Africans Caught in the Geopolitical Crossfire

“Proposed U.S. law seeks to punish African countries for ‘aligning’ with Russia,” declared the headline of a May 20 story in the Nigerian outlet *Premium Times*. The South Africa-based *Daily Maverick* warned it could see the “continent caught in crossfire.”

Both stories focused on the U.S. Congress’s debate in April of a bill that would seek to “counter the malign influence and activities” of Russia and its proxies in Africa. The headlines offered great insight into how some African journalists and citizens view U.S. foreign policy in Africa as being primarily driven by geopolitical concerns about rivals Russia and China rather than the prosperity of Africans.

The proposed act, sponsored by Democratic Rep. Gregory Meeks, would allow Congress to assess the scope of Russian engagement on the continent, as well as monitor disinformation operations and the activities of Russian private military contractors. It passed the House of Representatives on April 27, with 415 members voting in favor and just nine against.

However, the bill is just one of many pieces of legislation, and the broader picture is worrying for African observers who fear the escalation of a “new Cold War.”

Even before details of the Meeks bill emerged, some had envisaged reprisals over African countries’ nonalignment. The United States “expects other countries to fall in line,” Nontobeko Hlela wrote in the Kenya-based *Elephant*, despite being “systematically excluded from any decision-making.”

The bill exists alongside the Strategic Competition Act, seeking to bolster the United States as it vies with China for influence, and the 2,900-page U.S. Innovation and Competition Act, also aimed at countering China—both of which foreign-policy researchers Odilile Ayodele and Mikatekiso Kubayi have characterized as “arguably Cold War-esque.” That these large-scale projects prioritize China

and Russia as a key focus “speaks more about power … than a genuine partnership with Africa,” they wrote.

The bill does address real threats—and the relationship between Moscow and military governments in Sudan and Mali should not be overlooked. In Mali, suspected Russian mercenaries, alongside Malian soldiers, are accused of massacring an estimated 300 civilians in March—“the worst single atrocity reported in Mali’s decade-long armed conflict,” according to Human Rights Watch.

While the bill addresses Russia’s playbook of unfair extractive resource deals in exchange for weapons, it also requires the regular identification of African governments and officials “that have facilitated payments and other prohibited activities that benefit United States-sanctioned individuals and entities tied to Russia”—raising the question of whether a poorer African nation buying Russian oil from a sanctioned entity, for example, could then face sanctions.

Part of the problem, argue Zainab Usman and Katie Auth of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, is that the United States and its allies have engaged with Africa for decades only on humanitarian and security concerns. On a continent that has the largest number of foreign military operations and outposts, Africa’s young and increasingly cynical population perceives U.S. policies focused on China and Russia, in which African countries are merely pawns in a so-called great-power game, as an objectionable way to build partnerships.

U.S.-Africa trade has continued to slide from $142 billion in 2008 to just $64 billion in 2021. While Africa’s relationship with China is highly unbalanced and has sparked repeated regional protests, U.S. diplomats often fail to acknowledge the infrastructural benefits it has brought to democratic countries such as Senegal—where China’s Belt and Road projects have funded highways and cultural centers—and in the Seychelles, which actively courts Chinese investment as part of the country’s ambitions to be a financial hub.

In some countries, the Russia-Ukraine war has compounded the economic problems caused by the pandemic, China’s economic slowdown, and climate change-induced drought.

Egypt, the world's largest importer of wheat, relied on Russia for around 50 percent and Ukraine for 25 percent of its grain supply. "We will feel shame if we find that millions of people are dying because of food insecurity. They are not responsible for that. They didn't do anything wrong," Egyptian Finance Minister Mohamed Maait told the *Financial Times*.

Last week, as India banned exports of most of its wheat, Egypt asked to be exempt. A Russian blockade of Black Sea ports has stopped the export of some 25 million metric tons of Ukrainian grain that now cannot leave the country, according to the United Nations.

Some Western writers have sought to use food supply challenges as an argument for why African governments should condemn Russia, failing to understand the position that sanctions on Russia are the main driver for their economic turmoil. As Nic Cheeseman wrote in the *Africa Report*, the idea that economic injustices in "the world's most economically exploited regions" should be used as "a stick with which African governments can be hit to force them back into line, is equal parts perplexing and offensive."

Certain African governments have condemned Russia's actions in Ukraine in strong terms. Kenya's U.N. ambassador, Martin Kimani, affirmed to the U.N. Security Council just days before Russia's invasion that "we must complete our recovery from the embers of dead empires in a way that does not plunge us back into new forms of domination and oppression."

Therefore, it would be a mistake to view Kenya and many other nations' abstentions as being "pro-Russia." Kimani said Kenya abstained on votes to avoid being dragged into global power rivalry, stating that the Security Council in the future may appear "weaponized."

Responding to questions about African neutrality, the United States' ambassador to the U.N., Linda Thomas-Greenfield, said that "we have to do additional work to help these countries to understand the impact of Russia's war of aggression on Ukraine"—a comment that implied African

leaders required education on their own sovereign decision-making.

As Ghanaian historian Samuel Adu-Gyamfi tells it, Western-imposed forms of democracy have failed the continent. In his view, economic reforms required by institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank have led to underdevelopment in African countries, "as have more recent imports like lockdowns, travel bans and vaccine mandates—pushed on Africa by Western-dominated institutions," he wrote in *NewsAfrica*.

Resentment of neocolonialism is also driving opposition to Western demands. France's policies toward its former colonies have prompted growing backlash against the French government. A nine-year military engagement in Mali that failed to subdue violent extremists has brought frustration and accusations of civilian killings in drone attacks, while in Chad France's support for the military regime has angered the Chadian people, who overwhelmingly want a democratically elected leader.

Africa, like much of the world, is not aligned with Washington's framing of the war. As FP columnist Howard French wrote, "America's concern with containing the spread of Chinese or Soviet influence overrode considerations of governance and democracy" for decades in Washington's Africa policy.

Some things haven't changed. In January, an op-ed in *GhanaWeb* suggested that "[i]n most cases, the US government continues to support corrupt regimes," citing Uganda's Yoweri Museveni. "Western powers continued to provide his regime with nearly $2bn a year," Cheta Nwanze noted in *Al Jazeera*.

If the West wants to bring African countries into the fold, it would do well to acknowledge and understand the legacy of its own policies in those countries while genuinely engaging citizens and providing incentives for leaders to get on board. New proposals that Africans perceive as punishment for exercising their own geopolitical agency risk undermining long-term U.S. goals on the continent.