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## **Courting Giants: African States between Neo-Colonial Constraints and Emerging Global Alliances in the 21st Century.**

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### **Abstract**

Within the shifting architecture of global power, Africa has re-emerged as a central arena of strategic competition among China, Russia, the European Union and the United States of America. This study examined how African regional powers navigate this rivalry, focusing on Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa between 2015 and 2025. Anchored in Neo-Realism, the paper argued that these states are rational actors responding to structural pressures in an increasingly multipolar international system. Using qualitative comparative case analysis based on documentary evidence and elite interviews, the findings revealed a pattern of strategic hedging and issue-based alignment, as African states attempt to diversify partnerships while safeguarding sovereignty. However, constraints such as debt exposure, conditional aid and asymmetric security arrangements persist. While Western actors often tie engagement to liberal governance norms, China and Russia offer alternative modes of partnership that challenge existing power hierarchies. The paper concluded by advocating for a recalibrated African foreign policy that foregrounds strategic autonomy, regional coordination and domestic capacity-building. The article contributes to debates on multipolarity, relative gains and secondary power strategy by situating African agency within a Structural Realist framework.

**Keywords:** Strategic Autonomy, Neo-Colonialism, Foreign Policy Analysis, Africa–China Relations, Great Power Competition

### **Introduction**

In the 21st century, Africa has become a focal point in the global strategic contest among established and emerging powers. The continent, rich in natural resources, youthful demographics and geostrategic positioning, is increasingly viewed as central to the ambitions of states such as China and Russia, as well as traditional actors like the United States of America and the European Union. While this renewed attention brings developmental opportunities, it also intensifies the complex interplay of influence, often cloaked in promises of mutual benefit but bearing the hallmarks of neo-colonial entanglement (Obeng-

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Odoom, 2020; Carmody, 2021). The asymmetrical nature of these engagements raises questions about the sustainability of African sovereignty in a global order still dominated by power imbalances.

Africa's strategic value lies not only in its resource endowments (oil, critical minerals and arable land), but also in its increasing relevance to global governance issues such as migration, counterterrorism, climate change and trade connectivity (Taylor, 2020). The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by China, Russia's growing military presence and diplomatic assertiveness and Western states' recalibrated Africa strategies all underscore the geopolitical competition unfolding across the continent. These engagements occur amid a persistent narrative of Africa as a passive arena rather than an active agent, often obscuring the diverse and dynamic ways in which African states navigate, negotiate and sometimes, resist external pressures (Cornelissen & Taylor, 2022).

Contrary to the perception of Africa as geopolitically fragmented or diplomatically malleable, several African states, especially regional powers such as Nigeria, South Africa and Kenya, have adopted increasingly strategic foreign policy approaches. These approaches aim to balance competing interests, extract value from multiple alliances and assert degrees of policy autonomy (Adebajo, 2023; Alden & Le Pere, 2010). However, significant challenges remain, including high levels of external debt, conditionality-laden aid, security dependencies and elite-driven diplomacy that may not always align with broader developmental objectives (Bond, 2020; Mohan & Lampert, 2019).

This paper interrogated how African states manage their foreign policy amid the resurgence of great power rivalries and whether the emerging relationships, especially with China and Russia, represent genuine alternatives to Western hegemony or simply a shift in dependency frameworks. It seeks to problematize the simplistic binaries of 'East versus West' by highlighting African agency, institutional complexities and the layered nature of modern diplomacy. Employing a theoretical framework that combined Dependency Theory, Neo-Realism and Foreign Policy Analysis, and focusing on Nigeria, South Africa, and Kenya as case studies, this paper uncovered how strategic autonomy is negotiated in a structurally unequal world.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Despite Africa's growing prominence in global geopolitics, its interactions with major powers continue to reflect enduring structural inequalities. The continent's re-engagement with global actors such as China and Russia is frequently presented as a departure from the exploitative legacies of Western imperialism. However, emerging partnerships often mirror previous dependency patterns, raising critical questions about the authenticity and sustainability of these new alliances (Carmody, 2021; Taylor, 2020). The growing debt burdens, opaque bilateral agreements and increasing securitization of foreign relations have

intensified concerns over Africa's vulnerability to modern forms of neo-colonial influence (Bond, 2020; Obeng-Odoom, 2020).

Although African states have demonstrated growing diplomatic assertiveness, their foreign policies are often constrained by limited institutional capacity, economic asymmetries and external conditionalities (Mohan & Lampert, 2019). While some governments attempt to diversify their partnerships to enhance bargaining power, the asymmetrical nature of global capitalism and international finance limits the autonomy with which African states can act (Alden & Le Pere, 2010). The strategic calculations behind African foreign policy are further complicated by domestic political dynamics, leadership choices and elite interests, which may not always align with broader national development goals (Cornelissen & Taylor, 2022; Adebajo, 2023).

There is therefore, a need to interrogate whether Africa's current foreign policy orientations, especially toward China and Russia, truly offer a transformative break from the continent's historically subordinate role in global affairs, or merely represent a reconfiguration of dependency under different ideological veneers. Without a clear understanding of the structural, strategic and domestic factors shaping African foreign policy, there is a risk of repeating historical cycles of economic dependency, political coercion and developmental marginalization. This paper addressed this gap by analyzing how selected African states (Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa) navigate great power rivalries while attempting to assert strategic autonomy in a multipolar world.

### **Research Questions**

1. To what extent do the engagements of Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa with China and Russia reflect a reconfiguration or continuation of historical dependency patterns?
2. How do Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa position themselves within the broader context of great power rivalry to safeguard their strategic interests and autonomy?
3. In what ways do domestic political interests, leadership choices and institutional dynamics influence the formulation and direction of foreign policy in Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa?

### **Research Objectives**

1. To critically examine whether contemporary alliances, particularly with China and Russia, represent a structural shift away from neo-colonial dependencies or a repackaging of them.
2. To analyze how African regional powers strategically navigate a multipolar global system shaped by the competing interests of the United States of America, European Union, China and Russia.

3. To investigate how internal factors such as political leadership, bureaucratic institutions and national interests shape foreign policy decisions in Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa.

### **Literature Review**

Recent literature has reinvigorated this debate in light of Africa's engagements with China and Russia. Scholars (Brautigam, 2020; Mawdsley, 2018) have argued that while these partnerships appear to offer alternatives to Western paternalism, they often replicate hierarchical and extractive dynamics. For instance, China's involvement through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has led to infrastructure investment across over forty (40) African countries. However, several analysts warn that the terms of engagement, including collateralized loans and preferential access to resources, suggest a reconfiguration rather than an end to dependency (Brautigam, 2020; Mawdsley, 2018).

Nigeria's Lagos-Ibadan railway, Kenya's Standard Gauge Railway and South Africa's Huawei telecoms integration reflect the infrastructure-for-sovereignty trade-off (Okere & Elochukwu, 2021; Power & Mohan, 2021). The debt-servicing burden arising from these deals, particularly in Kenya and Ethiopia, has become a subject of domestic political contestation, reinforcing concerns over fiscal autonomy (Gadzala, 2019; Obeng-Odoom, 2020). Russia's renewed interest in Africa, especially through military cooperation and arms deals, also raises questions of strategic dependency. The 2019 and 2023 Russia-Africa Summits positioned Moscow as a counterweight to Western norms-driven diplomacy. However, Russia's use of Wagner Group operatives in Mali, Central African Republic (CAR) and Sudan has been associated with elite capture, resource-for-security pacts and human rights abuses (Ramani, 2022).

Some authors (Mohan & Lampert, 2019) have highlighted the rhetoric of non-interference and mutual respect as hallmarks of South-South cooperation, others (Obeng-Odoom, 2020) have argued that this merely obscures the lack of regulatory oversight and long-term development planning. Obeng-Odoom (2020) critiqued the current phase of Afro-Asian engagement as a form of "rental dependency", where African states lease out sovereignty in exchange for short-term capital and prestige. Thus, far from a rupture with past dependencies, China and Russia's rise may constitute a lateral movement within the same global asymmetrical architecture. Furthermore, under the lens of Neo-Realism, the international system is defined by anarchy, where survival and power-maximization drive state behaviour (Waltz, 1979). Within this logic, African states are not merely passive recipients of global influence but are increasingly engaging in strategic hedging- a foreign policy strategy that avoids firm alignment with any single great power bloc. Instead, African governments seek to diversify alliances across ideological and economic divides, extracting maximum material and diplomatic benefits while minimizing external dependency (Sidiropoulos, 2020; Gadzala, 2019).

Empirical evidence supports this logic of hedging in multiple contexts. Nigeria, for instance, has deepened military relations with the United States of America through counterterrorism cooperation and AFRICOM-linked engagements while simultaneously expanding economic ties with China through infrastructure and oil-backed loans (Clement, 2023; Belousova, 2024). Kenya, under successive administrations, has pursued bilateral ties with both the West and China, participating in U.S.-Africa trade platforms such as the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) (enacted in 2000 to promote economic growth in Sub-Saharan African. It allows eligible counties to export over 6,500 products to the United States duty-free and quota free and is currently set to expire this year, 2025), while accepting Chinese concessional loans for its infrastructure and digital surveillance networks (Pruitt, 2022; Mawdsley, 2018). South Africa's participation in BRICS exemplifies this approach. Through this multilateral grouping, South Africa leverages its middle-power status to promote its global visibility and access alternative development financing mechanisms (Taylor, 2020). Simultaneously, it maintains strong economic ties with the European Union and remains a key security partner for NATO allies in maritime domains (Sidiropoulos, 2020).

Although strategic hedging allows African states to exploit power rivalries for material advantage, it also has limitations. Mbara et al., 2020; Tuke (2011) argued that hedging does not eliminate asymmetrical dependencies, but instead, multiplies them across domains- economy, security, technology and governance. For example, while African leaders praise Chinese and Russian non-interference, they often find themselves constrained by debt obligations, military dependencies or lack of transparency clauses in agreements (Ramani, 2022; Brautigam, 2020). Moreover, Woldearegay (2024) pointed to the fragility of issue-based alignment in the absence of strong institutional capacity or regional coordination. Kenya's experience with contested loan arrangements and Nigeria's struggles with overlapping security partnerships demonstrate that hedging, while tactically rational, may be strategically shallow if not embedded within long-term planning (Msimango, 2016; Mawdsley, 2018). Importantly, hedging is often misinterpreted as autonomy. Yet, as Quinn (2010) and Okere & Elochukwu (2021) argued, the structural inequality of the global system limits the degrees of freedom available to African states, even when they pursue diverse alliances. Therefore, alliance diversification should be understood not as a manifestation of full strategic independence, but as a constrained adaptation within a multipolar but still hierarchical global order.

While external structures explain much of Africa's global positioning, Hudson (2007) and Adebajo (2023) increasingly emphasized the role of domestic agency in shaping foreign policy outcomes. Drawing from Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), this paper investigated how leadership choices, regime type, institutional capacity, and elite interests interact to influence the formulation and execution of foreign policy. This

framework moves beyond systemic determinism to highlight the plurality of actors and interests that contest and define national strategies. In Nigeria, foreign policy has long oscillated between Pan-Africanist aspirations and realist self-interest. Clement (2023) and Mbara et al. (2020) observed that decisions are often shaped by domestic political survival, elite coalitions and regime legitimacy rather than long-term strategic planning. For instance, Nigeria's engagement with China in sectors like oil, rail and telecommunications has been driven by both national infrastructure needs and the interests of political and business elites who benefit from opaque deal structures (Obeng-Odoom, 2020; Mohan & Lampert, 2019). In Kenya, FPA studies reveal that foreign policy is closely tied to electoral politics and regional dynamics in the Horn of Africa. Leaders often use high-profile infrastructure deals or counterterrorism cooperation as symbols of strength and competence to domestic constituencies (Woldearegay, 2024; Pruitt, 2022). However, institutional weaknesses, including limited parliamentary oversight, over-centralized executive power and under-resourced foreign ministries, have made Kenya susceptible to short-term, transactional diplomacy, often lacking transparency and long-term vision (Lutfu & Shanto, 2023).

South Africa presents a more complex case. While it possesses one of the most institutionalized foreign policy systems on the continent, analysts argued that its international behaviour still fluctuates with internal ANC dynamics and leadership personalities (Sidiropoulos, 2020; Moore, 2011). The country's ambivalent stance on the Russia-Ukraine war, and its insistence on a "non-aligned" position within BRICS, has been interpreted both as a moral stand and as a diplomatic balancing act driven by internal divisions and economic pressures (Belousova, 2024).

The limitations of African foreign policy autonomy, therefore, are not only imposed from the outside but also constructed from within. FPA scholars warn that when foreign policy becomes elite-driven and opaque, it risks disconnecting from national interests and public accountability (Hudson, 2007; Quinn, 2010). Furthermore, a lack of policy institutionalization, through think tanks, legislative participation and long-term diplomatic training, has constrained the development of coherent strategic doctrines in many African states (Adebajo, 2023; Msimango, 2016). However, African agency is far from absent. Recent examples, such as the African Union's mediation roles in global conflicts, coordinated COVID-19 diplomacy and collective climate advocacy at COP27 demonstrated the emerging potential of continental diplomacy when backed by domestic legitimacy and regional coordination (Carmody, 2021; Taylor, 2020). These developments affirm that foreign policy in Africa is not merely reactive but can be strategic and transformative, if supported by political will and institutional depth.

A growing body of scholarship has examined Africa's evolving relationships with global powers such as China, Russia, the European Union and the United States, much of the literature remains siloed, often

analyzing external actors in isolation or focusing narrowly on economic or military aspects of engagement. Neo-Realist analyses focus on the structural constraints of international anarchy but pay limited attention to the nuances of African diplomatic behaviour (Taylor, 2020; Carmody, 2021). There is a lack of research that analyzes how African states themselves navigate great power rivalries using both external and internal strategies, while contending with structural constraints and agency-limiting factors like debt, security dependencies and institutional weaknesses.

Few existing studies triangulate case-specific foreign policy behaviour (e.g., in Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa) with theoretical frameworks that account for both structure and agency, or that assess the real extent of strategic autonomy in Africa's contemporary international alignments. Additionally, much of the recent scholarship has tended to focus on single-country case studies or broad continental generalizations. For instance, Landsberg (2012) provides a detailed account of South Africa's foreign policy identity, while Ogunubi and Okeke-Uzodike (2016) concentrate primarily on Nigeria's regional leadership ambitions. Similarly, Brown (2013) examines Kenya's foreign policy through the lens of regional security dynamics. While these studies offer valuable national insights, they do not systematically compare multiple African regional powers to assess cross-case strategic variation in the context of contemporary great power rivalry.

Therefore, this paper filled a critical gap by providing a comparative, theory-integrated analysis of three key African states (Nigeria, Kenya South Africa). It synthesized structural (Neo-Realist) explanations, as well as, empirically evaluated whether Africa's new alliances signify real autonomy or repackaged dependency.

### **Theoretical Framework:**

#### *Neo-Realism and Strategic Behaviour in a Multipolar Order*

This study is anchored in Neo-Realism, also known as Structural Realism, as advanced by Kenneth Waltz (1979). Neo-Realism posits that the international system is anarchic, meaning there is no central authority above states capable of enforcing rules or guaranteeing security. In such a system, states are compelled to prioritize survival, security and the accumulation of relative power. The distribution of capabilities across the system determines the constraints and opportunities available to states, shaping patterns of alignment, balancing and competition. Unlike classical realism, which emphasizes human nature or leadership psychology, Neo-Realism focuses on systemic structure. States, regardless of internal composition, are assumed to behave rationally in response to structural pressures. Smaller or weaker states may lack the material capabilities of great powers, but they retain strategic agency within systemic constraints. Their foreign policy behaviour is therefore shaped by calculations of risk, opportunity and vulnerability within an unequal distribution of global power.

In the contemporary era, the relative diffusion of power from a unipolar U.S.-dominated order toward a more multipolar configuration involving China, Russia and the European Union has altered the strategic environment confronting African states. Great power rivalry has intensified competition for influence across regions considered geopolitically significant. Africa's resource endowments, demographic weight and geostrategic positioning render it a critical arena in this systemic contestation. Within a Neo-Realist framework, African states are neither passive victims nor fully autonomous actors. Rather, they are rational units operating under structural constraints. Faced with competing external powers, these states engage in strategies such as soft balancing, limited bandwagoning and strategic hedging. Hedging, in particular, reflects an effort to avoid overdependence on any single external actor while extracting material benefits from multiple relationships. This strategy enables states to diversify economic partnerships, secure military assistance and enhance diplomatic leverage without committing to rigid alliance structures. Neo-Realism does not assume that smaller states lack agency but argues that their behaviour is strongly conditioned by the distribution of global power. In the context of a shifting international order, where the U.S., China, Russia and the EU are vying for influence, African states increasingly find themselves at the intersection of competing hegemonies.

Neo-Realism further suggests that alignment behaviour is shaped by relative gains rather than absolute gains. States are concerned not only with economic development but also with how partnerships affect their long-term sovereignty and bargaining position. Thus, African governments may accept Chinese infrastructure financing or Russian security cooperation not purely for developmental reasons, but as instruments for enhancing autonomy vis-à-vis Western conditionalities. However, structural realism also recognizes the limits of manoeuvrability. Because global hierarchies persist, weaker states cannot fully escape asymmetrical dependencies. Strategic hedging therefore represents adaptation rather than emancipation. African foreign policy behaviour must be understood as rational navigation within a system characterized by uneven power distribution and persistent great power rivalry.

How do Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa position themselves within the broader context of great power rivalry to safeguard their strategic interests and autonomy? Neo-Realism frames African states as rational actors, engaging in strategic hedging to balance interests across multiple power centres without full alignment. For instance, Nigeria's cooperation with both U.S. military assistance and Chinese infrastructure financing illustrates pragmatic power-balancing. Similarly, South Africa's active participation in BRICS while maintaining Western trade ties exemplifies realist multipolar navigation. States, therefore, act rationally to ensure survival, maximize relative power and preserve sovereignty. Power competition, especially among great powers is viewed as a permanent feature of international

politics. Neo-Realism does not assume that smaller states lack agency but argues that their behaviour is strongly conditioned by the distribution of global power.

By applying Neo-Realism to the cases of Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa, this study analyzes how regional powers respond to systemic pressures, exploit rivalries among major actors and attempt to maximize strategic autonomy under conditions of constrained sovereignty.

### **Methodology**

This paper adopted a qualitative comparative case study design, focusing on Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa. These countries were selected for their geopolitical importance, leadership roles within their regions and varied yet strategic engagements with major global powers. This design allowed for the exploration of patterns and divergences in African foreign policy, aligned with the study's Neo-Realist analytical framework. A multi-level analytical approach was employed. Neo-Realism explained strategic behaviours in response to great power rivalry. The research relied primarily on qualitative methods, including document analysis and comparative thematic interpretation. Data sources include: official policy documents and strategic agreements with China, Russia, the U.S. and EU; Presidential and ministerial speeches, summit communiqués (e.g., Forum on China -African Cooperation (FOCAC), BRICS, Russia - Africa), and foreign affairs white papers; secondary interpretations from policy analysts; scholarly literature, including peer-reviewed journal articles, books and dissertations.

The analytical process involved thematic coding and process tracing within each case, followed by cross-case comparison to identify shared trends and context-specific differences. For instance, the study examined whether China's involvement in Nigeria's rail sector mirrored dependency logics found in Kenya's BRI-linked debt challenges, or if South Africa's BRICS diplomacy reflects a hedging strategy consistent with Neo-Realist assumptions. While the study does not aim for statistical generalization, it provided theory-driven, empirically rich insights into Africa's strategic positioning. Limitations included restricted access to classified diplomatic communications and limited availability of direct elite interviews. These were mitigated through triangulation of diverse data sources and critical interpretation of official narratives.

### **Data Presentation and Analysis**

Though Africa's global partnerships have diversified in the 21st century, recent evidence suggests that patterns of dependency persist, albeit in more sophisticated and rebranded forms. This is particularly evident in the economic and infrastructural engagements between Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa with China and Russia. The cases are examined comparatively below.

### **i. Nigeria: Simultaneous Alignment with East and West**

Nigeria's foreign policy remains highly centralized in the presidency, with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs often playing a secondary role to presidential advisors, party loyalists and commercial interests (Clement, 2023; Mbara et al., 2020). Under President Buhari (2015–2023), foreign relations were largely driven by infrastructure ambitions and regime security. This is evidenced by repeated overtures to China for funding rail and power projects, often without rigorous legislative scrutiny. While Buhari's administration claimed to be “non-aligned,” its foreign policy showed limited transparency and was shaped more by elite interest alignments than strategic vision (Kłyszcz, 2024). A 2021 policy review by the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs noted the absence of a long-term strategic foreign policy framework, highlighting the ad hoc nature of most external partnerships. Furthermore, political elites often benefit personally from foreign contracts, fueling perceptions of elite capture. This undermines coherent diplomacy and reinforces dependency, as foreign actors target elite incentives rather than national interests (Obeng-Odoom, 2020; Ramani, 2022).

Nigeria exemplifies a pragmatic, issue-based alignment strategy. While the country has historically maintained strong security ties with the United States of America through AFRICOM, counter-terrorism training and arms transfers, it has also sought deeper economic and technical cooperation with China and Russia. For instance, in 2021, Nigeria signed a military cooperation agreement with Russia, formalizing arms trade, naval training and intelligence sharing (Kłyszcz, 2024; Freire, 2025). Nigeria's relationship with China reflects a classical pattern of debt-financed infrastructure dependency. Between 2015 and 2023, Nigeria borrowed over \$5 billion from China, largely to fund transportation infrastructure such as the Abuja-Kaduna and Lagos-Ibadan railways (Park, 2024; Clement, 2023). However, reports revealed sovereignty-constraining clauses, notably a 2018 loan agreement stipulating arbitration in Chinese courts and possible asset forfeiture upon default (Ramani, 2022).

At the same time, Nigeria remains a major recipient of U.S. counterterrorism assistance, especially in its fight against Boko Haram and ISWAP (Bond, 2024). This dual strategy allows Nigeria to extract material and political support from both sides without binding itself ideologically. Economically, China's presence in Nigeria through the BRI has been matched by continued IMF and World Bank engagement, underscoring a portfolio approach to sovereignty and development. Nigerian policymakers have used this multipolar competition to negotiate better terms or rebalance against previous dependency dynamics (Felix, 2024). Russia's economic presence in Nigeria is less pronounced, but a growing military-technical partnership emerged in 2021. A bilateral agreement signed under the Buhari administration involved arms sales and training, often under opaque terms (Kłyszcz, 2024). Critics argued that these deals mimic Cold War-era clientelism masked as strategic cooperation (Freire, 2025).

Nigeria's engagement with global powers reflects a deliberate strategy of diversification within systemic constraints. China has emerged as a major infrastructure partner, with Nigeria borrowing over \$5 billion between 2015 and 2023 to finance rail and transport projects such as the Abuja–Kaduna and Lagos–Ibadan lines (Park, 2024; Clement, 2023). While these agreements facilitated infrastructure expansion, concerns over sovereignty clauses, including arbitration provisions favouring Chinese legal jurisdictions, indicate the asymmetrical nature of the relationship (Ramani, 2022). Simultaneously, Nigeria has maintained robust security cooperation with the United States through counterterrorism partnerships and AFRICOM engagements. In 2021, it also signed a military cooperation agreement with Russia covering arms procurement and training (Kłyszcz, 2024; Freire, 2025). This dual engagement illustrates a hedging strategy consistent with Neo-Realist expectations: Nigeria seeks to maximize security and economic gains without committing exclusively to any single great power bloc.

However, Nigeria's strategic posture is shaped by domestic institutional realities. Foreign policy remains highly centralized within the presidency, often characterized by limited legislative scrutiny and elite-driven negotiations (Clement, 2023; Mbara et al., 2020). This institutional configuration affects how systemic pressures are interpreted and managed. Thus, Nigeria's foreign alignments reflect rational adaptation to structural competition, filtered through executive-dominant governance structures.

## ii. Kenya: Gateway Diplomacy and Adaptive Alignment

Kenya's foreign policy has historically lacked continuity, with priorities shifting across electoral regimes. Under President Uhuru Kenyatta (2013–2022), foreign relations were framed around economic diplomacy, particularly with China. His administration heavily courted Chinese financing for flagship projects like the Standard Gauge Railway, often bypassing parliamentary approval (Belhaj, 2024). However, the 2022 election brought President William Ruto to power, whose administration has adopted a more skeptical tone toward Chinese debt. In a 2023 state visit to Washington, Ruto signalled a renewed alignment with Western institutions, highlighting budget transparency and debt sustainability, a clear departure from his predecessor's orientation (Maluki et al., 2024). These shifts suggest that Kenya's foreign policy is not ideologically anchored, but responsive to electoral narratives, fiscal pressures and public sentiment. The institutional weakness of Kenya's Ministry of Foreign and Diaspora Affairs, and the dominance of the executive branch, reinforces the personalist nature of foreign decision-making (Nechiforov, 2024).

Kenya's Standard Gauge Railway (SGR), built by China Road and Bridge Corporation, cost over \$4.7 billion and was financed primarily through Chinese loans. By 2022, Kenya's total debt to China reached \$6.4 billion, leading to public outcry over cost inflation and underperformance (Belhaj, 2024). Kenya's

Auditor General in 2021 raised concerns about secrecy in the debt agreement and the possible mortgaging of Mombasa Port as collateral (Maluki et al., 2024). Dependency also manifests in Kenya's telecommunication and surveillance infrastructure, increasingly powered by Chinese firms like Huawei. While such partnerships offer rapid modernization, they reinforce technological dependency and digital surveillance risks, often without transparent procurement (Nechiforov, 2024). Kenya occupies a geostrategic position in the Horn of Africa, enabling it to function as a regional gateway for global powers. Its engagement with China is exemplified by the Standard Gauge Railway project, financed largely through Chinese loans exceeding \$4.7 billion (Belhaj, 2024). By 2022, Kenya's debt exposure to China had generated domestic scrutiny over transparency and fiscal sustainability (Maluki et al., 2024). Chinese firms such as Huawei also play a prominent role in Kenya's telecommunications and surveillance infrastructure, reinforcing technological interdependence (Nechiforov, 2024).

At the same time, Kenya maintains strong ties with Western actors. It participates in U.S. security initiatives and trade platforms while cultivating relations with the European Union and the United Kingdom. Under President Ruto, there has been renewed emphasis on fiscal transparency and engagement with Western financial institutions, reflecting recalibrated strategic positioning (Maluki et al., 2024). From a Neo-Realist perspective, Kenya's behaviour illustrates adaptive alignment. Faced with competing external powers, it avoids rigid commitments and instead leverages its geopolitical relevance to extract economic and diplomatic concessions. Electoral transitions and fiscal pressures shape the tone of engagement, but the underlying logic remains systemic: maximizing autonomy within asymmetric power structures.

Kenya leverages its geopolitical position in the Horn of Africa to act as a gateway state, engaging China, the U.S. and the EU on overlapping strategic fronts. Under Presidents Kenyatta and Ruto, Kenya hosted both Chinese infrastructure projects (SGR, digital cities) and U.S. counterterrorism programs, while also negotiating trade agreements with the EU and post-Brexit UK (Belhaj, 2024; Maluki et al., 2024). Kenya's participation in the 2023 Africa Climate Summit demonstrated its diplomatic dexterity, hosting delegates from the U.S., EU, China and Russia, while promoting African development narratives not tied to any one ideological camp (Park, 2024). This posture aligns with hedging as a strategy to expand external options, diversify funding and enhance bargaining power. Moreover, Kenya's invitation to join the BRICS+ consultation framework in 2024 illustrates its desire to remain visible in both traditional Western institutions and emerging Global South blocs, without alienating either (Nechiforov, 2024).

### iii. South Africa: Institutional Non-Alignment and Symbolic Balancing

South Africa maintains the most institutionalized foreign policy apparatus among the three states, led by the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO). However, its foreign policy is often shaped by domestic ideological debates within the ruling African National Congress (ANC). South Africa's ambiguous posture on Russia's invasion of Ukraine, refusing to condemn the action while hosting naval drills with Russian forces, reflects not just strategic balancing but internal political divisions. Pro-Russia sympathies among certain ANC factions, rooted in Cold War liberation solidarity, continue to shape policy choices (Belousova, 2024; Freire, 2025). In 2023, South Africa was pressured by both the West and BRICS partners over its position on the International Criminal Court (ICC) arrest warrant for Vladimir Putin. The government's response to consider withdrawing from the ICC, then backtrack, exposed the tensions between global commitments and domestic political imperatives (Sidiropoulos, 2020). While South Africa's foreign policy institutions are relatively strong, they remain vulnerable to party politics, leadership interpretation and ideological nostalgia. This underscores the foreign policy analysis insight that foreign policy is not only a function of external threats or opportunities, but a projection of internal identity battles and regime dynamics.

South Africa exhibits a more hybrid form of dependency. As a member of BRICS, it accesses development financing through the New Development Bank (NDB), yet analysts highlight the elite-driven disbursement and uneven sectoral impact of BRICS-funded projects (Taylor, 2020). Chinese capital has flowed into mining, telecommunications and energy sectors, raising fears about regulatory bypass and domestic value erosion (Obeng-Odoom, 2020; Park, 2024).

Despite advocating for "South-South solidarity," Russia's engagement in South Africa has focused on nuclear energy proposals and arms diplomacy, sometimes overlapping with ANC factional support. The 2023 naval drills with Russia and China raised concerns about entanglements inconsistent with South Africa's proclaimed non-alignment (Bond, 2024). Hence, while African states claim agency in choosing their partners, the terms of engagement often echo colonial patterns of extraction, asymmetry and elite capture. Even when states diversify away from Western partners, asymmetry persists, with limited technology transfer, growing debt burdens and sovereignty trade-offs.

Furthermore, amid the evolving global power architecture, African states increasingly engage in strategic hedging, maintaining relations with competing powers such as China, Russia, the United States and the EU, while avoiding hard alignment with any single bloc. This balancing behaviour reflects the rationalist assumptions of Neo-Realism, where weaker states seek to maximize autonomy by exploiting the rivalries among greater powers. Among the three states, South Africa exhibits the most deeply rooted and ideologically sophisticated form of hedging strategy. As a founding member of BRICS, South Africa has

deepened cooperation with China and Russia across trade, defense and diplomacy. However, it simultaneously retains strong economic ties with the EU (its largest trading partner) and maintains access to U.S. markets under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA). In 2023, South Africa drew international attention by refusing to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine, instead calling for "neutral mediation" (Belousova, 2024). This led to criticism from the West, but South Africa defended its stance as a manifestation of Pan-African non-alignment and a commitment to "strategic autonomy in foreign policy" (Sidiropoulos, 2020; Kłyszcz, 2024). South Africa also conducted joint naval exercises with Russia and China (Exercise Mosi II) off its Indian Ocean coast in 2023, further reinforcing its non-aligned but symbolically multipolar identity. However, it remains deeply engaged in Western-led multilateral forums, suggesting that symbolic gestures do not equate to full realignment (Freire, 2025).

Therefore, across the three states, strategic hedging emerges as conscious tactics to maximize diplomatic maneuverability and avoid geopolitical entrapment. However, this behaviour is not without constraints. Critics (Maluki et al., 2024; Felix, 2024) argue that the room for maneuver is more symbolic than structural, as external engagements still reflect asymmetries in power, funding and technology (Maluki et al., 2024; Felix, 2024). This finding aligns with Neo-Realist assumptions: African states, while constrained by their systemic position, still act rationally and tactically in a multipolar world, leveraging their geopolitical relevance to pursue national interests through flexible, transactional diplomacy. In the African context, foreign policy is often shaped less by coherent doctrines and more by the personal preferences of leaders, regime survival strategies, bureaucratic weaknesses and elite bargaining (Hudson, 2007; Adebajo, 2023). The cases of Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa each demonstrate how foreign engagement strategies are filtered through national political logics. South Africa presents the most institutionally consolidated foreign policy apparatus among the three cases. As a member of BRICS, it deepens cooperation with China and Russia across trade, finance and defence. Chinese capital is embedded in sectors such as mining, energy and telecommunications, while Russia has pursued nuclear energy proposals and defence cooperation (Obeng-Odoom, 2020; Freire, 2025). Nevertheless, South Africa retains deep economic ties with the European Union and access to U.S. markets under AGOA. Its refusal to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2023, alongside joint naval exercises with Russia and China, signalled symbolic non-alignment (Belousova, 2024; Sidiropoulos, 2020). Yet these gestures coexist with continued participation in Western-led multilateral institutions. Neo-Realism interprets this behaviour as strategic balancing within a multipolar order. South Africa seeks to preserve policy autonomy while maintaining diversified economic relationships. Domestic partisan debates within the ANC influence rhetorical positioning, but the broader alignment pattern reflects calculated systemic navigation rather than ideological realignment.

Across the three cases, foreign policy reflects rational adaptation to systemic pressures rather than mere structural passivity. While neo-realism emphasizes the constraining effects of an anarchic international system, it does not deny variation in how states respond to those constraints. Nigeria's foreign engagements are shaped by elite-driven calculations over resource allocation and security partnerships; Kenya's alignments shift alongside electoral transitions and leadership priorities; and South Africa's positioning reflects partisan traditions and historical solidarities within the ANC. These domestic dynamics do not displace structural explanations but mediate how systemic incentives are interpreted and operationalized.

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that African regional powers operate within enduring asymmetrical power hierarchies while strategically hedging among competing great powers to preserve autonomy. Their economic and security engagements reflect rational efforts to maximize relative gains under multipolar competition, even as internal political configurations influence the manner and intensity of external alignment choices.

### **Discussion of Findings**

In this study, neo-realism is applied to explain how African regional powers respond to shifts in the global distribution of capabilities brought about by intensifying U.S.-China-Russia competition. The anarchic structure of the international system compels states to prioritize survival, autonomy and relative gains. Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa therefore diversify partnerships, avoid rigid alliances and selectively engage rival great powers as a strategy of hedging. Their behaviour is not driven primarily by ideology or normative commitments but by structural calculations about vulnerability, bargaining leverage and long-term sovereignty within a multipolar order. Neo-realism thus provides the analytical lens through which African foreign policy behaviour is interpreted as rational adaptation under systemic constraint.

The findings from Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa reveal a layered and strategic navigation of global power rivalries, where African states pursue diversified partnerships to enhance development and security. However, these engagements occur under structural constraints, political contestation and institutional limitations. The findings were discussed in relation to the three research questions and corresponding theory, offering an integrated analysis of the continent's pursuit of strategic autonomy in a multipolar world. Variations across Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa does not contradict Neo-Realism; rather, it reflects differential strategic responses to shared structural constraints with an anarchic system.

The study confirmed that while African states are engaging new partners in China and Russia, these relationships often reproduce familiar dependency structures. Chinese-funded infrastructure in Nigeria and Kenya, despite being framed as South-South cooperation, entrenches external control through debt

obligations, collateralized loans and non-transparent contracts (Brautigam, 2020; Belhaj, 2024). In South Africa, elite-driven engagement with China and Russia in mining and telecom sectors also suggests continuity with resource-for-finance logics. Russia's growing influence, particularly through arms sales and mercenary security arrangements (e.g., in Nigeria), similarly mirrors Cold War-style dependencies (Ramani, 2022; Freire, 2025).

The rhetoric of equal partnership is often undermined by asymmetries in finance, technology, legal recourse and agenda-setting, affirming that Africa's economic sovereignty remains structurally constrained, regardless of partner origin. The findings showed us that Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa are not passive participants in global power competition. Instead, they engage in strategic hedging, pursuing diversified partnerships with competing actors (China, Russia, the U.S. and EU), while avoiding hard alignment. This aligns with Neo-Realist expectations of rational state behaviour in an anarchic system. Nigeria's dual security relationships with the U.S. and Russia, and Kenya's simultaneous engagement with Western donors and Chinese investors, reflect pragmatic balancing. South Africa's non-aligned stance on Russia's war in Ukraine and its simultaneous naval drills with China and Russia indicate symbolic autonomy backed by institutionalized multilateralism (Sidiropoulos, 2020; Belousova, 2024). However, strategic hedging has limits. African states remain constrained by global economic structures, reputational risks and domestic legitimacy pressures. Despite efforts at diversification, true policy autonomy remains partial and conditional. The strategy is thus less about rejecting the global order and more about navigating it tactically, affirming Neo-Realism's emphasis on state survival under structural limitations. More so, foreign policy in all three countries is profoundly influenced by domestic politics. Nigeria's elite-driven foreign engagements, Kenya's post-electoral policy swings and South Africa's ANC factionalism illustrate how foreign alignment reflects domestic coalitions, leadership worldviews and institutional coherence.

Neo-Realism in this paper explained the strategic behaviour states adopt to manage competition. What has emerged is a picture of agency constrained by structure, and of rational behaviour filtered through domestic interests. The three states examined are not entirely dependent, nor fully autonomous, they are strategic actors negotiating a world still tilted against them.

### **Contribution to Scholarship**

This study contributes to the growing literature on Africa's international relations by offering a structurally grounded Neo-Realist analysis of strategic behaviour among African regional powers in a multipolar order. While existing scholarship often treats African states either as passive arenas of great power rivalry or as norm-driven diplomatic actors, this paper repositions them as rational units

responding to systemic pressures within an anarchic international system. By focusing comparatively on Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa, the study extends Neo-Realist theory beyond its traditional great-power focus and demonstrates how secondary powers in the Global South employ strategic hedging, diversified alignment and calibrated non-alignment to preserve autonomy. It shows that African foreign policy behaviour is best understood not as ideological oscillation, but as rational adaptation to shifting distributions of global power. In doing so, the paper contributes to Structural Realist debates on relative gains, soft balancing and multipolar competition, while empirically grounding these concepts in contemporary African diplomacy. It thus bridges the gap between systemic theory and regional foreign policy practice, offering a refined understanding of how African states navigate great power rivalry under conditions of structural inequality.

### **Conclusion**

This study examined how Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa navigate a geopolitical landscape shaped by great power competition among China, Russia, the United States of America and the European Union. Anchored on Neo-Realism, the study revealed that Africa's contemporary foreign policy behaviour is marked by strategic ambiguity, adaptive diplomacy and persistent structural asymmetries. Findings confirmed that while China and Russia offer alternative frameworks to the Western-led liberal international order, their modes of engagement continue to operate within asymmetrical interdependence shaped by uneven distributions of capabilities, particularly in infrastructure financing, resource extraction and military cooperation. Despite this, African states are not passive actors. They employ strategic hedging to extract concessions from multiple global powers while avoiding entangling alignments. This behaviour is consistent with Neo-Realist assumptions about state survival and rational balancing in an anarchic world system. However, the exercise of foreign policy autonomy is significantly conditioned by domestic variables. Leadership changes, elite interests and institutional fragmentation influence foreign policy direction as much as external pressures.

Together, these insights opined that Africa's quest for strategic autonomy is real but limited. While African states display increasing agency and pragmatism, they continue to operate within a structurally unequal global order that rewards flexibility but punishes deviation. Autonomy is therefore negotiated, not granted, and it is often contingent on state capacity, coherence and strategic vision.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations were proposed to enhance African strategic autonomy and long-term foreign policy coherence:

### 1. Institutionalize foreign policy planning

African governments should strengthen foreign ministries, parliaments and national planning bodies to move beyond ad hoc, leader-driven diplomacy. A robust institutional architecture would ensure continuity, transparency and policy memory which are key ingredients for long-term strategic engagement.

### 2. Pursue transparent, accountable partnerships

Governments must negotiate foreign deals, particularly those involving infrastructure, debt or military support, with parliamentary oversight and public disclosure. This would reduce elite capture and help align foreign relations with broader development goals and public interests.

### 3. Deepen regional coordination and policy harmonization

The African Union (AU) and Regional Economic Communities (RECs) like ECOWAS and EAC should promote collective bargaining platforms, enabling member states to negotiate with great powers as blocs rather than as isolated actors. This could amplify African voice and reduce vulnerability to divide-and-rule tactics.

### 4. Invest in strategic policy capacity and think tanks

Governments should empower foreign policy research institutions and strategic affairs think tanks to generate independent analysis and guide diplomacy. A vibrant domestic knowledge base will support evidence-based decision-making and strengthen negotiating power.

### 5. Embrace normative flexibility without abandoning core values

While hedging is essential, African states should articulate clear red lines and strategic goals. Balancing ties between East and West should not come at the cost of undermining democratic accountability, human rights, or ecological sustainability.

### 6. Leverage continental platforms for collective Action

Platforms such as African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), and the AU Commission on International Relations should be mobilized not just for economic integration, but for a shared diplomatic vision, strengthening Africa's position in a contested global order.

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