



Grave New World: The Foreseeable Resurgence of Proxy Warfare in Africa

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ABSTRACT

The shift to multipolarity has China and Russia rising to compete against the American hegemonic world order that has dominated the international scene since the end of the Cold War. However, given this competition, Africa has re-emerged as a theatre in which these tensions are unfolding. China, Russia and America are returning to the predatory relationships they engaged in during the Cold War, with African states becoming allies or environments for extraction and exploitation. Economic interest is central to these relationships. These hegemons are building corridors to promote their economic stability through access to lucrative resources and weapons deals, with politically unstable, conflict-ridden and resource-rich African states most susceptible to this fleecing. This paper applies a Marxist geopolitical lens to explain this phenomenon and why alternative theories, namely Neorealism, fail to fully appreciate the internal and multifaceted reasonings for these dynamics.

Introduction

This article investigates which African countries are more vulnerable to proxy wars spurred by China, Russia and the United States contesting one another for dominance in the shifting multipolar international environment. This paper argues that African resource-rich countries and fragile states engaged in armed conflicts will be especially susceptible to this foreign interference, as these superpowers are driven by ongoing competition to secure access to lucrative natural resources and weapons deals. Therefore, a Marxist analysis best explores this predatory relationship and how engagement may likely unfold. These global hegemony are driven by economic concerns to exploit peripheral countries in Africa, thus enriching their markets. As such, proxy warfare and strategic investments are increasingly attractive tactics leveraged to secure spheres of influence. As an independent theatre for these conflicts, Africa is becoming an environment critical to heightening these hegemony's economic competitiveness.

A Neorealist perspective would posit that China, Russia, and the United States' fundamental distrust of one another is the impetus for this increasing competition for alliances in African states. Neorealism contends that as states become more powerful in the international environment, such as Russia and China's ascendency against American unipolarity, they are interested in absorbing weaker states into their orbit to reap the resources and investment opportunities needed to improve their relative positions (De Maio 2014, 38). Therefore, a desire for power maximization drives these states to

aggressively seek out African partners to usurp one another's international sphere of influence. This would also explain why weaker states in Africa align themselves with more powerful actors to promote their improvement (Dunne and Schmidt 2020, 113). However, this lens fails to appreciate the domestic and economic causality that motivates these relationships. So, while important for understanding behaviour on the international stage, it is an incomplete theoretical tool.

This article outlines the attractiveness of proxy warfare for competing hegemony. It covers Cold War proxy engagements, primarily by the United States and the former Soviet Union, and how the African theatre reflected their foreign policy agenda. Thereafter, a breakdown of each country's interests and their current engagements will be explored to display the hegemony-oriented thread between these relationships.

Proxy Conflicts in Africa During the Cold War

During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union (USSR) engaged in proxy wars to exert their regional influence and undermine the enemy while gaining access to coveted resources. Proxy wars are conflicts where less powerful countries or non-governmental groups are supported by larger powers which reflect their respective interests (De Maio 2014, 38). This allows larger countries to engage in indirect conflict through these representatives, such as puppet regimes or rebel groups, without overt warfare between the two. Accordingly, proxy war has various advantages. First, the existential threat of nuclear conflict, as both the

United States and USSR were nuclear powers, disincentivized direct war. Proxy war allowed the superpowers to confront one another without risking global annihilation (Bar-Siman-Tov 1984, 263).

Furthermore, indirect engagement allows for plausible deniability. Therefore, any warfare atrocities or human rights abuses would not tarnish their global prestige to the same degree as they would have had they officially participated in the conflict. Moreover, this enables the superpowers to contest global hegemony by working to alter the outcome of regional conflicts to their benefit (Tafotie and Idahosa 2016, 451). By accumulating control across numerous regions globally, the United States and the Soviet Union aggregated spheres of influence to help tip the global balance of power in their favour. As a result, American and Soviet policymakers could enjoy the fruits of an additional ally and further enhance their interests if they won the proxy war without an obvious military defeat should they lose (De Maio 2014, 38).

Accordingly, the primary mechanism driving these Cold War proxy conflicts appeared to be fear of the rival's ideology: American liberal-democratic capitalism against Soviet authoritarian communism. This intrinsic distrust between the hegemonies led to a competition for their own perceived survival. This is where the Neorealist lens becomes an attractive explanatory tool. During Africa's main decolonization period, the majority of African nations joined the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) (Whitaker and Clark 2018, 47). The movement intended for its countries to avoid dominance by foreign superpowers and assert their new-found inde-

pendence. In practice, however, many African nations were sucked into the American or Soviet orbit. The United States, though initially unreceptive to the potential of African decolonization for their gain, quickly pivoted when it became apparent that emancipated nations provided potential allies to the Soviet Union (Whitaker and Clark 2018, 48). The USSR's anti-imperialist agenda and robust support for anti-Western independence leaders in Africa flamed American fears of the Soviets expanding their power by allying with these new international players. As such, any relative gains for each power were a loss for their rival.

As a case study, the Angolan civil war characterizes Russo-American proxy interference effectively. The Marxist-Leninist Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola, a dominant liberation party in the conflict, received \$63 million between 1964 and 1975 from the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact countries (Whitaker and Clark 2018, 69). In addition, Cuban troops, acting as Soviet expeditionary forces, also trained and armed this group to rival their colonial oppressors and then consolidate political power after their independence (Yeisley 2011, 80). Fearful of a communist government being installed in Luanda, the United States channelled limited financial support to the Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola (FNLA), a pro-American militant coalition, in its engagement (Thaler 2012, 57). Interestingly, as American support waned, China filled this vacuum to exercise its interests (Whitaker and Clark 2018, 69-70). Determined to prevent America from reorienting to a policy of isolationism during the 1970s, China supported the FNLA and later

the União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola to maintain Cold War balances of power (Hess 2014, 24). The more preoccupied America and the Soviet Union were with contesting one another, the fewer resources available for the USSR to threaten the weakened state of China (21). Moreover, this also presented China as a legitimate alternative for developing countries to align themselves against the binary of American or Soviet alliances.

This is a textbook example of African nations acting as an arena for superpower conflicts to play out. Engagement with Angola highlights a pattern of China, Russia and the United States meddling in African affairs to release the tension between them and advance their interests. Accordingly, this dynamic has continued into the current shifting multipolar era. Despite this recurring development, the Neorealist argument cannot fully explain the multifaceted nature of proxy conflicts between hegemonic powers. Threaded from Cold War politics into the modern context, Neorealism fails to account for how domestic politics and non-state actors shape foreign relations. To demonstrate, Russia's Putin administration has concretely re-oriented away from ideological aims to install communist regimes in proxy countries, instead launching foreign intervention campaigns to bolster their economic competitiveness (Matusевич 2019, 25). In tandem, the United States' Trump administration's goal of containment against threats to their economic primacy and China's interest in maintaining their status as a globalized economic player is the underlying mechanisms fuelling modern trends of intervention in Africa (Tafotie and Idahosa 2016,

452; Edoho 2011, 107).

Neorealism also fails to appreciate how non-state actors are powerful players in modern Sino-Russo-American confrontations. Most countries in Africa are mono-economies: their export income relies almost exclusively on one or few industries, such as crude petroleum in Angola, coffee in Rwanda, cocoa in Côte d'Ivoire or copper in Zambia (Whitaker and Clark 2018, 83). The resources these countries possess tend to be extremely lucrative. Nevertheless, its monopolization of industry makes their economies highly susceptible to volatility on the global market and intervention from wealthier countries also seeking to reap the benefits (Edoho 2011, 113). As such, leaders in many African countries ally with foreign corporations to stabilize the extraction and distribution of their resources (Schmidt and Mwaba 2019). This trend demands attention to economic factors and internal politics to be explained, which Neorealism ignores as it solely focuses on global interactions at the international level.

Furthermore, the security of profits and economic growth is the foundation of these relationships, not the fear other states pose to one's survival. Therefore, while useful, Neorealism is not a wholly fulfilling exploratory tool. The strong vertical hierarchy between hegemonic countries as the exploitative 'core' of the world order extracting wealth from 'peripheral' African countries to enrich themselves perpetuates a parasitic relationship where these countries become largely dependent on their stronger counterparts (Ahmad 2022). Appropriately, a Marxist explanation better incorporates the

central actors and underlying cause of China, Russia and the United States' intervention in Africa today.

China's Economic Expansion

China's economic output is reliant on nonrenewable energy sources to power its production industries. As a result, the ability to compete for global primacy against the United States is yoked to open access to a sustainable oil supply (Yeisley 2011, 83). Although Africa only possesses about 9% of proven oil reserves globally, experts cite that the continent likely has significant untapped reserves (Edoho 2011, 114). Africa's arguable political stability compared to other oil-rich nations in the Middle East and its willingness to engage with China makes it a highly attractive source of energy. The roots of China's investments in the African continent stem from Cold War relations. Although directly involved to some degree during its peak, such as the aforementioned Angolan Civil War, as American and Soviet tensions wound down, China filled the vacuum of foreign intervention via investments and 'no string attached' aid projects (Edoho 2011, 108). The Chinese state and its corporations explicitly prefer to build relationships with resource-rich African countries over those without a prominent resource industry to extract wealth from Africa's most profitable sectors.

Considering this, oil is the primary, although not exclusive, field of Chinese investment (Edoho 2011, 115). After the American oil tycoon Chevron abandoned oil fracking projects in Sudan in 1984, the Sudanese government invited the China National Petroleum Company

(CNPC) to oversee oil extraction projects (Tafotie and Idahosa 2016, 453-54). This relationship led to the explosion of oil-based investment relationships between African states and China. Partnering with three of the continent's top oil producers, between 2000 and 2013, China invested \$10 billion in Sudan, \$12 billion in Angola and \$9 billion in Nigeria (Whitaker and Clark 2018, 328). This has fostered an asymmetrical relationship between China as a rising superpower and these nations, where China's economic interests have been cultivated. Yet, the aid projects it has supplied to these countries in exchange do not allow them to develop effectively. In practice, it keeps them dependent on Chinese markets (Edoho 2011, 108).

However, strong Sino-African trade relationships undermine the United States' potential to fasten these resource-rich countries to their market. This obviously creates tension, prompting the funding of proxy wars. The Second Sudanese Civil War eloquently displays this. To weaken the power of the Sudanese regime in Khartoum that allied with China in the early 2000s, the United States funded rebel groups of the South Sudanese separatist movement, training and arming troops in the Sudan Peoples' Liberation Army (Tafotie and Idahosa 2016, 454). This strategy echoes their Cold War tendency to meddle in foreign conflicts for personal interests. Nevertheless, China has maintained a firm grasp of Sudan's oil industry, importing up to 65 to 80% of daily production (Tafotie and Idahosa 2016, 454). By creating heavy debt burdens for African governments, China can leverage this power to place political pressure on leaders to align with its foreign

policy agenda (Madeira 2020, 4). This presents an additional threat to American and Russian pursuits in the region. Even so, China has disregarded the politics, human rights abuses, and environmental degradation its investment brings to its partnered countries solely in pursuit of economic dominance. Therefore, resource-rich countries are most susceptible to foreign meddling as the global superpowers continue to fight for primacy.

Russia's Economic Stimulation

Similarly, Russia's foreign relations in Africa also centre around economic ascendancy. Russia, in the same vein as China and the United States, views Africa as a "new frontier of political and economic opportunity" (Schmidt 2018, 47). However, Russia is advancing their economic interests to maintain pace with the other superpowers, as it is unfeasible for them to surpass either the Chinese or American markets to become the world's leading economy. Instead, Russia is strengthening its neglected ties with Africa to compensate for its tightening economy. The 2014 Annexation of Crimea, coupled with the increasingly devastating invasion of Ukraine in 2022, has incurred the wrath of international markets, launching a series of sanctions against Russia (Fox 2021, 2; Kusa 2022, 9). In addition, the stiffening of global markets, capital flight and decrease in foreign investments in recent years has also tightened the Russian economy, heightening economic pressure on the nation (Azizi 2019, 92). While Moscow also has ties in the oil and mineral industries in Africa, particularly in Angola and South Africa, their primary mechanism of in-

fluence on the continent is arms deals (Matusevich 2019, 36).

By selling weapons to African states, Russia has the dual benefit of compensating for restricted income given their current geopolitical circumstances and incorporating fragile states into their orbit of influence (Azizi 2019, 96-97). This has been the main vein of Russia's strategy in the new shifting multipolar era. In North Africa during the Arab Spring, the 2011 fall of Gaddafi's regime in Libya dissolved a \$4 billion arms deal Russia was sowing with Tripoli (Azizi 2019, 97). Given the heavy investment Russia had already placed in the country through various infrastructure projects, amounting to approximately tens of billions of dollars by this point, Russia pivoted its support to Libyan warlord Khalifa Haftar's armed forces (Azizi 2019, 96-97; Uniacke 2022). Haftar's alliance maintained their influence in the region while perpetuating the current conflicts Libya is embroiled in.

Moreover, Russia makes up just under 30% of weapons exports in sub-Saharan Africa and has secured significant arms deals with Algeria, Angola, Egypt, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sudan and Uganda since 2010 (Whitaker and Clark 2018, 345). There is the trend that many of these countries suffer from weak political stability, corrupt government and lax constraints on government power (World Justice Project 2022). Accordingly, Russia's interference exhibits that weak states render their nations disproportionately susceptible to foreign intervention. As a result, Russia, China and the United States remain Africa's largest weapons suppliers, with Russian exporters dominating the scene

(Neethling 2020, 10). The hegemon accounts for a staggering 80% of Algeria's weapons imports and has tied numerous other countries to itself through this method of trade (Azizi 2019, 90). Naturally, this incentivizes Russia to foster animosities within the continent to maintain this lucrative market. Some of these conflicts threaten American and Chinese economic interests, which may evolve into proxy warfare to maintain their regional influence and dominance in their respective industries. Furthermore, Russia's current isolation on the world stage is prompting the power to strengthen ties with their allied states in Africa (Schiffrin 2022). Although Russia does not have the economic capabilities to viably compete with China and the United States in terms of economic supremacy, the sale of arms allows it to nurture its economic strength in an effort to maintain its relative competitiveness as a global power.

The United States' Fight to Maintain Unipolarity

Comparatively, the United States is uniquely situated against the other superpowers as it possesses an unparalleled decades-long history of investment in Africa and the economic might to invest in numerous industries rivalling the other powers. The Obama administration's view of China as "both an adversary, but also a potential partner" has been overridden by the Trump presidency's position that the other hegemon's investments are a threat to American economic primacy (Sachs 2019, 33, 37). As such, the United States' policy development has been largely reactive to counter Chinese and Russian initiatives while simultaneous-

ly protecting their interests on the continent through a policy of containment (Carr 2020).

In the same vein as China and Russia, the United States is deeply entwined with natural resource industries and arms deals in African nations. Notably, access to cobalt mines is a hotbed of power struggle between the United States and China. Africa possesses an estimated 53% of known cobalt reserves in the world, with 3.6 million tons solely in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), making the country the host of over half of global supplies (Edoho 2011, 113; Niarchos 2021). Cobalt is an integral material necessary for making battery components in electric vehicles. Considering this, China Molybdenum Company Limited bought out American mining giant Freeport-McMoRan in late 2020, acquiring possession of numerous cobalt sites across the DRC (Searcey et al. 2021). This new acquisition has tied American automakers, including Ford, General Motors and Tesla, to Chinese-owned mines, not only increasing China's influence in the region but also linking American companies to their global competitor (Searcey et al. 2021). Despite efforts to develop away from this extractive material to discourage reliance on Chinese industries, cobalt is still the primary resource for these batteries in many American-made vehicles (Niarchos 2021).

The Biden administration has warned against Chinese corporations' dominance in the industry, depicted as detrimental to American interests (Searcey et al. 2021). However, China maintains its ambitious goal to dominate Africa's mining and metal market (Eno and Eno 2014, 28). Given the United States' strong

incentive to repossess access to cobalt mines, this tension may encourage some leveraging of their military influence and support for outlaw rebels in the region to regain dominance in the industry. As Eno and Eno contend, should the United States continue to be pushed out of mineral markets in African nations, an escalation to proxy armed conflicts “will be irrevocable” (2014, 28). Given America’s lengthy reputation of intervening in foreign affairs for its gain, this avenue is not unforeseeable. Therefore, the United States’ economic interests will likely manifest into war by proxy should their access to resources continue to be curtailed.

Conclusion

The shifting multipolar order of Sino-Russian-American tensions leeches into African nations to play out these rivalries. However, given that economic enterprise is a key factor in the maintenance and exercise of power in the modern era, a Marxist lens best explains the motivations behind ensuing proxy wars on the continent. Therefore, weak African nations endowed with natural resources are disproportionately susceptible to this form of foreign interference. In turn, this tips the regional balance of power towards these superpowers. This orientation to soft power tactics could easily devolve into more concrete forms of confrontation (Neethling 2020, 15). China, Russia, and the United States’ lacklustre concern for human rights abuses or the predatory nature of their dynamic with African countries exhibits that evolution to armed conflict is not inconceivable (De Maio 2014, 37). Eager to expand their sphere of influence through economic dominance and cap-

ture as many resources into their camp without direct military involvement, proxy warfare appears to be an inevitability.

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