

Africa? US? Or China? The Impact of Policy Framing on Public Support Toward a Closer US-  
African Engagement

Yongzheng (Parker) Li  
Department of Political Science  
University of British Columbia  
parkeryz@mail.ubc.ca

## **Abstract**

Despite bipartisan consensus on intensifying the United States' involvement with Africa, there is a dearth of academic research addressing the public's support for such engagement. Moreover, while policymakers and politicians emphasize the objective of countering China (China-centric) when articulating the US's strategy toward Africa, the US also simultaneously purports to promote a more prosperous Africa (Africa-centric) and expand its influence on the continent (US-centric). This study employs a novel survey experiment to determine which framing most effectively elicits public support. The finding suggests that the US-centric framing, compared with other framings, decreases public support, and China-centric and Africa-centric framings cannot increase people's support further. The framing effect is based on the framing itself instead of traveling through other mediators, such as people's beliefs about the threat of China. Party identity is crucial in assessing the support level, as the Democrats are always more likely to support closer African-US engagement. Still, the US-centric framing effect is more pronounced among Republicans. These partisan differences suggest that the national-level bipartisan consensus on this issue does not capture the complexity at the individual level. This research highlights an additional avenue for examining the US-China and the US-Africa bilateral relations, and it reveals how these relationships shape public support for foreign policies where all three countries have considerable strategic and economic interests.

*Keywords:* Framing, Public Opinion, Party Identity, Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII), Africa, China, the United States

## 1. Introduction

The growing involvement of China in Africa has garnered significant interest from various international organizations and countries, particularly the United States, its allies, and Western-led organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). This is evident in the numerous appeals made by the IMF and World Bank to China to restructure Africa's debt and the introduction of US-led new policy initiatives like the *Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment* (PGII). PGII aims to offer the African continent and the broader Global South community an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI),<sup>1</sup> with a proposed allocation of \$600 billion over five years (2022-2027).<sup>2</sup>

Amid the increasing attention paid to Africa, the US has emerged as the most vocal and critical of China's activities. Africa has become a battleground for the intense global competition between China and the US.<sup>3</sup> The US's most updated strategies towards Africa—*US Strategy toward Sub-Saharan Africa*—align with the broader context of this competitive rivalry. In the 2022 *National Security Strategy*, the US explicitly stated that it would prioritize maintaining a competitive edge over the People's Republic of China (PRC), which it regards as the *only* world power capable of altering the current US-led world order.<sup>4</sup> The competition between these two

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<sup>1</sup> For a comparison between BRI and PGII, see “The Belt and Road Initiative and the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment: Global Infrastructure Initiatives in Comparison | Global Development Policy Center.” Accessed November 16, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Savoy, Conor, and Shannon McKeown. “Future Considerations for the Partnership on Global Infrastructure and Investment.” Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 29, 2022. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/future-considerations-partnership-global-infrastructure-and-investment>.

<sup>3</sup> To clarify, the competition between the US and China in Africa is not a new issue. For instance, see Campbell, Horace. “China in Africa: Challenging US Global Hegemony.” *Third World Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (2008): 89–105. However, the heated discussion on the competition between China and the US (the West in general) is relatively new.

<sup>4</sup> The White House, “The Biden-Harris Administration’s National Security Strategy,” The White House, October 12, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/10/12/fact-sheet-the-biden-harris-administrations-national-security-strategy/>. Emphasis mine.

superpowers can be seen in various forms, including hard military power competition,<sup>5</sup> sharp economic power competition,<sup>6</sup> and soft cultural power competition.<sup>7</sup> The US scrutinizes China's influence in Africa<sup>8</sup> and aims to “counter harmful activities by the PRC, Russia, and other foreign actors” on the continent.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, it is unsurprising that President Biden told the 49 African leaders who attended the US-Africa Business Forum in December 2022, the first such event in 8 years, that “the US is all in on Africa's future” and implied the US can and should be a better partner than China.<sup>10</sup> However, despite the bipartisan consensus among policymakers that the US should engage Africa more to assess the nature and impact of Chinese political, economic, sociocultural, and security sector activity in Africa and its implications for US strategic interests,<sup>11</sup> there is a shortage of academic and policy discussion regarding the public's support for the US's engagement in Africa, and if countering China should be the primary reason for the US to engage Africa.

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<sup>5</sup> For instance, see “National Defense Strategy,” U.S. Department of Defense, accessed October 27, 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/National-Defense-Strategy/>.

<sup>6</sup> For instance, see Anton Malkin, “The Made in China Challenge to US Structural Power: Industrial Policy, Intellectual Property and Multinational Corporations,” *Review of International Political Economy*, 2020, 1–33.; Schindler, Seth, Ilias Alami, Jessica DiCarlo, Nicholas Jepson, Steve Rolf, Mustafa Kemal Bayırbağ, Louis Cyuzuzo, et al. “The Second Cold War: US-China Competition for Centrality in Infrastructure, Digital, Production, and Finance Networks.” *Geopolitics*, September 7, 2023, 1–38. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2023.2253432>.; Zhang, Falin, Yang Cui, and Malcolm Campbell-Verduyn. “Digital RMB vs. Dollar Hegemony? Friendly Foes in China-US Currency Competition.” *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, November 9, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11366-023-09876-w>.

<sup>7</sup> For instance, see Yue Hu, Yufei Sun, and Donald Lien, “The Resistance and Resilience of National Image Building: An Empirical Analysis of Confucius Institute Closures in the USA,” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 15, no. 2 (2022): 209–26.

<sup>8</sup> For instance, see Nadege Rolland, “Political Front Lines: China's Pursuit of Influence in Africa,” *The National Bureau of Asian Research*, nbr special report #100, 2022, 92.

<sup>9</sup> The White House, “FACT SHEET: U.S. STRATEGY TOWARD SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA,” The White House, August 8, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/U.S.-Strategy-Toward-Sub-Saharan-Africa-FINAL.pdf>, p.7.

<sup>10</sup> Shalal, Andrea, Daphne Psaledakis, and Michael Martina. “Biden Says U.S. Is ‘all in’ on Africa's Future.” Reuters, December 15, 2022, sec. World. <https://www.reuters.com/world/china-an-unspoken-focus-biden-woos-african-leaders-2022-12-14/>.

<sup>11</sup> “The America COMPETES Act of 2022 | House Committee on Science, Space and Technology.” Sec. 30271. Accessed November 18, 2022. [https://science.house.gov/imo/media/doc/the\\_america\\_competes\\_act\\_of\\_2022-passed\\_by\\_the\\_house.pdf](https://science.house.gov/imo/media/doc/the_america_competes_act_of_2022-passed_by_the_house.pdf).

The limited attention on this topic is perplexing, given the historical relationship between the US and Africa,<sup>12</sup> as well as the existing body of research on the US public's views on aid,<sup>13</sup> foreign direct investment (FDI),<sup>14</sup> and trade,<sup>15</sup> all of which are foundational components of the US's strategies towards Africa (and Global South in general). One potential explanation for the lack of research is US policies' relatively new and fickle nature towards Africa. For instance, PGII, which replaces the 2021 *Build Back Better World* framework, was only recently announced in 2022. Furthermore, the public may require more time to develop a more informed opinion on this policy. However, this argument does not account for the lack of discussion on public opinions regarding other existing policies such as *Feed the Future* (launched in 2010), *Power Africa* (launched in 2013), and *Prosper Africa* (launched in 2019).

Examining the public's support for the US's engagement with Africa is essential for policymakers, brokers, and business communities to organize their respective coalition groups,

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<sup>12</sup> For instance, according to 2020 US Census data, African Americans, an ethnic group of Americans with partial or total ancestry from sub-Saharan Africa, comprise 14.2% of the total US population. Bureau, US Census. "Race and Ethnicity in the United States: 2010 Census and 2020 Census." Census.gov. Accessed November 18, 2023. <https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/interactive/race-and-ethnicity-in-the-united-state-2010-and-2020-census.html>

<sup>13</sup> For instance, see Baker, Andy. "Race, Paternalism, and Foreign Aid: Evidence from US Public Opinion." *American Political Science Review* 109, no. 1 (2015): 93–109.; Diven, Polly J., and John Constantelos. "Explaining Generosity: A Comparison of US and European Public Opinion on Foreign Aid." *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 7, no. 2 (2009): 118–32.; Lee, Hak-Seon. "Inequality and US Public Opinion on Foreign Aid." *World Affairs* 182, no. 3 (2019): 273–95.; Otter, Mark. "Domestic Public Support for Foreign Aid: Does It Matter?" *Third World Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (2003): 115–25.; Milner, Helen V., and Dustin Tingley. "Public Opinion and Foreign Aid: A Review Essay." *International Interactions* 39, no. 3 (2013): 389–401.

<sup>14</sup> For instance, see Kim, Hye-Sung, Youngchae Lee, and Scott Huffmon. "Public Opinion on US Investment in Foreign Countries: Survey Evidence from 11 Southern States in the United States." *Social Science Quarterly* 103, no. 5 (2022): 1113–24.; Please note that there is more research on the perceptions of FDI inflows than on the perception of FDI outflows. For inflows, for instance, see Zeng, Ka, and Xiaojun Li. "Geopolitics, Nationalism, and Foreign Direct Investment: Perceptions of the China Threat and American Public Attitudes toward Chinese FDI." *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 12, no. 4 (2019): 495–518.; Feng, Yilang, Andrew Kerner, and Jane L. Sumner. "Quitting Globalization: Trade-Related Job Losses, Nationalism, and Resistance to FDI in the United States." *Political Science Research and Methods* 9, no. 2 (2021): 292–311.

<sup>15</sup> Brutger, Ryan, and Siyao Li. "Institutional Design, Information Transmission, and Public Opinion: Making the Case for Trade." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 66, no. 10 (2022): 1881–1907.; Flynn, D. J., Yusaku Horiuchi, and Dong Zhang. "Misinformation, Economic Threat and Public Support for International Trade." *Review of International Political Economy*, 2020, 1–27.; Kono, Daniel Y. "Does Public Opinion Affect Trade Policy?" *Business and Politics* 10, no. 2 (2008): 1–19.

shape the potential declinism narratives in the US,<sup>16</sup> and develop and implement more effective policies. Additionally, the public's support is crucial because the absence of engagement could potentially weaken the US's global standing. Besides, policymakers and politicians are under electoral pressure and need to be responsive to public opinion to maintain legitimacy and avoid political costs,<sup>17</sup> or at least public opinion surveys should be conducted to examine the efficiency of those policies. However, to the author's knowledge, there is limited research on this topic. Compared with more "salient" foreign policy issues the public is aware of (e.g., regarding China, the Huawei incident, the human rights issue in Xinjiang), the public's knowledge of the US and China's strategies toward Africa may be limited, presenting the research as a hard case<sup>18</sup> when exploring how the US should frame its broader strategy toward the Global South in the context of US-China rivalry. If that is the case, then this research contributes to the call for the governments and research communities to be more active in introducing this topic to the public. Furthermore, this research contributes to the existing literature on the US public's perception of China and its influence on shaping public opinions on different issues.<sup>19</sup> While countering China's influence is one of the few bipartisan issues in Washington,<sup>20</sup> the explicit goal of the

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<sup>16</sup> Ralston, Robert. "Make Us Great Again: The Causes of Declinism in Major Powers." *Security Studies*, 2022, 1–36.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Tomz, Jessica LP Weeks, and Keren Yarhi-Milo, "Public Opinion and Decisions about Military Force in Democracies," *International Organization* 74, no. 1 (2020): 119–43.

<sup>18</sup> Harry Eckstein, "Case Study and Theory in Political Science," *Case Study Method*, 2000, 119–64; Aaron Rapport, "Hard Thinking about Hard and Easy Cases in Security Studies," *Security Studies* 24, no. 3 (2015): 431–65.

<sup>19</sup> For instance, see Hirshberg, Matthew S. "Consistency and Change in American Perceptions of China." *Political Behavior* 15, no. 3 (1993): 247–63.; Jin, Yongai, Shawn Dorius, and Yu Xie. "Americans' Attitudes toward the US-China Trade War." *Journal of Contemporary China* 31, no. 133 (2022): 17–37.; Mirilovic, Nikola, and Myunghee Kim. "Ideology and Threat Perceptions: American Public Opinion toward China and Iran." *Political Studies* 65, no. 1 (2017): 179–98.; Kim, Lee, and Huffmon, 2022; Brutger and Li, 2022.

<sup>20</sup> For instance, see Mattingly, Jeremy Herb, Lauren Fox, Phil. "Republicans and Democrats Have Found One Thing They Can All Rally around: Curbing China's Influence | CNN Politics." CNN, March 24, 2021.

<https://www.cnn.com/2021/03/24/politics/congress-china-economic-influence-bipartisanship/index.html>; Nerkar, Santul. "When It Comes To China, Biden Sounds A Lot Like Trump." *FiveThirtyEight* (blog), September 28, 2021. <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/when-it-comes-to-china-biden-sounds-a-lot-like-trump/>; Walsh, Deirdre.

"Democrats and Republicans Agree to Push Back against Human Rights Violations in China." *NPR*, December 8,

US's policies towards Africa, particularly under the Biden administration, is not directly stated as China-related to avoid potential geopolitical and Cold War-style conflicts. For example, Secretary of State Antony Blinken avoided mentioning China when articulating the Biden administration's first speech on Africa policy, although China's presence in Africa was implicit.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, China was not noted in the memorandum on the initiation of PGII.<sup>22</sup> However, scholars have argued that the PGII aims to provide an alternative to China's BRI and ensure that China is the alternative, not the default option. For instance, Conor Savoy, a Senior Fellow on the Project on Prosperity and Development from the Center for Strategic and International Studies, pointed out, “While the explicit goal of PGII is not to counter China’s Belt and Road Initiative, PGII does seek to provide an alternative to China’s estimated \$1 trillion in hard infrastructure investment around the world in the last decade,” and PGII should aim to “ensure that China is the alternative, not the default.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, when evaluating the public's support for closer US-African engagement, it is crucial to consider the potential impact of different framings of policy goals, as previous research has demonstrated that framing can significantly alter public opinion and political preferences.<sup>24</sup> Besides, though there are discussions and research on how the US navigates its relationship with particular countries

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2021, sec. Asia. <https://www.npr.org/2021/12/08/1062478295/democrats-and-republicans-agree-to-push-back-against-human-rights-violations-in->; NBC News. “Why China May Be the Last Bipartisan Issue Left in Washington.” Accessed November 18, 2022. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/congress/why-china-may-be-last-bipartisan-issue-left-washington-n1261407>.

<sup>21</sup> Hudson, John. “Blinken Lays out U.S. Policy toward Africa and Deliberately Avoids Mentioning China.” *Washington Post*, November 19, 2021. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/us-africa-policy-biden-administration/2021/11/19/cc11c95c-4933-11ec-95dc-5f2a96e00fa3\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/us-africa-policy-biden-administration/2021/11/19/cc11c95c-4933-11ec-95dc-5f2a96e00fa3_story.html).

<sup>22</sup> House, The White. “Memorandum on the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment.” The White House, June 26, 2022. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2022/06/26/memorandum-on-the-partnership-for-global-infrastructure-and-investment/>.

<sup>23</sup> Savoy and McKeown, 2022.

<sup>24</sup> For a thorough discussion on framing theory, see Chong, Dennis, and James N. Druckman. “Framing Theory.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 10, no. 1 (2007): 103–26.

regarding those countries' relationship with China,<sup>25</sup> there is a lack of discussion on how the US should frame its overall policies toward Africa and how the public responds to those framings.

To test how different framings may impact people's support level toward closer US-African engagement, I employed a survey experiment: the US-centric framing that emphasizes how closer engagement advances the US's influence on the continent, the Africa-centric framing that highlights the goal of creating a more prosperous Africa, and the China-centric framing that underscores the needs to counter-China's influence on the continent. My findings indicate that the US-centric framing, compared with other framings, may decrease public support, and the China-centric and Africa-centric framings are unable to increase people's support further. Party identity plays a crucial role in assessing the support level where the US-centric framing effect is particularly pronounced among Republicans. Still, Democrats are always more pro-PGII than their counterparts. These partisan differences suggest that the national-level bipartisan consensus on this issue does not capture the complexity at the individual level. Additionally, through causal mediation analysis, my study shows the effect is from the treatment itself instead of potential mediators like people's belief of China threat.

## **2. Public Opinion and Foreign Policy**

There was a realist and liberal debate on the influence of public opinion on foreign policy, with the realist being dismissive of public opinion and considered it volatile and uninformed.<sup>26</sup>

Specifically, the Almond-Lippmann consensus emerged in the first two decades after World War

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<sup>25</sup> For instance, see the discussion on the US-South Africa relationship: Pivotal States: Where Does the U.S.-South Africa Strategic Partnership Go From Here? 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k6PHeu2cWDA>.; AP News. "South Africa to Host US Trade Forum as Diplomatic Tensions Subside," September 21, 2023. <https://apnews.com/article/south-africa-us-trade-agoa-russia-eceb06295157b7500cf1b844165c1e86>.

<sup>26</sup> For a detailed discussion on the realist/liberal debate on this topic, see Holsti, Ole R. *Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy*. University of Michigan Press, 2004.

II as a broad consensus states that 1) public opinion is volatile and unable to provide adequate foundations for stable and effective foreign policies, 2) public opinion lacks coherence or structure, and 3) public opinion has little if any impact on foreign policy.<sup>27</sup> However, the Vietnam War stimulated a new wave of research on public opinion and foreign policy, and research since then has challenged the Almond-Lippmann consensus and demonstrates that public opinion can be stable and it is not fully elite/politician-driven.<sup>28</sup> For instance, Powlick identified 5 paths for communications between American foreign policy officials: elites, interest groups, the news media, elected officials, and the public, and he found that the public mass opinion path is more critical than the elite and interest group paths.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, recent literature suggests that the public is embedded in a social context that combines with their general orientations toward foreign policy in shaping responses toward the world around them.<sup>30</sup> Combined with the rise of social media and the Internet, the information asymmetry between elites/politicians and the public is getting narrower, and the public can actively engage with foreign affairs news. This engagement puts constraints on leaders because policies that contradict public opinions are “less likely to break through when media are fragmented and siloed.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Lippmann, Walter. “Public Opinion. 1922.” URL: <http://infomotions.com/etexts/gutenberg/dirs/etext04/PbpNn10.htm>, 1965. <https://www.gpullman.com/8170/texts/lippmann.pdf>.; Lippmann, Walter. *The Phantom Public*. Routledge, 2017.; Almond, Gabriel A. “Public Opinion and National Security Policy.” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 20, no. 2 (1956): 371–78.; Almond, Gabriel Abraham. “The American People and Foreign Policy.” 1950.

<sup>28</sup> For instance, see Holsti, Ole R. “Public Opinion and Foreign Policy: Challenges to the Almond-Lippmann Consensus.” *International Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (1992): 439–66.; Powlick, Philip J. “The Sources of Public Opinion for American Foreign Policy Officials.” *International Studies Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (December 1, 1995): 427–51. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2600801>.; Kertzer, Joshua D., and Thomas Zeitzoff. “A Bottom-Up Theory of Public Opinion about Foreign Policy.” *American Journal of Political Science* 61, no. 3 (2017): 543–58. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12314>.

<sup>29</sup> Powlick, 1995.

<sup>30</sup> Kertzer and Zeitzoff, 2017.

<sup>31</sup> Baum, Matthew A., and Philip B. K. Potter. “Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy in the Age of Social Media.” *The Journal of Politics* 81, no. 2 (April 2019): 747.; Baum, Matthew A., and Philip B.K. Potter. “The Relationships Between Mass Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 11, no. 1 (June 1, 2008): 39–65. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.11.060406.214132>.

Research on audience cost<sup>32</sup> and rally effects<sup>33</sup> further demonstrate the role of public opinion in shaping and evaluating policies. A concrete example of how public opinion matters for foreign policies can be seen from the research conducted by Chu and Recchia, who used a realistic research design where they surveyed 101 British members of Parliament (MPs) with actual public opinion data about an active policy issue and showed that MPs who were randomly assigned to receive the polling information voiced opinions closer to those of the public in the issue.<sup>34</sup>

Public opinion matters in developing and evaluating foreign policies. However, foreign policy may not always be in line with the public's preference, and this is particularly true in the US, where foreign policies are led by hawkish politicians.<sup>35</sup> Research has shown that presidents, presidential candidates, and politicians in general will use hawkish foreign policies to create a more attractive personal image, though those policies may not be what the public prefers. The politicians choose to craft personal images that voters find appealing over satisfying the public's policy preferences.<sup>36</sup> This hawkishness can help politicians win elections, but at the same time, it

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<sup>32</sup> Tomz, LP Weeks, and Yarhi-Milo, 2020; Casler, Don, and Richard Clark. "Trade Rage: Audience Costs and International Trade." *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 2021, 0022002721994085.; Kertzer, Joshua D., and Ryan Brutger. "Decomposing Audience Costs: Bringing the Audience Back into Audience Cost Theory." *American Journal of Political Science* 60, no. 1 (January 2016): 234–49. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12201>.; Li, Xiaojun, and Dingding Chen. "Public Opinion, International Reputation, and Audience Costs in an Authoritarian Regime." *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, 2020, 0738894220906374.

<sup>33</sup> Baekgaard, Martin, Julian Christensen, Jonas Krogh Madsen, and Kim Sass Mikkelsen. "Rallying around the Flag in Times of COVID-19: Societal Lockdown and Trust in Democratic Institutions." *Journal of Behavioral Public Administration* 3, no. 2 (2020). [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=4318576](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4318576).; Lee, Jong R. "Rallying around the Flag: Foreign Policy Events and Presidential Popularity." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 7, no. 4 (1977): 252–56.

<sup>34</sup> Chu, Jonathan A., and Stefano Recchia. "Does Public Opinion Affect the Preferences of Foreign Policy Leaders? Experimental Evidence from the UK Parliament." *The Journal of Politics* 84, no. 3 (July 1, 2022): 1874–77. <https://doi.org/10.1086/719007>.

<sup>35</sup> Bendix, William, and Gyung-Ho Jeong. "Hawks versus Doves: Who Leads American Foreign Policy in the US Congress?" *Foreign Policy Analysis* 19, no. 4 (2023): orad025.

<sup>36</sup> Friedman, Jeffrey A. "Issue-Image Trade-Offs and the Politics of Foreign Policy: How Leaders Use Foreign Policy Positions to Shape Their Personal Images." *World Politics* 75, no. 2 (2023): 280–315.; Friedman, Jeffrey A. "The Commander-in-Chief Test: Public Opinion and the Politics of Image-Making in US Foreign Policy." In *The Commander-in-Chief Test*. Cornell University Press, 2023. <https://www.degruyter.com/document/isbn/9781501772948/html>.

also produces a suite of policies—unilateral diplomacy, rising defense budget, open-ended wars of choice—that are at odds with public opinion.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, current research suggests that party identity shapes how the public perceives their leaders making compromises with other countries. In the US, the liberals are more supportive of compromise, suggesting that Republican presidents have greater leeway to negotiate compromises.<sup>38</sup> This phenomenon echoes the “only Nixon could have gone to China” argument, where only more hawkish right-wing leaders can credibly signal the desirability of a left-wing course of actions and policies.<sup>39</sup> In the case of the US developing its strategies toward Africa, even if the Republican public were more hawkish toward China, this may not mean the Republican politicians were reluctant to compromise with China. On the contrary, the politicians may have more leverage when negotiating and even working with China in Africa (and the Global South in general).

The above discussions lead to the question of whether the national-level bipartisan agreement on countering China will translate to the individual level. In fact, being hawkish to China may be a strategic move from politicians to demonstrate that they are strong enough to lead the US. Furthermore, research has shown policy support and public opinion about other countries’ foreign policies are conditional on the salience of the issue for the mass public.<sup>40</sup> Compared with more “salient” foreign policy issues the public is aware of (e.g., regarding China, the conflicts in the South China Sea), the public’s knowledge of the US and China’s

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<sup>37</sup> Friedman, Jeffrey A. “The Politics of Looking Strong.” *Foreign Affairs*, November 8, 2023. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/politics-looking-strong>.

<sup>38</sup> Brutger, Ryan. “The Power of Compromise: Proposal Power, Partisanship, and Public Support in International Bargaining.” *World Politics* 73, no. 1 (2021): 128–66.

<sup>39</sup> Cowen, Tyler, and Daniel Sutter. “Why Only Nixon Could Go to China.” *Public Choice* 97, no. 4 (1998): 605–15. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1004907414530>.

<sup>40</sup> Goldsmith, Benjamin E., and Yusaku Horiuchi. “In Search of Soft Power: Does Foreign Public Opinion Matter for US Foreign Policy?” *World Politics* 64, no. 3 (July 2012): 555–85. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887112000123>.

activities in Africa can be limited, suggesting that different policy goal framings would not have an impact on people's support level toward those policies.

### **3. Different Framings of the Policy Objectives in Africa**

The current official and explicit articulation of the objectives of the US's policies in Africa follows a two-pronged approach: one is based on moral and development-orientated considerations to foster greater prosperity for the African continent, and the other is grounded in the thinking of advancing American interests in the region. The implicit objective of the US's African policies can be construed as an attempt to counterbalance China's expanding influence. By explicit and implicit, I mean if the objective(s) is clearly written down and identified in the official announcement of the policies. A vivid example of how these three framings co-exist is Secretary Blinken's trip to Africa in Jan 2024, just a few days after Wang Yi's visit. In the official statement, the US Department of State says the US's engagement with Africa is a "future-focused economic partnership, and how the United States is investing in infrastructure in Africa to boost two-way trade, create jobs at home and on the continent, and help Africa compete in the global marketplace." Furthermore, the partnership is "based on shared values such as respect for human rights, promotion of democracy, and expansion of the rule of law."<sup>41</sup> We can see China is missing from the statement, and the officials under the Biden Administration tried not to mention China, though people's focus was all about China.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> United States Department of State. "Secretary Blinken's Travel to Cabo Verde, Cote d'Ivoire, Nigeria, and Angola." Accessed January 23, 2024. <https://www.state.gov/secretary-blinkens-travel-to-cabo-verde-cote-divoire-nigeria-and-angola/>.

<sup>42</sup> Wong, Edward. "The U.S. Wants to Counter China's Moves in Africa. But American Officials Try Not to Mention That." *The New York Times*, December 14, 2022, sec. U.S. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/14/us/politics/china-africa-us-relations.html>.

These three framings overlap. For instance, people may treat countering China as an illustration of advancing US interests. For people who hold anti-China sentiments, it would be “moral” to engage Africa to curtail China’s expanding influence on the continent. However, these three framings emphasize different countries and treat them as different unitary actors. Though they may overlap for some individuals, those framings are still distinct, and they may solicit the public’s support via various channels.

### **3.1 China-centric Framing**

The underlying objective of the US’s policies in Africa can be construed as an attempt to counterbalance China's expanding influence. Academic research and public opinion surveys have revealed an increasingly antagonistic sentiment among the US public toward China, which has the potential to impact their perspectives on various matters. For instance, Zeng and Li's work illustrated that, due to escalating geopolitical concerns and perceptions of China as a threat, the American public exhibits reduced favorability toward FDI inflows originating from China.<sup>43</sup>

Moreover, empirical studies suggest that the determinants influencing public perceptions of major global powers, such as China and the US, extend beyond economic considerations and geopolitical expediency to encompass political and ideological elements, including beliefs in freedom of speech, individual autonomy, and other related factors.<sup>44</sup> Given the distinct political and ideological contexts between China and the US and the general preference among the US populace for a world order guided by their values, it is plausible to posit that the American public

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<sup>43</sup> Zeng, Ka, and Xiaojun Li. “Geopolitics, Nationalism, and Foreign Direct Investment: Perceptions of the China Threat and American Public Attitudes toward Chinese FDI.” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 12, no. 4 (2019): 495–518.

<sup>44</sup> Bennett Institute for Public Policy. “A World Divided: Russia, China and the West.” Accessed November 9, 2022. <https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/publications/a-world-divided/>.

would endorse a more intimate US-African relationship if such engagement could undermine China's foothold.

Furthermore, since 2005, the US has represented China's rise to the international community as a collective risk across the military, political, and economic sectors,<sup>45</sup> and the US itself has called China a "strategic competitor."<sup>46</sup> To a certain extent, the rise of China may have even become a threat to American identity as the world leader.<sup>47</sup> Recent literature, much of which utilizes role theory, has shown that China is striving for a more influential international identity and status as a great power while the US may feel threatened and has to manage the challenges from rising powers like China.<sup>48</sup> This status competition further consolidates the public and the politicians' countering-China sentiments.

### 3.2 US-Centric Framing

The public may also prefer to prioritize their home country's interests in Africa, echoing the US-centric framing. For those who do not have personal interests in Africa, their preference for national interests may override other considerations. Even individuals with personal interests in Africa, such as businesspeople, may still support closer engagement with Africa, even if updated

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<sup>45</sup> Chang, Jun Yan. "Of Risk and Threat: How the United States Perceives China's Rise." *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 16, no. 3 (2023): 357–81.

<sup>46</sup> Please note there was no singular or universally applicable meaning of "strategic competition." Winkler, Stephanie Christine. "Strategic Competition and US–China Relations: A Conceptual Analysis." *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 16, no. 3 (2023): 333–56.

<sup>47</sup> To clarify, there is no consensus on the idea of China threat and people's reactions to it are different: Machida, Satoshi. "U.S. Soft Power and the 'China Threat': Multilevel Analyses." *Asian Politics & Policy* 2, no. 3 (July 2010): 351–70. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1943-0787.2010.01198.x>; Pan, Chengxin. "The 'China Threat' in American Self-Imagination: The Discursive Construction of Other as Power Politics." *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 29, no. 3 (June 2004): 305–31. <https://doi.org/10.1177/030437540402900304>.

<sup>48</sup> For instance, see Allison, Graham. "The Thucydides Trap: Are the US and China Headed for War?" *The Atlantic* 24, no. 9 (2015): 2015.; Larson, Deborah Welch, and Alexei Shevchenko. *Quest for Status*. Yale University Press, 2019.; Murray, Michelle. *The Struggle for Recognition in International Relations: Status, Revisionism, and Rising Powers*. Oxford University Press, 2018.; Ward, Steven. *Status and the Challenge of Rising Powers*. Cambridge University Press, 2017.; Ralston, Robert. "Make Us Great Again: The Causes of Declinism in Major Powers." *Security Studies*, 2022, 1–36.

US policies compromise their interests. This is because sociotropic considerations—perceptions of collective national interests—are critical in public opinion towards specific policies. For instance, Mansfield and Mutz argue that Americans' perceptions and support towards trade are primarily affected by how they perceive the national economy may be impacted by international trade.<sup>49</sup> The US is also leaning toward a more protectionist environment where people prefer export but may be critical of import, and the framing of American/national interests, though ambiguously defined, has been put at the top of many foreign policy agendas. In a nutshell, the US-centric framing may invoke a sense of patriotism, and the idea to “advance the US’s interest,” especially the economic interests on the continent through trading and export, may lead to higher support toward PGII. For instance, More and more policy reports have shown the importance of African natural resources for the US,<sup>50</sup> the public would prioritize the US-centric framing if they believed such engagement would expand the US’s influence on the continent.

### **3.3 Africa-Centric Framing**

On one hand, the Africa-centric framing can be seen as a response to China’s framing of its activities on the continent. China widely emphasizes prosperity and development to explain its activities on the continent. China utilizes an anti-colonial and anti-imperialist agenda to unite African states (and the Global South in general), and this framing can be dated back to the 1955 Bandung Conference, the starting point of contemporary linkage between China and Africa. Richard Wright’s seminal book *The Color Curtain* further discussed how morality, unity, and

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<sup>49</sup> Mansfield, Edward D., and Diana C. Mutz. “Support for Free Trade: Self-Interest, Sociotropic Politics, and out-Group Anxiety.” *International Organization* 63, no. 3 (2009): 425–57.

<sup>50</sup> For instance, on critical minerals, see United States Institute of Peace. “Critical Minerals in Africa: Strengthening Security, Supporting Development, and Reducing Conflict amid Geopolitical Competition.” Accessed April 10, 2024. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/04/critical-minerals-africa-strengthening-security-supporting-development-and>.

race-driven anti-colonial sentiments drove this Conference.<sup>51</sup> This framing from China prompts the US to use similar development-oriented and moral arguments to defend its position. The ensuing debate moralizes both sets of domestic audiences.<sup>52</sup>

More importantly, the Africa-centric framing implies the moral and development-oriented arguments for promoting prosperity and democracy. Morality has been linked to the US's foreign policies,<sup>53</sup> and the public may prioritize Africa's interests concerning economic benefits, environmental protection, human rights, and other moral and development issues. Research conducted by Rathbun and Pomeroy indicates that state leaders and the public use moral judgments, the most critical factor, as a basis for assessing international threats, similar to how they do at the interpersonal level.<sup>54</sup> The public's emphasis on prosperity may even override their focus on domestic interests when such interests negatively impact Africa. Additionally, the moral and development dimension echoes the importance of labor issues, environmental rights, and other ethical considerations highlighted in many American and Western projects in Africa. Overall, the African-centric framing indicates the importance of the US being an active player in world affairs.

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<sup>51</sup> Richard Wright, *The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference* (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1994).

<sup>52</sup> Post, A. S. (2023). Words Matter: The Effect of Moral Language on International Bargaining. *International Security*, 48(1), 125–165.

<sup>53</sup> For instance, see Frankel, Charles. "Morality and US Foreign Policy." *Worldview* 18, no. 6 (1975): 13–23.

Kennan, George F. "Morality and Foreign Policy." *Foreign Affairs* 64, no. 2 (1985): 205–18.

McElroy, Robert W. *Morality and American Foreign Policy: The Role of Ethics in International Affairs*. Vol. 201. Princeton University Press, 2014.

Mueller, Karl P. "Politics, Death, and Morality in US Foreign Policy." AIR UNIV MAXWELL AFB AL, 2000.

<sup>54</sup> Brian C. Rathbun and Caleb Pomeroy, "See No Evil, Speak No Evil? Morality, Evolutionary Psychology, and the Nature of International Relations," *International Organization* 76, no. 3 (2022): 656–89.

## 4. Theory and Hypotheses

Framing is about narratives and rhetoric, and political rhetoric, through coercion and persuasion, can help policymakers achieve their goals.<sup>55</sup> Framing has substantive implications for governmental actions. Choosing and promoting the appropriate framing can help explain from how autocracies build global support<sup>56</sup> to how countries control information in times of crisis,<sup>57</sup> from how to elicit support for indiscriminate and coercive policies against target states<sup>58</sup> to how to implement policy change while also preserving state ontological security.<sup>59</sup>

### 4.1 Which Framing Works?

Examining which of the current three policy framings is more effective in soliciting public support toward closer US-African engagement is crucial. These three framings, to a certain extent, conflict with each other, and current literature indicates that disparate and conflicting information can erode public trust in the behavior of elites and the mechanisms of accountability.<sup>60</sup> However, American policymakers regularly deliver conflicting messages on

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<sup>55</sup> Krebs, Ronald R., and Patrick Thaddeus Jackson. “Twisting Tongues and Twisting Arms: The Power of Political Rhetoric.” *European Journal of International Relations* 13, no. 1 (2007): 35–66.

<sup>56</sup> Mattingly, Daniel, Trevor Incerti, Changwook Ju, Colin Moreshead, Seiki Tanaka, and Hikaru Yamagishi. “Chinese State Media Persuades a Global Audience That the ‘China Model’ Is Superior: Evidence From A 19-Country Experiment,” 2023.

<sup>57</sup> Xia, Shouzhi, Huang Huang, and Dong Zhang. “Framing as an Information Control Strategy in Times of Crisis.” *Journal of East Asian Studies* 22, no. 2 (2022): 255–79.

<sup>58</sup> Altier, Mary Beth, and John V. Kane. “Framing States: Unitary Actor Language and Public Support for Coercive Foreign Policy.” *International Studies Quarterly* 67, no. 1 (2023): sqac080.

<sup>59</sup> Subotić, Jelena. “Narrative, Ontological Security, and Foreign Policy Change.” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 12, no. 4 (2016): 610–27.

<sup>60</sup> For instance, see Dalton, Russell J., Paul A. Beck, and Robert Huckfeldt. “Partisan Cues and the Media: Information Flows in the 1992 Presidential Election.” *American Political Science Review* 92, no. 1 (1998): 111–26.; Kobayashi, Keiichi. “Emphasis Framing Effects of Conflicting Messages.” *Journal of Media Psychology* 32, no. 3 (July 2020): 119–29. <https://doi.org/10.1027/1864-1105/a000263>; Rosenthal, Aaron. “Conflicting Messages: Multiple Policy Experiences and Political Participation.” *Policy Studies Journal* 49, no. 2 (May 2021): 616–39. <https://doi.org/10.1111/psj.12368>; Toney, Jeffrey H., and Stephanie Ishack. “A Pandemic of Confusion: Conflicting Messages Have Characterized Not Just COVID-19, but Also Many Past Disease Outbreaks.” *American Scientist* 108, no. 6 (2020): 344–48.

this topic. For instance, the top US trade official, Katherine Tai, downplayed competition with China as the primary motivation for Washington's engagement with Africa. But at the same time, she acknowledged that the US is facing mounting difficulties in Africa and other regions because of China (as the largest trading partner with so many Global South countries) and "China has been playing a very aggressive game all over the world."<sup>61</sup> Another conflicting messaging example would be the framing of fostering a more prosperous Africa, which can be at odds with the implicit aim of counteracting China's influence. The United States and other Western powers often encourage African nations to engage more actively in their interactions with China, perceiving Africa as a passive recipient and attributing this passivity to the contentious "debt trap" afflicting many African nations. Nonetheless, diminishing economic connections with China could impede infrastructural advancements in Africa, particularly when Western powers exhibit less engagement than China in allocating financial resources to the continent.

While these three framings may each enhance public support, I argue that compared with the US-centric and the Africa-centric framing, the China-centric framing exerts a more substantial influence on augmenting an individual's endorsement of a deeper US-African engagement.

***Hypothesis 1:*** Compared with the Africa-centric and the US-centric framings, the China-centric framing exhibits a larger effect on increasing public support for a closer US-African engagement.

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<sup>61</sup> *China Playing "Aggressive Game" in Africa and the World, Says USTR Katherine Tai, 2022.*  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=Pft5dpZ6fBY&ab\\_channel=AtlanticCouncil](https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=Pft5dpZ6fBY&ab_channel=AtlanticCouncil)

The Africa-centric and US-centric objectives may not be as consequential as the China-centric framing, primarily because they may not embody the most potent and credible beliefs. Furthermore, the China-centric framing directly presents China as another competitor on the continent, which is absent in the other two framings. This “competition” is critical in determining the efficacy of framing. As demonstrated by Chong and Bruckman, framing operates through a mediational process, moderating factors, and the influence of competitive processes. The mediational process functions “by making new beliefs available about an issue, making certain available beliefs accessible, or making beliefs applicable or ‘strong’ in people’s evaluations.” Moderators represent robust predispositions that can “reduce framing effects by increasing one’s resistance to disconfirming information. Nonetheless, even those with firm values are susceptible to framing on new issues that have yet to acquire a settled interpretation. Elite frames aim to appeal to the partisan and ideological leanings of the audience.” Competition denotes that “in competitive contexts, the strength of the opposition frame determines the distance one is pulled away from his or her values even when the frame that is congruent with those values is represented in the debate. If frames canceled, then individuals who received a congruent frame would agree with that frame to the same degree regardless of whether the competing frame was strong or weak.”<sup>62</sup>

Compared to the China-centric framing, the other two framings may be less robust, as empirical evidence may not corroborate such beliefs. US trade with Sub-Saharan Africa constitutes less than 1% of all US trade in goods: in 2019, the US conducted \$36.8 billion worth of trade in goods with the region, which further decreased to \$32.6 billion in 2020.<sup>63</sup> The limited

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<sup>62</sup> Chong and Bruckman, 2007, 111-113.

<sup>63</sup> “Getting It Right: U.S. Trade and Investment in Sub-Saharan Africa.” <https://www.csis.org/analysis/getting-it-right-us-trade-and-investment-sub-saharan-africa>.

interaction between the US and Africa—a low degree of sociotropic considerations—also suggests a limited extent of egocentric considerations. In essence, the US public does not possess substantial personal egocentric or sociotropic connections to Africa, and this low level of self-interest would challenge the efficiency of US-centric framing.<sup>64</sup> However, through PGII, there is a rise in engagement in investment and project development. For instance, in May 2023, the White House said the US Development Finance Corporation (DFC) would contribute up to \$250 million to help underwrite the Lobito Atlantic Railway Corridor. This project was announced at the 2023 G7 Summit, where G7 leaders reaffirmed their commitment to identifying new opportunities to scale up the PGII.<sup>65</sup> This would be the first time DFC has financed a railway project in Africa. However, the volume of \$250 million is still shadowed by the billions of investments China is investing in railway projects in Africa.

The domestically polarized political landscape on issues such as abortion, LGBTQ+ rights, (de)globalization, and other ideological matters may undermine the public's overall emphasis on morality and development. To clarify, the argument presented here posits that, *on average*, the morality and development-oriented framing is not as compelling as the China-centric framing, but it may still impact people's support level. Moreover, the US's endeavors to “foster prosperity” have had adverse consequences in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other areas,<sup>66</sup> where

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<sup>64</sup> Research has shown that egocentric considerations can override sociotropic considerations in people's opinions toward trade and certain policies. For instance, see Maria Schaffer, Lena, and Gabriele Spilker. “Self-Interest versus Sociotropic Considerations: An Information-Based Perspective to Understanding Individuals' Trade Preferences.” *Review of International Political Economy* 26, no. 6 (2019): 1266–92.; Fordham, Benjamin O., and Katja B. Kleinberg. “How Can Economic Interests Influence Support for Free Trade?” *International Organization* 66, no. 2 (2012): 311–28.

<sup>65</sup> House, The White. “FACT SHEET: Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment at the G7 Summit.” The White House, May 20, 2023. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/05/20/fact-sheet-partnership-for-global-infrastructure-and-investment-at-the-g7-summit/>.

<sup>66</sup> For instance, see Acharya, Amitav. “The War in Iraq: Morality or the National Interest.” *IDSS Commentaries*. Singapore, *The Institute of Defense and Strategic Studies*, 2003.

the US may have left a bad reputation.<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, under the veil of fostering prosperity, the US may want to advance its interests and remake another society in its own image.<sup>68</sup> The US may even fall into the meddler’s trap, especially when they conduct military interventions, where the US feels the ownership of the foreign territory, triggering the endowment effect.<sup>69</sup> Those past actions and reputations matter, and the public may have less confidence in trusting the government to implement such policies again in other regions.<sup>70</sup> Additionally, though moral and development-oriented framing effectively spurs public mobilization in issues like international law enforcement,<sup>71</sup> the impacts of normative framing would likely vary depending on people’s moral values. To have a broad appeal, such framing must appeal to principles that are salient to and attract the support of the target population.<sup>72</sup> It would be challenging to mobilize people to do something because morality and the need for development make them feel “entitled to act on their outrage.”<sup>73</sup> However, considering the living standards the US has compared to the standards in Africa and the generally limited salience of this topic, this framing may only gain limited support from the public. As a matter of fact, some countries and institutions have shifted from this normative framing of “force for good” power into a geopolitical actor in Africa to compete

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<sup>67</sup> For example, in Iraq, see Fawcett, Louise. “The Iraq War 20 Years on: Towards a New Regional Architecture.” *International Affairs* 99, no. 2 (2023): 567–85.; Acharya, Amitav. “The War in Iraq: Morality or the National Interest.” *IDSS Commentaries. Singapore, The Institute of Defense and Strategic Studies*, 2003.

<sup>68</sup> Boyle, Michael J., and Anthony F. Lang Jr. “Remaking the World in America’s Image: Surprise, Strategic Culture, and the American Ways of Intervention.” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 17, no. 2 (2021): oraa020.

<sup>69</sup> Mukharji, Aroop. “The Meddler’s Trap: McKinley, the Philippines, and the Difficulty of Letting Go.” *International Security* 48, no. 2 (2023): 49–90.

<sup>70</sup> Weisiger, Alex, and Keren Yarhi-Milo. “Revisiting Reputation: How Past Actions Matter in International Politics.” *International Organization* 69, no. 2 (2015): 473–95.

<sup>71</sup> Sheppard, Jill, and Jana von Stein. “Attitudes and Action in International Refugee Policy: Evidence from Australia.” *International Organization* 76, no. 4 (2022): 929–56.

<sup>72</sup> Benford, Robert D., and David A. Snow. “Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 26, no. 1 (August 2000): 611–39.; Busby, Joshua W. *Moral Movements and Foreign Policy*. Vol. 116. Cambridge University Press, 2010.;

<sup>73</sup> Miller, Dale T., Daniel A. Effron, and Sonya V. Zak. “From Moral Outrage to Social Protest: The Role of Psychological Standing.” *The Psychology of Justice and Legitimacy*, (November), 2011, 104.

with China because they found normative actions lack support and do not help them consolidate their status in Africa.<sup>74</sup>

Additionally, African nations may have not responded in ways that align with Western expectations. They may have become even more receptive to a China-led world order. For instance, despite facing sanctions from the US and restrictions on using certain American technology in its smartphones, Huawei's flagship devices continue to dominate sales for Telkom in South Africa<sup>75</sup> and other countries that the US may consider friends and allies. The recent example of 17 African countries (nearly half of all fence-sitting nations) abstaining from voting on the UN resolution condemning the Russian invasion and demanding the immediate withdrawal of Russian forces further highlights the expanding chasm between Africa and the West.<sup>76</sup> This growing political rift between the US and Africa could further weaken public support for the Africa-centric framing and make the other two framings more appealing.

The China-centric framing, on the other hand, possesses more empirical backing, given that the US public's unfavorable attitudes toward China have consistently increased (particularly since the US-China trade war and the COVID-19 pandemic), rising from 35% unfavorable in 2005 to 82% in 2022.<sup>77</sup> The relationship with China has been construed as a contest between China and the West, as well as China's endeavor to modify the existing US-led world order, aligning with declining confidence in President Xi across Europe and North America and

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<sup>74</sup> Stahl, Anna Katharina. "China's Expanding Footprint in North Africa and the European Union's Geopolitical Awakening." *Mediterranean Politics* 28, no. 5 (October 20, 2023): 834–59. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2022.2035140>.

<sup>75</sup> Myles Illidge, "Huawei's Loss Is Samsung and Apple's Gain in South African Smartphone Wars," accessed October 6, 2022, <https://mybroadband.co.za/news/smartphones/462957-huaweis-loss-is-samsung-and-apples-gain-in-south-african-smartphone-wars.html>.

<sup>76</sup> UN General Assembly (11th emergency special Sess.: 2022), "Aggression against Ukraine :," March 18, 2022, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3965290>.

<sup>77</sup> Greenwood, Shannon. "How Global Public Opinion of China Has Shifted in the Xi Era." *Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project* (blog), September 28, 2022. <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2022/09/28/how-global-public-opinion-of-china-has-shifted-in-the-xi-era/>.

diminishing favorability toward China in those regions.<sup>78</sup> Research on a rising China seeking elevated status and the establishment of a bipolar world order further substantiates the urgency for both the US public and government to broaden their influence in Africa and other regions to counterbalance China.<sup>79</sup>

Furthermore, the fact that the US public is already exposed to China-related information (e.g., Huawei, trade war, debt trap) in their daily lives through news and the consumption of Chinese products is linked to the mediational process when evaluating framing efficiency. This also renders the hypothesis a hard case: even individuals who only receive Africa-centric or US-centric information might have already considered China when determining their level of support. In other words, an unobserved interaction could exist between the China-centric framing and the other two framings. However, through a randomized controlled trial (RCT), such interaction would be controlled across all treatment groups, making it even more challenging to observe a significant result in the China-centric group. Consequently, observing a significant difference between the China-centric framing and other framings could further corroborate my argument that a countering-China framing is more effective than the other two framings in eliciting public support.

Last but not least, the framing effects may travel through some mediator variables. For instance, the Africa-centric framing echoes the belief of the US being more active in world affairs, the US-centric framing triggers the feeling of pride and patriotism, and the China-centric

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> There is a plethora of research on China's rise and how China's rise may challenge the US-led world order. For instance, see Kupchan, Cliff. "Bipolarity Is Back: Why It Matters." *The Washington Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (2021): 123–39.; Chin, Gregory T. "US-China Relations and Remaking Global Governance: From Stalemate and Progress to Crisis to Resolutions." *Asian Perspective* 45, no. 1 (2021): 91–109.; Xiang, Lanxin. "US–China Relations in the Shadow of Spengler." *Survival* 63, no. 3 (2021): 45–53.; Larson, Deborah Welch, and Alexei Shevchenko. *Quest for Status*. Yale University Press, 2019.; Allison, Graham. "The Thucydides Trap: Are the US and China Headed for War?" *The Atlantic* 24, no. 9 (2015): 2015.

framing is linked to identity fear of the US as the world leader. Therefore, it is also necessary to detect the direct and indirect effects of those framings.

## **4.2 Partisan Difference**

Current policy discussions and news coverage depict a bipartisan consensus on the US's efforts to counter China in Africa (and the rest of the world). Nonetheless, this agreement at the national level may overlook the intricacies at the individual public level. Existing research on public support for aid, FDI, and trade has indicated that party identification is a crucial determinant of people's perceptions of such matters. Generally, Democrats exhibit greater pro-trade and pro-aid stances, while Republicans display more anti-China and self-interest-driven attitudes. For instance, Jin, Dorius, and Xie, utilizing survey questions on US-China trade and the trade war, demonstrate that political identity is strongly correlated with attitudes toward the trade war (the more conservative an individual is, the more likely they are to support the trade war).<sup>80</sup> Research has also revealed that when comparing country A with a low-income level and few imports from the US to country B with a medium-income level and minimal imports from the US, Democrats prefer allocating more economic aid to country A, while Republicans favor country B.<sup>81</sup> Moreover, research on framing has shown that elite frames aim to appeal to the partisan and ideological leanings of the audience.<sup>82</sup>

Following this line of research, there may be no universal bipartisan agreement on supporting the US's engagement with Africa at the individual level. To clarify, consensus may still exist regarding the direction of preference, but the degree of preference level varies. For

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<sup>80</sup> Jin, Dorius, and Xie, 2021.

<sup>81</sup> Milner and Tingley, 2013.

<sup>82</sup> Chong and Bruckman, 2007

example, both Democrats and Republicans may endorse increased US engagement with Africa to contain China, but Republicans might exhibit a higher level of support if they were aware that the objective of US policies in Africa is to counter China.

***Hypothesis 2a:*** Under the Africa-centric framing, the more Democrat-leaning an individual is, the more likely that individual would support a closer engagement between the US and Africa.

***Hypothesis 2b:*** Under the US-centric framing, the more Republican-leaning an individual is, the more likely that individual would support a closer engagement between the US and Africa.

***Hypothesis 2c:*** Under the China-centric framing, the more Republican-leaning an individual is, the more likely that individual would support a closer engagement between the US and Africa.

### **4.3 Causal Paths**

Different framings can directly affect people's support levels. At the same time, those framings may work through different causal paths with different mediators to indirectly affect the outcome. Those causal pathways echo the "emotions" different framings may trigger: the sense of China and identity threat from the China-centric framing, the pride and patriotism linked to the US-centric framing, and the sense of intervention implied by the Africa-centric framing. The treatment may also work through the respondents' trust level in politicians, where they may trust the politicians more when they deem the issue important to the country. Considering my previous arguments in this section, I would further hypothesize that:

***Hypothesis 3a:*** Compared with the US-centric and Africa-centric framing, the China-centric framing leads to a stronger sense of China threat, which impacts people's support level toward a closer engagement between the US and Africa. This effect is stronger among Republicans.

***Hypothesis 3b:*** Compared with the US-centric and Africa-centric framing, the China-centric framing leads to a stronger sense of identity threat (the US as the world leader), which impacts people's support level toward a closer engagement between the US and Africa. This effect is stronger among Republicans.

***Hypothesis 3c:*** Compared with the US-centric and Africa-centric framing, the China-centric framing leads to stronger trust in politicians, which impacts people's support level toward a closer engagement between the US and Africa. This effect is stronger among Democrats.

***Hypothesis 3d:*** Compared with the US-centric and China-centric framing, the Africa-centric framing leads to stronger support toward intervention in world affairs, which impacts people's support level toward a closer engagement between the US and Africa. This effect is stronger among Democrats.

***Hypothesis 3e:*** Compared with the Africa-centric and China-centric framing, the US-centric framing leads to a stronger sense of patriotism, which impacts people's support level toward a closer engagement between the US and Africa. This effect is stronger among Republicans.

**Hypothesis 3f:** Compared with the US-centric and China-centric framing, the US-centric framing leads to stronger support toward international trade, which impacts people's support level toward a closer engagement between the US and Africa. This effect is stronger among Republicans.

## 5. Survey and Research Design

To examine the public support for the US's engagement with Africa, I conducted a vignette survey experiment<sup>83</sup> that systematically varies the framing of the objectives of the US's engagement policies. Specifically, PGII served as the focal policy under investigation. PGII was chosen as the case for analysis due to its status as the most recent US-initiated, G7-cooperated strategy directed toward the Global South community, and it is *the* presented strategy in the 2022 *US Strategy toward Sub-Saharan Africa*. This policy features explicit objectives within its description and represents an official policy. The policy's credible source origin further assists the public in forming valid and reliable preferences.<sup>84</sup>

Surveys have been a widely employed method for assessing public opinions and perceptions,<sup>85</sup> and vignette treatment is particularly suitable for this research, as it aims to evaluate the impact of systematic changes to the actual object of study or judgment or the context in which that object appears.<sup>86</sup> By employing different framing vignettes of the goals of the PGII, this research explored how various framings, which are not attainable through observational data, may influence people's opinions.

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<sup>83</sup> The survey was pre-registered with Open Science Framework (OSF) [osf.io/5afm8] and was approved by the University of British Columbia [H23-00637].

<sup>84</sup> For instance, see Alt, James E., John Marshall, and David D. Lassen. "Credible Sources and Sophisticated Voters: When Does New Information Induce Economic Voting?" *The Journal of Politics* 78, no. 2 (2016): 327–42.

<sup>85</sup> For a general discussion on measuring public opinion with surveys, see Berinsky, Adam J. "Measuring Public Opinion with Surveys." *Annual Review of Political Science* 20 (2017): 309–29.

<sup>86</sup> Diana C. Mutz, "Population-Based Survey Experiments," in *Population-Based Survey Experiments* (Princeton University Press, 2011), 54.

The survey targeted a nationally representative US sample of 2214 completed respondents, balanced on age (18+), gender, region, and ethnicity through the Lucid Theorem (Lucid) platform in March 2024.<sup>87</sup> Lucid supplies respondents for online surveys and scholars and policymakers have increasingly used it for their research.<sup>88</sup> Coppock and McClellan further validate the usage of the Lucid platform for survey studies and demonstrate that the experimental and demographic findings on Lucid align well with US national benchmarks.<sup>89</sup>

## 5.1 Framing Treatments

After collecting demographic data, such as gender, race, age, and party identity, I randomly assigned respondents to three treatment groups and one control group. People in the treatment groups were presented with a short vignette that included the same background information on PGII and different framings of the goal of PGII. Respondents in the control group were only provided general background information on PGII. The wording of the background information is based on the official 2022 *U.S. Strategy toward Sub-Saharan Africa*.<sup>90</sup>

***Background information on PGII, presented to all respondents:*** “In 2022, the US initiated the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII). PGII is a collaborative effort by the Group of Seven, a group of like-minded countries consisting of the US, Canada,

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<sup>87</sup> Completed means the respondent received the treatment and answered the key outcome variable questions. Some were dropped for sub-group analysis because they did not answer questions on demographic questions or other questions (all questions in the survey are optional to be in line with the ethnic board requirements).

<sup>88</sup> For a list of research using Lucid data, see Lucid. “LUCID Citations.” Accessed November 16, 2023. <https://luc.id/citations/>.

<sup>89</sup> Coppock, Alexander, and Oliver A. McClellan. “Validating the Demographic, Political, Psychological, and Experimental Results Obtained from a New Source of Online Survey Respondents.” *Research & Politics* 6, no. 1 (January 2019): 205316801882217. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053168018822174>.

<sup>90</sup> The White House. “FACT SHEET: U.S. STRATEGY TOWARD SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA.” p. 9. The White House, August 8, 2022. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/U.S.-Strategy-Toward-Sub-Saharan-Africa-FINAL.pdf>.

France, Germany, Italy, Japan, and the United Kingdom. PGII will leverage and streamline financing and co-invest to deliver game-changing projects to strengthen economies, diversify supply chains, and advance African national security. PGII will complement new and existing efforts from the US to help close the global infrastructure gap and support resilient and dynamic economies in the African continent.”

Upon introducing the policy, different framings of the objectives of PGII would be added to different groups before asking about respondents’ support level toward PGII.

***Control group:*** no objectives added.

***Africa-centric framing group:*** “The main goal of PGII for the US in Africa is to create a more prosperous Africa.”

***US-centric framing group:*** “The main goal of PGII for the US in Africa is to expand the US's influence on the continent.”

***China-centric framing group:*** “The main goal of PGII for the US in Africa is to counter China’s influence on the continent.”

My experiment design allows me to test whether public support for PGII is more pronounced when the policy is framed as countering China’s presence on the continent, compared with other framing rationales, such as advancing US gains or promoting African

prosperity. The treatment vignettes are nearly identical in terms of length, writing style, and structure, allowing us to assume that there is no “higher order” latent treatment that may interact with my framing treatment.<sup>91</sup>

## 5.2 Outcome Measurements

After reading the background information and the policy goal of PGII, respondents were asked: “How would you rate your support level toward the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII)?” I coded the answer on a 7-point scale: Strongly support (1), Support (2), Somewhat support (3), No preference/Neutral (4), Somewhat oppose (5), Oppose (6), and Strongly oppose (7).

## 5.3 Moderators

To test if the average treatment effect (ATE) is moderated by party identity, I asked people which of the following best described their current political party identification: Republican (-2), Republican-leaning (-1), Independent/No preference (0), Democrat-leaning (1), and Democrat (2). I also collapsed their party identity into a 3-point variable: Republican (-1), Moderate (0), and Democrat (1) as an indicator of people’s ideology.

I also collected information on respondents’ demographics (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity). Given the randomization process, demographic variables should not pose inferential challenges as confounders when studying the framing effect. However, those demographic differences may

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<sup>91</sup> Fong, Christian, and Justin Grimmer. “Causal Inference with Latent Treatments.” *American Journal of Political Science* 67, no. 2 (April 2023): 374–89. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12649>; Egami, Naoki, Christian J. Fong, Justin Grimmer, Margaret E. Roberts, and Brandon M. Stewart. “How to Make Causal Inferences Using Texts.” arXiv, February 6, 2018. <http://arxiv.org/abs/1802.02163>.

lead to significantly different outcome values within each group (and when examining the issue out of the limitation of framing effects).

#### **5.4 Causal Mediation Analysis**

I have included the following mediation questions to detect different causal paths and better understand the direct and indirect effects our treatment causes. Those questions are also asked in major surveys like the World Value Survey and American National Election Studies (ANES). I have kept the wording and coding scheme the same.

*China Threat:* How much is China a threat to the United States? The options are Not at all (1), A little (2), A moderate amount (3), A lot (4), A great deal (5), and Don't know (999).

*Identity Threat (The US as the world leader):* How important is it for the United States to be the leader in world affairs? The options are Very important (1), Important (2), Neither important nor not important (3), Not important (4), and Very not important (5).

*Intervention:* Which statement comes closer to your view, even if neither is exactly right? The options are It's best for the future of the US to be active in world affairs (1), We should pay less attention to problems in other countries and concentrate on problems in the US (2), and Don't know (999).

*Patriotism:* When you see the American flag flying, how does it make you feel? The options are Extremely good (1), Very good (2), Moderately good (3), Slightly good (4), Not good at all (5), and Don't know (999).

*International Trade*: Is increasing the amount of international trade good, bad, or neither good nor bad for our relationships with other countries? The options are Good (1), Bad (2), Neither good nor bad (3), Don't know (999).

*Trust in Politicians*: Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: most politicians are honest and truthful? The options are Disagree strongly (1), Disagree (2), Neither agree nor disagree (3), Agree (4), and Agree strongly (5).

To account for the potential order effect,<sup>92</sup> I grouped those questions in one mediation block and randomly assigned them right before (MO group) or after (OM group) giving the respondents different framings and asking for their support levels toward PGII. The only exception is the China threat question, which was only used as a post-treatment question due to the nature of this question. To a certain extent, assigning the mediation block before my treatment is like asking my respondents about their preexisting levels of patriotism, intervention, and other issues. Those could be treated as potential moderators when calculating the ATE. Model 4 shows the result of treating those variables as moderators.

The MO groups fit the real-life scenarios better because when officials discuss PGII, they would also mention the importance of the US as the world leader and the necessity to increase trade and other issues discussed in the mediation block and use those as the basis to gain people's support toward PGII. Having the block before the treatment also gives the respondents some time to be immersed in my survey and provides more accurate results. However, OM

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<sup>92</sup> Chaudoin, Stephen, Brian J. Gaines, and Avital Livny. "Survey Design, Order Effects, and Causal Mediation Analysis." *The Journal of Politics* 83, no. 4 (October 1, 2021): 1851–56. <https://doi.org/10.1086/715166>.

groups provide additional evidence on the effectiveness of causal mediation analysis, if any. Observing the same treatment effects in the OM groups would further increase my confidence in the treatment, but failing to observe the treatment effects in the OM groups would not necessarily invalidate this study.

## **6. Results**

I fielded the survey in March 2024. During the survey implementation period, there was no abrupt news regarding China's and the US's policies toward Africa, which may have altered people's preexisting exposure to this topic. There was media coverage of China on other topics. Still, there were no sudden issues that may have changed people's preexisting levels of China threat and other mediators we wanted to detect. Even if some respondents were exposed to some news, the RCT design would have handled those exposures. This survey experiment was pre-registered via Open Science Framework (OSF), and I report both null and positive results.

Table 1 shows the covariate balance across different groups. The values are the average age, gender, education level, and income level for each group. Table 2 shows the percentage of different party identification and ethnicity groups for MO groups, and Table 3 for the OM groups. Some differences exist. For instance, the OM groups' party identification categorization is not well-balanced. This may be due to the random sampling process or because I used a 5-point scale to measure party identification. A 3-point measurement would alleviate this problem to a certain extent. Overall, however, the groups are largely comparable. Again, MO indicates that the groups received the mediation block before the treatment, and OM shows otherwise. The

MO groups mimicked the real-life scenarios better. The codebook details the coding scheme, and the data and coding can be found on the online Appendix.<sup>93</sup>

Table 1 Covariate Balance across Different Groups

	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Income</b>
MO_control	47.5	1.52	4.85	6.50
MO_Africa	48.5	1.55	4.73	6.67
MO_China	46.7	1.53	4.70	6.77
MO_US	45.6	1.50	4.71	6.83
OM_control	45.0	1.51	4.84	6.99
OM_Africa	46.1	1.52	4.93	6.83
OM_China	45.3	1.51	4.98	6.89
OM_US	45.7	1.53	4.84	6.99

Table 2 Party Identification and Ethnicity Group Categorization, MO Groups

	<b>MO_control</b>	<b>MO_Africa</b>	<b>MO_China</b>	<b>MO_US</b>
Republican	53 (18.60%)	72 (25.09%)	65 (22.89%)	64 (21.99%)
Republican-leaning	46 (16.14%)	34 (11.85%)	29 (10.21%)	44 (15.12%)
Independent	71 (24.91%)	76 (26.48%)	81 (28.52%)	82 (28.18%)
Democratic-leaning	47 (16.49%)	35 (12.20%)	46 (16.20%)	43 (14.78%)
Democratic	68 (23.86%)	70 (24.39%)	62 (21.83)	58 (19.93%)
Asian	14 (4.91%)	10 (3.48%)	13 (4.58%)	13 (4.47%)
African American	28 (9.82%)	34 (11.85%)	39 (13.73%)	38 (13.06%)
White	107 (72.63%)	197 (68.64%)	203 (71.48%)	207 (71.13%)
Other Ethnicity	36 (12.63%)	46 (16.03%)	29 (10.21%)	33 (11.34%)
Total	285	287	284	291

<sup>93</sup> Will compile after no revision is needed for the paper.

Table 3 Party Identification and Ethnicity Group Categorization, OM Groups

	<b>OM_control</b>	<b>OM_Africa</b>	<b>OM_China</b>	<b>OM_US</b>
Republican	58 (21.56%)	46 (16.91%)	71 (26.59%)	66 (25.29%)
Republican-leaning	35 (13.01%)	40 (14.71%)	36 (13.48%)	32 (12.26%)
Independent	75 (27.88%)	70 (25.74%)	69 (25.84%)	63 (24.14%)
Democratic-leaning	44 (16.36%)	56 (20.59%)	44 (16.48%)	42 (16.09%)
Democratic	56 (20.82%)	60 (22.06%)	47 (17.60%)	58 (22.22%)
Asian	6 (2.23%)	17 (6.35%)	11 (4.12%)	25 (5.75%)
African American	28 (10.41%)	35 (12.87%)	28 (10.49%)	29 (11.11%)
White	196 (72.86%)	183 (67.28%)	183 (68.54%)	188 (72.03%)
Other Ethnicity	39 (14.50%)	37 (13.60%)	44 (16.48%)	29 (11.11%)
Total	269	272	267	261

### 6.1 Average treatment effects (ATEs)

Figure 1 showcases the difference in means regarding public support toward PGII across all MO and OM groups. Overall, the public is in the support (2) ~ somewhat support (3) category, quite different compared with many other political issues in the US, where public opinions can be very polarized based on people's party identity. As shown in the Figure, although the China-centric framing tends to have stronger support toward PGII, the difference between means across different groups is statistically insignificant except for the comparison with the MO\_US group. In the MO groups, framing matters, and a China-centric framing is much more effective than the US-centric framing in increasing public support toward PGII, partly in line with Hypothesis 1. This exception also indicates the necessity to examine the ordering effects: randomizing the order of the mediation block does have an impact on the effectiveness of the treatment,<sup>94</sup> considering the significant difference disappeared in the OM groups.

<sup>94</sup> Chaudoin, Gaines, and Livny, 2021.

The MO groups fit the real-life scenarios better, and the fact that in the MO groups, there is a significant difference between the US-centric and China-centric groups (at 95% confidence interval) and a significant difference between the US-centric and Africa-centric groups (at 90% confidence interval) highlights the importance of carefully explaining the goal of PGII when introducing the policy to the public. The overlap between control, China-centric, and Africa-centric groups is interesting and may be because the PGII background information already implies the goal of creating a prosperous Africa, echoing the Africa-centric framing. Besides, the fact that China is the most active player on the continent and the frequent reporting of Chinese activities in Africa and the overall “countering-China” message people receive in their daily lives makes it more challenging to separate the control group from the China-centric group. However, overall, the significant difference between the US-centric group and other groups still underscores the importance of policy framing on this issue.

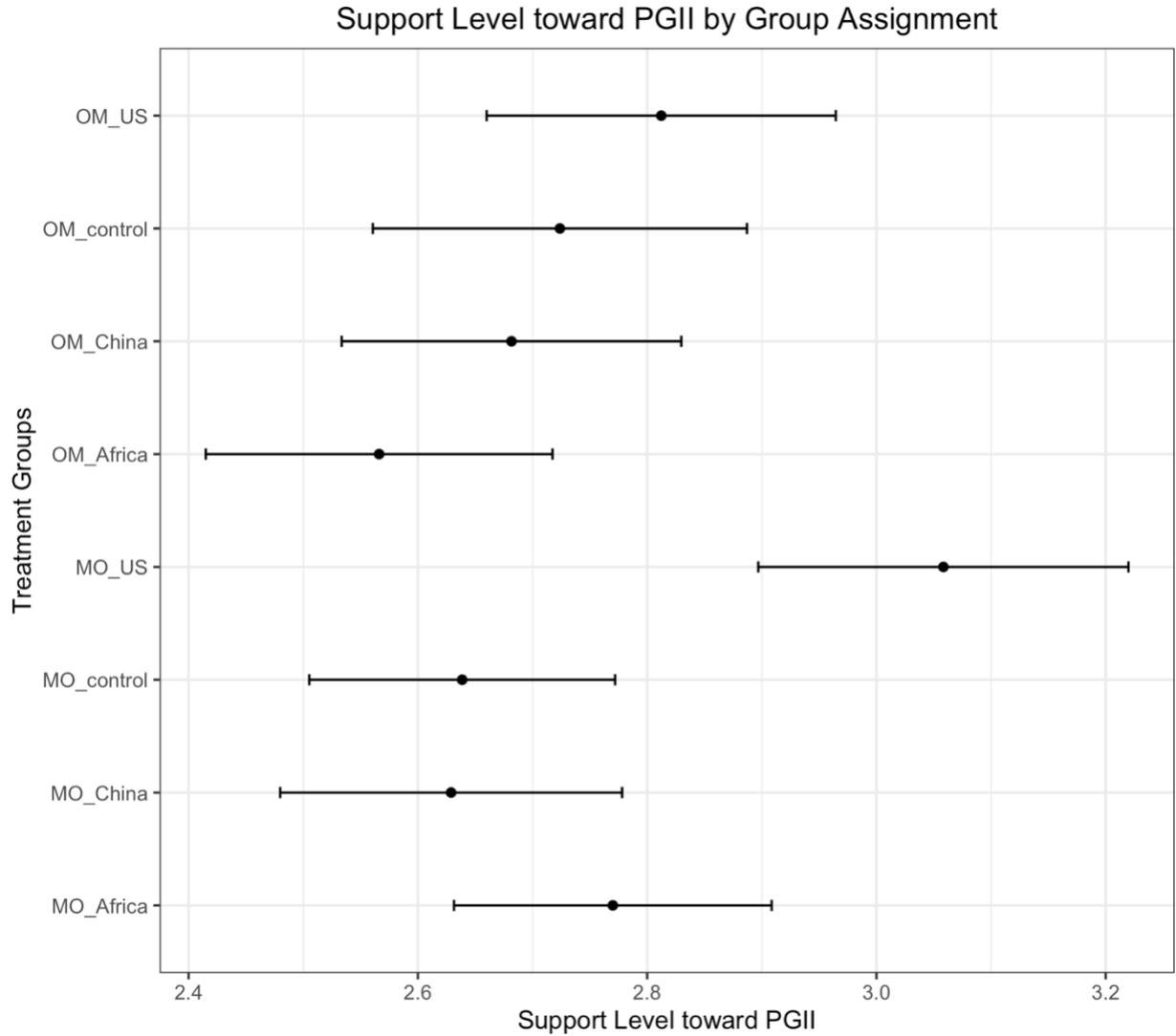


Figure 1 Support Level toward PGII across All Groups, at 95% Confidence Interval

## 6.2 Sub-group-analysis

To better understand the treatment effects, I compared the difference in means across different groups based on their partisanship, testing Hypothesis 2a, 2b, and 2c. Figure 2 below shows the difference in means categorized by people’s partisanship, with the first column being the MO groups and the second being the OM groups. Comparing the MO and OM groups, we can detect

similar patterns in the same framing scenario, though some significant results in the MO groups would become insignificant in the OM groups. These similarities and differences again highlight that in survey experiment settings, how the ordering of the mediation block (and questions in general) may have an impact on our treatment.

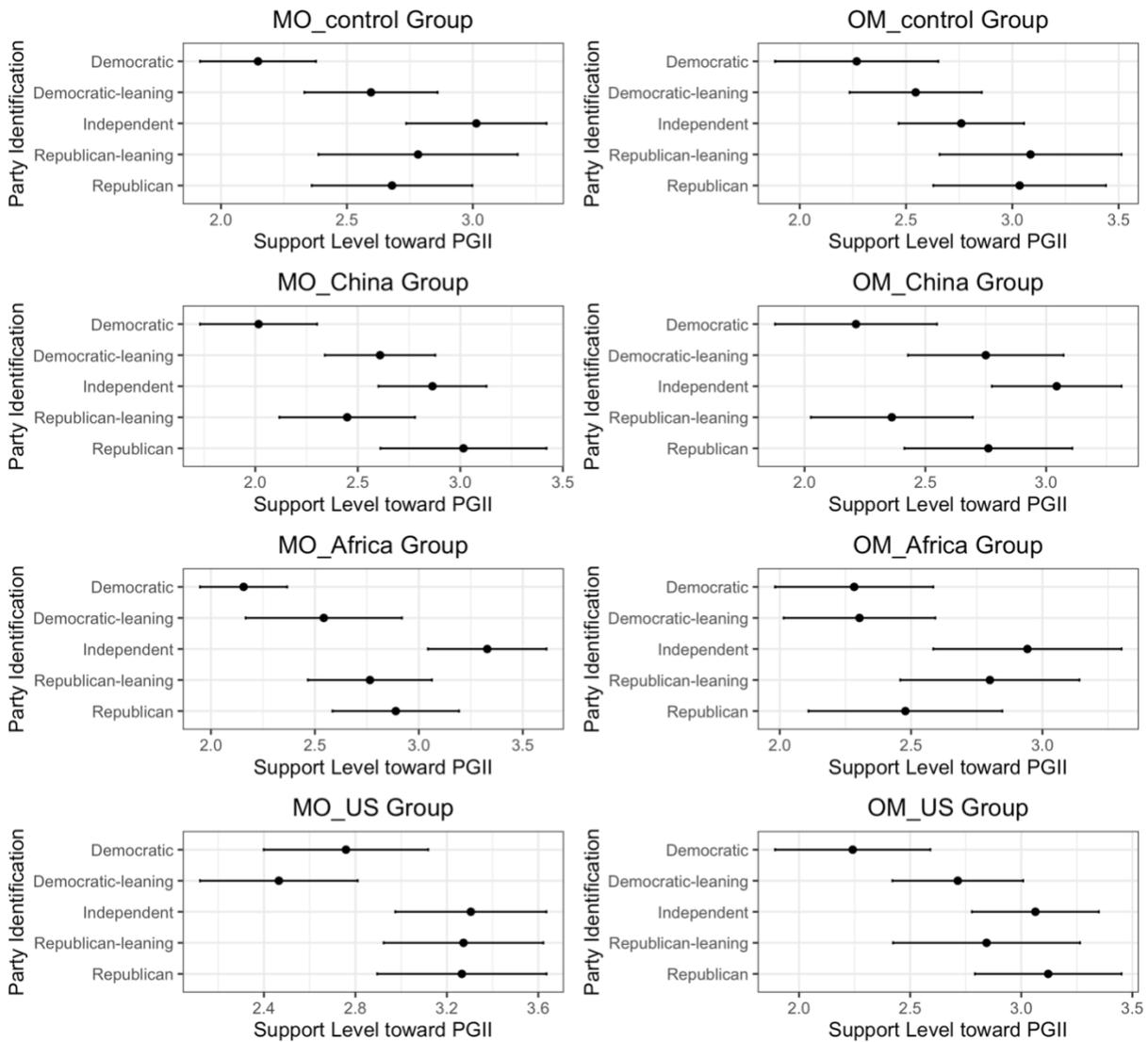


Figure 2 Party Identity (5-point scale) and Support Level toward PGII

The first row is the control groups: generally speaking, Democrats and Democratic-leaning groups tend to have stronger support for PGII, though the differences across groups are not significant except for the difference between the Democrats and Independents in the MO group. The second row is the China-centric groups. Again, there is a significant difference between the Democrats and Independents, which is evident in both MO and OM groups. There is also a statistically significant difference between the Democrats and Republicans in the MO group, but this difference disappears in the OM group. Similarly, there is a statistically significant difference between the Democrats and Independents and between the Democrats and Republicans, but this difference diminishes in the OM setting. The last row shows the difference across means for the US-centric groups. Interestingly, there is a statistically significant difference between the Democratic-leaning group and the Independents in the MO setting and a statistically significant difference between the Democratic and Independents and between the Democratic and Republicans in the OM scenario.

Overall, there is a partisan effect within the same ordering (MO or OM) groups. However, unlike Hypothesis 2b and 2c, which suggest that the more Republican-leaning an individual is, the more likely that individual would support a closer engagement between the US and Africa across all groups, the opposite exists: no matter which policy framing people receive, the more Democratic-leaning the individual is, the more likely that individual would support a closer engagement between the US and Africa. Furthermore, my measurement of partisanship has five different levels and may not be able to capture the differences between, for example, Republican and Republican-leaning groups. Therefore, I also used a 3-point ideology system (Republican-or-leaning, Moderate, and Democratic-or-leaning) to examine the partisan effects: Figure 3 validates my argument that partisanship is critical when assessing people's support level

toward PGII, and this finding aligns with literature that highlights the importance of partisanship when measuring public opinions in US politics. However, on this topic, the independent group is more in line with the Republican-or-leaning group instead of standing in the middle between the Democrats and Republicans.

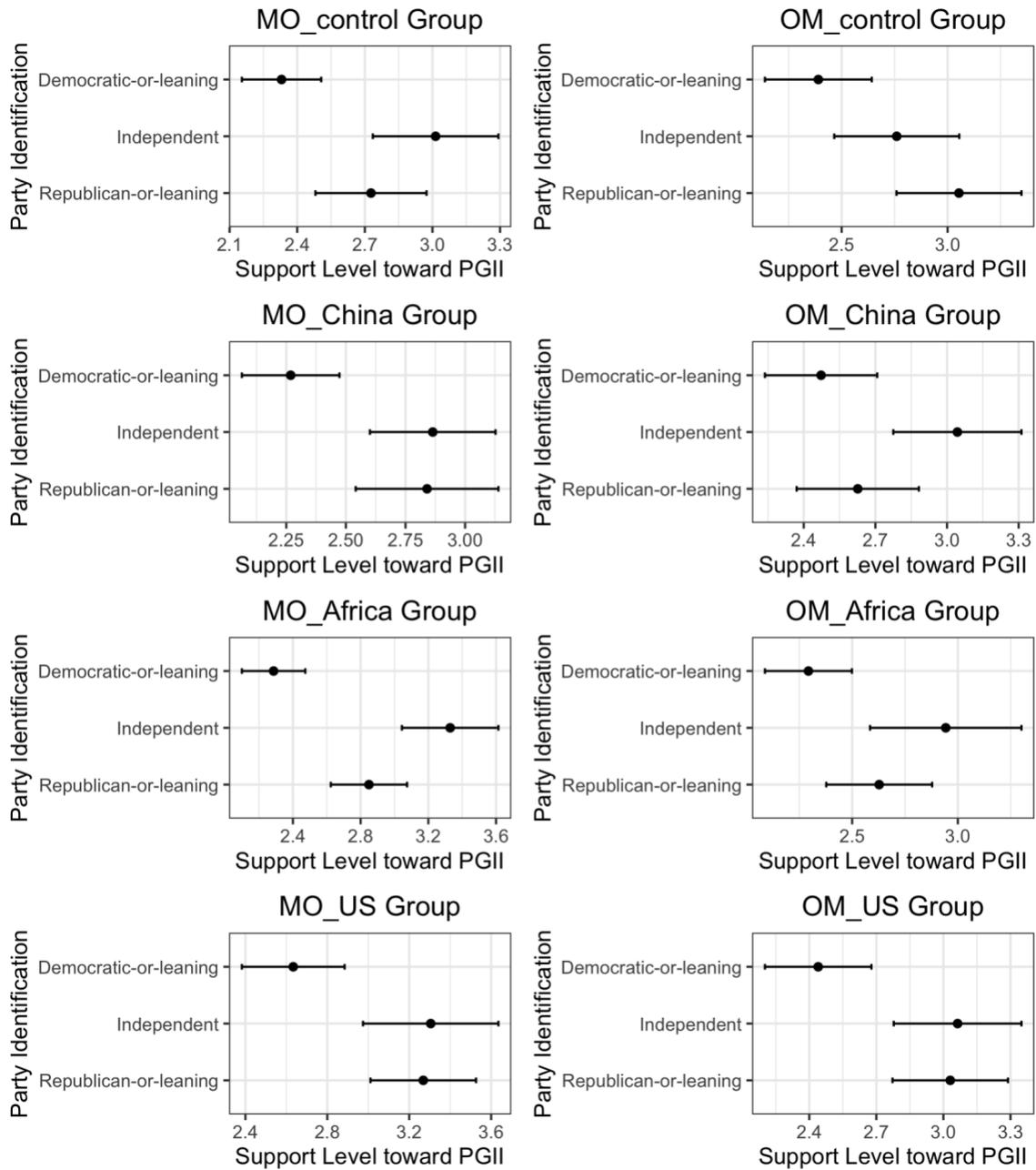


Figure 3 Party Identity (5-point scale) and Support Level toward PGII

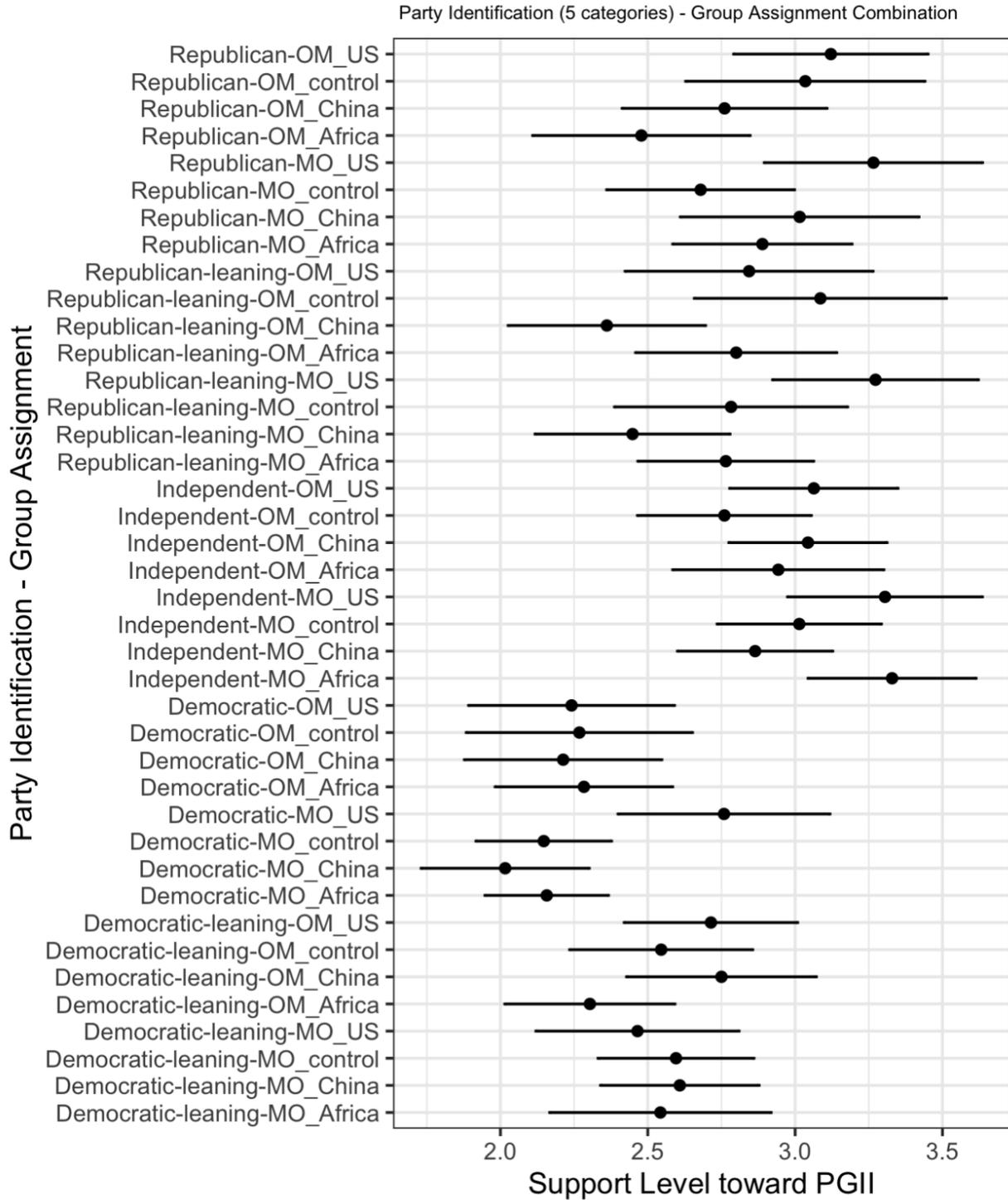


Figure 4 Party Identity and Group Assignment Combination

Figure 4 above demonstrates the means across all combination groups between party identity and group assignment: even within the same party identity group, some framings still

work better than others. For instance, the MO\_US-centric framing significantly decreases the Democrat's support level toward PGII. Besides, the size of the confidence interval suggests how easily different party groups can be affected by the framings: a narrower confidence interval suggests that the public attitude on this topic is more concentrated and less influenced by the framing (for instance, see the comparison between the Democratic groups and the Republican groups regarding the size of their confidence interval).

Table 4 below shows different OLS regression models to see the effects of different framings while controlling for partisanship (on a 5-point scale), age, ethnicity (white, Chinese, African American), sex (male, female), income level, education level, and their previous experience with the continent (visiting or connections with the continent). Specifically, Model 1 utilizes the whole sample. Model 2 only utilizes the responses from the MO groups and uses the control group as the reference group. Model 3 only utilizes the respondents from the OM groups and uses the control group as the reference group. Model 4 further adds the following controls for the MO groups: their beliefs of the US as the world leader (from 1 -5, with 1 being very important and 5 being very not important), the level of patriotism (from 1 – 5, with 1 being the highest level and 5 being the lowest level), the support level for international good (from 1 – 3, with 1 supporting and 3 not supporting), the trust level in politicians (from 1 -5, with 1 being the lowest level and 5 being the highest). Those variables are not controlled for the OM groups because they are post-treatment variables for the respondents in the OM groups.

Table 4 Regression Models

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Intercept	3.581 (0.116)***	3.706 (0.168)***	3.328 (0.186)***	1.791 (0.236)***
Age	-0.005 (0.002)***	-0.004 (0.002)*	-0.005 (0.002)*	0.002 (0.002)
White	0.039 (0.071)	-0.087 (0.096)	0.141 (0.105)	-0.028 (0.096)
Chinese	0.061 (0.352)	-0.192 (0.652)	0.209 (0.600)	-0.085 (0.541)
African	0.081 (0.103)	-0.051 (0.132)	0.189 (0.160)	-0.078 (0.124)
American				
Sex	-0.168 (0.054)***	-0.206 (0.074)***	-0.140 (0.077)*	-0.103 (0.071)
Income	-0.019 (0.008)***	-0.028 (0.011)***	-0.012 (0.012)	-0.017 (0.011)
Party	-0.151 (0.019)***	-0.163 (0.026)***	-0.134 (0.029)***	-0.098 (0.024)***
Connection	-0.364 (0.070)***	-0.362 (0.092)***	-0.394 (0.103)***	-0.098 (0.086)
Education	-0.075 (0.021)***	-0.088 (0.029)***	-0.048 (0.031)	-0.047 (0.029)
MO_China		-0.027 (0.097)		-0.007 (0.094)
MO_US		0.407 (0.104)***		0.352 (0.099)***
MO_Africa		0.094 (0.094)		0.056 (0.091)
OM_China			-0.041 (0.110)	
OM_US			0.085 (0.110)	
OM_Africa			-0.140 (0.112)	
Identity				0.212 (0.044)***
Patriotism				0.000 (0.000)
Intervention				0.682 (0.079)***
Trade				0.0003 (0.0001)**
Trust				-0.112 (0.035)***
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.073	0.106	0.060	0.236
N	2198	1139	1059	1065

*Significant at \* 0.1  $\alpha$  level, \*\* 0.05  $\alpha$  level, \*\*\* 0.01  $\alpha$  level. Robust standard errors (H3) are in parenthesis. Certain variables are omitted because of collinearity/reference group.*

Partly in line with my Hypothesis 1 and supported by Figure 1, Table 4 shows that framing matters: Receiving the US-centric framing for the MO group respondents would decrease their support for PGII, and this effect is still significant when controlling for people's pre-existing trust level in politicians and other pre-existing beliefs. The China-centric and Africa-centric framing does not have a distinguishable effect from the control group. Though the direction of the effect of the China-centric framing aligns with the hypothesis, the difference is not significant. Party identity matters, and this effect is consistent across all models. In Model 4, where the effect is the smallest, it still carries substantial importance: other things constant, being a Democratic, compared with being a Republican, would lead to an increase in support of 0.392. Considering the average support level is 2.77, this change is substantial. Having previous connections (family ties, visiting, business) with Africa would also increase people's support toward PGII, and this effect is significant across Model 1-3, but the effect diminishes in Model 4. Future research may want to delve into how pre-connections with the continent may impact people's support level and the interactions between those connections and people's pre-existing beliefs on different political matters.

For the pre-existing beliefs controls, the more important the respondents think the US is as a world leader, the more they think the US should intervene in world affairs and increase international trade, and the more they trust politicians, the more they support PGII. These effects are significant and align with the broader literature. The level of patriotism, on the other hand, does not have an effect.

### 6.3 Causal Mediation Analysis

To test Hypothesis 3, I employed the mediation package in R<sup>95</sup> to estimate the percentage of my framing treatment effect that travels through different causal paths for each mediator, taken one at a time. The same set of covariates<sup>96</sup> are used for all mediation analyses. Furthermore, I ran the analysis for both the MO and OM groups to see how the ordering effect may impact the analysis.<sup>97</sup>

Table 5 lists the average causal mediation effect (ACME) and average direct effect (ADE), grouped by potential mediators. ACME represents the indirect effect of my treatment that comes through the mediator, and ADE is the direct effect of the treatment on people's support level toward PGII. Please note that the "China threat" variable, which measures people's beliefs of China as a threat to the US (from 1 to 5 where 1 indicates not at all and 5 means a great deal), is a post-treatment variable in the MO groups. As shown previously, because the framing treatment only works in the MO US group, most ACME and ADE are insignificant, except for the MO US treatment group, where the more the respondents believe the US should intervene and be more active in world affairs, the more they support PGII.<sup>98</sup> Table 6 shows the ACME and ADE for the OM groups. Overall, the result is consistent with Model 3 in that framings do not work in this setting. The contrast (especially the US-centric group) between the MO and OM

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<sup>95</sup> Tingley, Dustin, Teppei Yamamoto, Kentaro Hirose, Luke Keele, and Kosuke Imai. "Mediation: R Package for Causal Mediation Analysis," 2014. <https://dspace.mit.edu/handle/1721.1/91154>.

<sup>96</sup> Based on Table 4, the covariates control variables used here are: age, sex, income level, and previous connection with the continent, and education level.

<sup>97</sup> Chaudoin, Gaines, and Livny, 2021.

<sup>98</sup> Note that the proportion mediated is negative, suggesting the existence of a suppressor variable. In this case, receiving the MO US-centric framing may reduce the support level toward PGII and also decreases people's support level toward more intervention. However, less intervention (mediator variable here) may actually increase the support of PGII, making the mediator a suppressor variable. For negative mediated proportion values, other explanations include ACME opposes ADE (mediator and treatment works the opposite way) and the existence of competing pathways. Considering the overall R<sup>2</sup> is limited and the fact that the treatment only works of the MO US group, some negative proportion numbers are expected.

groups and the fact that intervention is a valid mediator in the MO groups (for Republicans) but not in OM groups and trust in politicians is a significant mediator in the OM groups (also for Republicans) but not MO groups highlight the importance of taking the order of the mediation block into consideration when detecting direct and indirect effects of the treatment.

Although most ACMEs are insignificant across party identities, rejecting my Hypothesis 3, the significant results of some ADEs across party identities again suggest that party identity does play a role in shaping people's support level toward PGII. The interaction between some mediator variables (used as control variables for MO groups) and party identity does matter, and it indicates some information that may be buried away in OLS regression. For instance, in Model 4, patriotism is not a significant predictor, but this variable shows a significant direct effect for Republicans in both MO US and MO Africa groups. Another suggestive evidence would be the direction of the ACMEs. For instance, the identity variable where the larger number of ACME and ADE for the Republicans suggests that a stronger sense of identity threat (the US as the world leader) leads to a higher level of support toward a closer engagement between the US and Africa and this causal path is stronger for the Republicans. This is partly in line with my Hypothesis 3b. However, this ACME effect is not significant. Same for some of my other Hypothesis 3, where the direction of the effect aligns with my expectation, but the difference is not significant.

Table 5 Causal Mediation Analysis, MO Groups

			MO China	MO US	MO Africa
Identity	ACME	Republican	-0.01	0.04	0.02
		Independent	-0.07	0.00	0.00
		Democratic	-0.07	0.00	0.02
	ADE	Republican	0.05	0.49***	0.06
		Independent	-0.17	0.36	0.37
		Democratic	-0.03	0.43***	0.05

		MO China	MO US	MO Africa	
Patriotism	Total Effect	Republican	0.04	0.53***	0.08
		Independent	-0.24	0.36	0.36
		Democratic	-0.09	0.43***	0.07
	Proportion Mediated	Republican	0.02	0.07	0.05
		Independent	0.19	0.00	0.01
		Democratic	0.36	0.01	0.12
	ACME	Republican	0.00	0.00	0.00
		Independent	-0.04	-0.04	-0.03
		Democratic	0.00	0.01	0.01
ADE	Republican	0.08	0.53***	0.08*	
	Independent	-0.20	0.38***	0.40	
	Democratic	-0.10	0.43	0.06	
Total Effect	Republican	0.09	0.54***	0.08	
	Independent	-0.24	0.34***	0.37	
	Democratic	-0.11	0.44	0.07	
Proportion Mediated	Republican	0.00	0.00	0.00	
	Independent	0.11	-0.08	-0.06	
	Democratic	0.01	0.02	0.02	
Intervention	ACME	Republican	0.02	0.05***	0.10
		Independent	-0.09	0.08	0.05
		Democratic	-0.07	-0.03	0.02
	ADE	Republican	0.05	0.48***	-0.02
		Independent	-0.157	0.27	0.32
		Democratic	-0.03	0.47	0.05
	Total Effect	Republican	0.07	0.53***	0.08
		Independent	-0.245	0.34	0.36
		Democratic	-0.10	0.44	0.07
Proportion Mediated	Republican	0.10	0.10	0.38	
	Independent	0.267	0.19	0.12	
	Democratic	0.38	-0.07	0.13	
Trade	ACME	Republican	0.00	0.00	0.00
		Independent	0.00	0.00	0.00
		Democratic	-0.02	0.01	-0.02
	ADE	Republican	0.08	0.54***	0.07
		Independent	-0.24	0.00	0.37
		Democratic	-0.08	0.42	0.08
	Total Effect	Republican	0.08	0.54***	0.08
		Independent	-0.24	0.00	0.37
		Democratic	-0.10	0.44	0.06

			MO China	MO US	MO Africa
Trust in Politicians	Proportion Mediated	Republican	0.00	0.00	0.00
		Independent	0.00	0.00	0.00
		Democratic	0.07	0.03	-0.04
	ACME	Republican	0.00	0.00	-0.03
		Independent	0.03	0.03	0.03
		Democratic	-0.01	-0.01	0.02
	ADE	Republican	0.08	0.53***	0.12
		Independent	-0.26	0.33	0.32
		Democratic	-0.09	0.45***	0.05
Total Effect	Republican	0.09	0.53***	0.08	
	Independent	-0.23	0.35	0.35	
	Democratic	-0.10	0.44***	0.08	
Proportion Mediated	Republican	0.03	0.00	-0.05	
	Independent	-0.05	0.05	0.06	
	Democratic	0.04	-0.02	0.08	
China Threat	ACME	Republican	0.00	0.00	0.00
		Independent	0.01	0.00	0.00
		Democratic	-0.05*	-0.04	-0.02
	ADE	Republican	0.08	0.53**	0.07
		Independent	-0.26	0.35***	0.38
		Democratic	-0.06	0.47	0.09
	Total Effect	Republican	0.08	0.53	0.07
		Independent	-0.25	0.35***	0.39
		Democratic	-0.11	0.43	0.07
Proportion Mediated	Republican	0.00	0.00	0.00	
	Independent	-0.01	0.00	0.00	
	Democratic	0.23	-0.09	-0.04	

*Significant at \* 0.1  $\alpha$  level, \*\* 0.05  $\alpha$  level, \*\*\* 0.01  $\alpha$  level*

Table 6 Causal Mediation Analysis, OM Groups

			OM China	OM US	OM Africa
Identity	ACME	Republican	-0.06	0.08	0.01
		Independent	0.04	-0.03	0.08
		Democratic	-0.04	-0.04	-0.02
	ADE	Republican	-0.30	-0.04	-0.39
		Independent	0.52**	0.16	0.13
		Democratic	0.01	0.01	-0.13
	Total Effect	Republican	-0.36*	0.04	-0.38
		Independent	0.54**	0.13	0.22
		Democratic	-0.03	-0.03	-0.16

			OM China	OM US	OM Africa
Proportion Mediated	Republican		0.17	0.21	-0.01
	Independent		0.07	0.01	0.21
	Democratic		0.10	0.11	0.12
ACME	Republican		-0.02	-0.01	-0.01
	Independent		0.01	0.01	0.03
	Democratic		0.03	-0.04	0.00
ADE	Republican		-0.34*	0.04	-0.36
	Independent		0.54**	0.11	0.18
	Democratic		-0.06	0.01	-0.15
Total Effect	Republican		-0.36*	0.03	-0.37
	Independent		0.55**	0.13	0.21
	Democratic		-0.03	-0.02	-0.14
Proportion Mediated	Republican		0.03	0.00	0.01
	Independent		0.01	0.01	0.08
	Democratic		0.01	0.10	0.01
ACME	Republican		-0.06	0.04	0.02
	Independent		-0.01	-0.05	0.07
	Democratic		0.02	0.01	-0.04
ADE	Republican		-0.31*	-0.00	-0.40*
	Independent		0.55**	0.21	0.15
	Democratic		-0.05	-0.02	-0.12
Total Effect	Republican		-0.37*	0.04	-0.38*
	Independent		0.54**	0.15	0.22
	Democratic		-0.03	-0.01	-0.15
Proportion Mediated	Republican		0.16	0.12	-0.04
	Independent		-0.01	-0.04	0.19
	Democratic		0.03	0.03	0.14
ACME	Republican		-0.02	0.01	-0.02
	Independent		0.08	0.01	0.00
	Democratic		-0.02	-0.02	-0.05
ADE	Republican		-0.34*	0.01	-0.36*
	Independent		0.47**	0.14	0.20
	Democratic		-0.01	-0.00	-0.10
Total Effect	Republican		-0.36*	0.03	-0.38*
	Independent		0.56**	0.15	0.20
	Democratic		-0.04	-0.02	-0.15
Proportion Mediated	Republican		0.06	0.05	0.04
	Independent		0.14	0.03	0.03
	Democratic		0.08	0.06	0.24
ACME	Republican		0.04	0.09*	0.05

		OM China	OM US	OM Africa		
Trust in Politicians	Independent	0.03	-0.02	0.01		
		Democrat	0.03	0.00	0.02	
	ADE	Republican	-0.39**	-0.03	-0.40*	
		Independent	0.53**	0.17	0.20	
	Total Effect	Democrat	-0.06	-0.02	-0.15	
		Republican	-0.35*	0.06	-0.35	
	Proportion Mediated	Independent	0.56**	0.15	0.21	
		Democrat	-0.04	-0.02	-0.14	
	China Threat	ACME	Republican	-0.11	0.25	-0.11
			Independent	0.04	-0.01	0.04
		ADE	Democrat	-0.03	0.01	-0.04
			Republican	0.00	0.00	0.00
Total Effect		Independent	0.01	0.02	0.00	
		Democrat	0.00	0.00	0.00	
Proportion Mediated		Republican	-0.37*	0.03	-0.37*	
		Independent	0.54**	0.13	0.21	
Total Effect		Democrat	-0.04	-0.02	0.00	
		Republican	-0.37*	0.03	-0.37*	
Proportion Mediated		Independent	0.55**	0.15	0.22	
		Democrat	-0.03	-0.02	0.00	
Proportion Mediated	Republican	0.00	0.00	0.00		
	Independent	0.01	0.02	0.00		
Proportion Mediated	Democrat	0.00	0.00	0.00		

*Significant at \* 0.1  $\alpha$  level, \*\* 0.05  $\alpha$  level, \*\*\* 0.01  $\alpha$  level*

## 7. Conclusion

Africa plays an essential role in China's foreign policies: since 1991, Africa has been the destination for the Chinese foreign minister's first overseas visit each year, and in the 2022 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), Wang Yi, the Chinese State Councilor, has called on Africa to strengthen their friendship, solidarity, and cooperation for a new era of common development.<sup>99</sup> To counter China's expanding influence on the African continent, the US and its allies have initiated new policies toward Africa to regain their influence. Among those

<sup>99</sup> Yi Wang, "China and Africa: Strengthening Friendship, Solidarity and Cooperation for a New Era of Common Development," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx\\_662805/202208/t20220819\\_10745617.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202208/t20220819_10745617.html).

policies, PGII stands out as the most ambitious and influential. PGII, led by the US and coordinated by G7 members, shows how the US and its allies want to provide an alternative for African and Global South countries when funding infrastructure projects. However, we still lack knowledge of whether the public supports PGII and if the public would find the framing of countering China more compelling than other rationales.

My research suggests that the US public generally supports PGII, but the US-centric framing decreases their support level compared to China-centric and Africa-centric framings. However, emphasizing the goal of countering China and helping Africa would not further increase people's support level. In other words, the politicians may want to downplay the "national interests" argument when introducing and promoting PGII to the public. Furthermore, this framing effect disappears when the treatment is presented alone without triggering people's pre-existing beliefs in the trust in government officials, their support level toward international trade, and other political matters. This suggests that politicians may want to discuss PGII in a broader political context instead of fixating on the goal alone. Furthermore, the treatment effect is largely drawn from the treatment itself instead of traveling through other mediators.

One reason for the ineffectiveness of the Africa-centric framing could be that the nature of PGII already suggests the goal of creating a more prosperous Africa (and other Global South countries), and highlighting this goal would not further gain support. Considering the frequent bipartisan discussion on countering China and how China has become a hot topic in people's daily lives would further weaken the effectiveness of this framing. Saying this, the China-centric and the Africa-centric framings are still more effective than the US-centric framing to gain public support. Furthermore, party identity is essential in measuring people's support level,

where the Democrats are always more likely to support closer African-US engagement, but this issue is not that politically polarized compared with other issues related to China in the US.

The politicians' and policymakers' emphasis on China overlooks the complexities of this issue at the public level. Considering the current US-China rivalry and the fact that public opinion does play a role in shaping and evaluating foreign policies, politicians and policymakers should be careful when articulating their policy objectives at the public level. Their counterparts in China and Africa should also separate the seeming consensus in Washington from the public opinion on this topic. Moreover, my research has implications for other countries and international institutions regarding how to frame their African policies (e.g., the EU's Global Gateway policy). For instance, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, on his trip to Africa, used similar narratives about deepening trade ties with Africa and proposing more collaborations to help Africa (Africa-centric framing), advance German interests on the continent (Germany-centric framing), and counter China (China-centric framing).<sup>100</sup>

In a nutshell, Africa and the broader Global South community are becoming a battleground for China and the US to compete for influence, and politicians in the US have used different framings of the goals of their policies to make their policies more attractive. However, politicians and researchers may want to downplay the importance of how this policy may help with the US interests, and they may not want to overemphasize the effectiveness of Africa-centric and China-centric policy framings to gain further support from the public.

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<sup>100</sup> *Bloomberg.com*. "Germany Woos Africa as Europe Wrestles With China for Influence." May 4, 2023. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-05-04/germany-woos-africa-as-europe-wrestles-with-china-for-influence>.