Place of Sub-Saharan Africa in the Multipolar World: Between the Dragon, the Polar Bear and the European Union 'Gateway'

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Introduction

This study delves into the intricate interactions between Sub-Saharan Africa and three major external players – China, Russia, and the European Union – within the context of an evolving global order characterized by multipolarity. Situated in a dynamically significant region, this paper aims to comprehensively analyze the geopolitical dynamics and strategic involvements of these external actors in Sub-Saharan Africa, transcending the historical dominance of Western powers. Through an exploration of the multifaceted relationships forged between these external actors and African nations, the research seeks to untangle the complex web of evolving power structures, economic collaborations, and geopolitical consequences for Sub-Saharan Africa. Moreover, the paper extends its inquiry to scrutinize potential neocolonial tendencies that may be embedded within the engagements of these external actors in the region. By examining these dynamics, the research aspires to provide a nuanced understanding of the multifarious challenges and opportunities emerging in Sub-Saharan Africa within the framework of an emerging multipolar world order. This inquiry not only contributes to the existing body of knowledge on international relations but also enhances our comprehension of the complex relationships shaping the future of Sub-Saharan Africa in a multipolar global landscape.

Sub-Saharan Africa stands at the crossroads of an evolving global order characterized by multipolarity. The region's strategic significance has attracted the attention of multiple global powers, each competing for influence and access to its vast resources and growing markets. This competition has created both opportunities and challenges for African nations, as they seek to leverage striving for development via foreign investments, while maintaining their sovereignty. As traditional Western dominance wanes, the engagement of new players like China, Russia reshapes the geopolitical landscape of Sub-Saharan Africa. The European

Union however tries to parry Russia and China with the new plan – The global gateway.

This paper explores the region's interactions with these three major external players. By focusing on the geopolitical dynamics and strategic involvements of these actors, this study aims to elucidate the complex matrix of power structures, economic collaborations, and geopolitical consequences for Sub-Saharan Africa. Additionally, the paper examines potential neocolonial tendencies within these engagements, offering a nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities for the region in a multipolar world.

Research Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative analyses. Data is gathered from primary and secondary sources, including academic journals, government reports, and international organization publications, and media sources. This paper seeks to answer the following research question: which are more prevalent, the characteristics of neocolonialism or decolonialism?[1]

To assess whether engagement with these actors exhibits neocolonial or decolonial characteristics, I introduce my own concept of neocolonial/decolonial indicator. This innovative approach is still work in progress, it aims to highlight the originality and novelty of this paper. It is a composite descriptive indicator Its goal is to uncover the extent to which the behavior of external actors towards a particular country or region reflects patterns of exploitation, dependency[2], and dominance

1 Neocolonialism, as defined by Kwame Nkrumah, refers to the covert continuation of socio-economic and political influence by former colonial powers, aimed at preserving neoliberal capitalism and cultural dominance over formerly colonized nations. Nkrumah (1965) described neocolonialism as the final stage of imperialism, where countries, though nominally independent, have their policies externally controlled, allowing for ongoing exploitation to benefit the former colonial powers in various domains, such as economics, politics, culture, and military affairs.

2 Dependency can be measured in at least eight different ways: trade dependency, debt dependency, FDI, infrastructure projects, aid, technology and telecommunications, military support, cultural and educational exchanges. Given the paper's limited length, our focus will be on specific areas: for China, we will examine dependency in terms of debt and infrastructure; for the EU, our focus will be on development and humanitarian aid dependency; and for Russia, we will explore dependency related to military support in certain African countries.

reminiscent of historical colonial relationships. Neocolonial indicator has four categories: economic (which includes resource extraction dependency, financial dependency, labor exploitation), political (which implies different types of political interference), environmental degradation, and cultural hegemony. Due to its complexity and limited scope of the paper cultural hegemony will not be analyzed on this occasion.

On the other hand we introduce a decolonial[3] indicator as well. It is comprized from the following categories: Inclusive development which implies local ownership and control, community participation and benefit-sharing (tricle down effects), technology transfer and capacity building, environmental sustainability, diversification and industrialization, human capital investment, political non-interference, cultural empowerment. Once again cultural dimension will be ommited. The idea for creating this indicator came from the need for post-colonial concepts to become more concrete and understandable. It was inspired by the works of Kwame Nkrumah (1965) and Albert Memmi (2003). After describing the actions of the aforementined actors in Sub-Saharan Africa, the effects their actions will be summarized in these two indicators.

Nature of Chinese Investments in Africa

Modus operandi of Chinese investments and expected benefits

Padraig Carmody's concept of „flexigemony" describes China's adaptable and context-sensitive approach to exerting influence in Africa. Unlike traditional hegemony, which is often rigid and relies on a consistent set of practices, flexigemony allows China to tailor its strategies to fit varying circumstances and objectives (Carmody 2011). This approach is evident in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), where China's investments in infrastructure are adjusted based on geopolitical shifts and economic landscapes. Flexigemony combines both soft power, such as cultural diplomacy and economic aid, and hard power, like military presence and economic sanctions, to create a coordinated and multifaceted influence. By promoting Chinese standards, especially in technology and

3 Decolonization represents an ideology focused on attaining true freedom for former colonies. It involves the ability or determination of previously colonized nations to liberate themselves from imperial dominance and gain control over their internal and external affairs (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018).

infrastructure, China secures long-term economic influence in Africa, as countries that adopt these standards are more likely to continue engaging with Chinese markets and technologies. This strategy of forming tailored partnerships ensures that China's engagement meets both its own strategic interests and the needs of its African partners (Carmody 2023).

Instead of using soft power or hard power exclusively, the concept of flexigemony allows China to use „smart power" (Carmody 2010, 499). Smart power is a blend of soft and hard power, using a combination of attraction and coercion to achieve foreign policy goals. This nuanced approach involves leveraging both economic and military strengths while also engaging in cultural diplomacy and building favorable international relations (Nye 2008).

Carmody contends that China's „flexigemony" contrasts with the Western neoliberal, one-size-fits-all model by offering a more adaptable and context-sensitive approach to development. While this method challenges the traditional „enclave-led growth" prevalent in Africa, it also bolsters existing authoritarian regimes, thereby reinforcing entrenched power structures rather than promoting more inclusive governance (Carmody 2011, 182).

In practical terms, Chinese investments in Africa are primarily channeled through Special Economic Zones (SEZs), which provide a liberal investment environment focused on strategic industries. These SEZs in countries like Mauritius, Nigeria, Tanzania, and Zambia serve several strategic objectives:

1. Counterbalancing protectionist measures against Chinese products.
2. Expanding Chinese companies into new markets, recognizing Africa's growing market potential.
3. Mitigating risks for Chinese firms through government protection via intergovernmental agreements.
4. Promoting industrial competitiveness by fostering industry-specific clusters.
5. Facilitating the exploration and processing of natural resources (Antonio and Ma 2015, 86-87; Rotberg 2008, 137- 141).

SEZ offer numerous benefits, including the transfer of Chinese expertise, local employment, and the production of domestic goods. The methodology of Chinese investments involves using large state-owned enterprises to enter the African market, followed by the entry of private companies, leading to widespread Chinese business activity across various sectors.

Africa's infrastructure needs are immense, with major gaps in roads, railways, and water systems. Chinese investments through the BRI play a crucial role in addressing these needs, particularly in large countries like D.R. Congo and Sudan. Improved infrastructure enhances internal connectivity, supports market growth, and mitigates secessionist tensions by promoting balanced development. While these projects boost trade, labor mobility, and quality of life, Western critics argue they primarily facilitate resource extraction. However, unlike colonial infrastructure, Chinese projects focus on inward connectivity, cementing China's influence by setting infrastructure standards (like railway standards) that limit other geopolitical players (Mlambo 2018; Babić 2019).

Carmody points out two major problems with Chinese investments: The first issue is poor investment appraisal. Between 2011 and 2013, China used more cement than the United States did throughout the entire 20th century leading to significant overcapacity in cement and steel that needed to be exported. This was a key driver of the BRI. Many projects, such as ports and railways, often suffered from inadequate investment appraisal and were not necessarily economically viable. African political elites are often interested in loans to fund infrastructure projects, such as Kenya's multi-billion dollar Standard Gauge Railway (SGR), because these projects generate short-term economic growth and create jobs, which boost the economy. For instance, the President of Kenya inaugurated the railway shortly before the 2017 election, highlighting the influence of the political business cycle. While these projects can lead to repayment challenges, they help maintain political regimes. However, if these projects are not economically viable, they can hinder long-term economic growth and result in a debt overhang. SGR cost 6% of Kenya's GDP to construct. For every 7.8 tons of high-value manufactured goods transported inland from Mombasa, only 1.01 tons of low-value raw materials and natural resources are sent back to the port for export. This disparity in volume and value has led to claims that this represents an extractivist economic model. Additionally, the Chinese government became concerned about the contradictions of the BRI, leading to a significant reduction in new loan commitments to Africa from

2016 onwards (Carmody 2023, 10). However, the Kenyan government and its Chinese partners intend for the SGR to be profitable in the long run.

In general, Chinese investment strategy operates as follows: China initially deploys large state-owned enterprises to penetrate the African market. After overcoming initial market-entry barriers, private Chinese firms start operating in conjunction with these state-owned enterprises. Gradually, business activities are redistributed, allowing Chinese companies to expand across various economic sectors, thereby fostering synergy within their operations (Бабић 2022).

Chinese investments are widespread across Africa. According to AEI, Nigeria receives the largest share (17%) due to its sizable economy, followed by Angola and Ethiopia (8% each), and Kenya (6%). The largest investment category is "rest" (46%), indicating widespread presence. Sector-wise, investments are distributed in transport (33%), energy (33%), metallurgy (11%), real estate (11%), and other sectors (12%), countering the narrative that China seeks only Africa's natural resources (Бабић 2024, 212-213).

Negative aspects of Chinese investments in Africa

Chinese investments in Africa have several negative aspects: 1) inadequate environmental regulations, 2) poor working conditions and 3) debt trap diplomacy, which are potential neocolonial tendencies:

1) Regarding environmental protection, at a macro level, China has initiated industrial restructuring efforts to enhance Africa's industrial framework and boost energy efficiency (Xie 2010, 25). However, micro-environmental issues, especially in the fishing industry and ivory trade, are significant. The expansion of Chinese fishing vessels, especially in Eastern Africa, threatens food security and depletes local fish populations like Mackerel. The high demand for ivory in China, fueled by cultural beliefs, promotes widespread poaching of elephants and rhinos (Power, Mohan, Mullins 2012, 203, 209). The environmental challenges are exacerbated by Chinese investors' failure to enforce robust environmental regulations, and local political elites' tendency to overlook environmental pollution, possibly due to unawareness, a desire to please investors, or corruption (Babić 2022). While China's environmental

policies are slowly evolving at home, their implementation in Africa lags, reflecting a broader issue of modern capitalism rather than specific national actions. Hence, the primary polluter in Sub-Saharan Africa is not China, but modern capitalism.

2) Working conditions under Chinese employers often include low wages, unfair dismissals, lack of paid leave, inadequate health and social insurance, and poor housing for workers living far from their jobs. African workers report job insecurity and risks of workplace injuries, lack of trade union representation and irregular health and pension payments as major issues. From the above we can conclude that African workers are in dire need of stable employment, fair wages, comprehensive health coverage, job security, and guaranteed time off. Chinese companies' reluctance to offer long-term contracts stems from perceived issues with the local workforce's working ethic, discipline and overall workforce quality, as well as fear of legal disputes (Бабић 2022, 156).

It is important to emphasize that Chinese workers in Africa live and work under the same conditions as local workers, and Chinese supervisors are housed in the same, or slightly better accommodations compared to local workers. This contrasts with supervisors from the Western companies, who typically live in luxurious villas separated from the local population. Almost every Chinese worker, guided by their country's experience, views harsh working conditions as a necessary price to pay for development. This is not the case with African workers. These cultural differences can explain misunderstandings regarding workplace accidents. Chinese supervisors consider the number of work-related accidents to be a normal occurrence in the initial stages of development. For instance, the managers of a copper purification company boasted about having „only" three accidents per week, as this was significantly fewer than the number of accidents they experienced in China. On the other hand, Africans were quite concerned about the high frequency of accidents. An event in 2010 in Zambia represents the worst labor dispute in the history of Chinese-African relations. Chinese supervisors shot at workers who were protesting against low wages and conditions in the Collum coal mine in the southern province of Sinazongwe. Eleven people were hospitalized following the shooting. The incident provoked reactions from both citizens and political leaders. However, it is essential to note that the situation in Chinese companies in Africa has significantly improved compared to the earlier period (2008-2010) due to the reduction of cultural gaps and language barriers. (Бабић 2024, 221-224).

3) The Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka, financed by Chinese loans, became a focal point of the „debt-trap diplomacy" narrative. In 2017, facing debt challenges, Sri Lanka leased a majority stake in the port to China Merchants Port Holdings for 99 years, raising concerns of sovereignty loss. However, the lease was a commercial agreement to generate foreign exchange currency, not a debt-for-equity swap. The port's proceeds were used to repay high-interest international bonds, not Chinese loans. The Sri Lankan government retains ownership and control over port security, countering claims of a Chinese military takeover. The port project aligns with Sri Lanka's long-term developmental goals (Brautigam 2019, Singh 2020 Бабић 2024, 224-225).

As Joseph Onjala points out, Chinese loans are very attractive in Africa given that the levels of domestic savings and investments are quite low, and money is necessary for successful development (Onjala, 2017). Chinese lending practices offer an alternative financing source, particularly appealing to countries with limited access to conventional financing. Chinese loans often come with competitive terms compared to commercial loans, including lower interest rates and longer repayment periods. However, they sometimes lack transparency, which has led to criticisms. Unlike Western loans that often impose policy reform conditions, Chinese loans typically do not require structural adjustments, allowing borrowing countries more policy autonomy. In cases where countries face repayment difficulties, China has shown a willingness to renegotiate loan terms to avoid defaults. These loans are sometimes secured by natural resource concessions, aimed at reducing lending risks rather than predatory resource acquisition (Brautigam 2019, Singh 2020)

Debra Brautingam (2019), previously critical of Chinese investments in Africa, revised her views in her paper „A critical look at Chinese 'debt-trap diplomacy': the rise of a meme". She argues that the narrative of the Chinese debt trap has become an internet meme, fueled by unverified stories and a biased negative narrative from Western media. She cites a major study by the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, which analyzed 1,000 Chinese loans in Africa and found no evidence of deliberate Chinese debt entrapment for unfair or strategic gain, including asset seizures. The study showed that China's involvement in African debts is limited, with significant presence only in three African countries facing debt issues out of 53 observed. Brautigam underscores this perspective, noting that from 2000 to 2017, Chinese financiers signed over 1000 loan commitments worth over $143 billion with African governments and their state-owned enterprises. The IMF classifies several African countries as being in or at risk of debt distress, but the contribution of Chinese lending to this distress varies significantly. For instance, in Djibouti, Zambia, and the Republic of Congo, Chinese loans are substantial, but the debt distress stems mainly from broader economic issues, including other international creditors and domestic fiscal mismanagement.

This is also confirmed with my own analysis. In August 2018, Kenya’s public debt was 56.4% of GDP ($49 billion), with China holding 72% of the external debt ($5.34 billion). This indicates Kenya is not at risk of a „Chinese debt trap“ due to its manageable debt level and the relatively small proportion owed to China.[4] Similarly, Tanzania’s total debt in 2017/2018 was 43% of GDP ($22.5 billion), with China being the largest bilateral creditor, yet maintaining a low debt distress score because debt is lower than 60% of GDP. Ethiopia’s external debt was $26.4 billion in 2017/2018, with China holding $17 billion. Nigeria’s total debt is $79.436 billion, with external debt at $25.27 billion (6.07% of GDP). China, as the largest bilateral creditor, holds only $2.485 billion, while Nigeria owes $8.7 billion to multilateral institutions like the World Bank (Бабић 2024, 226).

Ajit Singh (2020) also references the Hopkins University study, noting that the vast majority of African external debt is borrowed from multilateral institutions or other non-Chinese creditors. The average Chinese debt in countries at risk of debt distress is only about 15%. While concessions exist ин Chinese loans secured by natural resource, their primary motivation is to reduce lending risk, not to gain predatory access to resources. China’s lending practices often benefit countries with limited access to conventional financing, and China has shown a willingness to adjust loan terms in response to changing circumstances. The narrative of China using loans to take over natural resources oversimplifies a complex financial and geopolitical landscape.

4 Hoewer it must be mentioned that Kenya’s debt distress was worsened since that period. New arrangement with the IMF led to the introduction of new financial bill which sparked protests in summer of 2024.

The EU's Global Gateway: At the Crossroads of Postcolonial and Neocolonial Dynamics

The European Union (EU) unveiled the Global Gateway on 1 December 2021, a strategic initiative aimed at supporting global infrastructure development. With an ambitious target of mobilizing up to €300 billion in investments between 2021 and 2027, the Global Gateway represents the EU's efforts to position itself as a significant global power. The initiative seeks to foster sustainable projects through high standards, good governance, and transparency, while simultaneously enhancing the EU's own strategic interests and reinforcing the resilience of its supply chains (European Commission - Press release Brussels, 1 December 2021).

The Global Gateway is financed through a combination of development aid, loan guarantees, grants, investment capital from European investment banks, member state investments, and private capital. It aims to build connectivity through physical and digital infrastructure projects, renewable energy, trade, and capacity building. The initiative emphasizes an ethical approach, ensuring infrastructure projects do not create unsustainable debt or unwanted dependencies (Tagliapietra, 2021).

Key Pillars of the Global Gateway, its normative stance and geopolitical reality

The initiative's key pillars include:

• Democratic Values and Standards: Promoting the rule of law, high standards of human, social, and workers' rights.

• Good Governance and Transparency: Ensuring transparency, accountability, and financial sustainability.

• Equal Partnerships: Collaborating with partner countries based on mutual interests and needs.

• Green and Clean: Investing in climate-neutral projects aligned with the European Green Deal.

• Security-focused: Building secure infrastructure to enhance global resilience.

• Catalyzing Private Sector Investment: Leveraging resources to attract private capital.

• Digital Transition: Deploying digital networks and infrastructures.

• Sustainable Transport Networks: Promoting inclusive and safe transport networks.
• Health and Education: Diversifying pharmaceutical supply chains and investing in quality education and research (ECQ&A 2021).

By defining its principles in this way, the EU aims to emphasize the normative aspect of its actions, thereby implicitly assuming its own moral superiority. The concept of the EU as a normative power, primarily articulated by Ian Manners, posits that the EU transcends traditional state behavior, promoting peace, liberty, the rule of law, democracy, human rights, anti-discrimination, and good governance. This identity, rooted in a treaty-based legal order, allows the EU to influence global norms through its values and principles, distinguishing it from traditional state actors (Manners 2002; Manners 2008). The EU's foreign policy, thus, is aimed at promoting ethical norms (Schiepers and Sicurelli 2008).

However, the practical application of the EU's normative power often reveals inconsistencies, particularly when economic interests of member states overshadow ethical commitments. A notable example is the EU's stance on China in 1996, where economic relations took precedence over human rights issues, leading to a regular human rights dialogue rather than critical resolutions (Balducci 2010). Similarly, the EU's double standards are evident in its approach to Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. In Bosnia, the EU supports the controversial institution of the High Representative, reminiscent of colonial administration, while in Kosovo, it facilitates the recognition of the secessionist province, contradicting its firm support for Ukraine's territorial integrity (Бабић 2024, 389-390).

In reality, The Global Gateway is not just an economic initiative nor normative concept; it is a strategic geopolitical tool. It is designed to project the EU's influence globally, countering China's BRI by offering a „values-based" alternative. This competition between major powers is a hallmark of the emerging multipolar world order. The Global Gateway is explicitly framed as an alternative to the BRI. While China's infrastructure investments have been criticized for creating debt dependencies and prioritizing Chinese interests, the EU emphasizes transparency, ethical standards, and sustainable development. This framing aims to attract countries wary of falling into the so-called „Chinese debt trap". The evidence that Global Gateway is the direct opposite of the BRI comes directly from the statements of Ursula von der Leyen herself and other EU diplomats. (Standish 26 Oct 2023; Lau and Moens 20. Dec 2022).

Challenges and neocolonial tendencies

The major drawback of this initiative is its funding; specifically, it lacks a dedicated new funding line and instead relies on unspent remnants from other initiatives and funds. Blended finance, a key mechanism of the Global Gateway, involves combining public and private funds to finance infrastructure projects. While this approach can mobilize significant resources, it also risks creating debt dependencies that can be exploited for political and economic gains. (Prontera & Quitzow, 2023). Given this financing method, the sustainability of projects within this initiative is questionable. Moreover, if the goal is to compete with China, this funding model is not viable, considering China's substantially greater financial resources.

The neocolonial tendencies of the Global Gateway initiative are intertwined with the broader Green Transition Agenda. Through the signing of a series of memorandums on Sustainable Raw Materials Value Chains, the EU aims to shift potentially environmentally damaging mining operations to far away, non EU countries with less stringent regulations and lower environmental protection standards. Those memorandums are signed with Chile, Namibia, Kazakhstan, Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Argentina, D.R. Congo and Serbia in last two years. Most problematic is the memorandums with Rwanda. The reason for this is the fact that Rwanda does not possess some of the minerals for which it has signed agreements. These minerals are found in neighboring D.R. Congo. Rwanda has supported the rebel group M23, which operates in eastern Congo, and through this group, it facilitates the extraction of natural resources (UN Press SC/15760, 8 July 2024). In this way, the EU tacitly enables a proxy war and the destabilization of a sovereign state.[5]

[5] Outside the African context, the memorandum with Serbia is also problematic. Although there are countries in Europe with more lithium than Serbia, such as Portugal, Germany, and the Czech Republic, there is an insistence on mining in Serbia, which is not an EU member. Moreover, this would be a unique attempt at mining in a densely populated area. The guarantees provided by the EU for environmental protection are unclear because Serbia is not an EU member, and the company Rio Tinto is also not owned by EU states.

Reach and Limits of Russia's Influence in Africa

Historically, Russia's relationship with Africa dates back to Tsarist times and intensified during the Soviet era when the USSR supported anti-colonial movements. Despite a period of neglect post-Soviet dissolution, Russia has renewed its focus on Africa under Vladimir Putin. Politically, Russia leverages its non-colonial legacy and support for anti-colonial struggles to build credibility as a reliable partner (Babić 2022, 52-54).

In summary, Russian policy towards Africa is built on two main pillars: (i) securing economic access to international markets, and (ii) leveraging multilateralism to advance Russian geopolitical hegemony (Pahm 2010, 75). Recently, Russia has been leveraging BRICS as a platform to advocate for multilateralism. Since the onset of the conflict in Ukraine, Russia has been actively working to strengthen its relationships with African countries, positioning itself as an international actor that provides an alternative to the (neo)liberal order promoted by the collective West. Russia supports Africans in addressing their domestic challenges, including security and economic development, independently while actively participating in shaping global architecture. The connection between social and economic progress in Africa and long-term peace and stability is evident. A notable example is the African Union (AU), which granted observer status to Russia in 2006. Both Russia and the AU are keen on expanding their cooperation, as evidenced by the Memorandum of Understanding signed in September 2014 between the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the African Union Commission. This agreement outlines the procedures for political consultations Moscow prioritizes diversifying its relationships with continental and regional African bodies, especially the AU. Putin's special representative for the Middle East and Africa regularly participates in AU summits (Daniel and Shubin 2018, 56–57; Babić 2022, 53). The cooperation reached its peak with the Russia-Africa Summit held on 27-28 July 2023, which highlighted Russia's strategic engagement with the African continent, focusing on military, economic, and humanitarian cooperation. Russia offered weapons and intelligence support to bolster regional security and pledged to send up to 50,000 tons of grain to Burkina Faso, Zimbabwe, Mali, Somalia, Central African Republic and Eritrea, aiming to address food security challenges. Additionally, Russia emphasized expanding trade relations and proposed developing financial systems using regional currencies to reduce dependency on the US dollar and promote economic integration. These initiatives reflect Russia's broader strategy to strengthen its geopolitical influence in Africa by addressing immediate needs and fostering long-term economic and security partnerships, positioning itself as a key player amid the competitive presence of other major powers such as China and the European Union. Furthermore, Russia has become the unofficial patron of rogue West African states (Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso).

Goals and aspects of Russian Policy in Africa

Based on the previous points, we can more clearly articulate Russia's objectives in Africa.

First goal: Projecting Power on the Global Stage. By garnering support from African nations, Russia aims to enhance its global influence, especially within the UN General Assembly. African nations form the largest voting bloc in the United Nations General Assembly. By supporting these countries, Russia is strategically cultivating allies to challenge the current security order dominated by the United States and Euro-Atlantic powers. This approach has previously benefited China, which managed to exclude Taiwan from the United Nations with African support. Recognizing the effectiveness of this strategy, Russian diplomacy is actively working to win the hearts and minds of African countries. In doing so, Russia aims to bolster its ability to block resolutions in the United Nations General Assembly that are unfavorable to its interests.

Second goal: Accessing raw materials and natural resources: Russia seeks strategic resources that are complementary to its own, ensuring a steady supply of critical materials. Unlike other external actors focused on fossil fuels or gold, Russia is interested in different rare elements such as manganese, chrome, and cobalt. For instance, bauxites imported from Africa contribute to over 60% of Russian aluminum production, which benefits from lower production costs in Africa. From the DRC to the Central African Republic, Russian companies are expanding their mining operations for resources like coltan, cobalt, gold, and diamonds. In Zimbabwe, a joint venture between Russia's JSC Afromet and Zimbabwe's Pen East Ltd is developing one of the world's largest platinum group metal deposits. In Angola, Russian mining company Alrosa recently increased its stake in local producer Catoca to 41%, securing a significant production base outside Russia (Adibe 2019). Additionally, Russia is utilizing its state-owned oil and gas companies to establish new energy supply channels. For instance, in 2018, Nigerian oil and gas company Oranto Petroleum formed a partnership with Rosneft, Russia's largest oil producer, to develop 21 oil assets across 17 African countries. Russian companies have also made substantial investments in the oil and gas industries of Algeria, Libya, Nigeria, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, and Egypt. Unlike other international partners, Russia's approach is not centered on extracting African oil and gas but rather on developing infrastructure to transport these resources. This strategy not only enables Russia to generate profits but also maintains the option to integrate this infrastructure with its own systems in the future. By investing in African energy infrastructure, fostering long-term partnerships and creating new energy supply streams Russia is solidifying its position in the region (Babić 2022, 60-62).

Third goal: Arms Exports and Security. Arms exports serve both economic and strategic purposes, reinforcing Russia's presence and influence in Africa. In recent years, Russia has emerged as the leading supplier of arms to Africa, accounting for 35% of the region's arms exports, followed by China at 17%, the United States at 9.6%, and France at 6.9%. Since 2015, Russia has entered into over 20 bilateral defense industry agreements with African nations (Adibe 2019). For Russia, arms exports not only generate revenue but also extend its influence. Russian weapons are known for their favorable cost/quality ratio compared to those from other manufacturers. Additionally, their reliability is notably high, allowing them to be effectively used as „second-hand merchandise." A significant competitive advantage for Russian arms is their longstanding presence in Africa since the „liberation period", making them familiar and well-accustomed to local forces. The situation in the C.A.R. exemplifies a model Russia replicates across Africa. It is stepping in to fill security voids left by the waning interest or fatigue of Western countries. Russia's objective in such engagements is to secure governments that are open to cooperating with Moscow. Unlike some of its competitors, Russia's approach in these partnerships is not driven by ideological principles (Ibid, 61).

Between 2021 and 2023, a series of military coups swept through West Africa, notably in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. These coups were marked by a strong anti-French sentiment and a pro-Russian stance. Support for Russia was not only evident among the military leadership that orchestrated the coups but also widespread among the populace. In contrast, Guinea's situation was slightly different, with significant public support for Russia, but the new military government maintained a more balanced stance compared to Mali and Burkina Faso. The pro-Russian sentiment was solidified by Burkina Faso's President Ibrahim Traoré's statements at the Russia-Africa summit in July 2023.

Practically, these coups were executed peacefully without bloodshed, and there was no direct involvement of Russia in these events. Despite persistent claims by Western media regarding the involvement of the Wagner Group, evidence of Wagner's presence was only confirmed in Mali, and even then, solely in the capacity of instructors. Since the deaths of Wagner's leaders Yevgeny Prigozhin and Dmitry Utkin, Russia's military engagement in Africa evolved in a new form - Russian Africa Corps which means greater alignment with the official policies of the Russian state.

Based on these defined goals we can define three different aspects of Russian engagement in Africa:

1) Economic Aspect – Russia's economic interests in Africa are distinct from other global players. While other players seek to extract African resources to sustain their economic growth, Russia focuses on complementary resources like manganese, chrome, and cobalt. Major Russian companies participate in African mining projects, such as Zimbabwe's Darwendale platinum mine. Russia also invests in energy infrastructure, notably through projects like ANGOSAT in Angola, and has made significant invetments in Nigeria. Russia's trade with Sub-Saharan Africa has seen significant developments in recent years. Russian exports to Africa surged by 43% in 2023, reaching $21.2 billion, up from $12.1 billion the previous year. This increase is notable given the broader geopolitical context, including the ongoing war in Ukraine and Western sanctions against Russia. Key exports include grain, which constitutes

nearly 30% of Africa’s grain supply, as well as other commodities like coal, refined petroleum, and electronics. (Osman 19.04.2024).

2) Military Cooperation – Military cooperation is a cornerstone of Russia’s engagement with Africa. Russia is a major arms supplier to the continent, providing cost-effective and reliable military equipment. This cooperation often opens doors for business concessions in strategic sectors like energy and mining. Russia’s involvement in the C.A.R. exemplifies its military strategy, where it filled a security vacuum left by Western powers. Indeed, the cooperation model similar to that in the C.A.R. has been replicated in Mali and Burkina Faso, where Russian troops, alongside local forces, are effectively combating terrorist groups. In Mali, this collaboration has led to remarkable results, with government forces successfully regaining control over nearly the entire country, for the first time since 2011. However, this engagement has its drawbacks, including the preservation of authoritarian regimes, occasional human rights violations during military operations, and significant casualties among both local security forces and Russian soldiers.

3) Soft Power – Russia’s soft power in Africa includes cultural, educational, and humanitarian initiatives. Russian Centers of Science and Culture in various African countries promote Russian language and culture. Educational exchanges and scholarships attract African students to Russian universities. Additionally, Russia’s humanitarian aid and medical assistance, including vaccine distribution during COVID-19, pandemics, enhance its soft power. Media outlets like RT and Sputnik extend Russia’s influence by providing alternative narratives to Western media (Babić 2022, 59-60).

Discussion

Based on the criteria of neocolonial/decolonial indicator and the actions of the observed actors illustrated above, we can summarize their activities as follows:

	Neocolonial indicators					Decolonial indicators				
	Resource extraction	Creating dependency	Exploitative labor practices	Political interference	Enviormental degradation	Inclusive development	Diversification and industrialization	Financial access	Human capital investments	Technology and knowledge transfer
China	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
EU	✓	✓		✓	✓				✓	
Russia	✓	✓						✓	✓	

We have identified five neocolonial and five decolonial criteria. In the following sections, we will discuss each of these criteria in order from left to right. Neocolonial indicators are:

Resource extraction: All the countries under observation are engaged in the exploitation of natural resources, albeit through different methods and with different objectives. Despite these variations, each actor continues to extract resources from Africa. However, it's important to recognize that these countries now offer more in return than what has been given to Africa in eras of colonialism and early independence period.

Creating dependency: All of actors mentioned above the contribute to creating dependencies for African nations, though they do so in various ways. Our analysis has concluded that while there isn't a „Chinese debt trap" in the conventional sense, many African countries do carry substantial debts to Chinese creditors. Furthermore, Chinese companies have established significant presences in African markets, with Chinese products becoming the preferred choice for a large number of African consumers. Moreover, Africa is dependent on China for infrastructure building and development. The EU creates dependency by tying development aid, and very often humanitarian aid, to certain political conditions. While Russia's presence in Africa is not as extensive as to create widespread dependency, recent years have shown that countries like the C.A.R, Mali, and Burkina Faso are increasingly reliant on Russian security support.

Exploitative labor practices: It appears that only China engages in exploitative labor practices, though the situation is gradually improving. The presence of Russian companies in the region is considerably smaller compared to Chinese companies, resulting in fewer reports concerning working conditions in Russian operations. As for the European Union, it is not directly involved in these practices; instead, the values of the EU are implicitly represented through its member states and multinational corporations.

Political interference: There are only two notable instances of Chinese interference in African internal affairs. The first occurred as a defensive response to anti-Chinese rhetoric during Michael Sata's 2006 presidential campaign in Zambia. However, when Sata was elected in 2011, he did not implement anti-Chinese policies. The second instance involves China's implicit approval of the overthrow of Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe. The EU consistently engages in political interference in African politics by imposing various conditions for receiving aid or investments. Additionally, the EU tends to categorize African politicians as either „good" or „bad" dictators. Russia's policy consistently involves cooperating with the official authorities of a state rather than the opposition. Therefore, Russia does not participate in regime change operations. However, Russia does play a role as a guarantor for the stability of regimes in the Central African Republic, Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso.

Environmental degradation: The adverse environmental effects of Chinese mining operations in Zambia and the Congo are widely recognized. Despite advocating for a Green Agenda domestically, the EU engages in less environmentally friendly activities in Africa, especially in the mining of lithium and coltan. There is limited information on pollution from Russian activities, likely because the environmental impact from Chinese and European operations is more significant. Consequently, it can be inferred that the environmental degradation caused by Russian companies does not surpass the typical levels associated with resource exploitation.

Regarding decolonial indicators, the situation is as follows:

Inclusive development: Only China offers comprehensive and inclusive development to African countries. The other two actors neither have sufficient resources nor a clear strategic vision for Sub-Saharan Africa.

Diversification and industrialization: Among the observed actors, only China provides a diversified approach that encompasses all sectors of the African economy, emphasizing industrialization. The other two actors focus on specific sectors and do not implement a comprehensive, holistic strategy.

Financial access: China clearly holds the most substantial financial resources among all the observed actors. In contrast, Russia's financial resources are limited, particularly due to the ongoing war in Ukraine, but Russia offers debt cancelation and donations of agricultural products. Meanwhile, securing finance remains the biggest challenge for the EU's Global Gateway project.

Human capital investment: All actors invest in human capital through various initiatives, including student exchanges, scholarships, professional training programs, and other educational opportunities.

Technology and knowledge transfer: To date, only China has actively engaged in technology transfer. However, Russia has also announced plans to expand its technological contributions in the Sahel, including promises to build gold processing plants. The transfer of knowledge and technology is not included in the EU's strategic documents.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated the important role that Sub-Saharan Africa occupies in the evolving multipolar world order, marked by the strategic engagements of China, Russia, and the EU. Each actor's approach to the region reveals a complex interplay of economic, political, and normative influences that both challenge and reshape the traditional power structures in Sub-Saharan Africa. China's "flexigemony" model, characterized by its dynamic and context-specific strategies, has significantly impacted African development, particularly through infrastructure investments under the BRI. However, the risks of economic dependency, environmental degradation, and labor exploitation are evident, raising concerns about the long-term sustainability of this relationship.

Russia's re-engagement with Africa, rooted in its historical ties and strategic interests, has similarly shaped the region's geopolitical landscape. By offering military support, particularly in politically unstable regions, and securing access to key natural resources, Russia has positioned itself as a key player in the region. Nonetheless, this engagement carries the potential for reinforcing authoritarian regimes and contributing to regional instability, especially in the context of its military partnerships and influence in recent coups.

The EU's Global Gateway initiative, while ambitious in its goals to promote democratic values and sustainable development, faces significant challenges in its implementation. The reliance on blended finance, coupled with the initiative's inherent contradictions between ethical commitments and economic interests, raises questions about its effectiveness and the potential for neocolonial practices. Despite its emphasis on normative power, the EU's engagement with Africa is challanged by the competing influences of China and Russia, which offer alternative models of development and governance. The double standards applied by the European Union work to its detriment.

The neocolonial/decolonial indicator introduced in the methodology serves as an innovative tool for evaluating the interactions of external powers with Sub-Saharan Africa. This composite descriptive indicator was developed to assess the extent to which these interactions exhibit either neocolonial or decolonial characteristics, providing a nuanced framework for understanding the complex dynamics at play. The use of this indicator provides a structured approach to assessing the dualities inherent in the relationships between Sub-Saharan Africa and these global powers. It underscores the importance of evaluating both the exploitative and emancipatory elements of foreign engagements, offering a more comprehensive understanding of how these interactions shape the region's development. The analysis revealed that all the external actors – China, Russia, and the EU – exhibit varying degrees of neocolonial behavior, particularly in resource extraction and the creation of dependencies. However, the specific methods and impacts differ, reflecting each actor's unique strategies and interests in the region. Conversely, the decolonial aspects of the indicator highlight positive contributions such as inclusive development, diversification and industrialization, financial access, human capital investment, and technology transfer. Among the actors, China emerged as the most active in promoting decolonial forms of development.

Ultimately, the future of Sub-Saharan Africa in this multipolar world order will depend on the ability of African nations to navigate these external influences. While the engagement of these major powers presents opportunities for development and economic growth, it also poses significant risks, particularly in terms of dependency and exploitation. The challenge for African nations will be to leverage the benefits of these relationships while safeguarding their sovereignty and ensuring that development is both inclusive and sustainable. As the global order continues to shift, the strategic importance of Sub-Saharan Africa will only increase, making it a critical region in the ongoing reconfiguration of global power dynamics.

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