinese President Jiang Zemin in early 2000s, "China, the largest developing country, and Africa, the continent with the largest number of developing countries," share convergent interests (People's Daily, 2000). In this regard, China has been careful to avoid words like 'donor' and 'aid receiver' in its economic assistance to the region, and thus, has placed great emphasis on treating African countries as equal sovereigns and with dignity (Jianbo & Xiaomin, 2011).

As part of South-South solidarity, China agreed to share its technical expertise (in the form of consultancies, scholarships, technical training), human resources (teachers and doctors), and managerial capabilities with Africa in contrast to the zero-sum outcomes of globalization and marginalization that Africa has suffered during much of its postcolonial relationships with the West (Edoho, 2011:106; McCormick, 2008: 84). Today the official Chinese position continues to frame China–Africa relations as mutually beneficial, given that both sides pursue comparable development goals and a shared historical background.

China's portrayal of itself as a progressive development partner was prominently reflected in former Chinese President Hu Jintao's address to the Nigerian National Assembly in April 2006, in which he stated that "peace, development and cooperation are the bedrocks of this collaboration" and "working together to share opportunities, meet challenges, and achieve common development is the desire of all peoples". When we look at the discourse of the current Chinese President Xi Jinping on Africa, we see that he employs similar principles as he underscores sovereign equality, non-interference, and mutual benefit to portray China-Africa cooperation as an alternative to Western conditionality-driven engagement (Forum On China-Africa Cooperation [FOCAC], 2018). Xi emphasizes the notion of a "community with a shared future for mankind," situating China–Africa relations within a broader vision of South–South cooperation and multipolarity (FOCAC, 2025). In this narrative, China positions itself as a

fellow developing country that respects African ownership of development priorities and rejects external political or normative impositions.

Finally, the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) can be identified as an integral component of China's broader strategy aimed not only at securing its power and influence in the region but also at institutionalizing its sustained political discourse on Africa. Based on the "South-South" partnership to promote economic growth, the FOCAC has served as the main platform for Sino–African relations since 2000 and it became the principal forum through which China provided loans at below-market interest rates with extended repayment periods, preferential credits, and debt relief, as well as comprehensive assistance in multiple sectors—ranging from clean energy programs to medical teams and supplies, and from Chinese government-funded scholarships to agricultural technology demonstration centers and the training of agricultural personnel (Kornegay and Landsberg 2009; He, 2012). Simultaneously, the FOCAC provided an excellent opportunity for China to sustain its image as the benign leader of the Third World.

Nevertheless, it would be overly naïve to suggest that China's engagement in Africa is driven by pure altruism. As previously noted, China's engagement in Africa has been closely linked to securing sustained access to African markets, driven by its demand for oil and critical minerals and, more broadly, by the pursuit of material interests. Indeed, China's engagement in Africa has been viewed by many as adhering to neo-colonial patterns of resource extraction, labor exploitation, and infrastructure development that relegate Africa to the role of a raw-materials supplier. As this paper argues, appeals to "South–South solidarity" and "respect for state sovereignty" in Chinese foreign policy stand out as shared values and common interests that enhance cooperation between the two sides, ultimately serving China's interests.

In sum, Africa represents an opportunity for China to reassert its global role as part of its broader effort to promote a multipolar international order in which the influence of the United States and Europe is constrained. As stated by President Xi Jinping during the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in October 2017, "with more than 5,000 years of continuous civilization, the Chinese nation has created a brilliant civilization, made outstanding contributions to humanity, and emerged as a great nation of the world." Embedded within this

vision is a decisive departure from China's decades-long foreign policy approach of "keeping a low profile" (Nantulya, 2019). Instead, China has increasingly pursued a more assertive and proactive strategy aimed at expanding its influence within the evolving global power structure. With 54 countries, Africa is a significant player in global affairs. Its strengthened relationships with Africa constitute a major component of Chinese broader strategy of shifting the balance of power in international arena in its favor.

2. Russia in Africa: Security-Centered Strategy and Power Politics

Similar to China, Russia's growing influence in Africa can be understood through the lens of a multipolar international order it promotes, an order intended to challenge the global leadership of the United States and to advance core objectives of Russian foreign policy. As will be discussed in the following pages, the cooperation that has accelerated over the past decade between Russia and African states seems to have evolved on terms favorable to Moscow—enhancing the Russian Federation's international prestige and competitive standing while simultaneously bolstering its own economic power.

It is worth noting that Russia adopts a strategy characterized by selective and opportunistic engagement aimed at securing recognition as a global power across multiple regions while sustaining this status over time. As McClintok (2021) underscores, Moscow intervenes in a calculated manner in contexts where it can utilize the discontent against the United States and other international actors. In this sense, Russia adjusts its engagement with an awareness of its position as one among several competing powers within the international system.

In much the same way as China, Russia did not establish a formal colonial presence in Africa. Likewise, Russia's engagement with the continent intensified in the post–Cold War era, particularly over the past decade. It can be argued that Russia's renewed engagement with Africa began with President Putin's visit to the continent in 2006. By 2007, Russia had cancelled nearly 20 billion US dollars in debt owed by African countries and accumulated during the Cold War period (Gvosdev & Marsh, 2014). At around the same time, Russian companies began to establish a visible presence across the continent in the pursuit of exploration and production licenses in oil-rich countries as well as in states producing strategic minerals. In 2009, the then President Medvedev's visit to Africa, which included trips to Egypt, Nigeria,

Angola, and Namibia resulted in the signing of several cooperation agreements in the energy sector (Wheeler, 2009). Over time, Russian firms have obtained licenses in a number of African countries, including Equatorial Guinea, Libya, Mozambique, South Sudan, and Uganda (Stronski, 2019). Beyond these cases, today Russia also maintains investments in Ethiopia, Somalia, the Central African Republic, and Namibia, primarily in natural resource sectors such as oil, gas, minerals, and metals.

Following the outbreak of Russia–Ukraine war in 2022 and the subsequent escalation of Western political and economic pressure, Africa has gained more importance for Russia for alternative trade, investment, and economic opportunities. As access to Western markets, finance, and technology became increasingly constrained, Moscow intensified its outreach to African partners as part of its strategy to mitigate the effects of sanctions, diversify its external economic relations, and reinforce its position within an increasingly multipolar international order. Engagement with Africa thus reflects not only short-term economic adjustment but also a longer-term effort to reposition Russia within the Global South and to challenge Western dominance in global political and economic structures.

Despite intensified economic cooperation in multiple sectors, however, Russia's economic involvement remains limited in Africa. Recent data suggest that while trade between Russia and African countries has increased in recent years, it remains relatively low when viewed in comparative terms. In 2024, Russia–Africa trade reached approximately 24.5 billion US dollars, representing a relatively high level of exchange despite the persistence of economic sanctions and structural constraints. Russian exports accounted for the majority of this trade, totaling around 21.2 billion US dollars, and consisting mainly of energy products, machinery, and agricultural goods (REAB, 2025). Even so, this figure remains modest when compared with Africa's trade relations with other major external actors: China's trade with Africa exceeded 295 billion US dollars in 2024, consolidating its position as the continent's largest trading partner and reflecting a far deeper level of integration in goods exchange. Similarly, the European Union continues to play a central role, with total EU–Africa goods trade surpassing 350 billion euros in 2024, underscoring the depth of economic ties between the two sides (Ngundu, 2025).

What defines Russia's engagement with the continent is its position as Africa's largest single supplier of arms as it alone accounts for more than 20 percent of Africa's total arms imports (Droin & Dolbaia, 2023: 5; Wezeman et al., 2024). Beyond Algeria and Egypt—its most important clients—Russia succeeded in supplying arms systems to Mali, Sudan, the Central African Republic (CAR), and Angola in recent years. Two main factors explain the rapid increase in Russia's sales of arms and military equipment to African states. First, modern Russian weapons are generally more affordable than their Western counterparts; second, they are largely compatible with the Soviet-era stockpiles still held by many African militaries (Stronski, 2019: 14). Moreover, unlike the United States and its allies, Russia does not condition arms transfers on commitments to "democratic principles" or the "protection of fundamental human rights" (Hoste & Kouch, 2015). This policy constitutes one of Russia's key competitive advantages vis-à-vis other global powers active on the continent. Consequently, autocratic African leaders in countries such as Kenya, Ghana, and Uganda—frequently criticized by Western states—have become heavily reliant on Russian military equipment and security service (Stronski, 2019).

Beyond arms transfers, Russia also offers security and military-related services—including training and advisory assistance—to African states at lower costs than many other global actors[4]. It is also worth noting that Russia has expanded its engagement with African armed forces through participation in peacekeeping missions and joint training exercises, which appears to have contributed to the facilitation of its arms exports. Russia has provided support to United Nations peacekeeping operations in Africa through deployments in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Liberia, Sudan, and South Sudan, and has participated as an observer in selected peace processes under the auspices of the African Union (Stronski, 2019).

Following the coups in Mali (2020 and 2021) and Burkina Faso (2022), Russia has increasingly been perceived as a viable security partner in parts of the Sahel. This can be partly attributed to Russia's relatively limited use of political conditionality—particularly with regard to

[4] Within this framework, the management of pro-government disinformation campaigns has also been presented by Russia to African leaders as a strategic asset. In other words, Moscow seeks to shape public perceptions in fragile states and exert pressure on opposition actors through coordinated troll networks and digital influence operations to enable authoritarian leaders to influence electoral processes, thereby facilitating regime survival in African countries policies align with Russian interests (Secrieru & Faleg, 2020: 5).

democratization, human rights, and governance reforms—when compared to established security actors such as France and the European Union (Vuksanovic, 2023). It is worth noting that in exchange for the defense and security relationships it provides, Russia has obtained concessions in extractive industries—most notably in gold, diamond, and uranium mining—which did not only enable Russia to reinforce cooperative ties with various African states but also helped Russia to sustain its position as a significant global economic and military actor, despite the constraints imposed by the war in Ukraine.

As this paper suggests Russia's engagement with Africa needs to be assessed through a geopolitical and security-oriented lens. Voting behavior in multilateral forums suggests that a considerable number of African states have refrained from supporting efforts to isolate Russia, thereby providing Moscow with diplomatic room for maneuver amid the war in Ukraine. An illustrative example is the voting outcomes in the United Nations General Assembly in March and April 2022, which indicate that a significant number of African states refrained from approving resolutions aimed at isolating Russia. From Russian perspective, the geopolitical utility of its security partnerships with African states help sustain Russia's status as a relevant global security actor and reinforce its role in advancing a multipolar international order in which Western-led norms and enforcement mechanisms face growing contestation (Vuksanovic, 2023).

In defining its relations with Africa, Moscow has emphasized the concepts of cooperation and mutual benefit at the discursive level. In this context, Russia's emphasis on "partnership among equals" has clearly resonated with African leaders, eager to find an attractive alternative to Western actors (Secrieru & Faleg, 2020). Another normatively shared element in Russia–Africa relations is the defense of a multipolar world order. In other words, African states and Russia tend to converge around a vision of global politics in which the voices of historically marginalized African nations are more fully represented and in which non-Western powers such as Russia occupy a legitimate place at the table (Vuksanovic, 2023). This configuration—often conceptualized as a "Global South component"—has gained heightened importance in Russian foreign policy since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine.

Russia's efforts to maintain relations with all fifty-four African states, as well as with the African Union, serve as symbolic expressions of its multipolar vision. This normative stance was also evident during Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's 2023 tour of Africa, during which he explicitly criticized U.S. unipolarity and liberal interventionism, portraying Western military interventions as negative manifestations of a unipolar world order. His references to the interventions in Yugoslavia (1999), Iraq (2003), and Libya (2011) can thus be interpreted as a rejection of the "rules-based international order" as promoted by the United States and the West, which Moscow views as being imposed on the rest of the world (Vuksanovic, 2023).

Similar to China, Russia views Africa as a strategically important arena to reassert its global standing in its quest to promote a multipolar international order. However, constrained by relatively limited economic capabilities, Russia has increasingly turned to military cooperation, political support, and security partnerships as alternative means of advancing its strategic objectives. In contrast to China, Russia's engagement in Africa makes little use of narratives centered on shared humanity or collective victimization by the West. Instead, it is driven largely by material interests and pragmatic opportunities that are framed as reciprocal benefits and material gains.

3. Cooperation, Competition, or Both? Sino–Russian Dynamics in Africa

As argued in previous pages, both China and Russia are motivated by a shared objective to challenge Western dominance and to advance a multipolar international order that acknowledges their great power status and therefore, they articulate converging normative positions in Africa. Both states formally support the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of states and consistently resist the imposition of sanctions on African governments accused of human rights abuses within multilateral institutions, including the United Nations. This convergence is illustrated, for instance, by their joint opposition to UN sanctions against Zimbabwe in 2008, and also in 2019, when the UN Security Council sought to adopt a resolution condemning Sudanese military council for their actions during the Khartoum massacre.

Nevertheless, Sino–Russian relations are not free from tension, particularly in contexts where China's economic interests are jeopardized by Russia's predominantly militarized approach. This divergence is evident in the Central African Republic (CAR), where Russia's residual ties

with former Séléka rebel factions have generated frustration in Beijing, as these militias pose risks to the security of Chinese-owned oil assets (Ramani, 2021:14). Similarly, during the 2019 Sudanese Revolution, China prioritized regime stability, while Russia adopted a more hardline counter-revolutionary posture—initially offering strong support to Omar al-Bashir and subsequently backing a military-led transition (Ramani, 2021:14). Russia's readiness to exploit instability in the Sahel, especially following the August 2020 coup in Mali, further contrasts with China's preference for maintaining regional stability. The expanding presence of Russian private military companies, such as the Wagner Group, across Africa may intensify these divergences in fragile states, as they implement policies that often run counter to China's economic and stability-oriented objectives.

Competition over investment and trade agreements, as illustrated by the case of Zimbabwe, signals the emergence of potential economic contestation. The post–COVID-19 slowdown in Chinese Belt and Road Initiative investments across Sub-Saharan Africa—particularly in steel production and power plant construction—has created opportunities for Russia to intensify its engagement in Zimbabwe's platinum and gold mining sectors (Ramani, 2021: 15).

Additionally, as part of its strategy to secure its economic interests on the continent and bolster its image as a global actor, China has gradually expanded its security cooperation with Africa through a variety of instruments, particularly in satellite cooperation, nuclear cooperation, information technology, cybersecurity, and surveillance technologies. More precisely, although China's primary motivation in building influence in Africa is to safeguard its investments, protect its citizens, and maintain robust trade relations (Bhattacharya, 2025), its security engagement on the continent also serves to expand China's diplomatic influence globally and position it as a key player in international affairs, as well as a self-proclaimed leader of the "Global South" (U.S. Department of Defense, 2024).

This pursuit of security cooperation in Africa, however, is likely to place China in competition with Russia. This is most likely in nuclear energy sector. China has sought to deepen its engagement with African states that either possess significant uranium reserves—such as South Africa, Namibia, and Niger—or operate relatively advanced nuclear energy programs, including South Africa, Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, Kenya, Uganda, and Nigeria. Although Russia

remains a strong competitor in this field, China has nonetheless succeeded in positioning itself to obtain future contracts involving the provision of technical know-how and specialized services related to nuclear energy (Chimbelu, 2019).

Conclusion:

This article has argued that the parameters of Russian and Chinese engagement with Africa are best understood within the broader context of great power politics. As both states want to be recognized as great powers with global influence, intensifying economic, military and political relations in a region with great potential is important for their status-seeking motivation and reducing the role of long-standing Western influence on the continent. Consistent with Waltzian neorealist perspective, their approach is best explained by the structural conditions of the international system, in which states operating under anarchy are compelled to enhance their relative capabilities and improve their positional standing vis-à-vis other major powers. Thus, the dynamics of Chinese and Russian engagement in Africa dynamics reflect a core realist logic in which state behavior is shaped primarily by interest-based calculations and power political considerations within the international system.

In their efforts to advance a multipolar order and constrain the dominance of the United States and Europe, both China and Russia have expanded their relations with a wide range of African states in ways that reflect their respective material interests. While China's military engagement with the continent has gradually evolved, economic considerations remain the cornerstone of Chinese approach to Africa. Although these relations have largely developed on terms favorable to China, Beijing's strategy to secure political support among African elites has relied not only on material instruments—such as loans, debt arrangements, and trade facilitation—but also on ideational narratives that function as complementary tools for interest maximization rather than independent normative commitments. Russia, by contrast, has primarily prioritized the expansion of military cooperation with politically fragile states in specific, leveraging security partnerships to reinforce incumbent regimes in exchange for preferential access to strategic sectors such as mining and, in particular, energy. From a neorealist perspective, the cultivation of political support among African leaders serves a broader objective: mitigating Western-led efforts to isolate Russia within the international system. Constrained by the limitations of its

economic capacity, Moscow has increasingly relied on arms transfers and security cooperation as cost-effective instruments to enhance its visibility, project influence across the continent, and advance its material interests.

As for the parameters of cooperation and conflict between Russia and China on the African continent, this paper contends that Sino–Russian engagement reflects a pattern of strategic restraint, whereby both actors pursue cautious collaboration while deliberately avoiding actions that could undermine the other's core interests. Nevertheless, this tacit and interest-based alignment may give rise to tensions over time as their respective strategic maneuvers evolve.

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