

## Great Power Competition in the Gulf of Guinea

Arushi Singh<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract:

The erosion of unipolarity in conjunction with the rise of new as well as great powers who are “near peer competitors” in an increasingly multipolar world has contributed to the changing conceptualization of war. This development coupled with an increasingly uncertain international milieu, has brought significant changes in strategic thinking as new modes of warfare, new technologies and new adversaries in different places have come to the fore. These places of strategic consequence include the Gulf of Guinea which has the potential to become an important theatre for great power rivalry as a major hydrocarbon hub, an important trading route and also a source of economic diversification. The Gulf of Guinea has likewise seen increased securitisation as great powers increase their defence engagements across the globe. Moreover, the intensification of great power competition is likely to make each theatre more consequential as a competitive edge may be gained from greater engagement. The research has endeavoured to analyse the geopolitical background of the great power competition in the Gulf of Guinea; to assess the current nuances and dimensions of great power competition in the Gulf of Guinea; to examine the potential challenges and prospects that accompany great power competition and their implications for countries in the region; and to consider the long-drawn-out ramifications and implications of great power competition in the Gulf of Guinea.

**Keywords:** Great Power Competition, Gulf of Guinea, US, China, India, Hydrocarbons, CNPC, CRIMGO

### Introduction

In recent years, the Gulf of Guinea has emerged as one of the theatres for the involvement of great powers as they attempt to safeguard their energy security and their respective interests in the region. The Gulf of Guinea is surrounded by countries that include Benin, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Ghana, Gabon, Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Togo, Sao Tome and Principe, Angola, the Republic of the Congo, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, the Gambia

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<sup>1</sup> Arushi Singh a research scholar at Jawaharlal Nehru University.

and Senegal. Regional cooperation amongst these countries is often fraught by political undercurrents that fuel wariness among the nations surrounding the Gulf of Guinea. Strategically, the Gulf of Guinea maintains propinquity to the Sahel that includes access to Mali and Burkina Faso, a fact that has been slated to spell the peril of disruption and volatility from West Africa to the Gulf. Furthermore, the Gulf of Guinea borders 17 countries that remain at the forefront of maritime security as the Gulf is essential to a significant portion of maritime trade up to 25 percent in Africa as well as being a natural resource hub including for oil and fishing that is lucrative and a point of contention amongst various countries operating in the Gulf with extra-regional powers having an interest in hydrocarbon exploration (Morcos, 2021).

The crunch witnessed in hydrocarbons due to the war in Ukraine is also slated to increase the importance of the Gulf of Guinea as an avenue for alternative sources of fuel such as liquefied natural gas (LNG) as countries struggle to solidify their energy security. The strategic location of the Gulf of Guinea in the Atlantic Ocean makes it a fertile ground for both opportunities and vulnerabilities, particularly for the US and its allies. Furthermore, the region has evolved as a "confluence of threats" that has compelled great powers' involvement (Morcos, 2021). Great powers with global power projection capabilities namely the US, China and Russia are embroiled in the region along with ally countries that have colonial legacies such as France and the UK that pursue their respective interests in the Gulf of Guinea. Additionally, various navies such as the Italian, Danish, British and Russian navies have conducted cooperation with indigenous regional navies that encompass multinational exercises thereby showcasing the consideration of the Gulf of Guinea as an important sphere of influence. Concomitantly, the basing of Chinese vessels in the region, specifically, the port of Bata in Equatorial Guinea showcases considerable regional aspirations of Beijing for the future.

However, concerns abound in the region due to piracy that increases the "threat to regional security and could fuel jihadist movements coming from the inland" (Pinto & Nogueira, 2022). Piracy could destabilise the region and provide a space for terrorism to thrive which is particularly problematic due to the close proximity to the Sahel. The Gulf of Guinea has a complex network of "foreign oil traders, shippers, bankers, refiners, high-level politicians and military officials" operating that seeks to secure the interests of various actors (Munson, 2013).

In this context, the research undertook the task of understanding the geopolitical context of the great power competition in the Gulf of Guinea. It explored the contemporary strategic significance and nuances of the Gulf of Guinea in the great power competition and critically

analysed the future challenges and prospects for regional countries arising from the great power competition in the region. The study also evaluated the long-term repercussions of great power competition in the Gulf of Guinea.

### **The Geopolitical Context of the Great Power Competition in the Gulf of Guinea**

The Gulf of Guinea remains a vital point for oil extraction in Nigeria and for trade in Central and Southern Africa. Increased illegal activities in recent years have not only increased security threats but have begun to pose a risk to the region as it opens space for great powers to compete. (2021) Multiple extra-regional actors are currently involved in the Gulf of Guinea to advance their aspirations and protect their interests in the region. The colonial legacy has manifested in a multitude of languages, cultural practices and institutional frameworks with there being Anglophone, Francophone, Hispanophone and Lusophone countries surrounding the Gulf that present a challenge in terms of coordination. There are also organizations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), a regional economic community with its West Africa Regional Maritime Security Centre (CRESMAO); (ECOWAS, 2022) the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS); Gulf of Guinea Commission (GGC);<sup>2</sup> G7 Friends of the Gulf of Guinea Group (G7++FOGG);<sup>3</sup> and Maritime Organization for West and Central Africa (MOWCA) operating in the region that has enormous forbearance on maritime concerns (Egede, 2019).

Furthermore, various countries including the US, France, and the UK along with emergent powers that encompass China and India have become involved in the region. These players are solidifying and securing economic connections by providing financial assistance and security expertise to support regional ventures. Japan has similarly contributed financial resources to the West and Central Africa Maritime Security Trust Fund (IMO, 2019) and has also invested in Nigeria's security infrastructure 'Deep Blue Project' in the Gulf of Guinea to battle piracy (Onyenucheya, 2022).

These attempts likewise extend to natural resources. Countries in the region that have enormous potential for hydrocarbons such as Ghana, Togo, Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Congo, Cameroon and

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<sup>2</sup> The Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) is an economic community of the African Union that is tasked with the promotion of regional economic cooperation. ECCAS is part of the "Yaoundé Process" along with the Gulf of Guinea Commission (GGC) which is working to tackle maritime crime in the Gulf of Guinea.

<sup>3</sup> The G7++ Group of Friends of the Gulf of Guinea (FOGG) has been described as a multilateral maritime security group that works to support the execution of the Yaoundé Code of Conduct for the purposes of enhancing regional maritime security.

Gabon continue to attract the interest of extra-regional powers and multinational companies based in these countries (Brownfield & Charpentier, 2006). For instance, the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and the China Petrochemical Corporation (SINOPEC) have been involved in hydrocarbon operations in the region. The UK has supported the Oil Companies International Marine Forum (OCIMF) which is made up of companies trading hydrocarbons to set up a Maritime Trade Information Sharing Centre (MTISC) in Ghana. The pilot program was subsequently slated to be a success. Additionally, hydrocarbons from the region are sent to be refined in various countries around the globe including India and Eastern European which augments the interest of extra-regional powers in the dealings of the Gulf of Guinea (Pradhan, 2012).

Contemporaneously, Denmark declared preparations to situate a frigate to the Gulf of Guinea while calling on other countries to do the same. France has for more than three decades deployed naval ships in the Gulf of Guinea for the purpose of contributing to the reduction of maritime insecurity, by helping to strengthen the capabilities of the navies bordering the Gulf and of the centres of the Yaoundé Process. The vessels are part of Operation CORYMBE which aims to train regional armies and to enhance maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea. (Naval News, 2022). European Union (EU) also had implemented the Critical Maritime Routes Gulf of Guinea (CRIMGO) project to support the Yaoundé Code of Conduct and its accompanying architecture. Subsequently, the insecurity in the region has been increasing owing in part due to the encroachment of pirated vessels such as the Hai Lu Feng 11 incident that saw the vessel cross several the exclusive economic zones (EEZs) of countries including Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, Benin and Nigeria. Additionally, owners of vessels that have been pirated or the countries of origin of pirated vessels are also involved in the region as they have to secure the release of hostages such as the South Korean government (Ralby, 2021). The insecurity in the region has as well provided Beijing with an opening wherein China has engaged in a multitude of military exchanges with countries in the Gulf of Guinea that encompasses anti-piracy operations (Lin, Blanchette, & Bermudez Jr, 2021).

Scholars have posited that these developments have been “accompanied by a military rapprochement strategy,” (Ping & Mandanda, 2016). The Accord de Cooperation is an approach that was exemplified in France’s engagement with regional countries for infrastructure protection (Sundberg, 2019). An approach that has been aided by the Accord de Cooperation that provides Paris with the opportunity to have a say in the defence and external

matters of Francophone states including port access and troop deployment (Ali, 2015). France also conducted a three-year project with Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Togo and Nigeria called Support for Maritime Security in the Gulf of Guinea (ASECMAR) that was aimed at the cultivation of coordinated, training and construction of national maritime security strategies. A distinct extension of France's strategic commitment was a Priority Solidarity Fund to enhance maritime security with Benin, Ghana and Togo. It has been propounded that France has emerged as a prominent actor with Nigeria having purchased military equipment from Paris along with Senegal in recent years (Martin, 2015). Concomitantly, defence remains an important pillar of engagement with other extra-regional powers such as the US, Germany and China (Ping & Mandanda, 2016).

Furthermore, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is looking to create a permanent military facility in Equatorial Guinea. Experts posit that the move is slated to enhance China's global power projection capabilities as well as offer an important linkage in Beijing's dual-use facility construction agenda for facilities that may possibly be converted into forward operating bases. China has already invested heavily in Equatorial Guinea through its large-scale investments such as in the Port of Bata which has involved companies such as the China Communications Construction Company and the China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC). Reports have also emerged regarding China's quest to gain a foothold in the region to secure its hydrocarbon interests. The Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC) has likewise pledged to provide financial incentives to the government in Equatorial Guinea. Chinese influence in the country continues with Huawei Marine Networks being given a submarine cable system in Equatorial Guinea. China has also used its expertise in renewables to further cement its reach and carve out a niche. Beijing has, analogously to other great powers, been intent on inculcating defence ties. To that end, PLA Navy (PLAN) began "port calls with Gulf countries and launched its first anti-piracy drills with local navies" (Lin, Blanchette, & Bermudez Jr, 2021).

Gradually, China has emerged as a competitor for influence for France in the Gulf of Guinea as Beijing has established shipyards in sub-Saharan Africa and its companies have been building ties and have offered ships to Cameroon, the Republic of Congo and Nigeria such as an offshore-patrol ship. Other manifestations of Chinese influence include the "construction of maritime infrastructure to the development of military cooperation within the Framework on China–Africa Cooperation." The US, understanding these developments, has focused on regional military exercises to bind and to cement linkages with regional exercises. One of the

most prominent amongst them is the Obangame Express which emphasizes skill-sharing, "search-and-rescue operations, medical-casualty responses, radio communications and information-management techniques" (Decis, 2020). Other exercises include the African Grand African Navy's Exercise for Maritime Operations (NEMO) (Archus, 2021) that are additionally backed by the French Navy and European navies as part of the ambit of the Yaoundé Process. Maritime security missions by the US have likewise been undertaken in Sierra Leone, Cabo Verde, and Senegal. A few of the tools of the US comprises the International Military Education and Training program and the African Partnership Station that could strengthen people-people ties (US Dept of State, 2022).

Another great power, Russia has also been patrolling the Gulf of Guinea and has participated in rescue exercises with the Destroyer Vice Admiral Kulakov and deployed a unit of marines on a Ka-27 helicopter (Defence Web, 2021). Russia's Northern Fleet's task force has participated in anti-piracy patrolling in the region as well (Archus, 2021). Russia has been fostering relations with the Republic of the Congo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Gabon with aims to emerge as a major player in the region's hydrocarbon and mineral trade. (Siegle, 2022) Russian actors were also partners in oil-related ventures in Ghana, Nigeria, Cameroon, and Congo with Lukoil being operational in Equatorial Guinea and Congo. In Equatorial Guinea, Lukoil is involved in a deepwater Fortuna undeveloped gas project. (Kolly, 2022)

Extra-regional actors have similarly been involved in the implementation of the "Yaoundé Process" which explicitly has the objective of tackling maritime criminal movement in a coordinated manner. These efforts are also important for the integration of regional countries in the international system that increases the reliance of countries around the Gulf of Guinea on Western institutions and practices in turn creating a discernible distance from Chinese emerging anti-hegemonic institutions. Other extra-regional players have, nevertheless, continued to make forays into the region such as Russia's military agreement with Nigeria that may warrant enhanced Western attention to the Gulf of Guinea (VOA, 2021).

### **The Contemporary Strategic Significance and Nuances of the Great Power Competition in the Gulf of Guinea**

Amidst these various permutations and combinations of interests and drivers, the US has pushed for Prosper Africa and the Better Utilization of Investments Leading to Development

(BUILD) Act to maintain its presence in the region in a manner that is sustainable and indicates prolonged interest in the region. (Yachyshen, 2020 ) On the other hand, Beijing has focused on the Gulf of Guinea, particularly through commodity-backed loans, where "China receives control, or payments, of a commodity if the beneficiary defaults" (Anderson, 2021). Furthermore, Chinese grip in the region has been intensifying. This has been demonstrated by China's vital assistance with electricity infrastructure development in Ghana and the railroad contract that was awarded to a Chinese firm in Benin as opposed to a French firm. China has extended credit to Ghana, Niger, Cameroon Equatorial Guinea and Angola which has been backed by hydrocarbons whose importance has continued to rise in recent months. These actions by China have been referred to as "oil for loan diplomacy" (Ali, 2015).

Concomitantly, in Equatorial Guinea, the Export–Import (EXIM) Bank of China has engaged extensively in port development (Chaudhury, 2022). Joint anti-piracy missions have been undertaken by China with Nigeria and Cameroon. Interestingly, anti-piracy prerogatives were also stated to be objectives that led to the establishment of a Chinese base in Djibouti. China has provided countries with maritime equipment or has provided grants for the purchase of maritime hardware. The grantees encompass Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Ghana, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone. Nigeria also became the first country in Western Africa to run Chinese warships. China has, additionally, paved a path to greater cooperation through providing training and "surveillance platforms and technology that would expand the scope and capacity of states within the Gulf of Guinea" (Maho, 2021). Notably, Chinese military officials have reiterated that China is "willing to increase the support in personnel training and other areas, provide assistance in information sharing and maritime rescue, carry out regular exchange of ship visits and joint training and exercises with relevant countries, and expand practical cooperation in the areas of exchange between military academies, medical services and hydrographic surveys" (Wei, 2022).

The US has also been cognizant of the Chinese approach and has undertaken exercises and supported efforts by regional governments such as a global initiative put forth by Nigeria (Maho, 2021). On the defence front, the US through its Expeditionary Sea Base USS *Hershel "Woody" Williams* has established a lasting presence in the region (Gray IV, 2022). The platform has the ability to conduct a diverse range of operations and is incredibly flexible. "Woody" has also conducted exercises that have seen the active participation of navies from Ghana, Nigeria and Spain. The exercises conducted comprised of interdiction operations at sea,

visit, board, search, and seizure (VBSS) scenarios, fleet manoeuvring, and helicopter insertion and casualty evacuations. The US has also had a meeting with Nigerian leaders after the exercise. Conspicuously, “Woody” is part of critical “access infrastructure that supports the deployment of forces and supplies to support missions” (Maritime Executive, 2021). Other exercises have been undertaken by the US as well, for example, Operation Hot Pursuit with Togo and Benin. Interestingly, there is some overlap in the American and Chinese approach with Washington having donated maritime equipment such as boats to regional nations.

China has likewise learned from the US the advantages of bases and has keenly been interested in the Bata Port in Equatorial Guinea. Bata is a deep-water commercial port in the Gulf of Guinea that was built by China and can be instrumental in providing access to the Atlantic Coast (Maritime Executive, 2022). These developments have considerably increased the threat perceptions in Washington owing to the moderately brief distance from the Gulf of Guinea to the US East Coast. PLA Navy Commander Admiral Dong Jun recently stated that China would, in the region, pay attention to:

“...information sharing and maritime rescue, carry out regular exchange of ship visits and joint training and exercises with relevant countries, and expand practical cooperation in the areas of exchange between military academies, medical services and hydrographic surveys.” (Wei, 2022)

Thereby, dramatically increasing its engagement in the region in the coming years. These actions come in the aftermath of China having cultivated a five-decade long history and having invested in an empowered diplomatic mission in Equatorial Guinea with an infusion of credit to jumpstart cooperation in any lagging area. It has also been promulgated that the base in Equatorial Guinea would also allow Chinese naval units to “interdict western trade in the event of the current trade rivalry” and offer a forward basing opportunity (ARETE, 2022).

These assessments appear to have reprioritised the US understanding of the importance of Port of Bata as well. The direct consequences of these reevaluations seem to be the recent visit by an American Navy Ship to Equatorial Guinea that saw interactions of US personnel with local officials and the naval staff from the African country board the ship as observers. Other actions to strengthen the relations in the face of great power competition include the return of 26.6 million American Dollars of the surrendered assets of Equatorial Guinea in the form of medical



aid and the US State Department improved Equatorial Guinea's ranking in the annual assessment of effective countering of combat human trafficking. A move that is expected to allow the government to provide maritime-security assistance to Equatorial Guinea. (Phillips, 2021) Taking a multi-pronged approach, the US has launched a "charm offensive" with US Vice President Kamala Harris's West Africa tour prioritising Ghana (Soy, 2023).

Equatorial Guinea has also established a partnership with Israel, a staunch ally of the US. It has propounded that the Gulf of Guinea can emerge as an "early example of a partner-led and U.S.-enabled framework" (Morcos, 2021). Other US partners such as France whose relationship in the region stepped in the past have been trying to pivot that has been indicated with statements such as Paris's prerogative to construct a "new, balanced, reciprocal and responsible relationship" (Macron, 2023). Thereafter, US allies in Europe have stepped forward as well in the region with initiatives that are likely to be in conjunction with the African Partnership Station (APS) and the West Africa Training Cruise (WATC) that have been a mainstay of US security platforms and defence engagement in the region.

In a similar vein, India's relationship with West and Central Africa is growing steadily, with India playing a significant role in areas such as energy security, development partnership, education, and training. India now has diplomatic missions in 20 out of 25 countries located in West and Central Africa. Traditionally, Nigeria and Ghana have had strong ties with India, with Nigeria being one of the largest oil suppliers. The Indian Navy has also increased its presence in the Gulf of Guinea through port visits and joint naval exercises. In 2022, INS Tarkash was deployed for anti-piracy operations in West African waters, conducting joint exercises with the Nigerian navy and visiting four countries: Senegal, Togo, Nigeria, and Gabon (Gurjar, 2023). Furthermore, Nigeria had been invited as a guest country to participate in the G-20 summit, themed "Energy Security and Development: Roadmap to Prosperity" by India. While the Voice of Global South Summit organized in January featured a speech from the energy minister of Equatorial Guinea (Voice of Global South Summit, 2023).

## **The Future Challenges and Prospects for Regional Countries that Arise from the Great Power Competition in the Region**

### **Challenges**

#### **Enhanced Securitization of the Gulf of Guinea**

The Gulf of Guinea is currently facing a range of security challenges, including piracy, human trafficking, drug trafficking, and illegal fishing, which have not only destabilized the region but also attracted the attention of extra-regional powers seeking to establish a foothold in West Africa. The urgency of the situation has led to the securitization of these issues, presenting them as pressing matters requiring emergency actions that bypass standard political systems (Phillips, 2021). Recent incidents, such as the hijacking of a Chinese-run oil tanker by pirates (Mednick, 2023) and the kidnapping of the crew of a Liberian-flagged oil tanker, have further fueled perceptions of insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea (Reuters, 2023). These incidents have provided extra-regional countries with an opportunity to form partnerships with regional countries that may lead to the increased securitization of the region.

However, such securitization efforts could likewise result in a security dilemma in the Gulf of Guinea, with countries like Angola, Cameroon, Nigeria, and Senegal procuring maritime-patrolling equipment from extra-regional powers to address these threats which provide additional leverage to these powers (Warner, 2021). As opposed to addressing the root causes of these challenges, including poverty, unemployment, weak governance, and corruption.

#### **Duplication of Efforts**

As extra-regional powers remain focused on military and defence developments, there will likely be duplication of efforts at the expense of other priority areas. Furthermore, there remains limited communication and coordination that is likely to be aggravated as great power competition in the region picks up the pace between different powers (Anyimadu, 2013). This also makes future cooperation between regional countries a concern (Vircoulon & Tournier, 2014). The lack of adequate coordination could also signal competition between Western countries as they work to acquire lasting influence and finite resources.

However, there have been endeavours to enhance coordination through the Yaoundé architecture and its Code of Conduct as well as the G7++ Friends of the Gulf of Guinea. The

implementation has been convoluted and inconsistent, but it is also an indication of an understanding of the immensity of the challenge by the regional countries. Astutely, the EU has launched the "Coordinated Maritime Presences" initiative to bridge certain coordination-related gaps and to also sustainably maintain its presence in the region (EEAS, 2021).

## **Prospects**

### **Capacity-Building and Maritime Domain Awareness**

Chinese and American assistance is likely to improve the access of regional navies to better equipment to combat maritime threats in a bid to maintain the stability that is slated to benefit extra-regional powers in their pursuit of influence in the Gulf of Guinea after a foothold has been established to remove barriers to trade and commerce. Other advantages include information sharing and Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) enhancement that can provide an operational edge to regional countries against violent non-state actors operating in the region (Ali, 2015).

### **Blue Economy**

Blue Economy has been described as the “sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods, and jobs while preserving the health of ocean ecosystem” (WB, 2017). As the Gulf of Guinea increasingly becomes pervious to maritime challenges that are exacerbated by climate change, regional powers are likely to be compelled to take action. Extra-regional powers can be persuaded by regional powers to divert attention to a multitude of non-traditional threats that are also apt to provide the context for greater influence and collaboration. These threats demand innovative solutions such as the implementation of blue economy technologies that require capital and expertise that are easily accessible to great powers. Currently, the Gulf of Guinea Commission has such an agreement with the African Union (AU) (Xinhua, 2021) and this could be a template for similar cooperation with the EU or other powers such as the US and China.

### **The Long-term Repercussions of Great Power Competition in the Gulf of Guinea**

Countries in the Gulf of Guinea have embarked on local building capacity to reduce their reliance on foreign navies that have been involved in anti-piracy operations in the regions. These foreign navies encompass armed forces of great powers and their own interest's

prioritization in the region has resulted in increased usage of private maritime military companies (PMMCs) and this practice has also been embraced by regional countries such as Nigeria wishes to ensure security in the Gulf of Guinea (PVI, 2021). In the long run, PMMCs might be utilized to perform "undemocratic feats" and to ensure the maintenance of the status quo that might also be supported by certain great powers as competition becomes more contentious in the region. The use of PMMCs could also result in conflict escalation and information warfare campaign (Petersohn & Lees, 2021) as PMMCs have a wide skill set that comprises of "strategic planning, intelligence, risk assessment, operational support, training, and technical skills." Additionally, PMMCs are able to utilize and deploy the latest technologies such as biotechnology or data tracking that could encourage more authoritarian forms of government in the region (Pałka, 2020). Presence of PMMCs under contract with certain allies in the region could make the prospect of involvement with plausible deniability in proxy wars more attractive for some powers in the Gulf of Guinea.

Subsequently, the presence of foreign forces could also lead to more radicalization in the region which could lead to hydrocarbon exploitation by foreign companies backed by extra-regional powers that do not take into account environmental degradation and local interests. These actions could result in the formation of the environment-conflict nexus wherein environment deterioration fuels mass migration and conflict that in turn further breeds biological catastrophe for the region (Tarihi, 2020).

Furthermore, experts have stated that it is quite likely that the great powers will try to gain more favourable perceptions in the region through the utilization of agencies such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and international development ventures (Staguhn & Savoy, 2022). These aid-based programs could make the region more dependent on foreign aid that is seen as a tool of statecraft by great powers such as "China's aid to Africa is its "no strings attached" approach." (Li, 2018) However, this approach increases dependence on China and decreases the vitality of democratic institutions and norms as a "tendency to adopt the worst practices that prop up kleptocrats and autocrats" is implemented through the process (Tarihi, 2020). This becomes more important as Beijing is slated to employ a "formal channel to drive its Africa strategy forward" with the Chinese Communist Party having cultivated long relationships with ruling parties that are likely to benefit from patronage (Gavin, 2021). To further drive these relationships, China has also focused on "debt trap diplomacy" particularly in resource-rich regions such as Angola which could perpetuate the

vicious cycle of poverty as the government would focus more on debt servicing as opposed to investing in domestic development (Marsh, 2019). In the long term, these actions could result in operative forfeiture of public assets. Debt forgiveness could also provide significant leverage. Additionally, great powers could also benefit from new markets emerging in the region, particularly China and Russia that might hamper domestic indigenization efforts. The pandemic-related and induced vulnerabilities could provide more space for consolidation as China has made a faster recovery and could use the time in a fashion that takes into account the future benefit of the current quest for regional control and influence particularly as hydrocarbons diversification continues and is slated to remain a priority for Beijing (Soule, 2022).

One advantage in the long term for the Gulf of Guinea countries is the opportunity to diversify their partners "via a selective and strategic approach also allowed Senegal to be less dependent on old partnerships" that are based on a colonial calculus. If properly managed, interests from new and emerging countries could provide new partnerships prospects based on mutually beneficial relations, for instance, the US attempts to move away from the portraying of "African states as pawns or prizes rather than partners" (Gavin, 2021). There is a risk of project duplication or greater focus on certain great powers in certain sectors such as hydrocarbons could force some nations to supersede national objectives in favour of short-term gain.

## **Conclusion**

The Gulf of Guinea is important from a strategic point of view owing in part due to its prime maritime location and its proximity to the Sahel. (Pinto & Nogueira, 2022) The Gulf of Guinea is currently ensnared in geopolitical churning with regional countries dealing with increasingly intense conflicts, resource exploitation, and threat perceptions emanating from violent non-state actors operating in the region and the Gulf itself is a point of contention in a world rousing in the midst of a great power competition. Former colonial powers, the US, China, Russia and the EU are trying to find leverage in the region or working to maintain their long-sought-after influence.

The junction of commercial and military primacies makes the Gulf of Guinea an important region in regional and global consensus. China appears to be in the process of acquiring an access point in the Gulf of Guinea which seems to be an area of priority consideration for the country and an emerging arena of great power competition as the confluence of various

interests and complex allegiances intersect in the region. Chinese interests and actions can also compel heightened engagement and leverage procurement by other extra-regional powers.

Regional countries have multiple opportunities and challenges that are at the same time being generated due to the continued interest of extra-regional powers. Interest that is likely to be exacerbated due to the intensifying great power competition. However, the practice of autonomy and agency in selecting partners for long-term advancement can be deftly exerted by regional countries to fulfil the promise that the strategic and geopolitical advantages that the Gulf of Guinea confers. Particularly, as a Chinese base in West Africa is likely to lead to a spate of similar efforts to establish new bases and the re-alignment of logistical needs will result in incentives for regional countries with likely long-term consequences (ARETE, 2022).

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