

Alignment Strategies of Weaker States Under Insecurity and Great-Power Competition: The Case of the Democratic Republic of the Congo

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Abstract

As geo-political and geo-economic tensions among major powers escalate, weaker states face renewed pressure to take sides. This article looks at how the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) handles this dilemma. Drawing on leadership statements, policy documents, and economic, security, and diplomatic data from the 2007–2008 Sicomines agreement to early 2025, the article argues that Kinshasa pursued a context-specific, autonomy-seeking form of hedging, shaped less by fear of distant major powers than by elite concerns over regime survival, territorial integrity, and access to economic and security benefits. Hedging predominated but proved contingent: Western disengagement pushed the DRC towards constrained bandwagoning with China (2012–2018), whereas renewed US and European Union engagement after 2019 reopened room for manoeuvre and enabled greater assertiveness towards

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Beijing. The article reconceptualises hedging around the risks of exclusive alignment rather than great-power threat, explaining how weaker African states hedge amid insecurity and great-power competition.

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Keywords

Democratic Republic of the Congo, hedging, alignment strategies, autonomy, great-power competition, African agency

Introduction

As geo-political and geo-economic tensions among major powers escalate, weaker states, namely states whose material capabilities are substantially inferior to those of the major powers with which they interact, face renewed pressure to take sides. While a significant body of literature examines how East and Southeast Asian states handle these pressures amid US–China strategic competition (e.g. Goh, 2005; Haacke, 2019; Koga, 2018; Kuik, 2021; Lim and Cooper, 2015), this question remains comparatively understudied with regard to African states.

Nonetheless, a few works focused on African states' alignment choices are notable as exceptions to this general omission in the mainstream international relations literature. Alignment is used here as an umbrella term for how weaker states position themselves vis-à-vis major powers, with balancing, bandwagoning, and hedging treated as distinct alignment strategies. Whitaker (2010) and Blaauw (2016) report that African states do not necessarily bandwagon, meaning they do not inevitably align themselves with the dominant great power. Whitaker (2010) further tests the applicability of soft balancing – defined, following Pape (2005), as the use of non-military means to “undermine, delay, and frustrate” – as an alternative framework for understanding the alignment behaviour of African countries towards the United States. However, she found mixed results and notes, in particular, the difficulty of distinguishing intentional soft balancing from routine resistance driven by motives unrelated to balance-of-power concerns. She argues that the framework better explains the behaviour of regional powers, such as Nigeria and South Africa, than that of weaker African states.

Building on these observations, the present study proposes that hedging may offer a more compelling lens for understanding weaker African states' alignment. In a broad sense, hedging occurs when states engage several major powers concurrently rather than committing firmly to any single one. As Whitaker (2010: 1114) notes, African governments may oppose specific US initiatives while continuing to co-operate extensively with the United States in many other areas. We interpret this pattern as more consistent with hedging than soft balancing: rather than engaging in opposition aimed at constraining US power, states pair selective resistance with the cultivation of alternative external partnerships that reduce their dependence on any single major actor (Whitaker, 2010: 1118).

Yet hedging has rarely been applied to African states. One likely reason is the contextual difference: in Southeast Asia, hedging typically entails fostering economic ties with China while maintaining security relations with the United States. In Africa, however, such a dual-track approach appears less applicable, since African states, unlike their Southeast Asian counter-parts, do not typically perceive China's rise as a military threat. Thus, if African states hedge despite facing no military threat from China or another major power, the key question is which risks and security concerns their hedging is intended to address.

This article argues that answering this question requires a conceptual framework that accounts for the distinct security concerns of weaker African states as perceived by domestic political elites, as well as the specific strategic calculations emerging from these concerns. Drawing on a context-specific understanding of security in weak states (Ayoob, 1995), we suggest that hedging in African settings may be driven less by fear of a major external power than by domestic and regional security threats, economic expectations, and the pursuit of political autonomy, understood here as room for manoeuvre in foreign and security policies.

Empirically, the above theoretical propositions are tested through an examination of the evolution of the Democratic Republic of the Congo's (DRC) alignment strategies vis-à-vis China, the United States, and the European Union (EU), following China's emergence as an alternative partner to traditional Western actors via the landmark 2007–2008 Sicomines infrastructure-for-resources agreement. The empirical analysis is guided by two key questions: first, is the DRC's alignment behaviour best understood as balancing, bandwagoning, or hedging? Second, how do perceived security threats, economic expectations, and autonomy-seeking shape the DRC's alignment choices?

The choice to focus on the DRC in this study of weaker states' alignment strategies is informed by the country's dual condition as both chronically insecure and strategically valuable. On the one hand, persistent internal instability and overlapping regional conflicts keep the DRC in a state of chronic insecurity. On the other hand, its vast reserves of critical raw materials – central to global supply chains and strategic competition – make it an attractive partner for competing major powers. Although the DRC cannot be considered representative of the continent as a whole given Africa's heterogeneity, this combination of structural insecurity and resource-based attractiveness provides an analytically revealing case for examining alignment behaviour under conditions of insecurity and external competition. We propose that, together, these factors create strong incentives for Kinshasa to seek external support against internal and regional threats, leverage great-power competition for economic gains, and preserve autonomy by avoiding exclusive alignments.

These conditions ground the article's central proposition: that the DRC's alignment decisions are driven by calculations aimed at maximising economic and security benefits while preserving political autonomy. By tracing how Kinshasa has adjusted its policies since the Sicomines agreement (Malm, 2020), the article also contributes to the growing literature on African agency in international relations (Bischoff et al., 2016). In particular, it examines how ruling elites weigh both opportunities and threats – economic and security-related alike – posed by established and alternative powers. In the case of the

DRC, the security concerns at stake centre primarily on territorial integrity in the context of the war in Eastern Congo and regime security.

The article proceeds as follows. The second section outlines the main conceptualisations of weaker-state alignment, namely balancing, bandwagoning, and hedging. The third section reconceptualises hedging as an alignment strategy shaped by perceived security threats, economic expectations, and the preservation of autonomy. The fourth details the study's methodology and operationalisation of alignment. The fifth applies the framework to the DRC case, tracing its relations with China, the United States, and the EU from 2007 to early 2025. The conclusion summarises the findings and argues that the DRC's strategy reflects a contingent, autonomy-seeking form of hedging shaped by evolving economic expectations and shifting security concerns.

Balancing, Bandwagoning, Hedging, and Weaker States

According to the security-studies literature on alignment, weaker states often navigate their relations with major powers through three key alignment strategies: balancing, bandwagoning, and hedging. Balancing refers to forming alliances with others to counter the strongest power (Waltz, 1979) or the prevailing threat (Walt, 1987), while bandwagoning involves aligning with them, either to avoid conflict (Walt, 1987) or to gain benefits (Schweller, 1994). Hedging, finally, typically entails engaging with multiple major powers while avoiding firm commitments to any single actor (Goh, 2005; Haacke, 2019; Koga, 2018; Kuik, 2021; Lim and Cooper, 2015).

Threat perception is often considered to be a key variable in shaping state behaviour. Walt's (1987) balance-of-threat theory posits that states perceiving a significant external threat will tend either to balance against or to bandwagon with the threatening power, depending on their assessment of aggregate power, offensive capabilities, geographic proximity, and perceived intentions. Walt further argues that states usually align to maximise their security, rendering balancing more common than bandwagoning. Weaker powers, however, often solicit the assistance of great powers to counter prevailing threats from more proximate states, which, according to Walt (1987: 148), renders them less prone to balance against great powers. Schweller's critique of Walt's theory broadened the understanding of alignment behaviour by suggesting that states, especially weaker ones, may align with major powers not merely out of fear but for opportunistic reasons, seeking to maximise economic or political gains. Schweller (1994: 88) therefore suggests that, "positive sanctions are the most effective means to induce bandwagoning behaviour."

Over the past two decades, the rise of China – and the ensuing strategic competition with the United States – has produced a significant body of literature examining nuanced alignment strategies, particularly hedging, among relatively weaker states, primarily in Southeast Asia (e.g. Goh, 2005; Haacke, 2019; Kuik, 2021). Unlike balancing or bandwagoning, hedging is a more ambiguous strategy, typically pursued to manage security threats or risks while maximising economic benefits. Although this literature has significantly advanced our understanding of the alignment strategies of weaker states in East

and Southeast Asia, its application to the strategic choices of African states remains under-explored.

One explanation for this may lie in the substantial contextual differences between Southeast Asia – where the concept originated – and Africa. As noted by Goh (2005) and Haacke (2019), a dominant view in the hedging literature on Southeast Asia holds that weaker states manage risk and uncertainty by simultaneously pursuing strong economic relations with China while maintaining security ties with the United States for protection. This “China–US economic vs. security split” enables these states to reap economic gains from China’s growth while relying on US-backed security guarantees against risks or threats associated with China’s rise. Yet, although this framework may explain the strategic behaviour of Southeast Asian states, it does not adequately fit the African context, where perceptions of security threats stemming from China are considerably lower.

Reconceptualising Hedging: Threat Perceptions and Autonomy

In comparison to Southeast Asian countries, African states are not affected in the same way and to the same extent by the rise of China, particularly in terms of threat perception. The main reason for this discrepancy is geography: while most of the literature focuses on how Southeast Asian states hedge in response to a proximate rising power, China remains geographically distant from Africa, separated by logistical barriers such as the Indian Ocean. Furthermore, African states have neither territorial disputes nor a history of military conflict with China, reinforcing their perception that Beijing harbours no aggressive military intentions towards them. Beyond these structural factors, Beijing has also actively cultivated a benign image, presenting China as a South–South partner and a counter-weight to Western dominance, foregrounding sovereignty, non-interference, and mutual benefit (Mthembu and Mabera, 2021).

African security concerns differ fundamentally, emphasising regime security and elite survival (Blaauw, 2016), as well as military threats posed primarily by neighbouring states rather than by distant major powers such as China. In the DRC specifically, the security predicament – characterised by recurrent insurgencies and cross-border incursions, most notably the Rwanda-backed M23 rebellion – illustrates how domestic instability and regional insecurity, rather than threats from distant major powers, intertwine to shape foreign policy choices. In such cases, the search for external assistance is unlikely to be limited to a specific major power; instead, Kinshasa is likely to accept support from any available and willing provider. Consequently, the DRC might simultaneously cultivate defence relationships with China, the United States, and European partners, signifying a hedging strategy that diverges from the economics-versus-security division framework often seen as a defining feature of hedging in the Asia-Pacific region.

For these reasons, we argue for an alternative conceptualisation of hedging, one that is not founded on China – or any other great power – as the default primary threat, but rather on the inherent risks of exclusive alignment. By choosing sides, weaker states risk alienating one major power and becoming dependent on another (Labs, 1992: 389), thereby undermining their autonomy (Koga, 2018; Lim and Cooper, 2015).

We posit that, while seeking economic and security benefits, African states, such as the DRC, that adopt a hedging strategy aim to do so without compromising their autonomy. This concern with autonomy also runs through international political economy scholarship on African agency, which has highlighted resistance to domination and the preservation of autonomy as central goals even in situations of high dependency. As noted by Fraser and Whitfield (2008: 10), in negotiating aid, African governments have always sought “to maximize both funding and policy autonomy.” Ongolo and Karsenty (2015) provide an example of this dynamic by showing how Cameroonian political elites circumvented undesired forest governance reforms demanded by aid donors, despite lacking the strength to confront these dominant external actors directly. To achieve their twin goals of implementing their own preferred policy agenda and avoiding being sanctioned by donors for doing so, Cameroonian elites were found to use “cunning” (Ongolo and Karsenty, 2015: 196) Machiavellian strategies of manipulation and deliberate ambiguity. Majambu et al. (2021) found a similar dynamic at play in the DRC, where elites resisted donor-imposed forest policy reforms through strategies such as showing discursive support for donor priorities and exploiting asymmetric access to information. Our understanding of hedging retains this search for autonomy at the centre while foregrounding the agency African states exercise amid the opportunities presented by an emerging order in which external actors compete with one another for resources and influence, particularly following China’s rise as an alternative development partner (Zeitz, 2025).

Following Puig (1980, as cited in Pinheiro and Lima, 2018), autonomy is understood here, in a relative sense, as “the maximum capacity of choice that one [state] can have, taking into account objective real world constraints.” For weaker states such as the DRC, this entails preserving policy space and options by strategically managing – rather than eliminating – external dependence through diversified economic and security ties. This understanding of autonomy also resonates with Bayart’s (1999) notion of extraversion, which highlights how African leaders historically converted external dependence into a resource for domestic legitimacy and international bargaining. Yet, extraversion should not be conflated with hedging. Although extraversion refers to a broader political logic through which external dependence is instrumentalised, hedging in the framework we advance denotes a more specific alignment strategy.

More specifically, our proposed conceptualisation of hedging focuses on state behaviour that maintains strategic ambiguity through diversified economic and security ties with competing major powers, thereby avoiding the alienation of any of them and preserving autonomy. While seeking economic and security benefits, states that hedge deliberately avoid over-dependence or exclusive commitments. The two alternatives, by contrast, both entail conceding autonomy – bandwagoning to secure gains from a single major power, balancing to counter a perceived threat.

Methodological Approach, Data, and Operationalisation

The first guiding question of this article is whether the DRC’s alignment behaviour is best understood as balancing, bandwagoning, or hedging. Since these alternatives can only be

identified in relation to one another, the analysis assesses Kinshasa's alignment across all three possibilities and examines how its posture varies over time.

The period covered runs from September 2007 to early 2025. The starting point is the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) underpinning the Sicomines agreement, which marked China's formal entry as an alternative partner to the EU and the United States. This point is meaningful because alignment under great-power competition becomes a genuine strategic choice only once a credible alternative to the established Western partners exists. The analysis ended in early 2025, when Kinshasa's minerals-for-security overture to Washington opened a potential new alignment cycle whose outcome lies beyond the reach of this study. Within this timeframe, the article distinguishes three sub-periods, demarcated by electoral cycles and changes in leadership: Joseph Kabila's first elected term (2007–2011), his second term and extended tenure (2012–2018), and Félix Tshisekedi's presidency (2019–early 2025).

Given that this article examines high-level alignment decisions, the analysis focuses primarily on the perspectives and priorities of the incumbent leadership. This choice reflects the highly centralised nature of foreign and security policymaking in the DRC, where the presidency occupies the predominant decision-making position (Official Journal of the DRC, 2011: 25–30, 74), and allows us to trace how competing strategic imperatives – responding to security threats, maximising economic gains, and preserving autonomy – are mediated at the highest levels of decision-making.

To operationalise this approach, the study relies on a qualitative analysis of leadership-level primary source materials, including presidential speeches, media-published interviews, publicly available official statements, and longer authored works such as Joseph Kabila's *Notre pari pour le Congo* (2011) and his later master's dissertation (2021). These materials are used because they provide direct insights into how political leaders interpret external opportunities, threats, and national priorities when making alignment choices.

Alongside these primary materials, policy documents and secondary materials are also incorporated, such as reports from international organisations, official statistical datasets, and media coverage. Given the politicised character of official communications and media reporting, empirical claims are, where possible, triangulated across United Nations (UN) reports, official datasets – the United Nations Commodity Trade Statistics Database (UN Comtrade), Eurostat, the US Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA), and the Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China (MOFCOM) – and the publications of independent research institutes such as the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the Boston University Global Development Policy Center, and the American Enterprise Institute.

Beyond the choice of sources, we must also establish how alignment is to be measured. While some studies of hedging strategies by East Asian states use military signals as their main indicators of alignment (e.g. Lim and Cooper, 2015), such an approach is ill-suited to the African context. Military co-operation between African states and major powers tends to be both more limited and less indicative of strategic alignment, as engagement with one major power is generally unlikely to be directed

against another. Consequently, military indicators are both less prevalent and less analytically meaningful by themselves for capturing alignment behaviour on the continent. This study therefore adopts the broader, multi-dimensional conception of alignment found in the hedging literature (e.g. Koga, 2018; Kuik, 2021). Specific to our approach is the way the security, economic, and diplomatic dimensions are weighted, combined, and interpreted.

This rests on a distinction between two registers of evidence. Security and economic ties form the substantive core of alignment because they involve tangible commitments that generate dependency and therefore bear directly on autonomy. Diplomatic positioning, by contrast, is more readily reversible and can shift towards or away from a major power without the binding force of material ties; we therefore read it as the clearest observable signal of whether the DRC concedes autonomy to, or reasserts it against, that power.

These three dimensions are operationalised as follows:

- *Security alignment* is measured through the DRC's efforts to diversify or concentrate its security partnerships – arms transfers, training programmes, joint exercises, and reception of external advisory missions – and through whether such engagements are conditional on autonomy concessions.
- *Economic alignment* is assessed through the DRC's efforts to diversify or concentrate its strategic mineral partnerships (e.g. the Sicomines joint venture) alongside associated trade and investment flows, with particular attention to the dependency embedded in these arrangements.
- *Diplomatic positioning*, read as an indicator of autonomy, is assessed through public stances – leadership statements and selected positions taken in international organisations, particularly the UN General Assembly and the Human Rights Council (HRC), on issues marked by disagreement among major powers, such as Taiwan and human rights concerns in Xinjiang and Hong Kong.

Across these dimensions, what is assessed is the direction of movement. The DRC's security and economic partnerships are examined to determine whether they move towards diversification or concentration, and its diplomatic positioning, whether it is shifting towards concession or reassertion of autonomy. Quantitative series – trade shares (UN Comtrade), outward foreign direct investment (FDI) flows (Eurostat, BEA, MOFCOM), Chinese lending (Boston University Global Development Policy Center), and arms transfers (SIPRI) – establish the direction and degree of these movements, while qualitative materials clarify their terms and their implications for autonomy, cross-checked across source types. A single development may bear on more than one dimension, and where this occurs, it is assessed separately under each relevant dimension.

Within each sub-period, the prevailing alignment posture is inferred through a multi-dimensional but weighted assessment that rests primarily on the configuration of security and economic ties, with diplomatic positioning indicating the degree of autonomy retained or conceded. A posture that keeps its material (security and economic)

commitments non-exclusive, aimed at preserving autonomy and avoiding the alienation of any major power, is interpreted as hedging. A marked concentration of these material partnerships on a single major power, forgoing alternatives and conceding autonomy, indicates bandwagoning. Efforts to form coalitions against a third power, or to align with one major power in order to resist another, signal balancing. Where these dimensions diverge – for instance, when security and economic ties concentrate on one major power while diplomatic positioning distances Kinshasa from it – the security and economic configuration determines the classification, while the diplomatic divergence is treated as evidence of autonomy retained or reasserted.

Alignment Strategies in the DRC

Changing Expectations and Alignment Under Joseph Kabila

2007–2011: Pragmatic Hedging Following China's Entry Through Resources-for-Infrastructure Agreements. The DRC Government's decision in September 2007 to sign an MoU with a consortium of Chinese state-owned enterprises marked the formal entry of China onto the Congolese scene as an alternative partner to the EU and the United States. Following his victory in the 2006 elections, President Joseph Kabila had sought to fulfil his campaign promise of *Les Cinq Chantiers*, a development programme encompassing infrastructure, employment, housing, water and electricity, health, and education. To advance this agenda, the 2007 MoU led to the creation of Sicominex, a joint venture that exchanged access to key mineral resources, namely copper and cobalt, for wide-ranging infrastructure investments, including railways, roads, hospitals, universities, and social housing (Kambila, 2009).

While negotiating the Sicominex deal, the Congolese government simultaneously sought debt relief under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative. However, the agreement with the Chinese consortium drew criticism from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and Western donors over issues of transparency, debt sustainability, and what they deemed an “unreasonable” state guarantee (Maiza-Larrarte and Claudio-Quiroga, 2019: 428). Although the IMF ultimately permitted the DRC to access HIPC debt relief while retaining the Sicominex deal, it imposed substantial revisions, including downsizing the agreement and removing the state guarantee on the mining component.

Despite Chinese concerns over financial risk, these demands were met through an October 2009 amendment, which halved the infrastructure investment from €6 billion to €3 billion and limited the state guarantee to the repayment of the infrastructure component only (Congomines, 2009). Nevertheless, the deal enabled China to access Congo's copper and cobalt resources, while Congolese authorities anticipated substantial economic benefits. Beyond financing crucial infrastructure projects, the agreement was expected to stimulate economic growth, enhance public service delivery, and create numerous new jobs in both the mining and construction sectors (Kabila, 2011: 20; Maiza-Larrarte and Claudio-Quiroga, 2019: 442).

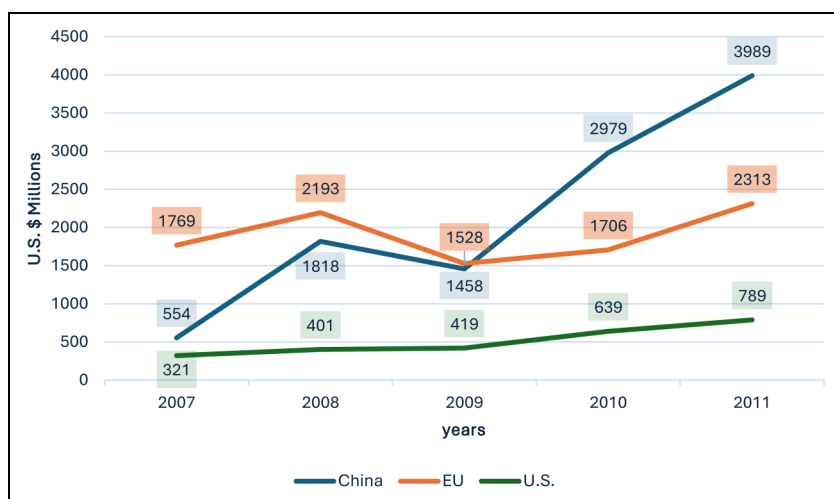


Figure 1. China–DRC Trade vs. US–DRC Trade vs. EU–DRC Trade, 2007–2011.

Data Source: UN Comtrade (2026). DRC Government Trade Reports are Unavailable for 2007–2011. All Trade Data in this Study are Sourced from the DRC’s Trading Partners. DRC: the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

In contrast, neither the United States nor the EU proposed a comparable offer for the reconstruction of the country. Kabila, in his justification of the Sicomines deal, remarked in this regard that “[w]e talked to everybody. Americans, do you have the money? No, not for now. The European Union, do you have three or four billion for these priorities? No, we have our own priorities. Then we said: why not talk to other people, the Chinese? So we said, do you have the money? And they said, well, we can discuss. So we discussed” (Gettleman, 2009).

Hence, the Congolese decision to enter into this agreement can largely be understood through the lens of development priorities and thus the pursuit of economic gains. At the same time, while providing economic benefits, it also enabled the DRC to reduce its economic dependence on Western partners, as trade with China increased significantly following the deal, driven primarily by Congolese exports of copper and cobalt. As shown in Figure 1, trade between the two countries increased sevenfold between 2007 and 2011, whereas trade with the United States and the EU expanded at a much slower rate. By 2010, China had overtaken the EU to become the DRC’s leading trading partner. Kabila, for his part, also emphasised autonomy in defending the use of infrastructure-for-resources barter loan agreements, arguing that such arrangements offer a means of avoiding economic dependence and the “loss of sovereignty” associated with the “trap of bank over-indebtedness” (Kabila, 2011: 46). In other words, while pursuing economic benefits, the DRC also used this agreement to reduce its economic reliance on the EU, an approach consistent with a hedging strategy.

In matters of security co-operation, the US Department of Defense established the Africa Command (AFRICOM) in October 2007, with the stated goals of strengthening military ties with African countries and addressing security threats, particularly terrorism. Although officially presented as a collaborative security initiative, AFRICOM was also perceived as a strategic move to counter China's growing influence on the continent (Whitaker, 2010: 1114). In response, Kabila firmly rejected any possibility of hosting a US military base in the DRC, signalling his refusal to bandwagon with the United States or take actions that might be interpreted as balancing against China.

Nevertheless, Kabila clarified his position as one of universal non-alignment, reflecting a broader concern to preserve Congolese autonomy. He stated: "We don't believe the Congo should be the base *for anybody or any power*, not at all" [*emphasis added*] (Gettleman, 2009). Furthermore, despite the launch of a Chinese military training mission in September 2008 (Wondo, 2015: 162), the DRC continued to strengthen its military relations with the United States, including the procurement of two second-hand transport aircraft in 2009 (SIPRI, 2025). At the same time, the DRC also remained significantly reliant on the EU for police and military reform, notably through the EUPOL DR Congo (2007–2014) and EUSEC DR Congo (2005–2016) missions, making the EU its principal security partner. These developments suggest a pragmatic hedging strategy: by enhancing partnerships with both Western actors and China, the DRC secured security benefits from multiple sources while avoiding entanglement in the broader US–China rivalry. By diversifying its military partnerships, Kinshasa also mitigated the risk of losing autonomy.

Finally, on the diplomatic front, a notable shift occurred in September 2007, shortly after the signing of the Sicomines MoU, when the Congolese ambassador to the UN expressed a more explicit endorsement of Beijing's position on Taiwan, commending China's efforts "to reunify their national territory *in accordance with the modalities they themselves will determine*, without any interference in the internal affairs of their country" [*emphasis added*] (UN General Assembly, 2007). This marked a contrast with his earlier, more neutral statement in 2004, which re-affirmed the DRC's recognition of the People's Republic of China as the "only legitimate government of China" (UN General Assembly, 2004), merely reiterating the DRC's longstanding support for the One-China principle. The shift in rhetoric suggests a deepening of Kinshasa's alignment with Beijing's broader objectives regarding Taiwan, possibly influenced by the economic expectations surrounding the Sicomines agreement signed shortly beforehand.

Nevertheless, the DRC's strong emphasis on the principles of sovereignty and non-interference must also be understood in light of its own domestic challenges. At the time, the Congolese government faced serious security challenges in the eastern provinces, where the national army – the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC) – was fighting the National Congress for People's Defence, a rebel group backed by Rwanda, which had established a parallel administration in areas under its control, thereby undermining Congolese sovereignty. Consequently, the DRC's vocal support for China's position on non-interference and territorial integrity not only reflected its relationship with Beijing but also mirrored its own concerns over foreign interference and territorial fragmentation.

Although the DRC's overall alignment posture, characterised by efforts to preserve autonomy by reducing economic dependence on the EU and avoiding exclusive military commitments, can be described as hedging, the timing of the diplomatic shift on the Taiwan issue suggests that economic expectations from China and a perceived commonly experienced threat to sovereignty influenced Kinshasa's closer alignment with Beijing's position.

2012–2018: Constrained Bandwagoning Amid Western Disengagement. In late 2011, Kabila was re-elected. During his campaign, he introduced the *Révolution de la Modernité*, a political agenda which, as in his first term, emphasised infrastructure development and identified China as a key partner in achieving this goal (Kabila, 2021: 115). Moreover, China's policy of non-interference in internal affairs suited Kabila particularly well at this time given that the United States and EU were becoming increasingly critical of his governance.

In late 2010, President Obama had already suspended the DRC's eligibility for the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), citing human rights concerns (White House, 2010), thereby removing the country's duty-free access to US markets and curtailing prospects for expanded trade. Diplomatic pressure intensified in May 2014 when the US Secretary of State John Kerry publicly opposed constitutional amendments allowing Kabila to extend his presidency beyond the two-term limit (US Department of State, 2014). Kabila's failure to hold the scheduled 2016 elections further strained relations with Western governments. Both the United States and the EU imposed targeted sanctions on key members of his regime, citing their roles in undermining the electoral process and committing human rights abuses (Ross and Emmott, 2016).

Against this backdrop of escalating tensions with Western partners, Kabila paid an official visit to Beijing in September 2015, where Xi Jinping re-affirmed China's commitment to its strategic partnership with the DRC (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2015). Following the postponement of the Congolese elections (2017–2018), China did not waver in this commitment, as evidenced by an increase in Exim Bank loans and Chinese FDI (see Figure 2). In 2018, Exim Bank even set a new record by providing nearly \$700 million in loans, highlighting China's sustained financial support.

Through targeted investments, China further consolidated its position in the DRC's copper and cobalt industries, notably by acquiring stakes previously held by US and Canadian enterprises (see Table 1). Noteworthy acquisitions included China Molybdenum Co.'s (CMOC) purchase of a 56 per cent stake in Tenke Fungurume Mining (TFM) from the US company Freeport-McMoRan in May 2016. By 2017, the remaining 24 per cent minority stake held by Canada's Lundin Mining Corporation had been sold to the Chinese investment firm BHR Newwood, which CMOC fully acquired in January 2019, thus securing 80 per cent ownership of one of Congo's largest copper–cobalt mines.

Although the state-owned mining company Gécamines formally opposed these sales, citing a lack of consultation and pre-emptive purchase rights, the prime minister explicitly welcomed the Chinese acquisitions (Els, 2016), and a compensation agreement was

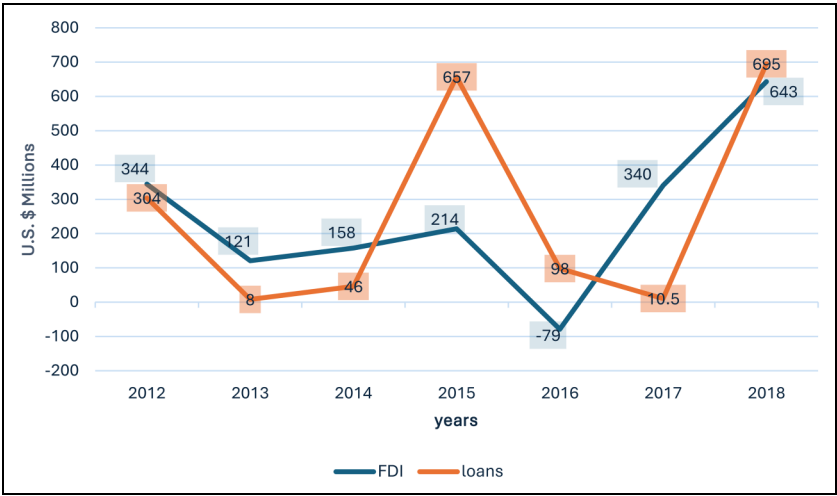


Figure 2. Chinese FDI and Loan Flows to the DRC. *Data Sources:* Ministry of Commerce of the PRC (2022) and Boston University Global Development Policy Center (2024). DRC: the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

reached with the Western companies in early 2017 (Wilson and Bochove, 2017). Gécamines’ opposition thus appears to have been a strategic manoeuvre to extract financial compensation, rather than a genuine effort to resist Chinese dominance.

This increased concentration of mining ownership in the hands of Chinese enterprises is consistent with an economic bandwagoning behaviour aimed at maximising economic gains, albeit at the cost of greater dependence. Yet, this development seems less the result of deliberate Congolese strategic choice than of a lack of viable alternatives, as illustrated by the withdrawal of Freeport-McMoRan and Lundin Mining from the TFM project.

A similar pattern of constrained alignment can be observed in the security sector. In 2015, the FARDC acquired five armoured personnel carriers from China (SIPRI, 2025), while between 2015 and 2017, thousands of Congolese recruits underwent an eighteen-month training programme conducted by Chinese instructors (La Libre Afrique, 2017). Concurrently, Western engagement steadily declined. The EU terminated EUPOL DR Congo in 2014 and EUSEC DR Congo in 2016. Belgium’s Kindu training hub was closed in April 2017 at the request of Kinshasa, which accused Brussels of interfering in the electoral transition (Boisselet, 2017). Meanwhile, US military assistance had already been largely suspended since September 2011 due to human-rights-related legal restrictions (Defense Security Cooperation Agency, 2011).

As a result, China emerged as the DRC’s primary bilateral military partner. This support brought Kinshasa security gains but concentrated its defence ties on a single major power, deepening its security dependence on Beijing – a case of military bandwagoning. Nevertheless, with the notable exception of Belgium – whose co-operation was

Table 1. Chinese Investments in the DRC, 2014–2018.

Year	Month	Investor	Quantity in millions (\$)	Share size (%)	Transaction party	Sector
2015	January	Zhejiang Huayou Cobalt	350	–	–	Cobalt
2015	May	Zijin Mining	410	49	Ivanhoe Kamo (Canada)	Copper
2015	July	PowerChina, China Railway Construction	220	–	–	Copper
2016	May	CMOC	2,650	56	Freeport-McMoRan (United States)	Copper
2016	August	PowerChina, China Railway Engineering	660	–	–	Energy (hydro)
2017	January	BHR Newwood (acquired by CMOC in January 2019)	1,140	24	Lundin Mining (Canada)	Copper
2017	April	China Nonferrous	420	–	–	Copper
2018	December	Zhejiang Huayou Cobalt	150	–	–	Copper

Data source: American Enterprise Institute (2024).

Note: A dash (–) denotes an investment that was not an acquisition of a pre-existing stake. DRC = the Democratic Republic of the Congo; CMOC = China Molybdenum Co.

ended by Kinshasa – this shift primarily reflected the diminishing willingness of Western actors, particularly the EU and the United States, to remain engaged as defence partners, in a context of mounting tensions over Kabila’s governance and the conduct of Congolese security forces.

On the diplomatic front, the imperative of retaining power likewise shaped Kabila’s foreign policy. Rather than engaging in balancing against the West as a single bloc, however, Kabila pursued a selective and opportunistic approach aimed at appeasing key powers, notably the United States, in order to mitigate pressure regarding constitutional term limits. This strategy was particularly evident in November 2016, when Kabila was among the first African leaders to congratulate Donald Trump on his “brilliant [presidential] election,” affirming his intention to “strengthen the relations of friendship and cooperation” between the DRC and the United States (Ngonga, 2016). Through this gesture, Kabila signalled his willingness to engage with and reassure the incoming American administration, which was perceived as less interventionist in the domestic affairs of other states.

The DRC’s voting record in the HRC following its election for the 2018–2020 term provides additional insights into its broader strategy to reassert its autonomy, despite

Table 2. DRC Votes in the HRC, 2018.

Sponsor	Votes in favour	Votes against	Abstentions	Total resolutions adopted
EU	4	2	10	16
EU/United States	1	0	3	4
China	3	0	1	4

Data source: OHCHR (2025).

Note. DRC = the Democratic Republic of the Congo; EU = European Union. Bold figures indicate the DRC's most frequent voting position for resolutions in each sponsor category.

growing economic and military dependence on China. While Kinshasa supported certain Western-backed resolutions, it tended primarily to abstain (see Table 2), particularly on resolutions condemning human rights violations in specific countries. This cautious approach suggests that the DRC sought to avoid taking polarising positions that could alienate Western powers. At the same time, although Kinshasa mostly supported resolutions sponsored by China, it did not fully align itself with Beijing, thus preserving a margin of diplomatic manoeuvre. For instance, Congolese representatives abstained on three Chinese-sponsored amendments aimed at weakening the resolution *Civil Society Space: Engagement with International and Regional Organisations*, which were widely opposed by the EU member states.¹

In sum, the DRC's overall alignment increasingly revolved around concentrated economic and military partnerships with China, indicating a form of bandwagoning. Yet, this alignment was, to a considerable extent, a constrained choice, stemming from the absence of a viable Western alternative, itself partly the consequence of Kabila's efforts to retain power.

In the diplomatic arena, however, Kabila's administration sought to re-affirm its autonomy, even as its dependence on China deepened. Notably, this did not preclude open confrontation with certain Western actors, such as Belgium and the EU, as demonstrated by the expulsion of the EU ambassador from Kinshasa in December 2018, following renewed EU sanctions (Paravicini, 2018). That same month, Kabila ultimately organised elections without running for a new term. While meeting Western demands for democratic processes, this move simultaneously enabled him to retain substantial post-electoral influence, particularly through an unusual power-sharing arrangement with the disputed election winner, Félix Tshisekedi.

2019–2025: Changing Expectations and Alignment Under Félix Tshisekedi

Félix Tshisekedi's inauguration in January 2019 coincided with a renewed US strategic focus on Africa, largely driven by intensifying great power competition with China. This shift was formalised in the Trump administration's Africa Strategy, announced by then National Security Advisor John Bolton in December 2018. The strategy placed strong emphasis on countering the influence of Beijing and Moscow, opposing what Bolton described as "predatory" financial and political practices (White House, 2018).

Shortly thereafter, in April 2019, President Tshisekedi visited Washington, where both countries launched the *Privileged Partnership for Peace and Prosperity* (PP4PP), a framework intended to promote US trade and investment by encouraging the strengthening of democratic institutions and human rights in the DRC. In December 2020, the DRC regained AGOA beneficiary status after a decade-long exclusion (US Department of State, 2021). Notably, this reinstatement coincided with Tshisekedi's decision to terminate the coalition agreement with the Kabila-aligned parliamentary majority, a step officially taken to advance governance reforms supported by both the United States and the EU.

The new partnership with the United States in particular, together with the warming of relations with key European capitals, significantly raised the DRC leadership's economic expectations. In his December 2019 State of the Nation Address, Tshisekedi emphasised the importance of his diplomatic missions to the United States and Europe, stating: "I therefore see my travels as the price to pay to [...] relaunch our *strategic partnership* with the United States, *reinvigorate cooperation* with the European Union, *warm up* our bilateral relations with Belgium, consolidate our *privileged relations* with France, and *establish economic relations* with Germany [...]" [*emphasis added*] (Presidency of the DRC, 2019a). Tshisekedi further praised Western support for the DRC's development, noting: "The challenges faced by the DRC have always been supported by the international community, in particular the United Nations, the African Union, the *European Union*, the *United States* and the United Kingdom, which are now *involved in the reconstruction of our country*. This is the place to pay tribute to them" [*emphasis added*]. By contrast, China was mentioned with considerably less prominence: "I also plan to *maintain* our bilateral relations with the United Kingdom, the Vatican, China and India, as well as many other countries [...]" [*emphasis added*]. This difference in emphasis suggests that, although Tshisekedi recognised China as a partner, his primary focus was on rebuilding and strengthening relations with the United States and the EU.

In terms of DRC–China relations, Tshisekedi's first term prioritised the re-negotiation of key mining contracts signed under Kabila, which he viewed as overly favourable to Chinese interests. Speaking at the Invest in Africa Forum in September 2019, he criticised the "very mixed" outcomes of infrastructure-for-resources agreements and emphasised the need for greater local processing of raw materials (Presidency of the DRC, 2019b). At the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in November 2021, despite the DRC's significant trade surplus with China (see Table 3), Tshisekedi called for a "correction" in the China–Africa partnership and a rebalancing of trade (Marbot, 2022), reflecting concerns over the country's reliance on raw exports and imports of higher-value goods, a common challenge in Africa–China trade relations.

In essence, Tshisekedi's critiques pointed to unmet economic expectations from earlier major mining agreements, including the aforementioned Sicominex joint venture. Simultaneously, his outreach to Western powers reflected a strategic effort to diversify the DRC's external partnerships, particularly in the economic sphere. Tshisekedi's attempt to reduce reliance on China was notably apparent in August 2019, when he became the first Congolese head of state to attend the Tokyo

Table 3. Volume of Goods Traded Between the DRC and China, 2019–2024.

Year	Exports to China (million USD)	Imports from China (million USD)	Trade balance (million USD)
2019	4,429	2,077	2,352
2020	7,084	2,013	5,071
2021	11,676	2,733	8,943
2022	16,781	5,118	11,663
2023	14,253	4,486	9,767
2024	21,593	4,345	17,248

Data source: UN Comtrade (2026).
Note. DRC = the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

International Conference on African Development, signalling interest in strengthening economic ties with Japan – China’s principal rival in East Asia. Tshisekedi’s attendance at the October 2019 Russia–Africa Summit further underscored this hedging strategy, especially as he emphasised Africa’s intention to “remain outside the rivalries of the great powers” (Presidency of the DRC, 2019c), reflecting a desire to avoid alienating any major power and to preserve autonomy.

Kinshasa’s diversification efforts continued with the United States and EU. At the US–Africa Leaders Summit in December 2022, the DRC signed a trilateral MoU with the United States and Zambia to establish an integrated electric vehicle battery supply chain. A year later, in October 2023, two competing international forums were held: the Belt and Road Forum in Beijing and the EU Global Gateway Forum in Brussels. While the DRC’s prime minister attended the latter, no senior Congolese official attended the former. In Brussels, two major agreements were concluded: a multi-party MoU with the EU, the United States, Zambia, and Angola to fund the Lobito transport corridor, and a bilateral EU–DRC MoU on strategic raw materials, supporting Kinshasa’s goal of boosting domestic mineral processing. This partnership was further institutionalised with the adoption of a detailed roadmap in December 2024 (European Commission, 2024).

While Tshisekedi’s efforts to diversify the DRC’s economic partnerships reflect a proactive hedging strategy, they also underscore persistent constraints. On trade, China has not only remained the DRC’s principal partner but widened its lead, with bilateral trade rising from \$6.5 billion in 2019 to \$25.9 billion in 2024 – far ahead of a substantial EU and a marginal United States (see Figure 3). On investment, China has remained the DRC’s leading investor, whereas US flows under the PP4PP remained minimal between 2018 and 2024, ranging from merely \$3 million to \$10 million annually (US Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2026), and EU investment peaked at over \$600 million in 2019 before falling back into net disinvestment in several subsequent years (see Figure 4). These Western capital inflows fell well short of the anticipated dividends of Tshisekedi’s outreach.

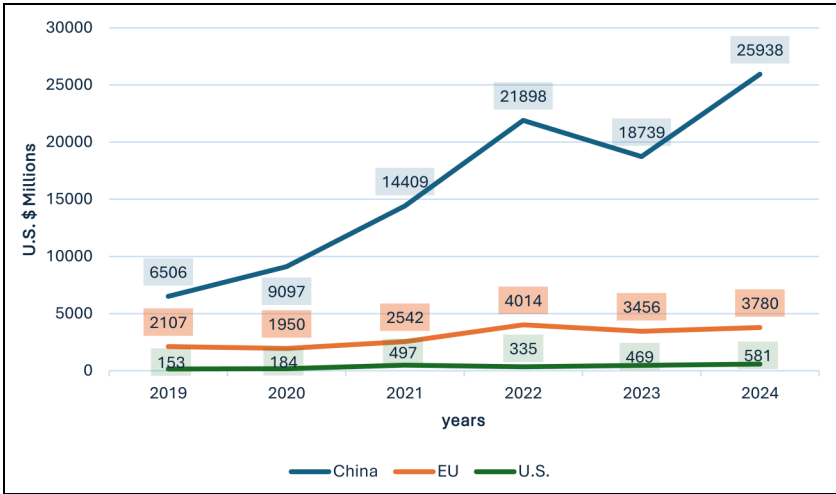


Figure 3. China–DRC Trade vs. US–DRC Trade vs. EU–DRC Trade, 2019–2024. *Data Source:* UN Comtrade (2026). DRC: the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

This gap between expectations and outcomes has provoked visible frustration within Kinshasa’s leadership. At the 2022 US–Africa Leaders Summit, Tshisekedi lamented “American investments, which are lagging” in a meeting with the Secretary of State Antony Blinken (US Department of State, 2022). By contrast, his 2023 state visit to Beijing appeared to restore some confidence in the Sino–Congoese partnership. The two countries elevated their relationship to a comprehensive strategic co-operative partnership, agreeing to re-evaluate mining co-operation to better align with mutual long-term interests (Xinhua, 2023). This political momentum culminated in the March 2024 revision of the Sicomines agreement, which doubled China’s pledged infrastructure investment from \$3 billion to \$7 billion, subject to copper price conditions (CTCPM, 2024).

In sum, while the DRC’s efforts to reduce its economic dependence on China through diversification are consistent with a hedging strategy, these initiatives have thus far delivered limited results. At the same time, China’s responsiveness to Congolese concerns, particularly through the re-negotiation of investment terms, can be considered to have raised Kinshasa’s expectations for a more mutually beneficial relationship.

In the realm of military co-operation, Tshisekedi’s presidency has marked a strategic effort to re-engage with Western partners, including the United States and Belgium. This renewed engagement, however, has not prevented the sharp deterioration in security in eastern DRC, following the resurgence of the M23 rebel movement in late 2021. The FARDC has struggled to contain the group, which benefits from Rwandan military support (UN Security Council, 2024). M23’s territorial gains have undermined national sovereignty and posed a direct threat to Tshisekedi’s hold on power. In effect, the

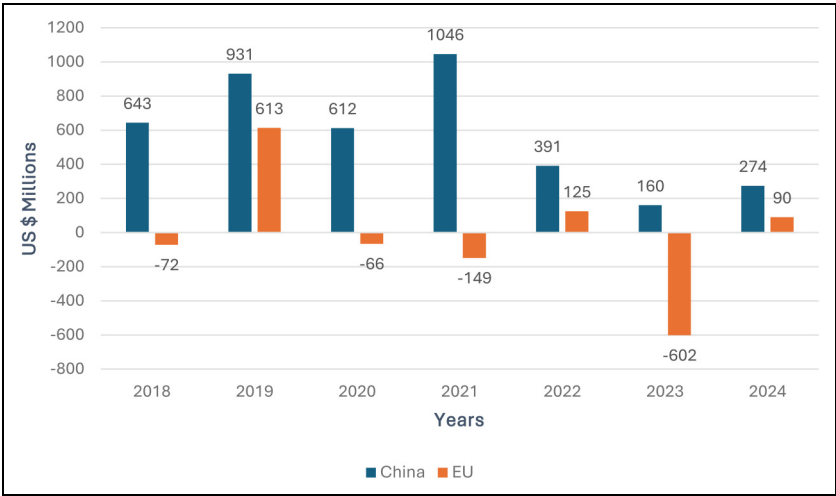


Figure 4. Annual Outward FDI Flows from China and the EU-27 to the DRC, 2018–2024. *Data Sources:* Ministry of Commerce of the PRC (2025) and Eurostat (2026) – EU Values Originally in EUR, converted to USD using ECB Annual Average EUR/USD rates. DRC: the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

resurgence of the M23 prompted Kinshasa to recalibrate its alignment calculus around immediate security imperatives.

Against this backdrop, Western partners have demonstrated a cautious willingness to engage, constrained by concerns over potential human rights violations and the risk of escalating tensions with Rwanda. Notably, while the EU approved a €20 million aid package for the FARDC in July 2023, it stipulated that the funds be used exclusively for non-lethal equipment (Council of the EU, 2023). China, in contrast, has expanded its military role in the DRC, imposing fewer restrictions on military exports. In February 2023, the FARDC ordered advanced Chinese drones, which Congolese officials considered potentially transformative in countering the M23 insurgency (Africa Intelligence, 2023). Moreover, Beijing’s joint statement with Kinshasa in May 2023 pledged support for strengthening the FARDC’s military capabilities (Xinhua, 2023).

The EU, meanwhile, has maintained parallel military co-operation with Rwanda. In both December 2022 and November 2024, it approved €20 million packages to support Rwandan military operations in Mozambique (Council of the EU, 2024). This dual engagement has fuelled resentment in the DRC, where many perceive the EU as indirectly supporting a state engaged in aggression against them. Tensions escalated further in February 2024, when the EU signed an MoU on strategic minerals with Rwanda. The agreement drew criticism from Congolese officials and civil-society actors, as well as from researchers, for risking the laundering of Congolese “blood minerals” through Rwanda (Zimmermann, 2024). Tshisekedi echoed these concerns, stating

sharply: “It is as if the European Union is waging war against us by proxy” (Jeune Afrique, 2024).

Despite these challenges, Kinshasa has continued to pursue a diversified military approach consistent with a hedging strategy, engaging with multiple powers to obtain distinct forms of support: training and non-lethal resources from the EU, while simultaneously leveraging China’s readiness to supply advanced weaponry. This approach reflects a pragmatic effort to bolster the FARDC’s operational capabilities primarily in response to the immediate threats posed by M23. Although such diversification reduces the risk of over-dependence on any single partner, it seems driven more by the need to exploit available opportunities for security gains than by a coherent strategy aimed at preserving autonomy.

On the diplomatic front, the US–DRC PP4PP initially coincided with a decrease in Kinshasa’s overt alignment with China’s core interests. In December 2019, the DRC’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs dismissed two ambassadors – to the HRC and the UN – both appointed under Joseph Kabila, after they had respectively endorsed China’s position on the treatment of Uyghurs in those bodies in July and October 2019 (RFI, 2019). Subsequently, the DRC declined to support pro-China statements at the UN General Assembly in October 2020, abstaining from a counter-statement to a Western-led declaration condemning human rights violations in Xinjiang and developments in Hong Kong, and again at the HRC in June 2021, where sixty-nine countries endorsed Beijing’s policies on Xinjiang (Permanent Mission of the PRC to the UN Office at Geneva, 2021; UN General Assembly, 2020).

However, this trajectory reversed over the course of Tshisekedi’s presidency, as the DRC aligned more openly with Beijing diplomatically. This shift was particularly evident in Kinshasa’s stance on Taiwan. Although the DRC has long adhered to the one-China principle, Tshisekedi’s administration took the unusual step of publicly re-affirming this position in August 2022, rather than maintaining a low profile. Amid heightened US–China tensions following then US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan, the DRC’s ambassador to China publicly condemned the visit as interference in China’s internal affairs, thereby signalling clear support for Beijing’s position over Washington’s (CGTN Français, 2022).

The diplomatic pivot was cemented in the May 2023 comprehensive strategic co-operative partnership, whose joint declaration unambiguously affirms that Kinshasa recognises Taiwan as an integral part of China and opposes “any statement or action that undermines China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity” (Xinhua, 2023). This explicit language, enshrined in a high-level bilateral accord, marked a significant deepening of the DRC’s commitment to Beijing’s core interests. At the same time, the fact that this diplomatic shift is embedded within a broader agreement encompassing promises of economic benefits and military support lends credence to the hypothesis that Kinshasa may be offering political concessions in return for concrete economic and military gains, particularly amid escalating domestic threats posed by M23.

Overall, the DRC’s alignment under Tshisekedi, marked by a willingness to reduce economic dependence on China and deepen military co-operation with multiple

powers, can be described as a hedging strategy. However, if this approach fails to achieve its security objectives, the DRC is likely to reconsider its alignment choices, potentially shifting closer to whichever major power proves most willing to offer security assistance. This logic is exemplified by Kinshasa's recent proposal to grant the United States exclusive access to strategic minerals in exchange for military assistance (Kavanagh, 2025).

Conclusion

This article has examined how a weaker African state navigates relationships with competing major powers. By tracing the DRC's relations with China, the United States, and the EU from the 2007 Sicomines agreement to early 2025, it has shown that Kinshasa prefers and practices a context-specific form of hedging – one that diverges from the economics-versus-security divide often seen as a defining feature of hedging in the Asia-Pacific region. Rather than separating economic engagement with one major power from security reliance on another, the DRC has adopted a more fluid and pragmatic strategy shaped by the imperative to maximise economic and security benefits while preserving political autonomy.

The findings further show that hedging in the Congolese context was not driven by fears of direct military confrontation with China or other distant major powers. Rather, the rationale underpinning this approach reflected domestic political elites' desire to maintain manoeuvrability amid shifting external opportunities and constraints. Autonomy thus emerges as a central driver of the DRC's alignment behaviour, a finding that resonates with earlier studies of its interactions with major powers. By engaging with multiple powers, Congolese leaders seek to avoid excessive dependence and preserve policy discretion, while economic opportunities and acute security threats – especially those linked to internal instability and regional conflicts – shape their alignment choices in decisive ways.

The analysis also demonstrates that hedging is a contingent strategy. The DRC's ability to hedge effectively depends on the availability of credible alternatives and on the willingness of major powers to offer tangible benefits. During periods of Western disengagement, Kinshasa drifted into a constrained form of bandwagoning with China. Conversely, renewed US and EU engagement after 2019 enabled a rebalancing and a more assertive stance towards Beijing, as reflected in the re-negotiation of mining contracts. Yet, when confronted with existential threats such as the M23 rebellion, the search for immediate security support may override concerns about autonomy, prompting selective concessions or granting access to strategic minerals to whichever major power is most willing to provide such assistance.

The DRC's experience shows that hedging can also be observed beyond Southeast Asia, where the concept has most often been studied. Notable parallels remain, especially in the shared desire for autonomy and the economic attractiveness of China. However, rather than being driven by direct military threats from a rising China, the security concerns shaping alignment in the DRC (and plausibly in some other African contexts) take the form of political instability, internal and regional conflict, and specific security threats such as rebel movements.

Ultimately, the DRC's alignment strategy illustrates how hedging enables weaker states to shape engagements with major powers to suit domestic priorities. The re-negotiation of mining contracts with China exemplifies Kinshasa's agency, bolstered

by the strategic importance of its cobalt and copper to global supply chains. This form of leverage, however, is unevenly distributed across the continent. African states lacking similarly strategic assets may find it more difficult to sustain a comparable hedging posture, highlighting the need for further research into the conditions that enable or constrain hedging strategies across Africa.

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Note

1. The three amendments are A/HRC/38/L.37, A/HRC/38/L.38, and A/HRC/38/L.39; the resolution draft is A/HRC/38/L.17/Rev.1 (OHCHR, 2025).

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Les stratégies d’alignement des États de moindre puissance dans un contexte d’insécurité et de rivalité entre grandes puissances : le cas de la République démocratique du Congo

Résumé

Alors que les tensions géopolitiques et géoéconomiques entre grandes puissances s’intensifient, les États moins puissants se trouvent de nouveau soumis à des pressions les incitant à choisir un camp. Cet article examine la manière dont la République démocratique du Congo (RDC) fait face à ce dilemme. S’appuyant sur des déclarations de dirigeants, des documents officiels ainsi que sur des données économiques, sécuritaires et diplomatiques couvrant la période allant de l’accord Sicomines de 2007–2008 au début de l’année 2025, l’article soutient que Kinshasa a généralement poursuivi une forme contextualisée de *hedging* orientée vers la préservation de son autonomie. Cette stratégie a moins été façonnée par la crainte de grandes puissances lointaines que par les préoccupations des élites en matière de survie du régime, d’intégrité territoriale et d’accès à des bénéfices économiques et sécuritaires externes. Si le *hedging* a constitué la posture dominante, il s’est révélé contingent : le désengagement occidental a poussé la RDC vers une forme contrainte de *bandwagoning* avec la Chine entre 2012 et 2018, tandis que le réengagement des États-Unis et de l’Union européenne après 2019 a rouvert des marges de manœuvre et permis à Kinshasa d’adopter une ligne plus affirmée à l’égard de Pékin. L’article propose une reconceptualisation du *hedging* autour des risques liés à un alignement exclusif, plutôt que sous l’angle de la menace exercée par les grandes puissances, et éclaire la manière dont les États africains moins puissants recourent au *hedging* dans un contexte d’insécurité et de rivalités entre grandes puissances.

Mots-clés

République démocratique du Congo, *hedging*, stratégies d’alignement, autonomie, rivalité entre grandes puissances, agentivité africaine