

Developing digital peripheries for strategic advantage: Competitive cyber capacity building assistance initiatives in Africa (Julia Carver)

Amidst escalating geopolitical competition and fears of weaponized interdependence, cyber capacity building assistance has climbed the foreign policy agendas of both weak and powerful actors. Yet, conventional wisdom about cyber capacity building (CCB) assistance implies a strategic conundrum: on the one hand, CCB assistance is held to be crucial for improving the recipient's autonomy and security in cyberspace. On the other hand, three major providers of such assistance—the United States, the EU, and China—have been accused of benefiting from the same network vulnerabilities that these programmes aim to redress. Therefore, this paper asks, how do powerful donors perceive CCB assistance provisions to developing states as shaping their strategic advantage? Further, what factors have shaped variation in donors' provision of CCB assistance to developing states? I argue that CCB assistance is a new and increasingly popular form of strategic alignment which has been used to reconfigure or maintain networked asymmetries in the donor's favour. To probe the plausibility of this argument, I undertake a qualitative analysis of primary source documents and elite interviews to assess American, EU, and Chinese provision of CCB assistance to African states. My analysis supports this argument, and further shows these donors have adopted different strategies of assistance to encourage favourable structural alignments with the recipient. Three mediating factors help to explain their different strategies of assistance: the donor's relative access to and control over the intermediary provider, their normative approach to development, and the locus of geopolitical competition. Ultimately, this paper reveals how CCB assistance can be instrumentalized to shape the hard and soft infrastructural conditions for strategic advantage.