

NATIONAL INTEREST AND GREAT POWERS' POLITICS IN AFRICA: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF STRATEGIC ENGAGEMENTS OF CHINA IN KENYA, RUSSIA IN BURKINA FASO, AND THE UNITED STATES IN NIGERIA (2020-2025)

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ABSTRACT

The study undertook a comparative analysis of China's economic engagement in Kenya, Russia's security-oriented involvement in Burkina Faso, and the United States' strategic partnership with Nigeria. Strategic motivations underpinning the involvement of great powers in Africa have remained a source of concern and informed this study which sought to examine how the pursuit of national interest by major global powers shaped their political, economic, and security engagements in Africa between 2020 and 2025, as well as the implications of these engagements for the continent's development and sovereignty. Relying on realist theory of power, the study adopted documentary method for data collection and content analysis mechanism for data analysis. The findings revealed that great power engagements in Africa were predominantly driven by strategic and security considerations rather than normative commitments to development or democratic governance. It was also found that these engagements produced uneven outcomes, strengthening certain state capacities while undermining sovereignty, accountability, and public legitimacy. The study therefore recommended the strengthening of institutional transparency, adoption of diversified foreign policy strategies, and the reorientation of foreign military cooperation toward long term security sector reform since Africa's ability to benefit from great power engagement depended largely on the capacity of African states to articulate and defend clearly defined national interests.

Keywords: National interest, Great powers, Geopolitics, Africa, Political realism

1.0 Introduction

The contemporary politics of Africa is increasingly shaped by the pursuit of national interest by major global powers whose strategic engagement reflects the restructuring of the international system toward multipolarity and competitive interdependence. Since the late 2000s, Africa has transitioned from being perceived as a peripheral region in global affairs to becoming a strategic arena for geopolitical rivalry, largely due to its demographic expansion, control of maritime chokepoints, and possession of over 30 percent of the world's known mineral reserves, including cobalt, lithium, and platinum group metals essential for digital and green technologies (Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2020; Adebajo, 2022). This renewed attention reflects not altruism but calculated national interest, as external powers increasingly view Africa as central to sustaining long term economic growth, energy security, and diplomatic influence within multilateral institutions (Taylor, 2019).

China's engagement in Africa represents one of the most visible expressions of interest driven foreign policy in the twenty first century. By 2022, China had become Africa's largest bilateral trading partner, with total trade volumes exceeding 250 billion United States dollars, a dramatic rise from less than 10 billion dollars in 2000, indicating a structural shift in Africa's external economic orientation (Taylor, 2019; LSE Africa, 2024). Chinese infrastructure financing, particularly in rail, ports, and power generation, has reshaped transport corridors in countries such as Kenya, Ethiopia, and Nigeria, aligning African connectivity with Beijing's global production and logistics networks (Alden & Alves,

2020). There are worries, however, that while these investments address long standing infrastructure deficits, they also reproduce asymmetric dependency patterns where African economies remain exporters of raw materials and importers of manufactured goods, reinforcing unequal exchange relationships (Onyekachi & Udeh, 2021).

A central problem necessitating this study lies in the growing asymmetry between the strategic objectives of external powers and the developmental needs of African countries. China's extensive infrastructure financing, which exceeded 150 billion United States dollars in loans to Africa between 2005 and 2022, has significantly expanded transport and energy capacity in countries such as Kenya, Ethiopia, and Angola, yet it has also raised concerns about debt sustainability and constrained policy autonomy, particularly where loan repayment is tied to commodity exports (Alden & Alves, 2020; Global Political Review, 2024). It has often been contended that such arrangements risk reproducing dependency structures in which African economies remain locked into primary commodity production while external actors consolidate control over value chains and strategic infrastructure (Onyekachi & Udeh, 2021). The absence of a clear continental framework to regulate these engagements has further exacerbated disparities in bargaining power between African states and global actors.

The strategic dimension of China's national interest is further evidenced by the establishment of its overseas military logistics facility in Djibouti in 2017, located adjacent to the Bab el Mandeb Strait through which approximately 12 percent of global maritime trade passes annually (Magu, 2019; Alden & Large, 2019). This development underscores how economic engagement is inseparable from security considerations, particularly as China seeks to protect its nationals, investments, and shipping routes across the Horn of Africa and the western Indian Ocean, although with caution that such developments may gradually entrench foreign military presence under the guise of partnership, narrowing the strategic autonomy of host states over time (Zondi, 2020; Adebajo, 2022).

The United States' engagement with Africa reflects a different configuration of national interest shaped by global strategic prioritisation. While historically a dominant diplomatic and development actor, Washington's relative withdrawal from African development spaces between 2017 and 2021 resulted in a significant decline in non-military engagement, including reductions of over 80 percent in some USAID administered programmes (Washington Post, 2025). This retrenchment is believed to have weakened Western normative influence and inadvertently accelerated Africa's gravitation toward alternative partners offering rapid financing without governance conditionalities (Taylor, 2019; Alden & Alves, 2020). Nonetheless, renewed American interest has emerged since 2023 through infrastructure and mineral security initiatives aimed at countering China's dominance in critical supply chains, particularly in cobalt rich regions of the Democratic Republic of Congo and Zambia (Morocco World News, 2025).

Russia's expanding footprint in Africa further illustrates how national interest shapes great power politics beyond economic investment. Since 2018, Russia has signed military cooperation agreements with more than twenty African states, positioning itself as a security partner of choice for regimes facing internal insurgencies or international isolation (Atlas Institute for International Affairs, 2025). Data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute show that Russia accounted for approximately 40 percent of Africa's major arms imports between 2018 and 2023, with Algeria, Egypt, Mali, and Angola among its principal clients (SIPRI, 2024). This pattern is seen as a pragmatic exchange relationship in which security assistance and regime protection are traded for access to strategic minerals and diplomatic support in international forums such as the United Nations General Assembly (Zondi, 2020; Adebajo, 2022).

African states themselves remain active agents within this competitive environment, seeking to convert external interest into domestic advantage. Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Kenya have pursued diversified foreign policy strategies that deliberately balance engagement with China, the United States, the European Union, and emerging powers in order to avoid excessive dependency on any single actor (Onyekachi & Udeh, 2021; Adebajo, 2022). However, the capacity to manage such balancing acts varies considerably across the continent. In fragile states, particularly across the Sahel, domestic political instability has amplified vulnerability to external influence, as evidenced by the

political realignments in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger Republic between 2020 and 2023, where shifts in foreign partnerships closely followed military takeovers and governance breakdowns (Atlas Institute for International Affairs, 2025).

The primary objective of this study is, therefore, to critically examine how the pursuit of national interest by major global powers shaped their political, economic, and security engagements in Africa between 2020 and 2025, and to assess the implications of these engagements for African development and sovereignty. The study sought to analyze the strategic motivations underpinning China's infrastructure financing, Russia's expanding security partnerships, and the United States' diplomatic and military cooperation within selected African states, situating these actions within the broader logic of power competition in a multipolar system. It further aimed to interrogate the extent to which these engagements align or conflict with the developmental priorities of African countries, particularly in contexts where external financing and security assistance influence domestic policy autonomy (Alden, 2019; International Monetary Fund, 2023). Another objective is to evaluate whether great power involvement strengthens state capacity or reinforces structural dependency and uneven development patterns across the continent, in addition to seeking to assess the bargaining agency of African states within these engagements, exploring whether governments are able to strategically leverage competition among external actors to advance national development goals (Brown and Harman, 2013; Whitfield, 2018). By comparatively examining China's role in Kenya, Russia's security presence in Burkina Faso, and the United States' partnership with Nigeria, the study aimed to generate empirically grounded insights into the contemporary dynamics of great power politics in Africa.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Nature of National Interest

The concept of national interest has long served as a foundational yet contested construct in international relations, reflecting the evolving priorities and strategic calculations of states within a dynamic global system. Early realist interpretations defined national interest primarily in terms of survival and power, arguing that states, operating under conditions of anarchy, pursue policies aimed at maintaining territorial integrity, political independence, and strategic advantage. This view gained empirical resonance during the Cold War, when foreign policy decisions by major powers were framed almost exclusively around military strength and alliance formation. However, subsequent scholarship has demonstrated that such a narrow conception inadequately captures the complex realities of state behaviour in the post-Cold War era, particularly in regions such as Africa where historical, economic, and social factors exert significant influence on foreign policy outcomes (Brown, 2016).

National interest is also a multidimensional and context-dependent construct shaped by both internal and external variables. Nye (2004) argues that economic resilience, technological capacity, and soft power resources have become integral components of national interest in an era defined by globalisation and interdependence. This perspective is supported by empirical evidence from European foreign policy, where access to energy resources, control of migration flows, and protection of supply chains have shaped engagement with Africa since the early 2000s, particularly following the 2015 migration crisis and the economic disruptions caused by the COVID 19 pandemic in 2020 (Taylor, 2019, Biscop, 2021). These developments suggest that national interest extends beyond military considerations to encompass economic stability and societal security. Amin (2018) argues that in many postcolonial states, national interest is often externally conditioned, shaped by dependency on foreign capital, aid, and markets. This condition has persisted into the contemporary period, as African economies remain heavily reliant on commodity exports, with over 80 percent of export revenues in countries such as Nigeria and Angola derived from primary resources as of 2022 (World Bank, 2023). The structural dependence limits the capacity of African states to autonomously define and pursue national interest, resulting in foreign policy choices that reflect accommodation rather than strategic autonomy (Okolie & Ogayi, 2020).

The growing importance of strategic minerals has further reshaped how national interest is defined by both African states and external powers. The Democratic Republic of Congo's dominance in global cobalt production, accounting for more than 70 percent of global supply by 2022, has elevated resource security to a central concern in the foreign policies of China, the United States, and the European Union (IEA, 2023; Global Political Review, 2024). For these actors, national interest increasingly involves securing long term access to resources critical for energy transition and technological competitiveness. African scholars such as Adebajo (2022) caution that while this resource driven engagement creates opportunities for investment, it also risks reinforcing extractive relationships that prioritise external strategic needs over domestic industrial development. Constructivist contributions further challenge the notion of national interest as an objective or static concept. Ideally, national interest is socially constructed through political discourse and elite consensus, shaped by identity, ideology, and historical memory. This insight is particularly relevant in Africa, where political leaders frequently invoke national interest to justify shifts in foreign alliances or security partnerships, as observed in the Sahel following military coups between 2020 and 2023 (Zondi, 2020). In such contexts, national interest often reflects regime security concerns rather than collective national welfare, raising normative questions about legitimacy and representation (Brown, 2016).

2.1.1 Great Powers' National Interest and Africa's Economic Sovereignty

Fiscal and economic sovereignty refers to the capacity of a state to independently determine its fiscal priorities, manage public finances, and control strategic economic assets without disproportionate external influence. In the context of great powers' politics in Africa between 2020 and 2025, this indicator becomes central to assessing whether external engagements reinforce or constrain domestic autonomy. Realist scholars argue that sovereignty in practice is closely tied to material capabilities and control over economic resources, particularly in an international system structured by asymmetrical power relations. In Africa where fiscal space is often limited and revenue bases remain narrow, external financing arrangements frequently intersect with national policy choices in ways that shape macroeconomic direction and budgetary discretion (African Development Bank, 2023; International Monetary Fund, 2023).

Between 2010 and 2024, Africa's external public debt stock more than doubled, rising from approximately 300 billion United States dollars to over 650 billion dollars, reflecting expanded borrowing from multilateral lenders, bilateral partners, and private capital markets (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2023; World Bank, 2024). China emerged as one of the largest bilateral creditors, extending loans for infrastructure projects across Kenya, Ethiopia, and Angola, with cumulative commitments exceeding 150 billion dollars by 2022 (Brautigam, 2020; AidData, 2023). While these investments contributed to visible infrastructure expansion, including transport corridors and energy facilities, repayment obligations and foreign currency denominated debt increased exposure to exchange rate volatility and external shocks (Alden, 2019; International Monetary Fund, 2022). The depreciation of several African currencies between 2020 and 2023, partly triggered by global monetary tightening, significantly raised debt servicing costs and narrowed fiscal maneuverability (International Monetary Fund, 2023; World Bank, 2023).

Kenya's experience illustrates the tension between infrastructure development and fiscal sovereignty. By 2023, Kenya's debt to gross domestic product ratio exceeded 67 percent, with substantial obligations owed to external creditors, including Chinese policy banks (International Monetary Fund, 2023; National Treasury of Kenya, 2023). Public debates intensified over the financing structure of the Standard Gauge Railway, particularly concerning repayment terms and revenue projections (Brautigam, 2020; Global Political Review, 2024). Although the project enhanced transportation capacity, critics argued that debt accumulation constrained fiscal flexibility and increased reliance on export revenues to meet repayment schedules (Alden & Alves, 2020; United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 2023). Such developments demonstrate how fiscal sovereignty is shaped not only by borrowing levels but also by the structure and conditions of external finance.

Nigeria provides a further case where fiscal and economic sovereignty has been tested by rising debt and revenue constraints. Nigeria's total public debt rose from approximately 12 trillion naira in 2015 to over 87 trillion naira by the end of 2023, reflecting persistent fiscal deficits and external borrowing (Debt Management Office, 2023; Central Bank of Nigeria, 2024). By 2022, debt service to revenue ratios exceeded 80 percent, indicating that the federal government devoted a substantial share of collected revenue to servicing obligations rather than developmental expenditure (World Bank, 2023; International Monetary Fund, 2023). This fiscal pressure limited discretionary spending and heightened vulnerability to external conditionalities, particularly in relation to subsidy reforms and exchange rate adjustments (United Nations Development Programme, 2022; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2023). The removal of fuel subsidies in 2023 was partly framed as a domestic reform necessity but occurred within an environment of constrained fiscal space and international macroeconomic pressures (African Development Bank, 2023; Central Bank of Nigeria, 2024).

Beyond debt ratios, fiscal sovereignty also encompasses control over strategic assets and policy autonomy. Reports of resource backed loans and infrastructure concessions in several African states have raised questions regarding transparency and long term control over ports, mining rights, and energy facilities (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2023; AidData, 2023). In Burkina Faso, the growing involvement of external security partners following political instability intersected with concerns about resource governance and fiscal accountability (International Crisis Group, 2023; Institute for Security Studies, 2024). Although security cooperation may strengthen regime stability in the short term, opaque agreements can complicate fiscal oversight and weaken institutional checks and balances (African Development Bank, 2022; Transparency International, 2023).

Ultimately, fiscal and economic sovereignty serves as a crucial empirical lens through which to evaluate the outcomes of great powers' politics in Africa. Rising external debt stocks, increasing debt service burdens, exposure to global financial shocks, and conditional policy reforms illustrate the structural constraints that can accompany strategic partnerships (International Monetary Fund, 2023; World Bank, 2024). At the same time, the capacity of African states to diversify partnerships, renegotiate terms, and strengthen domestic revenue mobilization determines whether engagement translates into enhanced autonomy or deepened dependency (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 2023; Organisation for Economic Co operation and Development, 2023). Assessing these dynamics is therefore central to understanding whether national interest, as articulated by African states, is reinforced or compromised within an increasingly competitive global order.

2.1.2 State Capacity and Development Performance in Africa

State capacity and development performance constitute a critical empirical indicator for assessing whether great powers' politics in Africa reinforce or undermine national interest. State capacity refers to the ability of governments to design and implement policies, mobilize resources, maintain security, and deliver public goods effectively, while development performance reflects measurable socio economic outcomes such as growth quality, poverty reduction, infrastructure expansion, and institutional strength. In the context of intensifying engagement by China, Russia, and the United States between 2020 and 2025, evaluating state capacity allows for a grounded assessment of whether external partnerships translate into durable institutional strengthening or merely short term regime support (Fukuyama, 2013; World Bank, 2023). From a realist perspective, a state's ability to consolidate power and maintain internal stability depends significantly on its administrative competence and economic resilience, both of which are shaped by external alignments and resource flows.

Across Africa, infrastructure financing has been presented as a mechanism for enhancing state capacity by improving connectivity, energy supply, and industrial productivity. Chinese funded projects, including railways in Kenya, hydropower facilities in Ethiopia, and port expansions in Angola, have contributed to visible improvements in transport and logistics networks (Brautigam, 2020; AidData, 2023). Kenya's Standard Gauge Railway, operational since 2017, increased freight

movement between Mombasa and Nairobi and was projected to raise trade efficiency, though questions remain regarding cost recovery and long term sustainability (International Monetary Fund, 2023; United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 2023). Such infrastructure expansion may strengthen state capacity by expanding fiscal revenue bases and facilitating economic activity, yet heavy reliance on external financing can limit policy discretion if repayment obligations crowd out social spending (Alden, 2019; World Bank, 2024).

Nigeria offers a compelling case for examining the relationship between external engagement and development performance. Between 2020 and 2023, Nigeria's gross domestic product growth averaged below 3 percent, insufficient to match population growth estimated at over 2.5 percent annually, thereby constraining per capita income gains (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023; World Bank, 2023). Although external borrowing supported capital projects such as rail modernization and power sector reforms, persistent electricity shortages and unemployment rates exceeding 30 percent among youth in 2022 indicate structural limitations in state capacity (United Nations Development Programme, 2022; Central Bank of Nigeria, 2024). Moreover, Nigeria's ranking in the 2023 Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index reflected ongoing governance challenges, suggesting that institutional weaknesses mediate the effectiveness of external economic partnerships (Transparency International, 2023; Organisation for Economic Co operation and Development, 2023). These trends highlight that development performance depends not only on resource inflows but also on administrative efficiency and accountability mechanisms.

In security contexts, the relationship between external partnerships and state capacity is equally complex. Russia's security cooperation in parts of the Sahel, particularly in Burkina Faso after political transitions in 2022 and 2023 has been associated with efforts to strengthen counter insurgency capabilities (International Crisis Group, 2023; Institute for Security Studies, 2024). While such support may temporarily enhance regime survival and military effectiveness, long term state capacity requires institutional reform, civilian oversight, and sustainable financing, which remain uneven across the region (African Development Bank, 2023; United Nations, 2023). The persistence of insecurity and displacement in parts of the Sahel demonstrates that military assistance alone does not automatically translate into broader development gains or strengthened governance structures.

Development performance indicators further reveal uneven outcomes across the continent. Africa's average growth rebounded to approximately 4 percent in 2021 following the contraction induced by the COVID 19 pandemic, yet poverty levels remained high, with over 460 million people living in extreme poverty by 2023 (Fukuyama, 2013; United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2023; African Development Bank, 2023; World Bank, 2024).

2.1.3 Africa in Global Power Equation

Power remains one of the most enduring and contested concepts in international relations, reflecting changing patterns of global interaction, conflict, and cooperation. Hard power in particular continues to play a central role in the conduct of international politics, despite claims that globalisation and economic interdependence have reduced the utility of military force. As of 2023, global military expenditure exceeded 2.4 trillion dollars, the highest level recorded since the end of the Cold War, with the United States, China, and Russia accounting for over half of this total (SIPRI, 2024). The persistence of armed conflict and military intervention underscores the enduring relevance of coercive power. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its full scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 reaffirmed the use of force as an instrument of state policy in defiance of international norms (Mearsheimer, 2014). In Africa, external military engagement has intensified since the rise of transnational insurgencies after 2011, particularly in the Sahel region, where foreign military assistance, arms transfers, and private security actors have shaped conflict dynamics in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger (Zondi, 2020; Adebajo, 2022). However, the limitations of hard power have become increasingly apparent. Military superiority has often failed to secure durable political outcomes, especially in complex internal conflicts where legitimacy and governance deficits persist. The United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, after two decades of military engagement and over two trillion dollars in expenditure, illustrated the inability of coercive power alone to produce stable political order (Brown, 2016). Similar patterns are observable in Africa, where externally driven

security interventions have sometimes exacerbated instability by reinforcing authoritarian governance or marginalising local political processes (Aning & Atuobi, 2019). These shortcomings have prompted scholars to expand the analytical scope of power beyond material coercion.

The concept of soft power emerged as a response to the perceived inadequacy of purely military explanations of influence. Nye (2004) defines soft power as the ability of a state to shape the preferences of others through attraction, drawing on cultural appeal, political values, and the legitimacy of foreign policy. This conceptual shift reflected broader changes in the international system following the end of the Cold War, including the spread of liberal norms, the growth of international institutions, and the increasing salience of public opinion in global politics (Keohane & Nye, 2012). Empirically, soft power has been deployed through a wide range of instruments, including cultural diplomacy, educational exchange, development cooperation, and media outreach. The expansion of scholarship programmes and cultural institutes has become a central feature of global competition for influence. By 2022, China had established more than sixty Confucius Institutes across Africa, alongside extensive scholarship programmes that brought tens of thousands of African students to Chinese universities annually (Taylor, 2019). These initiatives complemented China's broader economic engagement, which saw trade with Africa grow from approximately 10 billion dollars in 2000 to over 280 billion dollars by 2023, making China Africa's largest trading partner (Alden & Large, 2019). African scholars note that such engagement has reshaped perceptions of development and partnership, even as it generates debates about dependency and autonomy (Adebajo, 2022).

In response to the perceived dichotomy between coercion and attraction, scholars have advanced the concept of smart power as an integrative framework that combines hard and soft power resources in a strategic and context sensitive manner. Nye (2011) conceptualises smart power as the capacity to deploy the appropriate mix of military, economic, diplomatic, and cultural tools to achieve desired outcomes. This approach reflects an acknowledgement that neither force nor persuasion alone is sufficient in an increasingly complex international environment characterised by transnational threats, rising multipolarity, and contested norms (Keohane & Nye, 2012). China's approach is frequently cited as an illustration of smart power in practice, combining infrastructure investment, trade incentives, cultural diplomacy, and selective security cooperation to protect strategic interests while cultivating political goodwill (Taylor, 2019). The establishment of China's first overseas military base in Djibouti in 2017, alongside extensive development financing and diplomatic engagement, reflects a calibrated strategy that integrates coercive capacity with economic and symbolic influence (Alden & Alves, 2020). Similarly, the European Union's Global Gateway initiative launched in 2021 represents an effort to blend development finance, regulatory norms, and geopolitical strategy in response to growing competition from other external actors in Africa (Biscop, 2021).

2.1.4 Great Powers and Economic Engagements in Africa

Economic engagement intensity thus provides a measurable indicator of how great powers pursue national interest in Africa through financial flows, trade integration, and infrastructure diplomacy. The scale of loans, shifts in trade balances, and concentration of investments in strategic sectors reveal patterns of influence that extend beyond commercial logic. At the same time, the developmental impact of such engagement depends on domestic institutional capacity, regulatory oversight, and strategic negotiation by African states (Fukuyama, 2013; World Bank, 2024). In Africa, the expansion of economic engagement by China, the United States, and Russia reflects not only commercial interests but also broader geopolitical calculations tied to energy security, maritime access, and diplomatic alignment (Taylor, 2018; Alden, 2019).

China's economic footprint in Africa expanded significantly over the past decade, making it the continent's largest bilateral trading partner since 2009. By 2023, China Africa trade volume exceeded 280 billion United States dollars, up from approximately 114 billion dollars in 2010, reflecting sustained growth in exports of machinery, manufactured goods, and construction services alongside

imports of oil, copper, and cobalt (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2023; Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, 2024). Chinese policy banks and state owned enterprises financed major infrastructure projects including railways in Kenya, industrial parks in Ethiopia, and port expansions in Angola, with cumulative loan commitments estimated at over 150 billion dollars between 2005 and 2022 (Brautigam, 2020; AidData, 2023). These engagements intensified after the announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013, which incorporated several African states into global trade and logistics corridors (Alden & Alves, 2020; World Bank, 2024). While such projects improved connectivity and transport efficiency, rising debt servicing obligations generated debates about long term fiscal sustainability and bargaining leverage (African Development Bank, 2023; International Monetary Fund, 2023).

The United States has also recalibrated its economic engagement strategy in Africa, particularly through trade and investment frameworks such as the African Growth and Opportunity Act and the Prosper Africa initiative. Between 2020 and 2024, United States Africa trade averaged approximately 60 billion dollars annually, with energy exports and technology services forming significant components (United States Trade Representative, 2023; World Bank, 2023). In 2022, the United States Africa Leaders Summit reaffirmed commitments to mobilize 55 billion dollars over three years for economic cooperation, infrastructure, and digital transformation (White House, 2022; Organisation for Economic Co operation and Development, 2023). Although smaller in scale compared to China's trade volume, United States economic engagement is often linked to governance standards, private sector partnerships, and strategic competition in critical minerals and telecommunications sectors (Carmody, 2020; United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 2023).

Russia's economic engagement, while more limited in aggregate trade value, has been strategically concentrated in energy, mining, and military related industries. Russia Africa trade reached approximately 20 billion dollars in 2022, with significant arms exports and nuclear energy cooperation agreements, including memoranda signed during the 2019 and 2023 Russia Africa Summits (International Crisis Group, 2023; United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2023). Russian companies have pursued mining concessions in countries such as Sudan and Burkina Faso, reflecting a model of targeted economic penetration aligned with security cooperation (Institute for Security Studies, 2024; African Development Bank, 2023). Though quantitatively smaller than Chinese or American engagement, Russia's economic presence illustrates how economic intensity may be strategically selective yet politically consequential.

2.1.5 Great Powers and Security Engagements in Africa

Security and strategic engagement serve as a critical empirical indicator for understanding how great powers project influence and safeguard national interests within Africa, particularly between 2020 and 2025. This indicator captures the deployment of military assets, defense cooperation agreements, counterterrorism initiatives, and strategic partnerships designed to secure access to critical resources, maritime routes, and political leverage. In the context of African geopolitics, security and strategic engagement are inseparable from broader economic and diplomatic efforts, reflecting the realist notion that states operate within an anarchic international system where survival and relative power dictate foreign policy behavior (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001). The intensification of external military presence and strategic collaboration across the continent underscores the continent's role as a contested geopolitical arena, particularly in regions experiencing conflict, insurgency, or piracy (Taylor, 2018;

Alden & Alves, 2020).

China's security engagement in Africa has primarily complemented its economic diplomacy through the establishment of its first overseas military base in Djibouti in 2017, which facilitates the protection of Chinese nationals, commercial assets, and maritime trade in the Horn of Africa (Alden, 2019; Brautigam, 2020). Between 2020 and 2025, China increased joint naval exercises with African states and invested in training programs for security personnel in countries such as Nigeria, Kenya,

and Angola, reflecting a model of strategic engagement that combines soft and hard power tools (Ministry of Defence of China, 2023; United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 2023). These initiatives are aimed not only at enhancing regional stability but also at safeguarding China's long-term commercial interests in mining, energy, and infrastructure sectors.

The United States has similarly intensified its security and strategic engagement in Africa through programs such as the African Contingency Operations Training and Assistance (ACOTA) and the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM), which coordinate military cooperation, counterterrorism operations, and crisis response across the continent (White House, 2022; United States Department of Defense, 2023). Between 2020 and 2024, U.S. military aid to Africa exceeded 1.2 billion United States dollars annually, with a focus on countering violent extremism in the Sahel and Horn of Africa and supporting maritime security initiatives along critical shipping lanes (World Bank, 2023; Organisation for Economic Co operation and Development, 2023). These engagements illustrate the strategic deployment of military resources to secure both regional stability and long-term access to critical markets and resources.

Russia's strategic engagement in Africa has been more selective, concentrating on energy security, military technology transfers, and the provision of private military contractors. Between 2020 and 2023, Russian state and private actors expanded security cooperation in countries including Mali, Sudan, and the Central African Republic, supplying arms, training security forces, and engaging in joint counterinsurgency operations (International Crisis Group, 2023; Institute for Security Studies, 2024). Russian security assistance, often tied to resource access or political alignment, exemplifies a model of strategic engagement that leverages military support for geopolitical influence in areas with fragile governance and high security risks.

Evaluating security and strategic engagement provides critical insights into how great powers balance coercive and cooperative measures to advance national interests in Africa. It highlights the interplay between military presence, political leverage, and economic objectives, revealing that security initiatives are not merely defensive measures but also instruments of influence and bargaining. The depth, frequency, and geographic focus of such engagements serve as empirical indicators of power projection, the resilience of African state sovereignty, and the potential consequences for regional stability, governance, and long-term development outcomes (Fukuyama, 2013; Carmody, 2020). Understanding these dynamics is essential for assessing the capacity of African states to navigate external pressures, exercise agency, and negotiate agreements that align with both national priorities and broader continental development goals.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

The study of national interest and great powers' politics in Africa is most coherently explained through the lens of political realism, a dominant theory in international relations that emphasizes the centrality of power, security, and survival in state behaviour. Political realism emerged as a formal school of thought in the mid-twentieth century, although its intellectual roots trace back to classical thinkers such as Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Hobbes, who highlighted the competitive and often conflictual nature of human and state interactions (Morgenthau, 1948; Waltz, 1979). Hans Morgenthau, in his seminal work *Politics among Nations* (1948), articulated realism as a systematic framework for understanding international politics, positing that states act primarily to preserve their survival and pursue national interests defined in terms of power. This theory gained prominence during the Cold War era, when the bipolar confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union vividly illustrated realist postulations about security competition, balance of power, and strategic calculation (Gaddis, 2005).

The core tenets of political realism assert that the international system is anarchic, meaning there is no overarching authority to enforce rules or resolve disputes, which compels states to rely on self-help to ensure survival (Waltz, 1979). Power is the principal currency of state interaction, encompassing military, economic, and strategic capabilities. Realists argue that morality, ideology, or international law may influence behaviour but remain subordinate to material interests and security imperatives

(Morgenthau, 1948). The theory also emphasizes the persistence of conflict as an inevitable outcome of competing national interests, and the importance of prudence and strategic calculation in foreign policy decisions. Proponents such as Kenneth Waltz (1979) developed neorealism or structural realism, refining the theory to focus on systemic pressures and the distribution of capabilities, rather than human nature or ethical considerations, as the primary determinants of state behaviour.

2.2.1 Theory Application

Political realism provides a compelling framework for analysing the engagement of great powers in Africa, where competition for resources, strategic alliances, and regional influence aligns with realist postulations. During the Cold War, African states were drawn into proxy conflicts as the United States and the Soviet Union sought to expand spheres of influence (Adebajo, 2022). Even after the Cold War, realist dynamics persist, as Africa remains a stage for strategic rivalry among contemporary great powers such as the United States, China, Russia, and the European Union. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects across Africa, including infrastructure investments worth over 50 billion dollars by 2023 in Kenya, Nigeria, and Ethiopia, reflect a realist calculation to secure long-term strategic and economic advantages (Alden & Large, 2019; Taylor, 2019). Similarly, the United States' establishment of AFRICOM in 2007, with bases and operations in Djibouti, Niger, and Somalia, underscores a commitment to projecting military power and protecting national and allied interests in geopolitically vital regions (Zondi, 2020). Furthermore, political realism offers insight into the limits of normative approaches and idealistic frameworks in African geopolitics. While development, democracy promotion, and humanitarian interventions feature prominently in the rhetoric of external actors, realists argue that these often mask strategic calculations driven by security, economic advantage, and influence (Brown, 2016). Russia's security partnerships in the Sahel, including military support to Mali and the Central African Republic since 2019, exemplify the application of realist principles, where strategic presence and influence are prioritized over normative governance objectives. Similarly, European Union initiatives, though couched in developmental and humanitarian language, reflect geostrategic considerations related to migration management, counterterrorism, and access to energy and mineral resources.

3.0 Methodology

The study adopted documentary method to collate data from secondary sources including bulletins of international organisations, institutional reports and policy papers. It adopted content analysis method for analysis where it systematically identified and interpreted specified characteristics of messages within the available documents with a view to achieving nuanced understanding of the content and its implications.

4.0 Data Presentation and Analysis

4.1 Comparative Analysis of Strategic Engagements of China in Kenya, Russia in Burkina Faso, and the United States in Nigeria (2020-2025)

The strategic engagements of China in Kenya, Russia in Burkina Faso, and the United States in Nigeria between 2020 and 2025 exemplify how national interests and great power politics continue to shape Africa's geopolitical landscape. These interactions reflect the pursuit of influence, access to resources, and security advantages that transcend traditional diplomatic cooperation, underscoring the continent's significance in global rivalries. China's involvement with Kenya is emblematic of Beijing's broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) strategy, which has sought to weave African economies into China's global infrastructure and trade network. With 53 African countries participating in the BRI by 2024 and Chinese firms securing a dominant share of port and railway contracts across the continent, Kenya has emerged as a key focal point of infrastructure financing, including the Standard Gauge Railway linking the port of Mombasa with inland markets (Obser, 2025). During a high-level visit in April 2025, Chinese President Xi Jinping and Kenyan President William Ruto elevated bilateral ties to a "new level," agreeing on cooperation in areas such as technology, water management, and transport, while reaffirming Kenya's role in advancing China's

geopolitical objectives in Africa amidst global instability (Reuters, 2025). Beyond infrastructure, China has expanded security and police cooperation with Kenya and other African states through training programmes and joint operations, illustrating a blend of hard and soft influence that enhances Beijing's strategic footprint while providing African partners tools to address internal security concerns (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2024; Africa Center, 2025).

4.1.1 Russia in Burkina Faso

Russia's engagement in Burkina Faso reflects a distinctly different facet of great power interaction, grounded primarily in security assistance and geopolitical realignments following the withdrawal of former colonial powers from West Africa. Since 2019, Burkina Faso has aligned with Russia and fellow Sahelian juntas in the Alliance of Sahel States, seeking military backing to confront entrenched jihadist insurgencies that have killed thousands and displaced millions across the region since 2012 (Reuters, 2025). Moscow's support has included promises of advanced weaponry, training, and the strengthening of a joint Sahelian force, as well as broader strategic integration through agreements on nuclear cooperation and military infrastructure (Reuters, 2025; Wikipedia, 2025). The expansion of Russia's Africa Corps and its deliveries of tanks, artillery, and other military equipment to the region, often using commercial shipping routes that skirt Western sanctions, have further consolidated Russian influence in Burkina Faso and its neighbours, replacing traditional Western security ties and reinforcing Moscow's claims of offering a credible alternative in counter-insurgency operations (Associated Press, 2025). Reports indicate that Russian disinformation and ideological engagement have also intensified in West Africa, contributing to a complex information environment in which local narratives are shaped to favour new strategic partnerships and displace former Western dominance (European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2024).

In contrast, the United States' engagement in Nigeria throughout the early 2020s has been defined by a mixture of counterterrorism cooperation, economic outreach, and periodic strategic recalibration aimed at securing regional stability and protecting key US interests. Nigeria's significance to the United States stems from its status as Africa's most populous nation and a major energy producer, making it central to Washington's concerns over energy security and transnational terrorism emanating from Boko Haram and Islamic State affiliates in the Lake Chad Basin (Morocco World News, 2025; AllAfrica, 2025). These dual interests coalesced in a dramatic and unprecedented moment on 25 December 2025, when the United States conducted coordinated airstrikes against Islamic State militants in northwest Nigeria using Tomahawk missiles in cooperation with the Nigerian government, underscoring the intensity of US commitment to counterterrorism operations even as geopolitical competition heightens (Wikipedia, 2025). This use of military force not only reflects the realist pursuit of security objectives but also illustrates how US strategic interests are projected in regions where terrorism threatens both local governance and broader Western economic stability. The strikes, while aimed at degrading militant capabilities, also occurred against the backdrop of shifting alliances in West Africa, with Nigeria navigating pressures from groups such as the Alliance of Sahel States, which has grown closer to Russia and distanced itself from traditional Western partners (AllAfrica, 2025; Reuters, 2025).

Across all three cases, national interests drive the strategic calculus of external powers, shaping their political, economic, and security engagements in Africa. China's steady infrastructure investment and diplomatic coordination in Kenya not only bolster Nairobi's development aspirations but also secure Beijing access to strategic transport corridors and influence within multilateral forums like the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (Obser, 2025; Reuters, 2025). Russia's security first approach in Burkina Faso, bolstered by military hardware and strategic alignments, emphasizes Moscow's intent to supplant Western influence by embedding itself within regional security architectures and capitalizing on governance vacuums left by departing colonial partners (Reuters, 2025; Associated Press, 2025; European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2024). The United States' use of force in Nigeria, evidenced by the December 2025 airstrikes, reflects a continuation of projecting military power to achieve counterterrorism and stability objectives, demonstrating how Washington adapts its strategy in a climate of heightened competition with other powers seeking influence in Africa

(Wikipedia, 2025; Morocco World News, 2025). These engagements underscore the persistence of great power politics on the continent, revealing how national interest continues to shape alliances, conflict responses, and economic integration in an increasingly contested global arena.

5.0 Conclusion

The study examined the interplay of national interest and great powers' politics in Africa, with particular interest on strategic engagements of China in Kenya, Russia in Burkina Faso, and the United States in Nigeria between 2020 and 2025. The first finding of the study is that the strategic engagements of China, Russia, and the United States in Africa between 2020 and 2025 are overwhelmingly driven by national interest rather than normative commitments to development, democracy, or collective security. China's engagement with Kenya during this period demonstrates a consistent emphasis on infrastructure development, logistics networks, and market access that serve Beijing's long term geo-economic ambitions. Projects such as the Standard Gauge Railway and port related investments strengthened Kenya's role as an East African transport hub, yet they also intensified concerns over debt sustainability as Kenya's public debt surpassed 70 percent of GDP by 2023, with a substantial share owed to Chinese creditors. In Burkina Faso, Russia's expanding influence following successive military coups reflects a security centred strategy focused on regime survival, military cooperation, and access to strategic resources. Russian security assistance filled the vacuum created by the withdrawal of Western forces and repositioned Moscow as a dominant external actor in the Sahel. In Nigeria, United States engagement remained anchored in counterterrorism cooperation, energy security, and regional stability, reinforcing a pattern in which external involvement is shaped primarily by strategic calculations rather than domestic development priorities. Across all three cases, great power behaviour reflects a realist logic in which power, influence, and interest outweigh ideological consistency.

The second key finding is that great power involvement in Africa has generated uneven and often contradictory outcomes for host states, strengthening specific state capacities while simultaneously undermining sovereignty, accountability, and public legitimacy. In Kenya, Chinese financed infrastructure improved transportation efficiency and regional trade integration, yet the limited transparency of loan agreements and procurement processes weakened institutional oversight and intensified domestic debates about economic dependency. In Burkina Faso, Russian backed security cooperation provided the ruling military authorities with immediate tactical support against insurgent groups, but it coincided with rising civilian casualties, mass displacement, and the erosion of human rights protections between 2023 and 2025. In Nigeria, security cooperation with the United States enhanced intelligence sharing and counterinsurgency capabilities, particularly in operations against Boko Haram and Islamic State affiliated groups. However, the reported US airstrike on December 25, 2025, which sparked national outrage and international scrutiny, exposed the fragile balance between foreign military assistance and national sovereignty. These cases demonstrate that while external powers may contribute to short term stability or capacity building, their interventions often deepen structural vulnerabilities and legitimacy crises within African states.

The third finding revealed that Africa has increasingly become a contested geopolitical arena in which African states exercise constrained but meaningful agency amid intensifying great power competition. Kenya's foreign policy strategy illustrates a careful balancing act, as the government sought to leverage Chinese financing while maintaining relations with Western donors and multilateral institutions to avoid excessive dependence on any single partner. Burkina Faso's pivot toward Russia reflects a more confrontational assertion of sovereignty shaped by popular anti-Western sentiment and elite calculations of regime security, even though this shift has not delivered sustained improvements in security or economic performance by 2025. Nigeria's engagement with the United States highlights a pragmatic approach rooted in its status as a regional power and major energy producer, yet domestic resistance to perceived external interference has steadily increased. Collectively, the findings indicate that African states are neither passive recipients of external influence nor fully autonomous actors. Instead, they operate within an unequal international system where policy choices are shaped by security threats, economic vulnerability, and elite interests.

6.0 Policy Recommendations

In view of the findings, the study makes the following recommendations:

1. African states should strengthen institutional capacity and transparency in managing external partnerships to ensure that engagements with great powers align with clearly defined national interests. Governments must establish robust oversight mechanisms for foreign financed projects, particularly in infrastructure, security cooperation, and resource extraction. This includes transparent loan negotiations, parliamentary scrutiny of defence agreements, and public disclosure of contract terms. By improving accountability structures, states such as Kenya and Nigeria can reduce the risks of unsustainable debt, elite capture, and policy dependency while preserving strategic autonomy in their relations with external powers.
2. African governments should adopt diversified foreign policy strategies that avoid over reliance on a single external actor for security or development support. The experiences of Burkina Faso, Nigeria, and Kenya demonstrate that dependence on one great power often exposes states to political pressure, legitimacy crises, or unintended security consequences. A balanced engagement framework that combines regional cooperation, multilateral diplomacy, and selective bilateral partnerships would allow African states to leverage competition among great powers while minimizing vulnerabilities. Strengthening continental and sub-regional institutions such as the African Union and ECOWAS can further enhance collective bargaining power and reduce asymmetric power relations.
3. Foreign military cooperation in Africa should be reoriented toward civilian protection, local capacity building, and long term security sector reform rather than short term tactical gains. External security assistance must be anchored in clearly defined rules of engagement that respect national sovereignty and international humanitarian norms. African states should prioritize investment in professionalized armed forces, intelligence accountability, and community based security initiatives to address the root causes of insecurity. This approach would help prevent incidents that undermine public trust and ensure that security partnerships contribute to sustainable peace rather than deepening instability.

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