
The New Scramble for Africa: Is the West Losing Out?

Bheki Mahlobo

Acknowledgments

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**Bheki Mahlobo, Author**

Bheki is an economist and Partner at Frans Cronje Private Clients. He began his career at the Centre for Risk Analysis before joining the financial consulting firm ETM Analytics as a financial analyst. Specialising in economic and financial markets research as well as political trend analysis, Bheki has briefed numerous companies on South Africa's long-term economic, market, and political outlook. He has drafted an extensive range of analytical notes and reports and he co-author of a chapter in the book *The Future of Cities*, written in collaboration with Professor Joel Kotkin of the American Enterprise Institute.

Raised in the rural Eastern Cape village of Lupapasi and later relocating to Johannesburg for his schooling, Bheki brings a unique perspective to his work. He is currently pursuing a Masters in Behavioural and Computational Economics at Chapman University, further enhancing his expertise in the field.

**Joel Kotkin, Editor**

Joel Kotkin is the Roger Hobbs Presidential Fellow in urban futures at Chapman University and a senior Research Fellow at the Civitas Institute at the University of Texas at Austin. He writes a regular column for *The National Post* (Canada) and *Spiked* but contributes regularly to *Unherd*, *LA Times*, *The Spectator*, *National Review*, *The Telegraph* and *City Journal*. His last book was *The Coming of Neo-Feudalism: A Warning to the Global Middle Class* (Encounter: 2021)

Executive Summary

...the EU's foreign affairs and security policy chief Josep Borrell has warned, “little by little, we are losing Africa.”

America and the West overall face its most consequential strategic challenge in Africa since the end of the Cold War. While Washington's attention has been focused on great power competition in the Pacific and crises in Eastern Europe, China has orchestrated a systematic campaign to dominate the African continent—alongside an opportunistic coalition of challengers including Russia, Iran, and Türkiye. This new scramble for Africa represents nothing less than a fundamental reshaping of global power dynamics, with stakes that extend far beyond the continent's borders.

The numbers tell a stark story in particular of American decline and Chinese ascendancy. According to Nantulya (2025), Chinese firms are active stakeholders in 78 ports across 32 African countries as builders, financiers, or operators—representing over one-third of Africa's 231 commercial ports.¹ Turkey has achieved the most dramatic diplomatic expansion, growing from 12 to 44 embassies across the continent (+266%), while China expanded from 40 to 65 diplomatic missions (+63%) (Lowy Institute, 2024).² Meanwhile, America's diplomatic presence has declined slightly and trade volumes have contracted by 16% since 2013, while China's trade with Africa has grown 71% to reach \$295 billion in 2024 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024; China Africa Research Initiative, 2024).³

This retreat from Africa is not merely a regional setback; it represents an existential threat to American, and allied Western, global leadership. Africa sits at the nexus of three critical American interests: resource security for technological and defense industries, maritime control over global trade routes, and diplomatic leverage in international institutions. The continent's transformation into a strategic battleground coincides with its emergence

as home to five of the world's ten fastest-growing economies and more cities over one million residents than Europe and America combined.

The stakes have never been higher. As Houthi attacks in the Red Sea disrupt traditional trade routes through the Suez Canal, alternative South Atlantic corridors through African partnerships become strategically essential. China's systematic acquisition of African ports and naval facilities directly challenges America's seven-decade role as guarantor of global maritime trade—the foundation upon which the post-war international order was built.

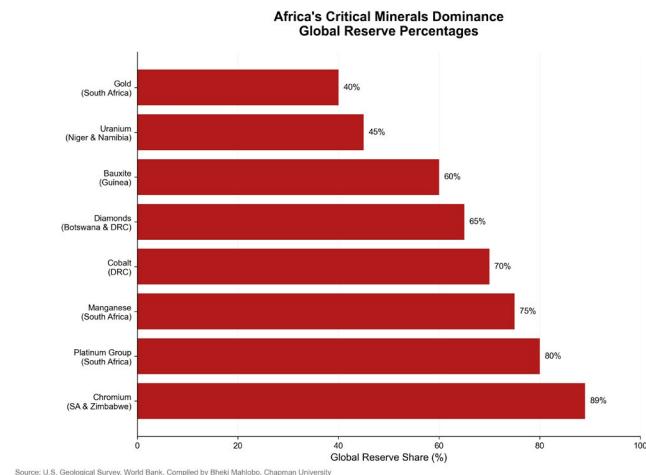
In this new model of the 19th Century's “great game” between Russia and the British Empire, the real prize lies not in Europe or North America but emerging powers in Latin America but especially Africa, now home to five of the world's ten fastest-growing economies—Ethiopia, Rwanda, Ghana, Ivory Coast, and Tanzania—sustaining GDP growth rates of 6% while the global average is expected to reach 3.1% in 2025 and 4.2% for emerging markets.⁴

This far exceeds most developed economies, including China, as well as the neo-Stalinist brotherhood of Russia, China and North Korea. And unlike India or even Iran or Türkiye, Africa's rise is just beginning. China's strategy is clearly out-pacing both the US and now rapidly diminishing former European colonial powers who notes the EU's foreign affairs and security policy chief Josep Borrell has warned, “little by little, we are losing Africa.”

Africa's Strategic Importance: Why It Matters Now

The Resource Imperative

Africa's strategic importance begins with its unparalleled resource endowments, particularly in critical minerals essential for America's technological edge and defense capabilities. The continent dominates global reserves in materials that power everything from fighter jets to smartphones, making African partnerships a national security imperative rather than merely a development opportunity.



Africa's dominance in critical minerals is overwhelming and strategically decisive for global supply chains. The Democratic Republic of Congo alone controls over 70% of the world's cobalt reserves, essential for battery technology and advanced electronics. South Africa dominates platinum group metals with over 80% of global reserves, critical for catalytic converters and

industrial applications. Zimbabwe and South Africa combined control nearly 90% of the world's chromium reserves, indispensable for steel production and aerospace applications. These strategic materials represent the foundation of modern technological civilization, yet China has systematically secured preferential access through long-term partnerships that exclude American competitors.

Beyond critical minerals, Africa's broader resource portfolio encompasses 30% of the world's known mineral reserves, including substantial deposits of oil, natural gas, diamonds, and gold. Nigeria and Angola rank among the world's top oil producers, while Mozambique's liquefied natural gas reserves promise to reshape global energy markets. These resources are not merely commercial opportunities—they represent strategic assets that China and its coalition of challengers are systematically acquiring through infrastructure investments and political influence operations.

The agricultural dimension adds another layer of strategic importance. With 60% of the world's uncultivated arable land, Africa represents the planet's last major frontier for agricultural expansion. China has recognized this reality, investing heavily in African agricultural infrastructure and securing long-term food supply agreements that reduce its dependence on American agricultural exports while positioning China as Africa's primary food security partner.

Geopolitical Leverage and Demographic Power

Africa's political transformation has fundamentally altered the global balance of power in international institutions. With 54 member states commanding 28% of the United Nations General Assembly, Africa represents the world's largest unified voting bloc.

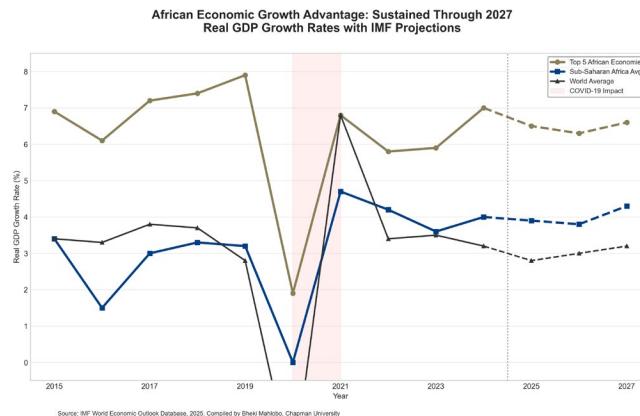
This mathematical reality means that no global initiative—from sanctions regimes to peacekeeping operations—can succeed without significant African support.

The continent's remarkable economic resilience becomes evident through sustained growth rates that far exceed global averages.

Five of the world's ten fastest-growing economies are located in Africa, with several countries sustaining GDP growth rates above 6% even during periods of global economic uncertainty. Ethiopia, Rwanda, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, and Tanzania have demonstrated remarkable economic resilience and growth potential that far exceeds most developed economies.⁵ China has positioned itself as the primary partner for this growth, while America has largely remained on the sidelines.

The continent's demographic trajectory amplifies this political influence. Africa's population is projected to double to 2.5 billion by 2050, with the median age remaining below 25 throughout this period. This youth bulge represents both opportunity and challenge for American interests. A pro-American African youth

population could provide decades of strategic partnership and market expansion. Conversely, an



anti-American generation shaped by Chinese investment, Russian disinformation, and Iranian ideological influence could fundamentally alter global power dynamics.

Security Implications for Global Stability

Africa has emerged as the epicenter of global jihadist threats, hosting more active terrorist organizations than any other region. Groups like Boko Haram, al-Shabab, and various Islamic State affiliates operate across vast territories, threatening both regional stability and global security. The collapse of state authority in countries like Somalia, Mali, and parts of the Sahel has created ungoverned spaces that serve as training grounds, recruitment centers, and operational bases for international terrorist networks.⁶

These security challenges create direct threats to American interests through multiple pathways. Terrorist organizations based in Africa have repeatedly attempted attacks against American targets, including

the devastating embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania and the Benghazi assault in Libya, while migration pressures emanating from Africa affect American allies and partners, particularly in Europe, with cascading effects on transatlantic relations that strain NATO cohesion and European Union stability. Managing these challenges requires stable, prosperous African states with strong governance institutions and effective security services—precisely the outcome that Chinese and Russian influence operations systematically seek to undermine through support for authoritarian regimes and military partnerships that prioritize regime survival over democratic development and regional stability.

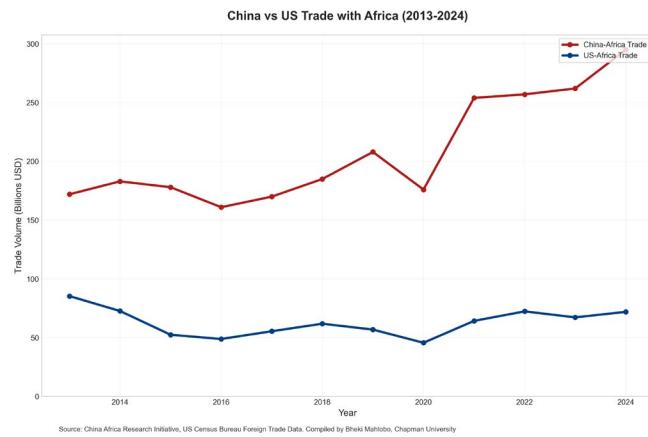
China's African Dominance Strategy

China's approach ---what one author calls part of an ongoing "charm offensive"--- to Africa represents the most comprehensive and systematic foreign engagement strategy on the continent since European colonialism.

Some of China's appeal reflects admiration for its remarkable reduction of extreme poverty and a huge growth in monthly wages, up almost fivefold since 2006. At a time when the middle class has been shrinking in the West, China's over the period from 1980 to 2000 enjoyed an enormous increase, at least until recently.⁷

Economic Penetration Through Infrastructure Investment

China's approach to Africa represents the most comprehensive and systematic foreign engagement strategy on the continent since European colonialism. Unlike previous great power interventions, China's strategy combines massive infrastructure investment, technology transfer, and long-term partnership agreements that create deep structural dependencies while avoiding the political conditionality that has traditionally accompanied Western engagement.

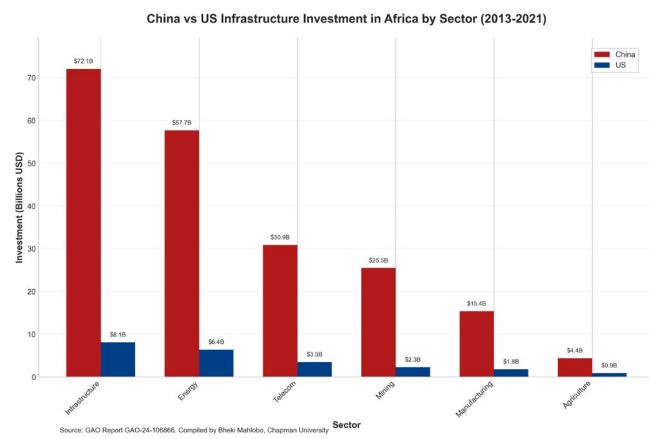


China's trade dominance over the United States in Africa is overwhelming and continues to expand. China-Africa trade has grown from \$172 billion in 2013 to \$295 billion in 2024, representing a 71% increase over the period. US-Africa trade has declined over the same period, falling from \$85 billion to \$72 billion—a

China's remarkable ability to build infrastructure at home is far more impressive than the generally sluggish pace experienced in the West, particularly the US. Chinese innovation, at least in biotechnology and AI, threatens to challenge or even surpass that of the West.

With Trump's attention focused on great power competition in the Pacific and crises in Eastern Europe, China sees Africa as a critical element in their drive to reshape global power dynamics. In this they have the aid of their prime ally, Russia, in replacing a fading Europe and the US as guarantors of security.

16% decrease (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024; China Africa Research Initiative, 2024).⁸ This 4.1:1 trade advantage gives China enormous economic leverage over African governments and creates sustainable partnerships that extend far beyond simple resource extraction.



The Belt and Road Initiative serves as the organizing framework for Chinese economic penetration, with 156 documented BRI projects in Africa from 2013-2021 according to U.S. Government Accountability Office (2024) analysis.⁹ However, this ambitious program faces significant challenges: GAO research indicates that 40% of Chinese BRI projects encounter substantial implementation difficulties, and Chinese funding peaked at over \$120 billion annually in 2016-2017

before declining by 67% to \$40-60 billion annually by 2021.¹⁰

The data reveals dramatic funding disparities between Chinese and American infrastructure commitments in Africa. According to U.S. Government Accountability Office (2024), China provided \$206 billion to Africa through Belt and Road Initiative funding from 2013-2021, while the U.S. provided approximately \$23 billion in infrastructure assistance to Africa during the same period—a 9:1 advantage for China in infrastructure development funding. Chinese BRI funding peaked at over \$120 billion annually in 2016-2017 but declined by 67% to \$40-60 billion annually by 2021, while U.S. funding remained relatively stable at \$8-10 billion annually.¹¹

Through state-owned enterprises and carefully structured financing arrangements, Chinese firms are active stakeholders in 78 ports across 32 African countries. These ports have hosted 55 People's Liberation Army Navy port calls since 2000, with 36 ports having dual-use military capabilities demonstrated through port calls or military exercises (Nantulya, 2025).¹² China's first overseas military base in Djibouti exemplifies this dual civilian-military strategy, extending from commercial port development to permanent military presence.

Today European Union still remains Africa's top trade partner by share, accounting for 31% of exports and 29% of imports Intra-African Trade Hits \$208bn in 2024, The UK's presence is even more modest, with trade with South Africa alone reaching \$14.6 billion South Africa - Trade and Investment Factsheet—and South Africa represents the UK's largest African partnership.

Role of Policy choices

But this role is being undermined by policy choices, particularly from the EU. Finally, the West's efforts are stimulated by its green agenda --- which objects to nuclear and natural gas as well as dirtier fuels. Today this approach is being remade by Trump and perhaps even by some skeptical Europeans. But for now, the emphasis of international bodies, NGOs and Western governments seem to be willfully accelerating the de-industrialization of both the United Kingdom, and the EU. In contrast coal and other power sources have thrived in less regulated places like India and China, by far the world's largest emitters of carbon dioxide.

China's pragmatism on energy allows it to push for the development of growth inducing things such as roads, airports, highways, and power plants . According to U.S. Government Accountability Office (2024), China provided \$206 billion to Africa through Belt and Road Initiative funding from 2013-2021, while the U.S. provided approximately \$23 billion in infrastructure assistance to Africa during the same period—a 9:1 advantage for China in infrastructure development funding.¹³

Africans appreciate the importance of fossil fuels as the best hope of bringing electricity to the roughly 600 million in sub Saharan Africa who do not have it now. Facing such challenges, African leaders will ignore the scolding of Greta Thunberg if it means slower growth. Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari has warned that the climate policies favored by Western governments investors and aid agencies could precipitate a Africa-wide energy crisis. South Africa's Energy Minister, meanwhile, has criticized NGOs and universities that promote "climate-driven solutions" with money from European think tanks.

Diplomatic Offensive and Technology Integration

China's diplomatic engagement with Africa operates at multiple levels, from high-profile summits to grassroots cultural and educational exchanges. The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) has become the premier diplomatic platform for China-Africa relations, bringing together heads of state from across the continent every three years for summits that consistently produce multi-billion-dollar commitment packages and comprehensive cooperation agreements.

The scope of Chinese diplomatic engagement extends far beyond traditional government-to-government relations. Chinese medical diplomacy during the COVID-19 pandemic positioned China as a reliable partner when Western vaccines were scarce and expensive. Technology transfer represents a crucial component of China's diplomatic strategy, particularly in the digital

infrastructure sector. Chinese companies like Huawei and ZTE have built telecommunications networks across much of Africa, creating dependencies on Chinese technology platforms while providing African governments with surveillance and communications capabilities.

Educational and cultural exchanges reinforce these formal diplomatic relationships through people-to-people connections. The Confucius Institute network operates across Africa, teaching Chinese language and culture while providing scholarships for African students to study in China. These educational exchanges create lasting personal and professional relationships that influence African elite attitudes toward China for decades.

The Axis of Challengers: Russia, Iran, and Türkiye

Russia's Military-First Approach

Russia's return to Africa represents one of the most significant geopolitical developments of the past decade, marking Moscow's systematic effort to rebuild global influence through military partnerships and security cooperation agreements. The Wagner Group, recently reorganized as the Africa Corps, serves as the primary instrument of Russian engagement across the continent, operating in at least 10 African countries while providing security services to governments facing internal challenges.

Russia's arms sales strategy complements its military deployment approach by creating long-term dependencies on Russian weapons systems, training, and maintenance support. African countries that purchase Russian military equipment become locked into decades-long relationships with Russian defense contractors, creating political influence that extends far beyond the initial arms sales' agreements. This approach has proven particularly effective in countries where Western governments have imposed arms embargoes or where colonial histories create receptivity to Russian military cooperation.

Iran's Religious-Economic Strategy

Iran's engagement with Africa combines religious outreach, economic partnerships, and institutional building in ways that create lasting influence across the continent. The scale of Iranian engagement became apparent when Tehran hosted over 700 delegates from 40 African countries at a recent Africa-Iran summit, demonstrating the breadth of relationships that Iran has cultivated across the continent.

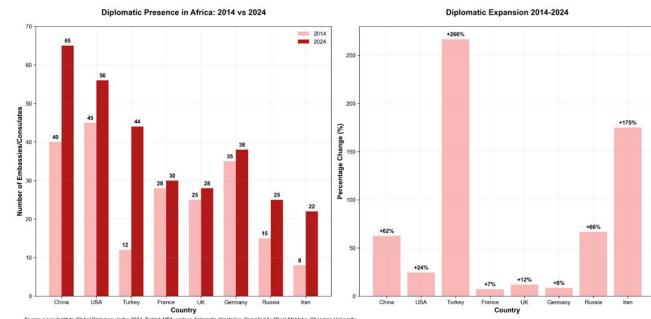
Al-Mustafa International University represents Iran's most significant institutional investment in Africa, operating 17 branches across the continent with over 100 affiliated institutions in 30 countries. This educational network trains thousands of African students annually in Iranian universities while providing scholarships and cultural exchange programs that create lasting personal and professional relationships with Iranian institutions.

Türkiye's Comprehensive Engagement

Türkiye's African engagement represents perhaps the most dramatic expansion of any external power's influence on the continent over the past decade. Under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's leadership, Türkiye has transformed from a peripheral player in African affairs to one of the continent's most active partners.

Türkiye and China have dramatically expanded their diplomatic presence across Africa in ways that dwarf American efforts, as well as those of our leading European allies, despite the long history of colonial

involvement by countries like the United Kingdom and France.



Turkey's expansion from 12 to 44 diplomatic missions represents the most dramatic change in African diplomatic presence over the past decade—a 26% increase that demonstrates systematic strategic commitment (Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024).¹⁴ China has expanded from 40 to 65 missions (+63%), while US diplomatic representation has declined slightly from 45 to 56 missions (-20%) (Lowy Institute, 2024).¹⁵ This diplomatic expansion provides these powers with intelligence gathering capabilities, cultural influence platforms, and political access that rivals or exceeds

traditional Western presence across much of the continent.

Turkish Airlines serves as both a practical tool and a symbol of Türkiye's African engagement, connecting over 50 African destinations compared to fewer than 10 destinations served by all American carriers combined. This aviation network creates business opportunities for Turkish companies while facilitating the movement of people, goods, and ideas between Türkiye and Africa in ways that strengthen bilateral relationships across multiple sectors.

America's Strategic Retreat

Diplomatic Decline and Economic Underperformance

America's retreat from Africa is most visible in the dramatic decline of diplomatic engagement and institutional presence across the continent. The closure of American embassies and consulates across Africa over the past two decades reflects both budgetary constraints and strategic prioritization decisions that have consistently placed African engagement secondary to other regional priorities.

The inconsistency of high-level American engagement with Africa has undermined the credibility of American commitments and created perceptions of American unreliability among African leaders. While China's leadership makes regular trips to Africa and consistently follows through on announced initiatives, American engagement has been sporadic and often subject to changes in administration priorities.

America's economic engagement with Africa has failed to keep pace with the continent's growth or match the investment levels of key competitors. While African economies have sustained some of the world's highest growth rates over the past decade, American trade and investment have remained essentially flat, representing a massive, missed opportunity for both American businesses and strategic influence.

Limited American infrastructure investment in Africa contrasts sharply with the massive commitments made by China and other competitors. While China has committed hundreds of billions of dollars to African infrastructure development through the Belt and Road Initiative, American infrastructure investment has been minimal and largely focused on small-scale projects that lack strategic impact.

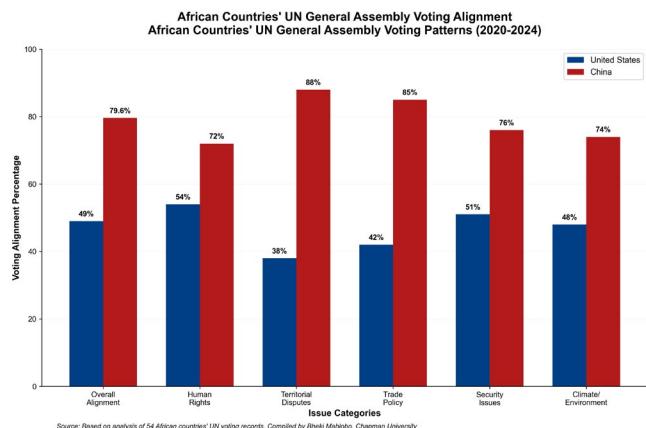
The UN Voting Reality

Perhaps nowhere is America's declining influence, and that of its closest allies, more evident than in African voting patterns at the United Nations, where the continent's 54 votes increasingly align with Chinese rather than American positions across key international issues.

China has clearly won the diplomatic battle for African support at the United Nations.

African countries consistently vote with China across all major issue categories, with Chinese alignment averaging 79.6% compared to US alignment of just 49% (UN Voting Records Analysis, 2020-2024).¹⁶ The gaps are particularly striking in territorial disputes (China 88% vs US 38%) and trade policy (China 85% vs US 42%), areas critical to global governance. With Africa representing 28% of UN General Assembly votes, China's diplomatic dominance provides Beijing with effective veto power over many international initiatives while blocking American policy goals.

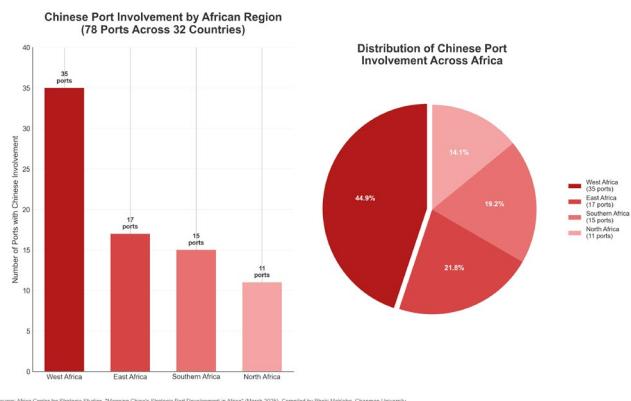
This voting pattern represents more than statistical alignment—it demonstrates China's success in convincing African governments that Chinese positions better serve African interests than American positions. This diplomatic victory has profound implications for America's ability to build international coalitions and maintain leadership in global governance institutions.



Maritime Control and the Battle for Sea Lanes

China's Maritime Dominance Strategy

China's systematic acquisition of port facilities and naval capabilities across the African continent represents perhaps the most direct challenge to American global maritime supremacy since the end of the Cold War. The so-called "String of Pearls" strategy has evolved from a theoretical framework to an operational reality that directly threatens America's seven-decade role as guarantor of global maritime commerce and freedom of navigation.



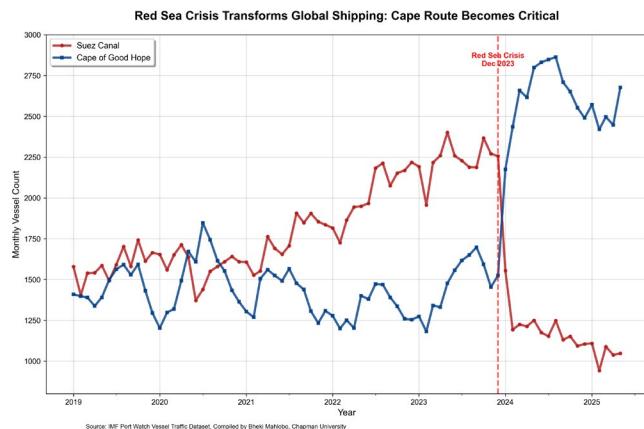
Source: Africa Center for Strategic Studies, "Mapping China's Strategic Port Development in Africa" (March 2025). Compiled by Bheki Mahlolo, Chapman University.

China has built a network of port facilities that spans the entire African coastline, giving Beijing unprecedented control over maritime trade routes.

The scope of Chinese port acquisitions across Africa reveals the comprehensive nature of this challenge. Chinese firms are active stakeholders in 78 ports across 32 African countries, with regional distribution including 35 ports in West Africa, 17 in East Africa, 15 in Southern Africa, and 11 in North Africa (Nantulya, 2025).¹⁷ These facilities have hosted 55 People's Liberation Army Navy port calls since 2000, with 36 ports demonstrating dual-use military capabilities through port calls or military exercises.¹⁸

The debt-to-equity conversion model pioneered at Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka provides a template for converting economic relationships into strategic control. Several African port projects financed through Chinese loans include provisions that could allow China to assume operational control if host governments cannot meet debt service obligations, creating potential for systematic expansion of Chinese maritime control without requiring direct military conquest.

The Red Sea Crisis and Strategic Vulnerability



Source: IMF Port Watch Vessel Traffic Dataset. Compiled by Bheki Mahlolo, Chapman University.

Houthi attacks on commercial vessels transiting the Red Sea have forced major shipping companies to divert cargo around the southern tip of Africa, adding thousands of miles and weeks of transit time to shipments between Asia and Europe or North America. This disruption has increased shipping costs by 200-400%, created supply chain bottlenecks, and demonstrated the vulnerability of traditional trade routes to asymmetric threats.

The South Atlantic corridor around the Cape of Good Hope has emerged as the primary alternative to Red

Sea transit, making partnerships with South African ports and other West African facilities strategically essential for maintaining global trade flows. However,

Chinese influence over many of these ports provides Beijing with potential leverage over alternative shipping routes that could prove decisive in future crises.

Strategic Recommendations for American and Western Leadership

Immediate Actions for Strategic Recovery

America's response to the challenge in Africa must begin with immediate actions that can quickly restore American credibility and competitive position while providing foundation for longer-term strategic initiatives. These immediate actions should focus on diplomatic expansion, economic engagement, and private sector mobilization that can produce visible results within the next three years.

Doubling American diplomatic presence across Africa within three years represents the most critical immediate priority for restoring American influence and competitive position. This expansion should prioritize countries where Chinese influence is growing rapidly but where American partnerships could still provide

effective alternatives. The new diplomatic facilities should be equipped with commercial offices, cultural centers, and educational exchange programs that can provide comprehensive engagement capabilities.

Private sector incentive programs are essential for mobilizing American business engagement with African markets on the scale necessary to compete with Chinese state-directed investment. These programs should include risk insurance, financing guarantees, and regulatory streamlining that make African investment more attractive for American companies while maintaining appropriate oversight and transparency standards.

Long-term Strategic Framework

America's long-term strategy for Africa, as well as that of its allies, must rival China's comprehensive approach while leveraging unique American advantages in innovation, democratic governance, and alliance relationships. This strategy should recognize that African engagement is not merely a regional issue but a fundamental component of global competition between democratic and authoritarian systems.

The democratic governance partnership model represents America's most significant comparative advantage over Chinese authoritarian alternatives. This model should emphasize practical governance improvements, institutional capacity building, and civil society strengthening that provide immediate benefits

to African populations while supporting long-term democratic development.

Technology and innovation hubs across Africa could showcase American technological capabilities while providing African partners with access to cutting-edge innovations that support economic development and improve living standards. These hubs should focus on areas where American companies maintain clear technological advantages while creating opportunities for African innovation and entrepreneurship.

The West has other assets, notably in approaches that differ from those of China. Even looking beyond migration, the West remains for many Africans a model of

democratic governance far superior to Chinese authoritarianism. Western tech and infrastructure firms should work to create partnerships with Africa's rising technology and innovation hubs. These hubs should focus on areas where American companies maintain clear technological advantages while creating opportunities for African innovation and entrepreneurship.

This company-to-company approach provides a stark contrast China's which relies largely on payments to governing elites and employing not upskilled African workers, but on those imported from China. Not surprisingly GAO research indicates that 40% of Chinese BRI projects encounter substantial implementation difficulties, and Chinese funding peaked at over \$120 billion annually in 2016-2017 before declining by 67% to \$40-60 billion annually by 2021.¹⁹

China also seems reluctant to share its industrial prowess, as the West has more often done, since its

economy relies largely on massive exports to pay for resources and build its military. In some cases, they seek to tie flows of African resources to fund infrastructure projects; there is less evidence of boosting industrial employment as bring orders to factories back home are the prized commodity. Instead China has sent a million migrants to what author Howard French has called it's "second continent" to do much of the hard work, engineering and planning.

In the end China ends up less a beneficent donor than a ruthless debt collector, which sometimes seizes projects if payment is not made. In 54 of the 120 developing countries for which the World Bank has relevant data, debt service payments to China now exceed the combined repayments owed to the Paris Club—a group of 22 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries including major lenders such as the U.S., United Kingdom and France.

Coalition Building and Alliance Coordination

America's African strategy should leverage alliance relationships and partnership networks that provide force multiplication opportunities while sharing costs and responsibilities among like-minded partners. European allies, in particular, have strong interests in African stability and prosperity that align with American strategic objectives.

European alliance coordination should focus on areas where American and European capabilities complement each other, such as combining American security capabilities with European development assistance and cultural ties. Joint initiatives could provide more comprehensive alternatives to Chinese engagement while sharing costs among multiple partners.

Regional power partnerships with countries like South Africa, Nigeria, and Kenya could provide American strategy with African legitimacy and local knowledge that enhance effectiveness while demonstrating respect for African leadership. These partnerships should recognize African countries as partners rather than recipients of aid or assistance.

The West's Cultural Advantages

Yet in reality, even now, the liberal culture of the West still possesses a great allure. Over the past decade, the number of Chinese emigrating has close to tripled. Chinese President Xi Jinping may offer global pre-eminence and the prospect of a " Chinese dream," but the number of Chinese immigrants living in America has doubled since 2000, to around 2.5 million. Similarly in Canada, Chinese immigration is at a peak, with nearly two-million people of Chinese descent calling Canada home. Much the same can be said about the Chinese-born population the third-largest migrant community in Australia after the United Kingdom and India.

Critically many educated young Chinese do not seem to be finding their "Chinese dream" close to home. Roughly a quarter million Chinese currently study at US universities while unemployment has doubled for people 16 and 24 since 2018. Worse off are graduates with advanced degrees, around 45% of recent college graduates in China received no job offers, according to one published survey.

This exodus continues not only for economic reasons, which were true in the past, but today China is no longer a poor country. They continue to migrate to the West, notably the US, Canada and Australia, in part because they may prefer to live and invest in a country where business is not seen as a tool of national policy.²⁰ The same cultural attraction works with Africans, as we can see by the 683,700 Africans who obtained permanent residency in the US from 2017-2023 alone, while over 330,000 visas were issued to Sub-Saharan Africans by the UK in 2019 and Nigeria is projected to contribute over 21,000 new permanent residents to Canada in 2024.

Western culture may be seen as decadent to some, but remains alluring to many people in developing countries, including Africa. With 7 out of 10 Nigerians seeking to emigrate and sub-Saharan Africa ranking lowest globally on freedom indices, weak institutions—including poor rule of law, limited economic freedom, and declining political rights—drive mass migration to Western nations with stronger institutional frameworks protecting individual liberties. A pro-Western African youth population could provide decades of strategic partnership and market expansion. Conversely, an anti-American generation shaped by Chinese investment, Russian disinformation, and Iranian ideological influence could fundamentally alter global power dynamics.

Conclusion: The Stakes for American and Western Global Leadership

The struggle for influence in Africa represents far more than a regional competition between great powers—it constitutes a fundamental test of America's ability to maintain global leadership in an increasingly multipolar world. The outcome of this competition will determine whether America can preserve the international system that has provided unprecedented prosperity and security for the American people and their allies, or whether that system will be replaced by a Chinese-led order that prioritizes authoritarian control over democratic values and state direction over market freedoms.

Africa's emergence as a major center of global political and economic power makes this competition existentially important for American interests. With 54 votes in the United Nations General Assembly, rapidly growing economies, and vast resource endowments, Africa will play a decisive role in shaping global governance for decades to come. If China and its coalition of challengers succeed in dominating African partnerships, they will possess the diplomatic leverage, economic resources, and strategic positions necessary to reshape the international order according to their authoritarian preferences.

The consequences of continued American retreat from Africa extend far beyond the continent itself. Chinese control over African ports and resources would provide Beijing with the capabilities to threaten American maritime supremacy and disrupt the global trade system that underpins American prosperity. Russian military presence in Africa creates opportunities for asymmetric threats against American interests worldwide. Iranian and Turkish influence operations demonstrate how second-tier powers can exploit American disengagement to build anti-American coalitions.

The opportunity costs of American inaction are equally significant. Africa's demographic and economic growth trajectories represent some of the world's most promising opportunities for American businesses, workers, and investors. The continent's vast natural resources, growing consumer markets, and innovative potential could provide foundation for sustained American economic growth if properly developed through strategic partnerships.

The path forward requires sustained bipartisan commitment to African engagement that transcends electoral cycles and political divisions. America's competitors

have demonstrated that systematic, long-term strategies can produce decisive advantages over improvised responses and episodic engagement. Matching their commitment requires institutional changes, resource allocation, and political leadership that prioritize African partnerships as essential to American security and prosperity.

The stakes could not be higher. America faces a choice between sustained engagement that preserves global leadership and continued retreat that cedes influence on competitors who reject American values and interests. The new scramble for Africa represents the world's last major opportunity to shape the emerging global order according to democratic principles and free market values. Failure to seize this opportunity may mark the beginning of the end of the American century and the emergence of a world order that serves the interests of America's adversaries rather than the American people and their democratic allies.

The time for half-measures and bureaucratic inertia has passed. America must commit to comprehensive engagement with Africa that matches the scale of the challenge and the magnitude of the opportunity. The future of American global leadership depends on the decisions made today about America's relationship with the world's last frontier.

This comprehensive strategy requires immediate implementation of coordinated diplomatic, economic, and security initiatives that can restore American competitiveness while building sustainable partnerships with

African nations. The window for effective American response is rapidly closing as Chinese investments create irreversible dependencies, and Russian military partnerships establish permanent presence. Success demands unprecedented interagency coordination, substantial resource commitments, and sustained political leadership that treats African engagement as essential to American national security rather than optional development assistance.

The strategic imperative extends beyond traditional foreign policy considerations to encompass technological leadership, economic competitiveness, and democratic values preservation. America's response must recognize that the new scramble for Africa represents a defining moment in twenty-first-century geopolitics, where failure to engage effectively could permanently diminish American global influence and accelerate the transition toward a Chinese-dominated international order that fundamentally contradicts American interests and values.

American leadership must act decisively to reverse the trajectory of decline and establish a new framework for comprehensive African engagement that combines strategic vision, operational excellence, and sustained commitment. The cost of inaction far exceeds the investment required for success, making immediate and comprehensive American engagement with Africa both strategically necessary and economically prudent for securing American prosperity and global leadership in the decades ahead. *

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- Lowy Institute Global Diplomacy Index (2024): Diplomatic presence analysis
- Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2024): Turkish diplomatic expansion data
- UN General Assembly Voting Records (2020-2024): Voting alignment analysis

Data Currency:

Investment data covers 2013-2021 (GAO reporting period). Trade data is current through 2024. Diplomatic presence reflects 2024 status. Port control analysis reflects March 2025 research. All monetary figures are in US dollars.

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