

African agency and the new foreign policy response to the US's Huawei ban: Evidence from Kenya

CLIFF MBOYA

Abstract

As rivalry between China and the United States (US) for global dominance of the digital landscape intensifies, countries across the globe are responding to the impact, with serious implications for their foreign policy postures. This article extends the concept of rational choice to an examination of strategies directed by China and the US to influence African policy positions. By applying this framework to an examination of the Huawei ban in the US and pressure on its allies to follow suit, the article distinguishes the overriding emphasis of research on global power competition and foreign policy-making on the interests and values of China and the US from an emerging strategy of agency in Kenya. The rational choice perspective enables us to understand what informs Kenya's interests, preferences, choices, and foreign policy decisions in the US Huawei ban. By focusing on the role of domestic factors shaping Kenya's foreign policy choices, we come to see how individuals, local businesses, consumers, interest groups, bureaucracies, and policymakers in Kenya are self-interested rational actors influencing collective action and shaping the country's policy choices rather than passive recipients of great power influences. The article aims to contribute to a strategy of re-centring domestic actors in Kenya's foreign policymaking and exerting their agency in the rivalry between China and the US.

Keywords: U.S-China competition, Huawei ban, digital policy, digital technology, Africa

Introduction

The meteoric rise of China as an economic and military rival to the global dominance of the United States (US) has drawn Africa's Information and Communications Technology (ICT) industry as the latest frontier into the great power global carve-up (Layne, 2008). Driven by interactions between individuals, societies, and economies (Wu, 2020, pp. 1-2), the ICT industry has enormous potential to profoundly influence the global balance of power. As China moves swiftly to assert its technological superiority and control in the digital realm of developing countries (Dollar, 2022), concern by the US and its allies over Beijing's apparent authoritarian tendencies and the state's extensive control over the private sector has been growing (MacKinnon, 2011).

Consequently, the US has been actively implementing measures to contain China's global digital footprint and has called on its international allies to prevent China from establishing an illiberal tech-

nological hegemony (Lim & Ikenberry, 2023; Cheney, 2019). In what has been widely described by commentators as a “tech war” between China and the US for control of the global digital landscape, the US has resorted to isolating and excluding Chinese technology and tech companies from its market and has urged its allies to follow suit. In retaliation, China has initiated a cyber security review of Micron, the leading US producer of memory chips, and blocked all corporate mergers involving US semiconductor companies operating in the Chinese market (Allen, 2023).

In recent years, the tech war between China and the US has been playing out in Africa, where both countries are determined to enhance their digital footprints by investing and expanding digital connectivity through significant investments in digital infrastructure. Because most Chinese tech companies have links to the Chinese state, the US is concerned that Chinese tech businesses operating in the African region could threaten countries’ national security by using cyber strategies and tools to advance the military and security interests of the Chinese government.

Tech tensions between Washington and Beijing and their respective efforts to influence African countries to align with their digital governance values, tech norms, and standards place immense pressure on countries reliant on Chinese and American technology to pick a side. The central concern of this article is the implications of the global tech standoff in Africa for countries’ foreign policy postures. Although existing literature on the China-US tech war has focused on the two countries’ digital interests and strategies, there has been scant analysis of their impact on other countries’ foreign policy postures towards China and the US. Thus, the article aims to offer novel insights into African responses and perspectives on China-US digital competition. The article extends the concept of rational choice to an examination of strategies directed by China and the US to influence African policy positions on the tech war. The rational choice perspective demonstrates how Africa’s policymaking about the China-US tech war is increasingly being shaped by African agency rather than great power influence. By applying this framework to an examination of the Huawei ban in the US and pressure on its allies to follow suit, the article distinguishes the overriding emphasis of research on global power competition and foreign policymaking on the interests and values of the two competing great powers from an emerging strategy of agency in Kenya.

The article finds that Kenya’s response to the US’s Huawei ban has been influenced by Kenya’s national interest and desire for political autonomy. A cost-benefit analysis of the US’s Huawei ban shows that without alternative investments and services, it is not in the interest of Kenya to heed US calls to shun Huawei and its services.

The following section explicates the theoretical framework of the article. Section 3 contextualises the digital standoff between China and the US. Section 4 discusses the polarising effect of the US Huawei ban on developing countries. Section 5 examines Africa’s response to the Huawei ban, while section 6 uses Kenya as a case study to explore its foreign policy posture in the US and China. Section 7 implements a cost-benefit analysis of a potential Huawei ban in Kenya. Section 8 concludes.

Rational choice theory

At the core of rational choice theory is a set of assumptions about human behaviour and social processes to explain social practices and institutional behaviour as rational motivations, expectations, and actions of individual agents. In this theoretical postulate, individual agents are rational insofar as their actions tend to be more or less consistent with their interests and, given what they know about themselves and the world around them, are often tailored to meet their needs and satisfy their

desires (King, 2011). Ontologically, rational choice theory consists of instrumentalism, individualism, and subjectivism. It builds understanding of socio-political relations as instruments created and used by rational agents to pursue their interests and preferences (Neal, 1988).

In political science, rational choice theory can be used to explain public choice and positive political economy (King, 2011). Hechter & Kanazawa (1997) note that collective action is an abiding concern of rational choice research on politics. Following this perspective, rational choice theory is an important vehicle for understanding the behaviour of states/agents and the choices they make in the face of competing strategic options. The political logic is that states possess interests they pursue in their diplomatic engagements with foreign actors; thus, policy choices depend on the utility of external actors. This is especially true for the agent that has several options from which to choose. Even when the state/agent chooses multiple options, the theory suggests that the agent's behaviour is motivated by a cost-benefit analysis.

From a policy perspective, engaging in one-sided diplomacy and cooperation with foreign actors is unsustainable when better alternatives are available precisely because states/agents are rational and motivated by interests. As a result, their political, economic, cultural, and other interests influence decisions on the choice of preferred foreign allies. In extending the theory to the African context, political actors are regarded as collections of interrelated rules and routines that define and construct appropriate behaviour regarding relations between roles and situations. The process involves determining the situation, the role being fulfilled, and the obligations of that role in the situation. Generally, behaviour is based on the logic of appropriateness and justifications are based on the logic of consequentiality (Ostrom et al., 1991). This paper preferred a political economy approach because political and economic costs are measurable and manageable to verify.

Contextualising the US-China great power competition

It is well documented that since the first decade of the 2000s, the world has been in a new era of great power competition characterised by intense rivalry between China and the US. In the context of China's rising global influence, there has been concern in Washington about the threat to American interests and values (Zhao, 2016). Of particular concern to US state officials is the ideological spectre of China's authoritarian values and global control through surveillance, communications, and artificial intelligence (Wong, 2019).

US concerns have led to a China-focused foreign policy approach featuring elements of competition, containment, and constructive engagement (Wong, 2019). A significant turning point came between December 2017 and January 2018 when the American National Security Strategy (NSS) and National Defence Strategy (NDS) were formally redirected to focus on the dynamics of great power competition with China. Countering China's military capabilities became the top priority of the US Department of Defence (DOD) (Congressional Research Service, 2020).

Historically, great power competition was characterised by exclusion or fear of exclusion by each power's international sphere of influence, be it subordinate polities, colonies, or states, including domestic markets. In this stratagem, great power competition pivoted around influencing policies in favour of domestic firms and investors, with the effect of either entirely or partially excluding foreign actors or agents of rival powers in their spheres of influence and control. These divisive, exclusionary tactics can easily carve the world into economic and political zones privileged by rival great powers (Lake, 2018).

Viewed from this perspective, Chinese officials have argued that the US is trying to staunch China's rise (Wong, 2019). However, China's determination to play a more prominent role in the international system suggests that its strategy – of emphasising “information dominance” as key to winning the great power contest - is aimed at displacing the US as the pre-eminent leader in world politics (Mazarr, 2022). Underpinning the strategy are ongoing economic and diplomatic manoeuvres by China to reshape the economic playing field in Eurasia, Africa, and the Middle East through trade and investments to solidify its strategic position (Mazarr, 2022).

In this gargantuan contest, China and the US have taken extreme positions on democracy, global institutions, and internet governance in their courtship of allies, thereby threatening to divide the globe into two competing ideological poles: a US-led versus a Chinese-led world order. Emblematic of the geopolitical carve-up of the world into competing spheres of influence have been bitter disputes over trade, technology, democracy, and human rights (Allison, 2020).

Launched in 2013, The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been China's strongest geopolitical gambit. Through the BRI, China has successfully exerted economic and political influence through massive infrastructure and digital investments on a global scale (Cheney, 2019). In response, the US introduced the Build Back Better World (B3W) initiative in 2021 with the support of its allies in the G7 group of developed countries. The initiative seeks to mobilise democracies and US allies to counter massive BRI investments in developing countries and thereby check China's growing influence (Rana, 2021).

Russel & Berger (2020) point out that the BRI could be interpreted as a dual commercial and military strategy. They delve into the expansion of the BRI into space through the launch of the Beidou satellite network, arguing that venturing into the digital realm through the Digital Silk Road raises questions as to how China may use the technological innovations of the BRI to enhance its influence over recipient states and gain military advantage. They highlight the seemingly overbuilt but underutilised ports along the Indian Ocean as an example of the BRI's covert military ambitions, claiming that the ports appear suitable for potential naval bases rather than commercial operations. While they aver that these concerns justify US warnings against China's activities in other countries, they insist that these countries cannot reasonably be expected to resist China without alternative incentives.

The US's containment measures against China have escalated into various geopolitical actions, including sanctions against Chinese businesses and products that culminated in the US Innovation and Competition Act of 2021. The act seeks to bolster the US's technological innovation capabilities and competitive edge over China through massive subsidies (Berhmann & Elbeshbishi, 2021). In response, Chinese officials, including the country's top legislature, the National People's Congress (NPC), expressed dissatisfaction and virulent opposition to the act saying it “fabricates the China threat theory to preserve the US's global hegemony by seeking to deprive China of its legitimate development rights through technological and economic decoupling” (Wang, 2021).

The polarising effect of the Huawei ban

On May 19, 2019, US president Donald Trump signed an executive order declaring a “national emergency” and promptly blocked US companies from doing business with foreign tech companies that posed risks to US national security. This was amid concerns that the Chinese tech giant Huawei had links with the Chinese government and could potentially use its technologies, particularly smartphone devices, to spy on the US and its allies. Huawei's activities were deemed “contrary to US national security or foreign policy interests” (Hosain, 2019, p. 22).

Umback (2019) explains that communication technologies and networks are not exclusively commercial concerns but also arenas for great power strategic competition. According to Umback (2019), where the technology and company originate from and their relationship with host governments matters as these factors determine information flows and have consequences for coordination, propaganda, intelligence, and espionage.

Huawei is a crucial pillar of the Digital Silk Road component of the BRI, with its advanced 5G network speculated to serve China's civil-military fusion strategy. The 5G network will enable high-speed and high-quality streaming videos to smartphone users and industrial-scale machine-to-machine communication for the first time and facilitate driverless cars. Its military capabilities include autonomous cars, military drones and ancillary military benefits like situational awareness, supply chain efficiencies, and improved command control (Umback, 2021).

A geopolitical turning point was reached when the US's sanctions against Huawei led Washington to pressure its allies worldwide to follow suit. Countries like New Zealand, Australia, Japan, Germany, and the Czech Republic imposed restrictions on the use of Huawei's 5G solutions, citing national security concerns, while others such as Britain, France, and Brazil are still weighing their options on the matter (Panettieri, 2023). In this strategic gambit, policy choices seem to follow not just security concerns but also the development levels of countries and their ability to offset losses resulting from restrictions on Huawei. While many developed economies have banned or restricted Huawei from their 5G networks, developing countries, heavily dependent on Huawei for their ICT and technological advancement through cloud infrastructure and e-government services, are finding it difficult to follow suit (Hillman & McCaplin, 2021). What matters for this article is that many smaller and less powerful developing economies like Singapore and Kenya are starting to caution against the potentially polarising impact of the Huawei ban on countries having to pick a side which, they insist, is not in their respective interests (Ni, 2021).

Consistent with this emerging narrative, Sabatini (2020) argues that the US has attempted to arm-twist its allies into offering an attractive alternative to Chinese technologies and countering the threat Huawei poses. However, the responses of countries have not been linear. For instance, Britain found it difficult to ban Huawei from upgrading its internet infrastructure and instead opted to place limits on government infrastructure, much to the chagrin of the US (Sabatini, 2020). In Brazil and other Latin American countries, the debate on the use of Huawei products and ICT infrastructure has divided opinion on whether to completely ban or limit the use of Huawei products (Panettieri, 2023). An unnamed pro-US government ambassador's view on the matter is instructive: "The US treats us like we're teenagers (when it comes to China), but we can manage our own relations responsibly" (Sabatini, 2020). Sabatini suggests that most Latin American countries, including Chile, Columbia, Ecuador, Panama, and Peru, will likely continue to deepen their relations with China not for ideological reasons but as responsible actors seeking to diversify their economic and diplomatic options to further their interests.

To put that in perspective, the Center for Strategic and International Studies' (CSIS') Reconnecting Asia project identified 70 deals across 41 countries between Huawei and foreign governments and state-owned enterprises for cloud infrastructure and e-government services. Most of the deals were in middle-income countries led by Africa, followed by Asia, the Americas, Europe, and the Middle East (Hillman & McCaplin, 2021). As well as financing from Chinese banks, these countries are lured by Huawei's hard infrastructure packages, including data centres, servers, document digitisation, national ID systems, tax services, crisis communications, and elections (Hillman & McCaplin, 2021). These

critical and beneficial services that developing countries require for their economic and technological advancement will be difficult to abandon without alternatives.

Despite the apparent lure of Huawei, experts and commentators' opposing views on the matter highlight the polarising effect of US-China tech competition. Liu Baochen of the University of International Business and Economics in Beijing advocates supporting innovation, critiquing as "childish" the US's regard for China as a foe (CGTN, 2021). He contends that China-US tech rivalry detracts from the rationale for supporting science and technology as shared infrastructure and software. Similarly, Iain Begg, of the London School of Economics and Political Science, argues that protectionist policy inflections drive the US campaign against Chinese tech companies towards walling off Americans from what they consider to be stiff competition from China (CGTN, 2021).

Much of the debate on trustworthiness has centred on Huawei opponents like Thomas Donahue, who supports the Huawei ban, advocating the use of technological equipment from trusted US sources, while Purdy et al. (2020) argue that those who support the US's Huawei ban and assume that Huawei's European competitors are a trusted alternative are blind-sighted. They contend that banning vendors like Huawei and trusting others like Nokia without assessing and addressing real cyber security risk misses the point: that the selection of a supplier should be based on the quality and reliability of its products. They argue that understanding of the Huawei ban is clouded by geopolitical concerns linked to China's rise economically, militarily, and technologically (Purdy et al., 2020).

African responses to the Huawei ban

A year after the US Huawei ban, US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman, during an official visit to Angola in May 2022, cautioned African countries against using Huawei equipment, citing espionage and sovereignty concerns. She stated that, "We believe that that when countries choose Huawei, they are potentially giving up their sovereignty. They are potentially turning over their data to another country" (Bartlett, 2022).

However, African countries have generally resisted US pressure to delink from Huawei, with the African Union (AU) dismissing spying allegations against Huawei and, instead, questioning their validity. Rwandan President and AU chair at the time, Paul Kagame, quite publicly argued that the US's preoccupation with spying by the Chinese was not a matter of concern to the AU (Biji, 2019). Other African reactions mirrored the AU position. Particularly noteworthy was the Ethiopian Prime Minister who was quoted as saying, "There's nothing to be spied on because the China-Africa relationship is very strategic [and] comprehensive" (Biji, 2019). A more explicit alignment with China was articulated by an anonymous AU official: "The Chinese have nothing to listen to. They have never colonised us. They have supported the struggles of independence on the continent and helped us economically today" (Biji, 2019). The remark was suggestive of the general African posture towards Huawei and security allegations against it.

Even South African president Cyril Ramaphosa weighed in when he made South Africa's choice public in July 2019: "The US has been unable to imagine a better future that goes beyond 4 plus one G. We cannot allow our economy to be contained because of this fight that the US is having and that was created because of jealousy" (Research ICT Africa, 2020, para.9). Ramaphosa's public avowal came soon after South Africa's four main telecom operators with strong links to Huawei warned that shunning Huawei would have "unwanted and damaging consequences" for them (Research ICT Africa,

2020). This position was confirmed by South Africa's ambassador to the BRICS bloc of nations when she affirmed that South Africa will resist US pressure to ban Huawei (Cele & Prinsloo, 2023). Despite pressure from the US to ban Huawei in Africa, Zimbabwe and Senegal commissioned Huawei to build national data centres in February 2021 and June 2021, respectively. Moreover, Huawei is building and planning to build new data centres in African countries such as Tanzania, South Africa, Mozambique, Nigeria, Ghana, Egypt, Cameroon, and Kenya with the ideal of digital sovereignty in focus (Bangwan-deen, 2023).

The case of Kenya's foreign policy posture and national development

Since gaining independence in December 1963, Kenya's foreign policy has been marked by continuity and change. Besides the abiding need to promote the national interest and values codified in the country's founding documents, such as the national constitution and local institutions such as parliament, personal idiosyncrasies and political predispositions of leaders have largely shaped Kenya's foreign policy posture since independence (Kaburu, 2020). Like most jurisdictions worldwide, the Presidency has wielded immense influence in the conduct of Kenya's foreign relations (Anyona, 2019). As a constitutional democracy, the Office of the President is responsible for shaping strategies that promote the national interest abroad with the support of diplomats in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the National Assembly.

In 2014, Kenya issued its first written foreign policy document to guide its international relations policy and diplomatic engagements. Underpinning the policy are five pillars, namely economic, peace, environmental, cultural, and the diaspora, aimed at giving citizens a more significant say in Kenya's foreign policymaking and implementation process (Republic of Kenya, 2014).

Kenya's US foreign policy posture

After Kenya gained independence, the US was one of the first countries to establish diplomatic relations as part of its Cold War strategy to staunch the spread of communism in Africa. However, Kenya maintained a non-alignment policy to circumnavigate the two competing global powers (Howell, 1968).

When the Cold War ended in 1989-91, the US aggressively promoted market-based policies, political pluralism, and a human rights agenda in Kenya. In this post-Cold War context, security cooperation has remained a key pillar of Kenya-US relations, especially in the fight against terrorism. Beginning with the 1998 bombing of the US Embassy in Kenya and the 9/11 terror attacks in New York, Kenya has supported the US-led global war on terror and worked closely with Washington to counter the threat of the Al-Shabaab terrorist group and stop frequent incursions by Somali Islamic extremists into Kenya (Prestholdt, 2011).

In 2013, Kenya-US relations ran aground after the US and its allies threatened unspecified consequences for Kenya if former President Uhuru Kenyatta and current President William Ruto - then facing charges at the International Criminal Court for the 2008 post-election violence in the country - were elected to the Presidency. In March 2013, the pair were elected President and Deputy President, respectively. The Presidency has primarily perceived the US's actions towards Kenya as overreaching, thus setting Kenya on a course towards political and economic autonomy from the US (Brown & Raddatz, 2014).

Kenya's China foreign policy posture

Some analysts have argued that Kenya's break with the US strongly incentivised Kenyatta's administration to look to China for alternative development financing (Raghavan, 2013). Just as Kenya's independence bears the imprints of a strategic partnership with the US, 1963 signalled the start of productive bilateral relations with China. The 21st century expanded and deepened relations between the two countries when, in 2002, Mwai Kibaki was elected Kenya's President. Kibaki's first order of business was an open economic policy approach towards foreign capital inflows and investments. Wary of the restrictive and conditional financing models of Kenya's traditional development partners in Europe and North America, Kibaki turned to emerging markets in Asia in what was described as a "Look East" policy (Cerere, 2015).

Although nominally tied to the US, Kenya began forging closer economic relations with China. Unlike the US's political and financial conditions, China's diplomacy was built on a policy of non-interference, mutuality, and equality. Infrastructure development was a key pillar of Kenya's economic relations with China during Kibaki's term of office, resulting in the rollout of many infrastructure projects between 2002 and 2013 (Otele & Etyang, 2019).

Driven by the desire to improve its economic well-being, Kenya has since courted China for development support. Since 2000, Kenya has received development financing from China, most of which has been directed at developing railways, ports, roads, and energy infrastructure. An estimated 400 Chinese enterprises are operational in the capital, Nairobi, providing approximately 40,000 job opportunities for locals (Wanjiku, 2018). China has also financed and significantly contributed to developing Kenya's ICT and digital infrastructure.

The central fulcrum of China's digital partnership with Kenya is Huawei. The pivotal role of Huawei is evident in its partnership with Kenya's ICT Authority to promote ICT literacy and capacity, ICT infrastructure development, access to devices and the internet, and ICT research, innovation, and enterprise development (ICT Authority, 2023). Huawei also oversees the implementation of the National Optic Fibre Backbone Infrastructure Extension Project (NOFBI) that will link 47 counties in Kenya. Its considerable investments in the country cover digital infrastructure and include training in its ICT academy programmes (Calzati, 2020). These strategic and economic ties partly explain why Kenya has repeatedly spurned US efforts to undermine Huawei's construction of Kenya's information systems. It lays bare the tightrope Nairobi has to walk in managing the growing great power rivalry between China and the US.

In order to understand the political and economic implications of Kenya's relations with China and the US, the costs and benefits of a ban on Huawei in Kenya are examined in the subsequent section. Cost-benefit analysis of a potential Huawei ban in Kenya. In March 2022, a 15,000-kilometre PEACE (Pakistan and East Africa Connecting Europe) undersea cable arrived at Kenya's seaport city of Mombasa (Nyabiage, 2022). Huawei's role in implementing the NOFBI is a central pivot of the PEACE cable. The fibre network is estimated to reach more than 220,000 homes and 17,000 businesses in various towns in Kenya (Kivuva, 2019).

Huawei is at the heart of Kenyan's technological drive and is already implementing the Konza Technopolis project, which began in 2008. The project is part of Kenya's Vision 2030 national plan to establish "technology-intensive and high-tech industries in ICT, biotechnology and e-commerce". Vi-

sion 2030 was conceived by both the ICT ministry in Kenya and Huawei. Huawei expected to deliver a cloud data centre, smart ICT network, Public Safe City, and Smart Traffic Solution (Moss, 2019). These projects are complemented by extensive training under the “Huawei Seeds for the Future” program to train young Kenyans in ICT skills in partnerships with universities and academics to prepare Kenyans for the digital economy (UNESCO, 2022).

These articulations and interventions are not confined to fibre and skills. A more significant measure of the infusion of Huawei's technologies into the capillaries of everyday life in Kenya is the smartphone market, where Huawei enjoys a relatively huge market share for relatively low-cost and high-performance handset devices. Handsets account for approximately 7.44% of Huawei's vendor market share, behind other popular Chinese brands such as Techno, Infinix, and Oppo (Kivuva, 2019). Huawei is also the main driver of Kenya's 5G revolution, having been contracted as the major vendor by Kenya's largest telecommunications company, Safaricom, in March 2021 to roll out its 5G network along with the Nokia company (Miriri, 2021).

In addition, Kenya's revolutionary M-Pesa mobile payment service by Safaricom runs on Huawei's network and support system, as significant banks in the country rely on its networks for their digital banking services (Ravenscroft, 2023). In recent years, Huawei diversified its product portfolio to include data archiving, backup, and recovery services, supporting a vast market of enterprises and consumers in the country. Huawei's latest country report, ‘Huawei Kenya Sustainability Report 2018’, showcases the company's rollout of over 4,000 kilometres of fibre optic network cables in the country with 3,500 mobile base stations that account for 62% of the country's base stations and serve millions of customers across the country (Huawei Kenya Sustainability Report, 2018).

Against this backdrop, there has rightly been concern in the country since the US ban on Huawei over the economic costs to Kenya of severing ties with Huawei. The Star, a major newspaper in the country, captured the public mood when it published an opinion piece under the headline, Kenya should not get sucked into Huawei security scare. The article described the US's Huawei ban as “absurd”. It went on to urge the Communication Authority of Kenya (CAK) to “ascertain that local telecom companies do not get sucked into this fake security scare. Safaricom, Airtel and Telkom Kenya should be allowed to buy whatever equipment they think is best for 5G in Kenya” (The Star, 2020).

Concerns that Safaricom's parent company, Vodacom in the UK, would compel Safaricom to take action against Huawei were heightened after October 13, 2022, when the UK succumbed to US pressure to renege on its decision to allow Huawei to provide 35% of its new 5G network. Instead, the UK decided to remove all Huawei equipment from its 5G network by 2027 (Reuters, 2022). However, despite stating that Safaricom would follow guidelines from its principal shareholders in Britain and South Africa, acting CEO Michael Joseph was quick to affirm that, “We will use Huawei in 5G ... What will we do in terms of the American statements about not using Huawei? We don't have that situation in Africa” (Miriri, 2020). The statement followed former Safaricom CEO Bob Collymore's very public stance that uprooting the network infrastructure laid by Huawei and installing new equipment from other vendors would likely result in losses running into billions that Safaricom was unprepared to bear (Frankline, 2019).

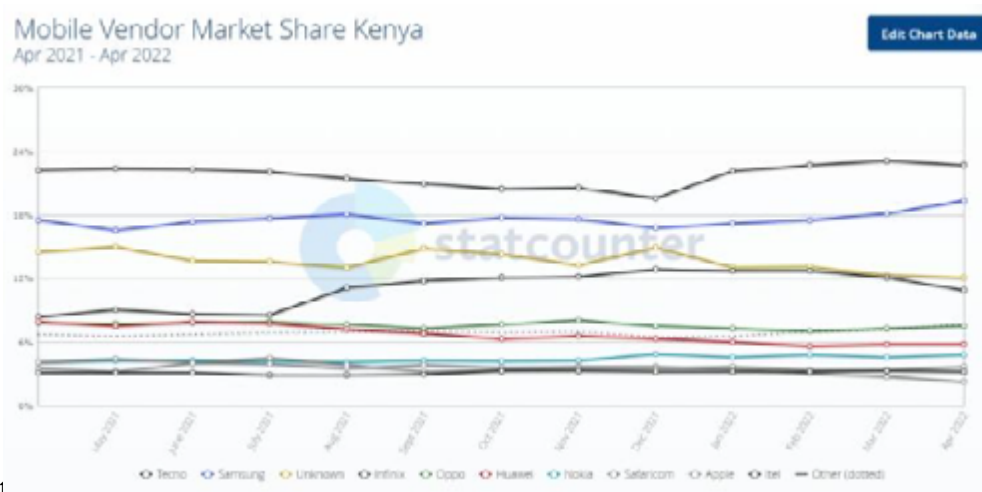
Kenyan ICT Minister Joe Mucheru initially appeared non-committal when he said it was up to telecoms operator Safaricom, not the Kenyan government, to decide whether or not to use Huawei equipment. However, he affirmed the government's position, stating, “I have not seen any letter or

document about stopping the project, and we cannot stop even if we are asked to do so. We are an independent country” (Munda & Njau, 2020).

At the core of these statements is a dominant narrative which suggests that Kenya is unlikely to heed US calls to stop using Huawei equipment and technology. The inconvenience of not having popular US apps pre-installed on Huawei smartphones may have been an initial concern for Huawei customers. However, concerns such as these were soon allayed when it emerged that Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram could be installed.

The costs to Huawei of the US ban are nonetheless a potential cost to Kenya. According to Ken Abuya, an enterprise and mobile technology expert, “Huawei has not been doing well on the smartphone front following the US ban” (Abuya, 2021). Data from Statcounter Global Stat in Figure 1, a reliable Dublin-based web traffic analysis website, shows that Huawei’s mobile vendor market share dropped marginally from 7.9% to 5.75% between April 2021 and April 2022, confirming that the ban slowed down its handset sales in Kenya.

Figure 1: Huawei’s mobile market share (April 2021 – April 2022)



Source: Statcounter

Conclusion

This paper has explored how African countries respond to intensifying US-China tech rivalry and the US ban on Huawei. It shows that African countries’ policy responses are increasingly driven by African agency rather than great power influence. Using Kenya as a case study, the article utilised rational choice theory to show the cost-benefit implications of a potential Huawei ban in Kenya to justify the country’s policy response. Despite the strategic intent of the ban to curb the growth of Huawei’s digital footprint worldwide, the absence of viable investment alternatives to meet Kenya’s digital needs has not justified the economic and political costs of complying with the US ban.

The analysis found that Huawei’s entrenchment in the Kenyan market has meant that severing ties would inflict a heavy economic cost on the country and derail its digital economy plans and connectivity drive. In considering the salience of Huawei in propelling Kenya’s ICT development, the benefit to Kenya of Huawei’s facilitation of access to high-quality, affordable digital infrastructure and services far outweighs the cost of the ban. The economic incentives certainly outweigh America’s security con-

cerns, often exaggerated and undergirded by geopolitical motives.

The validity of US concerns in the context of the tech war with China remains murky, leaving countries like Kenya with no option but to leverage Huawei's potential to deliver its digital goals as the only rational choice. The economic stakes are very high for the country's myriad domestic actors, including state departments, telecommunication companies, millions of customers, and students who rely on Huawei's technology and services. The findings suggest that it would be irrational not to consider the interests of local actors for whom the security allegations against Huawei are a minor concern.

From a broad foreign policy perspective, Kenya has merely followed a trajectory since independence of non-alignment and a desire for political and economic autonomy that prioritises the national interest over great power politics. Thus, Kenya's prioritisation of technological and economic development, measured by the costs of alignment with the US, has justified compliance with the Huawei ban.

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