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ANALYSIS

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# A FOCAL IN RIVALRY BETWEEN CHINA AND THE UNITED STATES: SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

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### A FOCAL IN RIVALRY BETWEEN CHINA AND THE UNITED STATES: SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Sub-Saharan Africa attracts attention especially with its rich natural resources, young population, and strategic position in international terms. The fact that the geography and countries of Sub-Saharan Africa have gained importance over the years brings the region to the forefront as a geography where the competition between global powers is intensifying and its strategic importance is increasing. While Sub-Saharan Africa is becoming an important region in the world economy, the competition among international actors is also increasing. Although there are many important and powerful actors such as France, Russia, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates at the centre of the competition in the region, it is seen that global powers such as China and the United States are much more prominent in the region and try to have an effective role in Sub-Saharan Africa by trying to increase their influence in the countries of the region in various ways.

From an economic perspective, Sub-Saharan Africa's natural resources, particularly oil, natural gas, mineral resources and agriculture, are attracting the interest of international companies and great power actors, particularly China and the United States. Moreover, the region's young population and rapidly growing consumer markets attract the attention of investors from competing states, making the region a key location for future economic growth. At this point, ensuring the control of resources plays a critical role for the economic development of the region and the balance of power, especially for the states competing in this geography.

Likewise, the geographical location of Sub-Saharan Africa is strategically recognised as one of the main drivers of competition in the region. At this point, the region's location at the crossroads of intercontinental trade routes makes it play a key role as a critical transit point for international transport routes. In addition, Sub-Saharan Africa plays an important role in maintaining the political and strategic balance between East and West.

In this context, Sub-Saharan Africa's characteristics and its position at the centre of competition between global powers are becoming increasingly important. Major actors such as China and the United States are endeavouring to protect, expand and deepen their economic and strategic interests in the region. The competition between the two actors is considered as an important factor that will shape the future of both the region and international relations. At this point, this analysis will examine the strategies and actions of both global power actors in the region, focusing on the dimensions of China's and the United

States' rivalry in Sub-Saharan Africa and the areas in which they compete, and will make predictions about the dimensions of competition for the future.

#### Geopolitical Importance of Sub-Saharan Africa

From the past to the present, the African continent is a region that has been the scene of a constant power struggle, even though the elements within it have varied and changed in various ways over time. In the past, European actors such as the United Kingdom and France, especially until the Cold War years, and the Soviet

Union and the United States during the Cold War period have shown themselves as effective powers in the continent. In today's conjuncture, the US and China have found a place for themselves as global powers in the region and both actors continue to struggle for influence on the continent and the countries of the region.

Before analysing the power struggle in Sub-Saharan Africa and the rivalry between the two global actors, it is necessary to get to know this geography, examine the opportunities available and evaluate the attractive elements of the continent. In this respect, it is possible to say that the strategic importance of the Sub-Saharan geography is shaped by the combination of various elements. The main reasons for the attractiveness of this region for other actors include its economic resources as well as its high market potential, ports on trade routes, the presence of various energy corridors and the potential for a young population, all of which emphasise the strategic importance of the region.

In this context, firstly from an economic point of view, the countries in the Sub-Saharan region attract a lot of attention with their rich natural resources such as oil, natural gas and minerals and their valuable mineral reserves such as gold, silver and diamonds. To go deeper, countries in the region such as Nigeria, Angola, Kenya, Chad and Gabon have a great economic potential for companies affiliated with various international actors with their large oil deposits. In this context, especially Nigeria is at the highest level in terms of daily oil production in Africa. Nigeria, which has a significant capacity in the global oil market with oil reserves exceeding 37.0 billion barrels, is followed by Angola and other countries in the region (*Erik, 2021, p.29*). Similarly, the Sub-Saharan

geography harbours a very rich potential in minerals and metals, and this potential plays an important role in the formation of competition among various actors. Countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, in particular, hold significant amounts of cobalt, copper, gold and other valuable minerals worldwide, and these minerals are largely utilised by foreign companies in industrial production and technological developments. In this respect, when evaluated in general, the fact that these natural resources and mineral reserves in the continent are dense is seen as one of the main factors that add importance to the importance of Sub-Saharan.

Another factor that is effective in attracting strategic attention and being seen as important in the region is the high population potential and the density of the young population. This situation is seen as a very important factor especially in terms of enabling foreign actors to invest in the region and to develop their investments by utilising the existing human capital. Similarly, the excess population also increases the potential for the formation of new markets as a result of the investments of foreign actors in the region and harbours a great economic opportunity for the future.

On the other hand, another factor that can be seen as the most important factor that reveals the geopolitical importance of the region is the energy corridors of Sub-Saharan Africa, various trade routes and ports located at critical points of maritime trade.

In this context, firstly, when the important energy corridors are analysed within the framework of the economic potential of the region, it is possible to see that these

corridors play a key role especially for the transport of oil and natural gas. For example, the ports in the Niger River Delta region of Nigeria constitute the main exit points of the region's oil exports and pave the way for these energy resources to reach the world markets. In addition, energy corridors in the interior of Sub-Saharan Africa are of strategic importance both for meeting the continent's energy needs and for its transfer to other international actors.

On the other hand, the trade routes of Sub-Saharan Africa and the ports in the region within the scope of these routes are seen as other important elements that emphasise the geopolitical importance of the region. From a geopolitical perspective, Sub-Saharan Africa plays the role of an important trade bridge between different parts of the African continent. This situation has a great potential to facilitate the flow of goods and services between the north and south, west and east of the continent through the main trade routes in the region. For example, important ports such as Côte d'Ivoire's Port of Abidjan and Ghana's Port of Tema are at the centre of West Africa's trade and are important points of integration with other parts of the region. These trade routes of Sub-Saharan Africa are seen to increase regional and international co-operation, while at the same time constituting one of the main arteries of international trade. In addition, these ports support Sub-Saharan Africa's economic development and integration, while at the same time strengthening the region's role in global trade, thus increasing its geopolitical importance. In the current conjuncture, this is the basis for various global power actors to approach the Sub-Saharan geography and the countries in the continent with various strategies and interests.

### China's Strategy in the Region

The growing geopolitical importance of Sub-Saharan Africa has attracted the attention of China, as well as many other international actors, and has sparked China to formulate foreign policies and strategies towards the region. However, before discussing China's presence and strategies in the region, a brief overview of China's past relations with the Sub-Saharan region will play a key role in understanding China's presence and actions in the region today.

In this context, although China's relations with Sub-Saharan Africa and its presence in the region date back to the past, its interaction with the countries in this geography started with the Bandung Conference in 1955, which was attended by twenty-nine countries from Asia and Africa that had just gained independence (*Küçükaltan, 2022, p.108*). At this point, the then Chinese President Zhou Enlai led the conference and signaled the development of post-colonial economic cooperation and post-colonial trade relations with Sub-Saharan African countries. Moreover, following the conference, China's successful investments in African countries and the wide acceptance of these investments led to closer relations between the countries. This situation encouraged both China and Sub-Saharan African countries to focus more on their common interests (*Vural, 2017, p. 135*). In this process, China moved to establish and develop diplomatic and economic relations with the newly independent countries in the Sub-Saharan geography and managed to increase the number of diplomatic and commercial representations in the region from ten to forty-four by this period (*Küçükaltan, 2022, p.109*). Considering the small number of countries that gained independence status

in the continent during this period, it is largely understood that China wanted to establish a presence in the African continent with these moves. Moreover, this is a step that forms the basis of China's strategies and approaches in the region today.

On the other hand, as the valuable geopolitical importance of the Sub-Saharan region has increased over time and in a changing conjuncture, the region has become the center of attention, especially by the major power actors in the international system. In this regard, China, which does not want to be left behind from the competition and potential of the continent, has tended to rapidly develop its relations with the Sub-Saharan countries, as it has done in the past, and has tried to introduce itself to the countries of the region as an alternative to other actors. In this context, China's approach to Sub-Saharan Africa has been realized in a different way from Western actors, and it is seen to have a pragmatist meaning unlike the ideological pressures or colonialist approach that the West has applied in the region since the past (*Tamçelik & Akkaya, 2014, p.318*). At this point, China's approach to the region has largely developed to benefit its developing economy by finding raw materials and to meet the needs of its large population, and this approach has manifested itself in adopting a model based on economic priorities and win-win logic with the countries in the region.

When China's strategies and actions in the region are examined within the framework of this model and strategy, it is seen that China has deepened its relations with the Sub-Saharan countries since the 1990s and has become the most important commercial collaborator in Africa by

standing out from many other actors in a short period of time, and this has been seen as a very important achievement for China's economic priorities and interests. Moreover, China has invested in the region in order to utilize the region's geopolitically important natural resources and minerals, especially oil, for its own economic needs. To go deeper, China has adopted a strategy based largely on economic cooperation and has been an actor trying to increase its presence in areas such as building oil refineries in oil and energy-rich countries in the geography and having a share in the extraction of minerals and other important resources in areas where natural resources are located.

Similarly, China's other strategy in the region focuses on importing Chinese-produced goods to Sub-Saharan African countries in order to improve its trade relations with them. In this direction, China, which plays an active role in areas such as the operation of railways and ports and increases investments in these areas, has needed new markets as a result of the rapid growth of its economy. In this context, it is seen that China has turned towards Sub-Saharan countries, which have the potential to produce cheaply and provide cheap labor, and continues to try to realize its goals in this field in these countries (*Tamçelik & Akkaya, 2014, p.319*). At this point, the Sub-Saharan region has an important potential to meet China's needs. In particular, the fact that African markets have reached 1 billion people is the basis for China's increasing importance to these markets (*Vural, 2017, p. 147*). In this context, China's strategies in the African continent have resulted in greater demand for Chinese products in African countries. While this situation significantly increases China's dependence on Africa, it also plays a key role in terms of

demonstrating its effectiveness and economic power in this continent.

In general terms, China's strategies in Sub-Saharan Africa are largely economic-based. Recognizing the geopolitical importance of the region, China has been finding a place for itself as an effective actor in the region with the economic strategies it has adopted. In this context, the strategies adopted by China in Sub-Saharan Africa and the resources of these strategies have created a positive image of China among African countries, and China has seen and continues to see a significant return on its economic policies and activities in this continent. Today, the African continent and the countries in the region are still vital for China's rapidly growing economy in terms of raw materials, energy resources and food supplies.

### US Strategy in the Region

Sub-Saharan Africa's prominent position in world politics is often emphasized and emphasized. This is based on a variety of factors, including the region's critical location on the coast of the Horn of Africa and the Gulf of Guinea for energy and trade transit routes. In addition, the region's rich energy and mineral resources and strong market potential have paved the way for its strategic importance in many areas (*Demirtaş, 2021*). At this point, there are many international actors in the region, which has various attractive opportunities, and these actors are trying to increase their activities in different fields and to become permanent in the region.

At this point, the US is seen as one of the other important competitive actors in Sub-Saharan Africa. Sub-Saharan Africa is an important region that plays a decisive role in US foreign policy strategies. With its

geopolitical position, natural resources, security concerns and economic potential, Sub-Saharan Africa is vital to US national interests. Stabilization in the region, counterterrorism, energy security and economic cooperation are among the factors that increase the US interest in Sub-Saharan Africa. In this context, US engagement in Sub-Saharan Africa is strategically critical for both the region and the United States. Before examining the US strategy and approach to the region, it would be important to talk about the relations of a powerful actor like the US with the continent and the countries in the region.

In this context, it is worth noting that until the Second World War, the US's relations with Africa were generally low profile. However, after this period, developments and various economic crises affecting the whole world have led to the need for countries to turn to different geographies. In this respect, the relations of the United States, a powerful global actor after World War II, with Africa have gained a new dimension. Critical issues such as the establishment of strategic military bases, the supply of raw materials and the potential to become a military supply center have not escaped the attention of US statesmen and soldiers (*Demirtaş, 2021*). This can be understood as important steps to strengthen the US presence in Sub-Saharan Africa and protect its interests in the region.

On the other hand, during the Cold War, Sub-Saharan Africa was perceived by the US not as the focal point of the East-West polarization, but rather as Europe's backyard and received limited attention in the international system. During this period, the US interest in the continent was generally limited to the prevention of

Soviet expansionism and economic reasons (Özel & Şahin, 2020, p. 463).

Subsequently, the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States in the 2000s caused not only the Middle East but also Africa to take an important place on the US agenda (Özel & Şahin, 2020, p. 465). These attacks emphasized the need to reshape the US counterterrorism strategy and showed that regions such as Sub-Saharan Africa could also play a central role in the fight against terrorism. In this process, the US focused more on the presence and effectiveness of terrorist organizations in Sub-Saharan Africa and increased its efforts to enhance security cooperation in the region. In this context, the post-September 11 period marks a process of reshaping US policy towards Sub-Saharan Africa and deepening its relations with the region.

In addition, another important aspect of the US focus on the region during these years, which is still valid in the current conjuncture, is that the oil reserves in Sub-Saharan Africa, which could potentially be discovered, hold remarkable economic potential for the US. The United States has found it important to fulfill basic capitalist requirements in the countries where these oil reserves are located, such as maintaining political stability, supporting the transition to a free market economy and ensuring basic economic standards. This can be understood as part of the US strategy to ensure energy security and secure its access to oil resources.

On the other hand, from a historical perspective, it can be read that the US approach and strategies towards the region have been multidimensional and multifaceted. This situation constitutes the basis for the US to continue to approach

this geography in different ways in the current conjuncture. In this context, when the US strategies in the region are analyzed in today's international system, it is generally understood that the US strategies in Sub-Saharan Africa include a comprehensive approach to the geopolitical, economic and security dynamics of the region.

Digging deeper, when we consider the military dimension, which is perhaps the most prominent of the US strategies in the region, the US presence in the region seems to involve counterterrorism operations and taking measures against security threats. Factors such as the effectiveness of terrorist organizations in Sub-Saharan Africa, especially the activities of al-Qaeda-linked groups, have encouraged the US to strengthen its military presence in the region. In addition, the US has various objectives under these military strategies, such as training and building the capacity of local security forces, working in cooperation with the countries in the region and taking the lead in supporting the operational capabilities of the countries in the region. Moreover, the fact that terrorist organizations such as al-Shabaab and Boko Haram have caused problems for Sub-Saharan countries in many respects can be seen as one of the factors that reinforce the need for military support and training provided by the US to the countries in the region.

Another area of US strategy and approach in Sub-Saharan Africa has been economic in nature. In this context, US policies and strategies in Sub-Saharan Africa generally focus on economic cooperation, security and support for democratic reforms. US economic policies in this region aim to promote economic growth through trade promotion, increasing investment

opportunities and supporting development projects. For example, the United States strengthens economic relations with countries in Sub-Saharan Africa by signing free trade agreements and investing in infrastructure projects to facilitate trade. Moreover, the economic potential of Sub-Saharan Africa and its rapidly growing young population are driving the US economic interest in the region, which is one of the most important factors in the realization and implementation of its economic strategies in the region.

Finally, it is possible to see that the US strategy and approach to Sub-Saharan Africa in the current conjuncture is oriented towards diplomatic and political cooperation with the governments of the countries in the region. US diplomatic and political cooperation policies in Sub-Saharan Africa are mainly aimed at promoting sub-Saharan stability, strengthening democratic institutions, promoting human rights, and contributing to the resolution of regional conflicts. In addition, US policies often take a multidimensional approach that includes cooperating with regional and international partners, addressing regional security threats, and supporting the region's economic development. For instance, mediation to resolve regional conflicts, peacekeeping, and diplomatic efforts to strengthen security institutions are examples of important elements of US political cooperation policies in the region. In this context, the US diplomatic and political cooperation policies in Sub-Saharan Africa can be read as aiming to contribute to increasing stability in the region, promoting democratic values and thus protecting US interests.

### Dimensions of Actors' Competition

Africa has been playing an increasingly prominent role in the global economy in recent years. The continent's rich natural resources, rapidly growing population and expanding markets are among the factors that attract the attention of international actors. In particular, competition over Africa's development and access to its resources occupies an important space in international relations. Great powers such as China and the United States are at the center of this competition. Both countries are making efforts to expand their economic, political and strategic interests in Africa. However, the US-China rivalry in Africa is not only economic, but also has profound implications for development patterns, political influence and the global balance of power. In this context, understanding the dynamics of the US-China rivalry is critical for the future of both the African continent and global politics.

In this context, when the dimensions of competition of both actors are analyzed, it is seen that the main points of competition of these two actors focus on the economy. In this respect, it is possible to say that both the US and China attach great importance to the economic resources and market potential in Africa. Moreover, both countries seek to increase their economic influence by investing in natural resources, infrastructure projects and trade relations in the region. While the United States usually conducts investments and cooperation projects with the private sector, China focuses more on large state-sponsored infrastructure projects. Going deeper, for example, the US Power Africa initiative aims to develop the energy sector in Africa by encouraging private sector investment. By partnering with local companies, the US initiative aims to



strengthen electricity infrastructure and increase energy access. Similarly, trade agreements such as the US's AGOA (African Growth and Opportunity Act) can also be considered very important in enabling the private sector to capitalize on the growth potential in Africa. On the other hand, looking at China as another power player, China's influence in Africa is generally focused on large state-sponsored infrastructure projects. For instance, China has carried out and continues to carry out many important infrastructure projects in the Sub-Saharan region under the "Belt and Road" initiative. These projects are usually implemented with China's financial and technical support and involve large-scale infrastructure investments such as airports, ports along international trade routes and railways in Sub-Saharan Africa. In this context, it is possible to see that China's state-sponsored projects are mostly aimed at increasing political interaction and realizing its long-term strategic objectives. These projects also serve the political purposes of strengthening China's influence in Sub-Saharan Africa, fostering friendship and cooperation in the region, and increasing its global influence. They also aim to increase China's international competitiveness with the United States by supporting its economic growth and providing more resources and market opportunities around the world.

In addition, the two most important actors of competition in the Sub-Saharan region, the United States and China, focus on the importance of increased trade in the region and seek to increase their trade shares there. While both countries compete in different industries, China tends to dominate the market with more competitive prices. The US, on the other hand, competes more by offering high

value-added products and services. This reflects the differences in the trade strategies of both countries in Africa, which adds to the complexity of economic interaction in the region.

On the other hand, the other dimension of competition between the two actors in Sub-Saharan Africa is military. In this context, the military rivalry between China and the United States in the region is characterized by various differences stemming from different strategic focal points and modalities, and this is an important factor that reveals the dimensions of their military rivalry.

When we first consider the US, it is seen that the US military presence in Sub-Saharan Africa and its strategies in this area are generally aimed at supporting security and stability in the region. In this context, the US tries to increase its military presence by providing military aid and training programs to various countries and tries to assert itself militarily against other regional actors such as China. For instance, it is understood that the US has been conducting training and advisory programs aimed at increasing the capacity of local forces in countries such as Nigeria, Kenya and Somalia in order to support counterterrorism efforts in the region. However, the US military presence in Sub-Saharan Africa is not limited to training and assistance programs, but also includes strategic military bases such as Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti. Similarly, the US approach to military cooperation in the region includes supporting regional security institutions as well as building close ties with its allies. By supporting the G5 Sahel Alliance in the Sahel region, the US has adopted a regional approach to counterterrorism.

China, on the other hand, can be assessed as lagging behind the United States in terms of military competition. In this context, China's military presence in Sub-Saharan Africa generally has a different focus and shows different characteristics than that of the United States. China's military assistance to the countries in the region is generally less transparent and does not include military training. In addition, China's military presence in Sub-Saharan Africa is generally more limited and often less visible. For example, China's military base in Djibouti, despite being China's first overseas military facility, is smaller and has fewer military personnel compared to the US presence in Sub-Saharan Africa. Similarly, China's approach to military cooperation, unlike that of the United States, is often unilateral and focused directly on states. In this context, the aspects of both actors' military competition in the region are key as they reflect the complex nature of US and Chinese rivalry in Africa and show that both countries pursue a range of strategies to strengthen their interests in the region.

### Conclusion

Sub-Saharan Africa has recently been seen as a geography on the rise globally due to its opportunities and rich attractive features, and this situation has attracted the attention of actors who want to be strong and effective in the international system. In this context, especially the United States and China are showing their global rivalry on this geography, and it is seen that they tend to establish superiority over each other in many aspects, especially in the economy. The competition between the US and China in Sub-Saharan Africa has a complex dynamic that deeply affects the political, economic and strategic balances in the region. Both countries pursue

different strategies to increase their presence in the region, protect their interests and expand their spheres of influence. While the US maintains its relations with the region by emphasizing values such as democracy, human rights, economic development and military cooperation, China adopts a pragmatic approach and tries to increase its influence through infrastructure projects and economic investments. The resulting rivalry in the region can influence the preferences of local leaders and people, while also affecting regional stability and security. Therefore, the US-China rivalry in Sub-Saharan Africa plays a decisive role in the future of the region.

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