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Strategic Geopolitical Competition and Africa's AI Future

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Africa's AI ecosystem is increasingly shaped by international competition, foreign aid, and global AI narratives. Two global hegemons at the frontier of artificial intelligence (AI), China and the United States, are vying for influence on the continent, with differing approaches to supporting AI capacity building in the region. At the same time, a range of development agencies are heavily investing in building capacity for African AI research and digital governance. Additionally, global dialogues on AI safety and digital rights, such as the series of Global AI Summits (previously held in Bletchley Park, Seoul, and Paris, with another recently held in New Delhi), as well as international declarations and UN resolutions, heavily influence AI policy choices. African countries also hold large reserves of critical minerals essential for developing AI infrastructure, resources that have mostly been mined by foreign companies and fueled internal conflict in central Africa.[1]

This convergence of external interests underscores the critical importance for African governments to maintain strategic clarity about their development priorities and ensure that partnerships serve national objectives rather than merely advancing foreign agendas. Without deliberate governance and careful alignment of external engagement with domestic development goals, African nations risk becoming pawns in a broader geopolitical contest, one that could replicate historical patterns of resource extraction and dependency rather than catalyzing genuine technological sovereignty and inclusive economic growth.

The African AI Divide

Underpinning all these factors is the stark reality of Africa's AI divide, exemplified by disparities in talent

concentration, investment in AI companies, access to computing power, and existing infrastructural and socioeconomic challenges with education and poverty. Further exacerbating the AI divide are the already existing challenges of the broader digital divide: low internet penetration, disparate access to mobile devices, and low digital literacy.[2] Education challenges, ranging from a lack of specialized programs, subpar research funding, and outdated curricula, hamper formal training opportunities for AI talent across the continent.[3] It is estimated that Africa is home to 1 percent of the world's AI talent, with the total talent pool ranging from an estimated 5,000[4] to 62,000[5] professionals. This disparity also affects the creation of AI startups across the continent and the subsequent amount of funding these companies raise. In the third quarter of 2025, African AI startups received just 0.03 percent of global venture capital investment in AI companies, amounting to $14 million of the $47.8 billion raised in aggregate.[6] In comparison, the United States raised 81.2 percent, with Canada accounting for 0.8 percent of global AI startup funding during that respective period. As AI companies, particularly those in the United States, drive mainstream AI development, pipelines for AI entrepreneurship must be strengthened in Africa.

Along with vast computing power, such as graphics processing units (GPUs) and data centers, cutting-edge AI requires a specialized talent pool that is currently scarce in Africa. A recent UNDP analysis finds that only about 5 percent of African AI researchers can access the compute resources they need.[7] Only ~1 percent have on-premise GPUs, about 4 percent can pay for limited cloud access, and 95 percent rely on shared or free tools such as Google Colab. By comparison, most supercomputing capacity is concentrated in a few countries: 60 percent of the world's top supercomputers are estimated to be in the United States (175), China (47), and Germany (41), with none in Africa. While the market for cloud services in Africa is growing, cloud infrastructure remains limited.[8] The compute shortage also has strategic implications: Chinese investments in African data centers and energy aimed at partly targeting this deficit, potentially allows foreign-controlled infrastructure to host African AI workloads. In contrast, initiatives funded by Western partners, such as AI4D or UNDP's AI Hub for Sustainable Development, aim to boost African-owned computing capacity. Policymakers must balance these pulls by encouraging infrastructure build-out while ensuring digital sovereignty.

Competition to Influence Africa's AI Growth

China has emerged as a dominant player in building Africa's digital infrastructure, including the groundwork necessary to develop and adopt AI technologies. Chinese tech giants, primarily Alibaba and Huawei, along with state investments from the Digital Silk Road effort within the Belt and Road Initiative, are building data centers, cloud services, and 5G networks across Africa.[9] For example, Huawei has pledged over $400 million for African data centers and 5G labs, while Alibaba Cloud currently operates in South Africa.[10] Chinese state-led investments are also tying data centers to energy projects: Recent reports estimate Chinese firms are funding ten times as much new power capacity in Africa as the United States, covering 15 countries versus three for the United States.[11] This industrial-focused approach to AI capacity building gives China significant leverage over the physical and digital infrastructure AI needs. To mitigate dependency risks and preserve strategic autonomy, African countries should actively

diversify their AI infrastructure partnerships across multiple providers from different regions, ensuring interoperability, data sovereignty, and the flexibility to adopt technologies that best serve their development objectives rather than the geopolitical interests of any single power.

In contrast, Western actors tend to emphasize capacity building in terms of supporting local research, developing ethical standards, and forming partnerships with African institutions. The United States, Canada, and various European countries have launched collaborative initiatives to support home-grown AI development. At the UK AI Safety Summit in Bletchley Park in 2023, the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States, and partners pledged £80 million (~$100 million) to establish the UK AI for Development Programme focused on sub-Saharan Africa.[12] This partnership, which includes support from the Canadian and US governments and the Gates Foundation, aimed to fund AI research labs, university fellowships, and country efforts to devise regulatory frameworks. Outlined goals included making several African countries influential contributors to global AI policy, developing computing capacity, and helping at least ten countries draft robust AI laws. However, since the summit concluded in November 2023, there have been limited updates on the status of this respective program, most likely due to the transition in the UK government in 2024. Likewise, the US government supported numerous digital development efforts across African countries before the dismantling of USAID and budget cuts to the State Department. However, the United States still retains a limited presence in AI capacity building compared to its European counterparts.[13]



There is also growing interest from other political and economic powers, such as Russia[14] and the United

Arab Emirates, in supporting greater African participation in AI development. Such interest adds another dimension to the "AI race" and heightens the implications of geopolitical competition and foreign influence across the continent. In January 2026, Ghana and the UAE signed a $1 billion investment agreement to build Africa's largest innovation and AI hub.[15] This hub complements existing efforts from the UAE, which also announced an AI for Development plan in November 2025 to invest $1 billion to scale AI infrastructure and AI-enabled services across Africa.[16] Powered by its growing focus on AI infrastructure,[17] the UAE could likely serve as a key partner in diversifying access to computing power for African countries. However, both Russia and the UAE's increasing interest in the region could lead to rising authoritarianism.

Both countries already have existing relationships with governments and factions that disregard civil rights or are in active internal conflicts. For example, Russia has significant military and mining partnerships with countries across the Sahel,[18] a region that has experienced notable democratic backsliding.[19] The UAE has also supported autocratic leaders and paramilitary forces with weapons and funding, particularly in Sudan, Libya, and Ethiopia.[20] Such strategic and political positioning could make Russia and the UAE appealing partners for AI projects in African countries experiencing democratic erosion. While diversification of partners is ideal for maintaining economic competitiveness, African governments must be aware of the underlying ramifications of prioritizing AI acceleration over fostering democratic societies.

A parallel influence is the global AI safety and ethics agenda. African leaders have participated in numerous multilateral AI agreements, recently signing onto the Bletchley Declaration on AI Safety, the Statement on Inclusive and Sustainable Artificial Intelligence for People and the Planet, and the Africa Declaration on AI. These nonbinding pledges call for international collaboration to advance research on AI risks, use AI for public benefit, and establish a unified continental vision for sustainable AI development. In 2024, the UN General Assembly adopted two AI resolutions, the first, "Seizing the Opportunities of Safe, Secure and Trustworthy Artificial Intelligence Systems for Sustainable Development," led by the United States,[21] and the second, "Enhancing International Cooperation on Capacity-building of Artificial Intelligence," led by China.[22] Both focus on bridging the AI and digital divide, urging economically developed countries to assist economically developing nations in building AI capacity. Although UN resolutions are not legally binding, they reflect and reinforce policy priorities, many of which could potentially benefit the continent. However, such global declarations could also implicitly pressure African governments to frame their AI strategies and policies around the priorities of Western corporations, development funders, and multilateral organizations who are gradually increasing their influence in AI governance processes.

Conclusion

The intensifying geopolitical competition in Africa surrounding AI development presents a complex duality. On one hand, this competition creates opportunities for African governments to accelerate responsible AI adoption, advance digital transformation initiatives, and capitalize on economic prospects

in critical minerals and natural resources. The African Union has begun to institutionalize efforts toward capturing the economic benefits of critical minerals through its Green Minerals Strategy,[23] which prioritizes the localization of processing and value addition for minerals essential to AI hardware, such as GPUs, data centers, and advanced semiconductors. On the other hand, the pursuit of partnerships with external powers risks intraregional fragmentation, resource exploitation, political instability, and unsustainable debt accumulation, outcomes that may ultimately constrain these nations' ability to develop AI systems aligned with their distinctive needs and priorities. Despite these challenges, multiple pathways exist for African countries to strengthen AI sovereignty and establish robust governance architectures. A foundational step involves implementing comprehensive AI governance frameworks. While over 20 countries have developed national AI strategies or policy frameworks, and the AU has advanced continental-level AI governance initiatives,[24] substantial progress remains necessary. These frameworks must explicitly address external influence and incorporate legislative mechanisms to prevent economic exploitation. Additionally, African nations should pursue strategic engagement with diverse global partners, prioritizing relationships that advance national interests while avoiding dependence on a singular actor or technical systems. Finally, leveraging existing regional institutions offers considerable potential. Collective approaches to computational infrastructure, scientific capacity building, and regulatory harmonization can strengthen the whole continent, fostering a shared vision for prosperity grounded in regional collaboration rather than external dependency.

Africa's AI ecosystem is at the crossroads of global influence. Chinese firms are expanding the continent's AI backbone through data centers and internet connectivity, which could translate into geopolitical leverage for China. Western governments and donors, meanwhile, are pouring resources into African AI governance and research, shaping policy agendas toward ethics and technical capacity-building. Global AI safety narratives have also helped center risk management and development equity in Africa's debates. Ultimately, African leaders should make the following strategic decisions: align with global AI norms while protecting local interests, harness foreign investment without yielding sovereignty, and close the compute and talent gap so the continent can innovate rather than just consume AI. How these choices are navigated in the coming years will determine whether African countries can independently steer their own technological futures.

Footnotes

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