Even sovereignist rulers need foreign friends: how political leaders in Africa design external engagement for domestic legitimacy

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Abstract

All political regimes, even autocracies, require some degree of legitimacy to rule. To this end, political leaders employ various legitimation mechanisms. Although most such mechanisms are domestic, scholars increasingly acknowledge external processes can also play a role. Yet, this external dimension remains under-researched due to data constraints. After outlining how leaders' international engagement contributes to domestic legitimacy and how the design of such engagement – particularly the choice of foreign partners – matters, we focus on how sovereignist leaders, who rhetorically emphasize self-(re)assertion and national autonomy, reconcile this stance with the need for external legitimation. We test our argument using original data on all international diplomatic visits made by African leaders in 1990-2022, which serves as a proxy for their external legitimation activities. Africa presents a highly-relevant context due to its variation in sovereignist discourse and post-colonial foreign relations. Our findings reveal that as sovereignist claims intensify, rather than reducing external engagement, sovereignist leaders reconfigure their partnerships by increasingly distancing themselves from former colonial powers. However, this shift does not indicate a broader disengagement from other advanced economies or emerging powers. Instead, sovereignist leaders remain aware of the reputational advantages associated with maintaining public engagement with various global actors.

Keywords: Africa; external partners; legitimation; sovereignism; visits

9,994 words

Introduction

In his nearly three-decade rule in Rwanda, President Paul Kagame has kept an impressive record of interactions with foreign leaders, earning him the nickname of "busy traveller". Such engagement has indeed produced numerous foreign investments and security agreements. Even when short of direct material results, it has hit the domestic headlines just the same, substantiating the President's protagonism in regional and global politics (The New Times 2025). Although not every president can or want to eventually engage internationally so frequently, Kagame's example sheds light on the role that international engagement can play for some leaders in signalling their legitimacy to domestic audiences.

Any leader, in any political regime, requires a certain degree of legitimacy to rule and survive (Burnell 2006; Kailitz 2013; Gerschewski 2013; Dukalskis and Gerschewski 2017). In democracies, elected rulers' entitlement to rule is generally built on the fact that it originates from their successful participation in a free and fair electoral process, yet is not limited to that. They also resort to other discourses, narratives and activities that can help validate their right to rule in the eyes of domestic audiences. Even authoritarian rulers, besides repression and cooptation, eventually use them. Although most such mechanisms are domestic, as they leverage domestic socio-economic performance, ideological traits, leadership skills, scholars agree that external processes also play an important role (Schatz 2006; Hoffmann 2015; Von Soest and Grauvogel 2017; Pak et al 2020).

External legitimation mechanisms consist of a regime's reference to externally-oriented activities through or from the international arena to legitimate its domestic rule. In their dynamic, they are two-level games in which the domestic and international reinforce each other (Putnam 1988; Wajner 2022). Such activities that they perform, and refer to, can include meetings with world leaders, the provision of mediation or peace-building services abroad, the chairing of regional and international organizations, as well as the hosting of international events, to name a few. External legitimation differs from "external legitimacy", a form of legitimacy in its own right referring to the formal recognition by the international community of a country's right to exist (Burnell 2006). External legitimation can certainly target international audiences too, to underscore a regime's "legitimate place" in the international community (Schatz 2006, 271). Yet, as their related activities are invariably reported by state media back to domestic audiences, the latter also remains a preeminent target of such endeavours.

Despite its acknowledged role in regime legitimation, this external dimension has received comparatively less attention in the political science literature, not least because of operationalisation challenges. Data availability has been a major obstacle to its large-scale empirical investigation. Expert-based legitimation measures with broad time and geographical scope, such as those recently developed by the V-Dem project (Coppedge et al. 2024; Tannenberg et al. 2021) sidelined this dimension outright. Exceptions such as their precursor, Von Soest and Grauvogel (2017)'s dataset, remain limited in time and space, while

works based on observational measures focus only on single or few case studies (Schatz 2006; Hoffman 2015).

Limited in scope as they are, these studies nonetheless show that research on legitimation strategies, including external ones, is in fact substantively important, as it can help explain why some regimes are able to resist internal and external pressure (Grauvogel and von Soest 2014; Wajner 2022). Claims to legitimacy, their strength, and their nature therefore matter and, to expand such results, it is worth exploring this dimension further. To that end, this article speaks to several such literatures that, from different angles, examine how performances abroad can reinforce legitimacy at home, and vice versa. These include comparativist work on international legitimation strategies (Hoffman 2015; Dukalskis and Gerschewski 2017; Von Soest and Grauvogel 2017), International Relations (IR) scholarship on two-level games (Putnam 1988), and visits-focused research (Malis and Smith 2021; Balci et al 2025). More specifically, our argument speaks to the emerging body of work from within this multi-faceted research space that, focusing on select leader types, investigates not only the rationale behind such "way-out" strategies but also the mechanisms through which they operate, for instance, by forming populist alliances or confronting delegitimizing enemies abroad (Wajner 2022).

Relative to this emerging body, our contribution is both theoretical and methodological. Theoretically, in delineating the underlying mechanism, we focus on the identity of foreign partners involved in such external engagements, as leaders choose partners whose engagement with would not undermine their legitimation quest. This is especially the case for sovereignist leaders who, as explained in detail below, need to reconcile their need for external engagement with their self-(re)assertion rhetoric. To theorise about our partner-selectivity dimension in their way-out strategies, we leverage the African context and specifically how postcolonial dynamics – the colonial-power specificity of distancing, the conditioning role of alternative trade partners, the prominence of intra-African visits – shape the design of external engagement. Africa provides insightful cases, especially because of its internal variety, including regarding sovereignist discourses, and allows us to expand this research field to often under-researched Global South cases (Balci et al 2025).

Methodologically, we depart from both existing IR two-level game research, which has relied primarily on case studies or small-N comparisons, and from major comparativist works which, when going beyond case studies, have drawn on large-scale expert-coded data. Given our aim of large-N analysis and the above-mentioned lack of large-scale expert-coded data on this external dimension, we instead turn to the diplomatic visits scholarship, using incoming and outgoing visits by regime leaderships as an empirical proxy for such externally-oriented engagements. Visits capture most of the possible expansive externally-oriented activities that leaders can perform and leverage to boost legitimacy (Malis and Smith 2021), and the original dataset we assembled covers all the visits made by African leaders in 1990-2022.

Our article proceeds as follows. The following section reviews the literature on regime legitimation and the strategies used to measure it empirically. We then outline the mechanism through which externally-oriented activities can translate into domestic legitimacy and introduce our alternative to expert-coded approaches, focusing on international visits and building on the visits-based literature. Finally, we apply this to African cases using new data on African leaderships' international visits over three decades (1990-2022), testing differences across varying levels of sovereignism. Our findings reveal that, as sovereignist claims intensify, leaders do not reduce external engagement, rather change their foreign partners, increasingly distancing themselves from former colonial powers, particularly where alternatives are available. However, this shift does not signal broader disengagement from other advanced economies or a consistent de-westernization trend, as recent literature has discussed (Ben Hammouda 2024). This suggests sovereignist leaders remain aware of the reputational advantages associated with maintaining public engagement with various global actors, including so-called western ones. Overall, this study contributes to a better understanding of the relationship between external legitimation, sovereignist politics, and shifting global alignments.

The external dimension of regime legitimation

A review of the literature on legitimation

It is now widely believed that, to ensure political survival, any regime requires and seeks some degree of legitimacy and support (Gerschewski 2013; Isaacs and Frigerio 2019). Even authoritarian regimes do not rely on repression alone, but leverage cooptation and, indeed, legitimation mechanisms alongside it. Following this literature, we define legitimation mechanisms as claims to legitimacy, namely all those processes through which governments seek to procure and maintain legitimacy (Ansell 2001; Hoffmann 2015). So defined, research on legitimation mechanisms focuses on the actual empirical strategies that governments publicly use to justify their right to rule, rather than on the normative evaluation of that right.

Various theoretical efforts have tried to identify and categorize such legitimation mechanisms. Dukalskis and Gerschewski (2017) highlighted four main ones through which political regimes try to substantiate their right to rule: ideological indoctrination, performance, passivity, and the democratic-procedural mechanism, which is the one primarily leveraged by democracies. Although indoctrination also acknowledges the role of external enemies and can thus employ an external scapegoat rhetoric, the external dimension is not presented as a category in its own right in their framework. Von Soest and Grauvogel (2017) proposed a different categorization which, following Easton (1965) and distinguishing between identity-based and output-based legitimation strategies, theorized that leaders also seek legitimacy through international activities, performances and roles. Acknowledging that "this has hardly been considered in a systematic fashion" by the extant research (2017, 5), they define the external dimension as a distinct category, separate from performance-, procedure-, and identity-based legitimation strategies, while noting that it can cut across all

of them in multidimensional configurations. The two-level dynamic underlying this external legitimation category, in which the domestic and the international reinforce each other, connects directly with the classic IR framework of two-level games (Putnam 1988) and with more recent work on how leaders, particularly populist ones, use external engagements strategically as "way-out" strategies to consolidate domestic support (Wajner 2022).

Von Soest and Grauvogel's contribution was not only theoretical but also empirical, as they supervised an original, albeit not globally comprehensive, expert survey on the legitimation strategies used by selected autocratic regimes and electoral democracies, addressing a methodological gap in a field previously reliant on anecdotal and case-based accounts, given the difficulties in operationalising not only legitimacy, but also legitimation mechanisms themselves (Gilley 2009). Their data collection had some limitations, however: with regimes as unit of analysis, the output of their expert survey was necessarily time invariant, assuming the same mechanisms applied with the same intensity throughout a regime's duration; robustness was instead limited by the small number of experts interviewed per regime; the scope was also restricted to a single post-Cold-War period regime per country and liberal democracies were excluded.

Improvements in this regard were introduced by Tannenberg and colleagues (2021) who, building on Von Soest and Grauvogel (2017), introduced four yearly expert-coded measures of regime legitimation strategies (RLS)[1] for more than 180 countries, from 1900 onwards, through the V-Dem datasets (Coppedge et al. 2024), covering ideology, the personal skills of the leader, performance, and rational-legal procedures. This systematic, yearly expert evaluation has opened significant opportunities for comparative empirical analysis (Aly 2025). However, the external category that some of those authors did theoretically conceive in earlier work was not included. As a result, extant expert-coded research on regime legitimation has yet to provide a large-scale comparative analysis of external legitimation mechanisms, let alone one attentive to the identity of partners involved therein.

How external engagement translates into domestic legitimacy

External legitimation mechanisms specifically refer to rulers' quest to draw domestic legitimacy from the international realm (Hoffman 2015). Indeed, rulers and their governments reference externally-oriented activities in order to signal legitimacy to domestic audiences, whether the ruling elite, the opposition, the selectorate, or the broader population.

[1] The literature has primarily focused on *regime* legitimation strategies rather than on *leader* strategies. We also use this *regime* label because some of our operational measures assume this perspective and, in practice, these terms often overlap. Indeed, one of our key operational indicators derives from V-Dem's RLS variables, where questions to coders are centred on "governments". Because in many world regions, especially where presidential systems abound, such as Africa, Asia and America, executive authority is concentrated and governments' actions and rhetoric are closely identified with their incumbent leaders, in such cases (which our work focuses on, as explained below) using regime-level RLS indicators maps closely to leader-level claims as well, so we can treat regimes and leaders almost interchangeably.

Here, we clarify the value of this external dimension for regime leaderships, explain how it can translate into domestic legitimacy, and identify the factors that shape its design.

A useful initial distinction is between the two sub-categories identified by Hoffman (2015), namely expansive and defensive external legitimation strategies. While the former involves proactive engagement to generate domestic legitimacy through or from the international arena, the latter involves portraying a foreign actor as a threat to national sovereignty, leveraging such interference to rally domestic support, as documented for instance in the sanctions literature (Thyne et al 2017; Von Soest 2024). Defensive strategies can also involve labelling domestic opponents as agents of foreign interference: in such cases, the enemy is domestic, from within, but portrayed as a bridgehead for external threats and interference. For example, in the run-up to the 2023 Democratic Republic of the Congo general election, the incumbent Félix Tshisekedi's campaign labelled his main challenger, Moise Katumbi, as "a foreigner […] in bed with Rwanda" (The Economist 2024), a charge that resonated strongly within most of the Congolese electorate given widespread resentment towards Rwanda's interference in eastern Congo. Our research focuses primarily on expansive external legitimation mechanisms, which constitute the broadest array of external legitimation tools (Hoffman 2015, 558).

From the perspective of rulers, expansive engagements should signal their right to rule to domestic audiences. This expectation builds on findings from previous works showing that international activity can serve legitimating functions (Malis and Smith 2021), including for populist governments (Destradi 2021; Tas 2022). Focusing on the latter, recent research has started examining the operative mechanisms through which such leaders pursue "way-out" strategies that use international positioning to consolidate domestic standing (Wajner 2022). Building on this research, we outline the underlying mechanism as follows. When leaders meet a foreign peer or participate in an international meeting, to sign a deal or mediate disputes, they convey the image of someone who has support from foreign peers, who participates actively in the international community, who even contributes to its prosperity and stability, or who procures benefits for their population. This logic is activated irrespective of the material benefit attached to such engagements, because it is the symbolic and reputational capital that any such engagement can bring that eventually matters to build an external legitimation effort. Indeed, all these images are relayed to the domestic population through state media, whose task is to report back on all official international activities the leader is involved in.

Media publicity is therefore central to this mechanism. Our attention to media coverage builds on existing studies which identified media visibility and framing as key mechanisms through which international activities enhance legitimacy, either arguing that media coverage of foreign policy activity shapes public perceptions of leaders as competent statesmen (Simon and Ostrom 1989) or adding that political actors often act on the presumed influence of media, seeking coverage because they believe it affects citizens and elites (Cohen et al 2008). These works suggest that not all potential visits are inherently legitimizing, but become so

when framed to emphasise the leader as competent, in a way that does not undermine domestic concerns. In our framework, media coverage and symbolic framing are therefore central insofar as leaders need coverage, especially the one of state media which *de iure* and *de facto* follows every official international activity of the leader, to present such engagements as endorsements of their competence to domestic audience. Because leaders know state media will publicize their foreign engagements, if they anticipate that an engagement would not serve their legitimation quest – because it may be framed negatively by media or fail to resonate with domestic concerns – then they either dispatch a lower-level official or keep the activity undisclosed. If they engage personally, instead, it is because they expect that at least state media will frame it positively, or neutrally at worst, and that the domestic audience, upon receiving this image, will be primed to infer that, as the international community approves of the leader's role, so should they.

This logic can unfold across a wide range of activities. Mediating foreign tensions signals the ability of the regime leadership to ensure stability. Meeting foreign peers to sign economic deals or other important treaties not only brings material benefits, but also projects an image of a regime embedded in global networks. In general, travelling to foreign leaders or hosting such visits, especially if by major powers, reinforces the narrative of the regime as a meaningful actor in international affairs. A case in point was the visit that Kenya's President Uhuru Kenyatta received from Pope Francis in 2015, which was widely heralded in the local press as a triumph for Kenyatta and his government (Africa Confidential 2015). Such meetings can also be used in electoral campaign materials to signal incumbents' foreign endorsements (Dzhuraev 2012). Similarly, when done after an electoral success, including at the inauguration ceremony, these "victory laps" can reinforce previous rational-legal legitimation activities (consisting in the successful management and result of the electoral process) in pursuit of additional validation. Participation in regional or international organizations can also provide material and ideational resources that leaders can leverage for domestic survival, with each visit to such events representing an opportunity to signal its international role and prestige at home.

Of course, these activities have their own context-specific operational aims – be it economic and security priorities, ideational and cultural dynamics, international status (Balci and Pulat 2024) – which can certainly coexist. The literature on the determinants of diplomatic visits discussed quite in detail this variety (Goldsmith and Horiuchi 2009; Lebovic and Saunders 2016; Goldsmith et al. 2021; Hoshiro 2021; Koliev and Lundgren 2021; Wang and Stone 2023; Balci and Pulat 2024; Corda and Casiraghi 2025; for a thorough review see Balci et al 2025). Some of these externally-oriented activities also feed other legitimation mechanisms. For example, signing an economic deal with a foreign power (i.e., Ethiopia's Abiy flying to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) soon after inauguration to sign new deals) can boost the economy and consequently generate domestic support, as captured by the performance legitimation mechanism. But because it involves foreign partners, such engagement also represents the external legitimation category. Similarly, mediating regional conflict resolutions, such as Uganda's Museveni hosting Somalia's president to discuss peace and

disputes with Ethiopia, can boost the charisma of the leader, as captured by the personal legitimation mechanism. But, as the previous example, it is also representative of external legitimation. As such, external legitimation can cut across the other legitimation mechanisms.

Arguing that such resource-, peace-, or status- seeking engagements with the outside do not have also an underlying motivation related to signalling legitimacy to domestic audiences misses the intentionality and publicity of these acts. Overall, any such externally-oriented activity done in person by a leader, and that is not held undisclosed, but rather publicly reported by state media back to the domestic audience, is inevitably an intentional act of communication directed to the local population for validation and consequently support. As already noted, if this latent motivation to show the leadership's authority and merit to the citizens were absent, and rather the leader anticipated a specific international engagement would convey a negative image, they would instead either reduce the frequency of visits with that partner, dispatch a lower-level official, or cancel the visit outright. For example, Abiy's deal with the UAE could have been signed by the ambassador in place of himself. If Abiy eventually decided to engage with them firsthand instead, it is because it was also the image that he truly intended to show to gain legitimacy at home. As such, not all potential visits are perceived by leaders as equally beneficial to their standing, as some factors – analysed below – influence these perceptions and the prioritization of partners chosen in the design of one's external engagement activities.

Domestic factors, related to the leaders' personal traits and the nature of their government can influence the use of these external mechanisms. This does not only relate to their physical ability to perform such activities, but also to their ideological commitments, in particular their sovereignist claims. By sovereignism we refer to a political orientation that emphasizes the (re)claiming of political control of the sovereign people within the boundaries of the traditional nation state from illegitimate external interference (Basile and Mazzoleni 2020; Angelucci et al 2025). Different dimensions can be involved in this reclaiming of sovereignty and autonomy from foreign powers, supranational institutions, and conditionalities, such as the political (nationalist claims), economic (protectionist claims), and cultural (multicultural claims) ones. While sovereignism overlaps with the concepts of nationalism and populism, it is analytically broader. As conceptualized by Jenne and colleagues, populism and nationalism are both forms of sovereignism, where nationalist claims emphasize the return of *national* sovereignty (the idealized sovereign being "the nation"), while populist claims emphasize *popular* sovereignty (the idealized sovereign being "the people"). Yet, both rest fundamentally on a sovereignist warrant (Jenne 2021; Visnovitz and Jenne 2021). Indeed, "while sovereignism might exist without populism, there is no populist discourse that does not include sovereignist claims" (Basile and Mazzoleni 2020, 156).

Over the past few years, the intensity with which governments have leveraged sovereignist claims has spread across both Global North and Global South regions. Their behaviour in external engagements deserves specific consideration given that, more than for any others, such leaders need to reconcile sovereignism as a principle of legitimacy based on a rhetoric

of self-(re)assertion of national or popular sovereignty against foreign interference with external legitimation as a principle of legitimacy based on their integration into foreign networks. Recent work on populist leaders' way-out strategies has begun to address this tension empirically (Wajner 2022). Building on it, our starting point, against which we pose our null hypothesis below, is that sovereignist leaders solve this apparent clash not by reducing external engagements outright, but through the strategic choice of foreign partners involved thereby.

Besides domestic factors themselves, in the mechanism of external legitimation we illustrated above, also the identity of the partners leaders engage with is in fact relevant. Partner diversification is a quite overlooked aspect in the legitimation literature, but speaks to its growing adaptation branch that assumes that legitimation claims are not static but can rather change over time (Tannenberg et al 2021). Schatz (2006) showed how Central Asia's autocrats pursued multilateralist foreign engagements, therefore diversifying partners, as a way to emphasise also the regime's ability to "foster tranquillity in a multiconfessional and multiethnic domestic society" (2006, 274). We can expect partner selection and diversification even more manifestly in recent years, which are characterized by rising sovereignty claims across many Global South countries.

These expectations in fact connect closely also with classic and contemporary works on foreign policy autonomy in the Global South, in particular with those which stress its resonance with postcolonial memories of subordination (Benabdallah 2024; Murithi 2024; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2023). Sovereignist leaders in these countries would find beneficial, according to the legitimation mechanism illustrated above, to choose to reduce the involvement with those specific partners who are perceived by the society as negatively influencing or illegitimately interfering in their domestic affairs. Partners perceived this way are often those associated with historical dominance or ongoing interference, whether former colonial powers or hegemonic actors (Afrobarometer 2026). Because engaging with such partners would not resonate with pressing domestic concerns and thus would risk undermining the legitimation efforts of the regime itself, these leaders would expectedly turn to others not only for material benefits, but also to accommodate, when present, the popular discontent towards those who are contested.

Because the most disruptive recent manifestations of such sovereignist claims in response to what was perceived as illegitimate encroachments and neo-colonial influence came from Africa (Carbone 2025; Langan and Price 2025), our empirical focus concentrates on this region. Over the past decade, protests have multiplied across much of Africa, with urban and rural youth alike channelling their dissent primarily against Western targets (de Heredia 2022; Mampilly 2024; Afrobarometer 2026). In some parts of Africa, including Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, and Ethiopia, such popular discontent did eventually push some regimes to "de-westernize", namely to shift away from Western partners, to capitalize on such popular attitudes, and to stress pan-African rhetoric emphasizing priority to regional solidarity (Carbone 2025).

At the same time, however, this shift has been made increasingly viable by the presence of alternative non-traditional partners on the international stage from whom African leaders could draw not only political but also material benefits. The gradual diffusion of power away from the West, traceable to the end of Cold War bipolarity and accelerated in the mid-2000s, has made this increasingly possible, driven in particular by the growing presence on the world stage of China and other rising powers (Li et al. 2024).

Taken together, we propose the following causal chain linking international activity to domestic legitimacy for sovereignist leaders from postcolonial Global South regions:

> historical memory of subordination → societal preference for foreign policy autonomy → leader's rhetorical rejection of external dependency → existence of partner alternatives → partner recalibration away from former colonial powers → enhanced domestic legitimacy.

This chain expands previous visit-based studies that did address the link between international visits and host leaders' domestic legitimacy emphasizing informational mechanisms signalling incumbents' strength or resilience (see Malis and Smith 2021 on the role of US visits; or Balci and Aras 2025 on the role of Russia's visits), by adding postcolonial dynamics and a Global South focus that remains underrepresented in this literature (Balci et al 2025). We therefore build on scholars' recent calls to expand research in this direction (ibidem), to uncover effects unseen in studies focused on major powers. From an empirical point of view, by showing how African sovereignist leaders use visits, we push the visits-based literature beyond major-power studies, as said. Relatedly, from a theoretical point of view, softening the traditional emphasis on the importance of engagement with extra-regional major powers, we emphasize instead also the important role of regional ties (Balci 2024) and colonial history (explored also in McManus and Nieman 2019, if from the major power's perspective) in influencing the way such African leaders design their external engagement. Even though our work eventually does not assess the actual impact of this mechanism on domestic survival or support, our findings still reveal new elements to consider when analysing (sovereignist) Global South leaders' foreign policy activity.

Hypotheses

As our primary interest lies in understanding how sovereignist leaders reconcile external engagement with their self-assertion rhetoric, our hypotheses focus on the interaction between external engagement and the sovereignist nature of governments pursuing such external efforts. In the previous section, we argued that sovereignist claims do not inherently influence the overall propensity for external engagements. Thus, we begin with a null hypothesis, representing the baseline expectation to be tested and potentially rejected by our data:

H_0: as sovereignist rhetoric intensifies, governments reduce external engagements

Rather than limiting engagement itself, we argue instead that sovereignist claims primarily reshape the choice of external partners. Specifically, in the African context, sovereignist leaders may reconcile their self-assertion rhetoric with continued public external engagement by strategically limiting interactions with powers citizens associate with negative influence or illegitimate interference, particularly advanced economies of the Global North, often framed as "the West".

H_{1a}: as sovereignist rhetoric intensifies, governments reduce external engagements with advanced economies

However, in postcolonial regions such as Africa, the primary target of such backlash may not be all advanced economies, but specifically the former colonial power, which domestically is typically associated with the most negative influence.

H_{1b}: as sovereignist rhetoric intensifies, governments do not distance themselves from all advanced economies, but primarily from their former colonial power

Finally, given the deep economic dependencies many African states maintain with former colonial powers, the actual distancing from contested partners may depend on the availability of viable alternatives, particularly economic partners capable of replacing traditional ones.

H_2: as sovereignist rhetoric intensifies, governments' ability to distance themselves from contested partners depends on the availability of alternative economic partners.

Research design

Existing empirical data for investigating current legitimation strategies both comparatively and on large numbers of cases consist only of the expert-coded measures provided by the V-Dem datasets (Tannenberg et al 2021; Coppedge et al 2024). However, measures of external mechanisms of legitimation are not included, as said. We therefore use an alternative methodological approach, based on an observational operationalization of this mechanism. Specifically, we focus on data related to international diplomatic visits as an empirical proxy which, albeit imperfectly comprehensive, captures our domestic legitimation-through-visits mechanism, as most of the externally-oriented activities leaders engage with firsthand entail a visit and are publicly reported back home by at least state media (see **Table 1**).

Data on visits

To this end, we use data on incoming and outgoing visits made by the heads of government or state (HoGSs) of Africa's 54 internationally-recognised sovereign states in 1990-2022.

Such data is drawn from the new Country and Organizational Leader Travel (COLT) dataset (Moyer et al. 2025). Because the data collection is based on open sources, our observations are exclusively publicly-announced, highly-visible, high-level visits reported by the media, which fits our operational strategy well. It is worth noting that such visits may have received different levels of publicity, yet all of them necessarily received some in order to be retrieved by coders. We also recognize that the extent to which recorded visits become politically salient for the legitimation mechanism varies across countries and over time, depending on media freedom and government control. In contexts where state media dominate, as is common across our African sample, announced visits likely receive more extensive and positive coverage than in pluralistic systems. In the empirical analysis, we account for this variation by controlling for democracy, as a measure capturing also the state of media freedom, and by treating COLT events as observable opportunities for external legitimation rather than uniform indicators of realized domestic impact.[2]

Table 1. Externally-oriented activities that can signal the ruler's legitimacy to domestic audiences

	ENTAILS A VISIT
• signing agreements to provide or receive goods and/or services	YES
• providing crisis mediation, negotiation, or peace-building services	YES
• joining, chairing, participating in regional and international organizations	YES
• hosting international events, inauguration ceremonies with foreign peers	YES

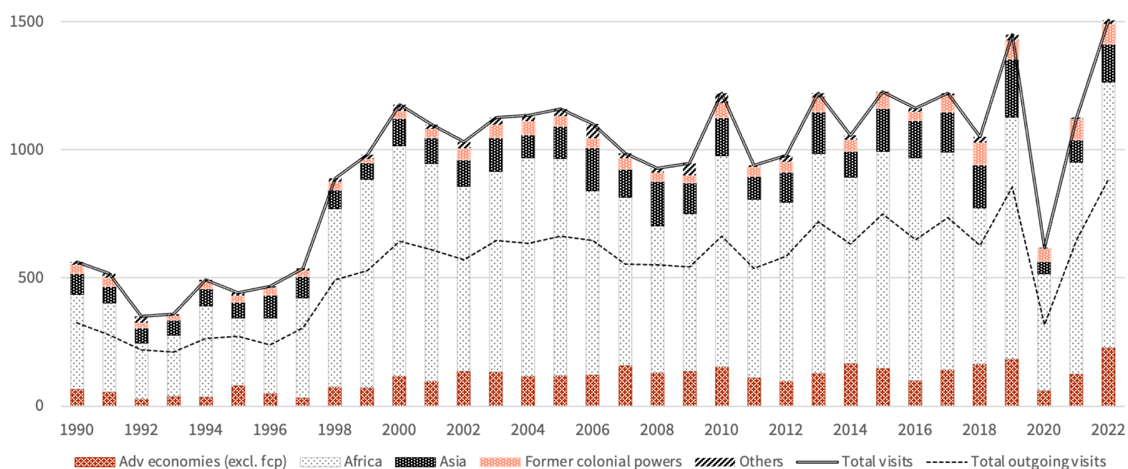
NB: All these activities are highly-visible (reported by the media following the leader) and entail either incoming or outgoing visits.

Because of these characteristics, Africa's COLT high-level visits should perform as acceptable proxies of expansive external legitimation mechanisms. From a theoretical point of view, both outgoing and incoming visits can work as such, as a potential vector of the legitimation-through-visit mechanism. Outgoing visits can be more clearly seen as visits that are intentionally pursued by a leader to contribute to his domestic standing, whereas some incoming visits can be seen as something that merely occurs as reactive hosting. Yet, diplomatic practice supports the idea that also incoming visits which are actively participated by the incumbent leader do hardly ever merely occur as passive engagement. A not-so-tacit agreement to host the visiting leader is generally secured before the visit happens, as a hosting leader can still reject to have meetings with visiting counterparts and either send low-level officials in their place or no one, in which case visits are cancelled before even being

[2] On this point, works on "international legitimacy" (Hurd 1999; Clark 2007) remind us that legitimacy is not only continually claimed, but also recurrently contested by other actors. In the domestic sphere, non-state actors such as government opponents and civil society organizations can embark themselves on counter-legitimation narratives that dispute the meaning of the government's own legitimation narratives. Their empirical investigation is limited by media censorship around these actors in non-democratic contexts, but their contribution would certainly deserve more space in future research.

announced. Therefore, in our main empirical analysis, we primarily use a combined measure that sums both incoming and outgoing visits per country-partner-year, not only because incoming visits are often based on the recipient's explicit invitation (such information is not always disclosed though), but most importantly because they invariably require the recipient's approval to take place. However, in alternative models, we also analyse outgoing visits separately as a robustness check that accounts for narrower interpretations. **Figure 1** provides a visual summary of the main patterns of all diplomatic visits, incoming and outgoing, involving African leaders in 1990-2022 (see the appendix for more data).

Figure 1. Total visits by partner regions over 1990-2022



Combining these visit data with additional sources, we assemble an original dataset for our empirical analysis that is structured on the African country-partner-year, for a total of 312,835 observations, reduced to 262,508 after adding all the controls. For the years with more than one leader in power, we focus only on the one coded by the WhoGov dataset. The variable *days* counts, for every observation, the number of days the indicated African leader was in power.

Variables

Dependent variables

We create the variable *All visits* to measure, for each country-partner-year, the sum of a given year's incoming and outgoing international high-level visits in which the African country's leader was involved. *Outgoing visits* counts instead only the outgoing ones from the latter's point of view.

Main explanatory variables

To capture the identity of partners, we create a categorical variable *Partner regions A* which codes whether the partner belongs to either of such groups: "Advanced economies", namely the IMF category that identifies the wealthiest European countries, US, Canada, Japan,

Australia, New Zealand.[3] "Asia", namely all Asian partners inclusive of Russia and Middle Eastern ones. "African" refers to any other partner in the region. "Other" is the residual category. To single out former colonial powers, we create also a second categorical variable *Partner regions B* which divides the "Advanced economies" category between "Former colonial powers" and "Advanced Economies (except former colonial powers)". To identify the former colonial power of each specific African country we refer to the Africa Leadership Change (ALC) dataset (Carbone and Pellegata 2020).

To measure sovereignist claims, we rely on V-Dem's Regime Legitimation Strategies (RLS) variables (Tannenberg et al. 2021). As explained above, sovereignism is a multidimensional concept (Basile and Mazzoleni 2020). To operationalize it, in EU-focused literature scholars have leveraged expert survey data to build a multidimensional index capturing all the concept's dimensions (Angelucci et al. 2025). As no equivalent data exists for replicating this index for African countries, we rely on the only dimension whose data is available for this region, the one about nationalist claims. These claims are captured by V-Dem's Regime Legitimation Strategies indicator *v2exl_legitideolcr_0*, measuring the extent to which a government promotes a nationalist ideology. This operationalization choice is suboptimal compared to a full index, but given that in previous works scholars found that the nationalist indicator is the most empirically dominant one, as it carries the highest factor loading in sovereignism's multi-dimensional index (Angelucci et al. 2025), it is methodologically the least bad alternative to a full index. This is further reinforced by the fact that even in such previous works, when some other indicators were unavailable to create the full sovereignist index, scholars restricted their index to only those available, among which nationalism (ivi, 253). This indicator is also the least bad fit for our region of interest on substantive grounds: an alternative populist indicator, if ever available, would have been even more suboptimal given the structural barriers the populist sub-dimension of sovereignism faces in sub-Saharan Africa (Cheeseman 2018). With regard to the specific operationalization process, we operationalize *Sovereignist claims* by multiplying V-Dem's variables *v2exl_legitideol* and *v2exl_legitideolcr_0*. The former captures how much a government promotes an ideology to justify itself; the latter measures the degree to which the identified ideology is nationalist. A qualitative examination of cross-country variation confirms face validity as the latest years of Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Mali, namely countries where sovereignist military juntas have publicly condemned French influence, rank among those with the highest values of our measure.

Finally, to capture the availability of alternative partners, which can mitigate the effect of sovereignist claims on the retraction from traditional partners in external engagements, we construct two variables. For each country-partner-year, *Asian trade alternatives* measures the average GDP share of major Asian (notably, China, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Russia, Türkiye) partners' trade with all African countries. We focus on these partners

[3] See: https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/weo-database/2023/April/groups-and-aggregates#ae. This categorization also largely resembles what others define as "the West". Because there is no commonly agreed definition on what the West is, we prefer to rely on this IMF category.

as their increasing economic presence in the region since the 2000s is well-documented in the literature and has undeniably expanded the range of alternative partners available to African leaders (Li et al. 2024). Alternatively, *HHI extra-regional trade* measures partner concentration in Africa's extra-regional trade using the Herfindahl-Hirschman index. Unlike the previous measure, this does not pre-select specific extra-regional partners. Higher HHI values indicate a greater concentration of extra-regional trade among few partners (e.g., former colonial powers in the 1990s), whereas lower values suggest more competition and diversification (e.g., following the rise of Asian powers).

Control variables
Our models include a large set of control variables which account for other plausible causes of visits and of partners selection. First, given the structure of the data, drawing from gravity models, we include a variable measuring the *distance*, in kms, between the capitals of each dyad and the logged GDPs of both members of the dyad (constant 2011 USD). Then, we add variables capturing the strength of each bilateral relation: (i) *bilateral trade (% GDP)* is the logged sum of their imports and exports, as a share of the African country's GDP; (ii) *bilateral aid (% GDP)* calculates the aid flows an African country receives from a partner, as a share of its GDP; (iii) *arms imports* is the stock of arms imported from a partner; *alliance* is a dichotomous variable capturing any kind of military alliance between them. All these dyadic variables are drawn from the Foreign Bilateral Influence Capacity (FBIC) dataset (Moyer et al. 2025).

We also include *GDP growth* and logged *GDP per capita* (World Bank Indicators 2024) of each African country to control for the economic affordability of such engagements, considering that low-income as well as more developed but economically stagnant countries can hardly afford extensive external engagements due to their economic or political costs. Embarking on a large number of such activities when the local population faces either temporarily or enduring tough economic conditions, can hardly be well received at home, irrespective of the country's income group, eventually undermining the ruler's legitimation attempt. Presidents of Uganda and Malawi indeed reduced visits at times of domestic economic downturns to prevent criticism. Kenyan and Nigerian Presidents who did not, instead, faced condemnation for this.[4] *Conflict*, instead, from the UCDP database dichotomously captures the presence of major instability, such as civil wars, which can also undermine the possibility of engaging with external partners. Given the demanding physical effort behind especially outgoing visits, we also add a variable *Age* of African leaders, taking this information from the WhoGov dataset (Nyrup and Bramwell 2020) and the ALC dataset. We also capture any potential lame duck syndrome by adding a dichotomous variable coding whether such leaders were performing those engagements during their first term (Carbone and Cassani 2024), whereas to account for possible effects related to the democratic and politically competitive status of these countries and the presence of elections in that year we include a measure of *Democracy,* operationalized with the polyarchy variable of V-Dem, and of *Multiparty elections,* a

[4] Kenya's President Ruto, Nigeria's Tinubu, Sierra Leone's Bio, among others, were dubbed "king of the sky", "flying presidents", "global tourists" by domestic critics for this – https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-68201964)

dichotomous variable sourced from the ALC.

Importantly, as many studies in the literature of diplomatic visits identify a positive correlation between visits and major-power status, we also add *Global influence* to capture the relevance a partner has on the global stage, as this can affect its propensity to attract visits, including those from African leaders. To have a comprehensive measure of such ties, inclusive of trade, military, and financial sectors, we leverage the *fbic* measure developed by Moyer et al. (2025), which offers a multidimensional operationalisation of a country's foreign influence. We sum the bilateral influence (all the single *fbic* values, 1 being the strongest ever, 0 the weakest ever) a partner has on any other country in the world, for each year of the dataset, so to capture the global relevance, and its variation over time, of any partner in 1990-2022.

Finally, we also include a lagged variable of visits (dichotomous), to account for possible routine effects whereby self-reinforcing dynamics can push a country to visit the same partners repeatedly or reciprocate a previously incoming visit (Hopf 2010), as well as variables related to the other domestic legitimation strategies a government can concurrently use, resorting to V-Dem's other RLS variables (*v2exl_legitlead*; *v2exl_legitperf*; *v2exl_legitratio*).

Model

To test our hypotheses, we use Poisson Pseudo-Maximum Likelihood (PPML) regression analysis with country and year fixed effects, and clustered standard errors at the country level. These models allow us to use an exposure variable which accounts for the number of days each African leader ruled over a given year (variable *days*) to account for the shorter time in power of leaders in multiple-leader years. With this specification, visits are weighted per unit time, similarly to rates. To ensure temporal precedence, all independent variables and controls are lagged by one year, except for those related to visits, geography, age, elections, and civil wars.

Table 2. Regression analyses

DV: All dyadic visits (count)	**(1)** **M0**	**(2)** **M1a**	**(3)** **M1b**	**(4)** **M2a**	**(5)** **M2b**
Sovereignist claims $_{(t-1)}$	0.125	0.243	0.257	0.228	0.312
	(0.084)	(0.162)	(0.163)	(0.226)	(0.267)
Partner regions (ref. cat. Others)					
- Africa	2.188***	2.169***	2.232***	2.226***	2.005***
	(0.180)	(0.180)	(0.187)	(0.193)	(0.193)
× sovereignist claims $_{(t-1)}$		-0.079	-0.080	0.018	-0.156
		(0.167)	(0.167)	(0.215)	(0.247)
× Asian trade alt $_{(t-1)}$ OR HHI extra-reg trade concentration $_{(t-1)}$				-0.009	0.198
				(0.013)	(0.465)
- Advanced economies (including former colonial powers)	0.577***	0.533***			
	(0.118)	(0.119)			
× sovereignist claims $_{(t-1)}$		-0.312*			
		(0.173)			
- Advanced economies (excluding former colonial powers)			0.344***	0.110	0.689***
			(0.116)	(0.135)	(0.173)
× sovereignist claims $_{(t-1)}$			-0.253	-0.108	-0.343
			(0.180)	(0.186)	(0.349)
× Asian trade alt $_{(t-1)}$ OR HHI extra-reg trade concentration $_{(t-1)}$				-0.012	0.267
				(0.017)	(0.608)
- Former colonial powers			1.336***	0.971***	1.821***
			(0.138)	(0.169)	(0.179)
× sovereignist claims $_{(t-1)}$			-0.521***	-0.221	-0.853***
			(0.183)	(0.253)	(0.286)
× Asian trade alt $_{(t-1)}$ OR HHI extra-reg trade concentration $_{(t-1)}$				-0.024	0.911
				(0.016)	(0.604)
- Asia (including Russia)	0.919***	0.909***	0.917***	0.796***	1.032***
	(0.130)	(0.130)	(0.132)	(0.172)	(0.167)
× sovereignist claims $_{(t-1)}$		-0.088	-0.093	-0.168	-0.035

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	(0.180)	(0.181)	(0.274)	(0.335)	
× Asian trade alt $_{(t-1)}$ OR HHI extra-reg trade concentration $_{(t-1)}$				0.007	-0.132
				(0.020)	(0.661)
Asian trade alternatives $_{(t-1)}$ OR HHI extra-regional trade $_{(t-1)}$				-0.030***	1.336***
				(0.009)	(0.274)
- Africa × Asian trade alt $_{(t-1)}$ OR HHI extra-regional trade $_{(t-1)}$				-0.003	0.331
				(0.007)	(0.243)
- Adv econ (excl. fcp) × Asian trade alt $_{(t-1)}$ OR HHI extra-regional trade $_{(t-1)}$				0.023***	-0.799***
				(0.008)	(0.290)
- Former colonial powers × Asian trade alt $_{(t-1)}$ OR HHI extra-regional trade $_{(t-1)}$				0.034***	-1.257***
				(0.009)	(0.300)
- Asia × Asian trade alt $_{(t-1)}$ OR HHI extra-regional trade $_{(t-1)}$				0.011	-0.333
				(0.009)	(0.301)
Sovereignist claims $_{(t-1)}$ × Asian trade alt $_{(t-1)}$ OR HHI extra-regional trade $_{(t-1)}$				0.003	-0.097
				(0.015)	(0.509)
Control variables					
	ALL	ALL	ALL	ALL	ALL
Constant	-22.150***	-22.223***	-22.472***	-17.841***	-23.870***
	(5.273)	(5.289)	(5.328)	(3.220)	(3.243)
Observations	262,508	262,508	262,508	262,508	262,508
Country FE (54)	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Year FE (32)	YES	YES	YES	NO	NO
Pseudo R-squared	0.343	0.344	0.348	0.342	0.343

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. Robust standard errors in parentheses, clustered at the African country level. All models are estimated with the *ppmlhdfe* stata command, with *days* as exposure variable. The controls are displayed in the appen

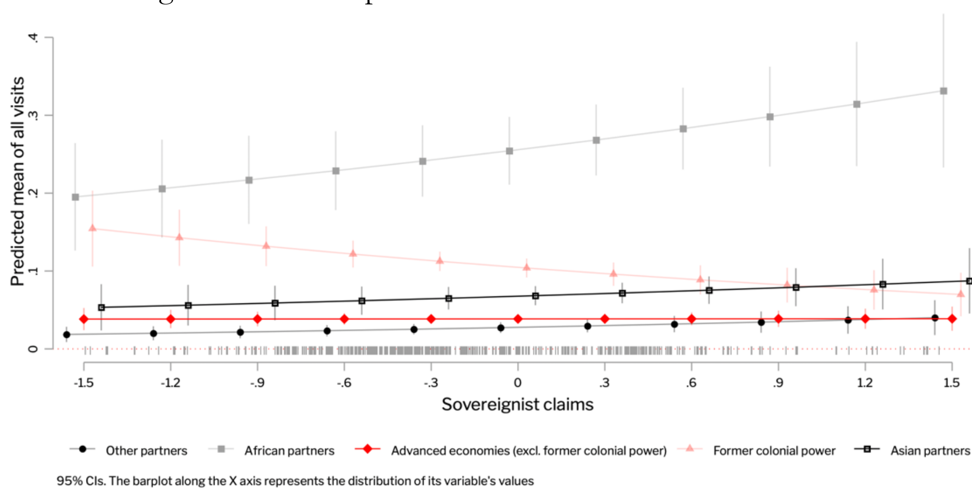
Results

Table 2 presents the results of our regression analyses. The first model (M0) examines the effects of the main explanatory variables in isolation. M1a introduces an interaction between sovereignist claims and partner regions, while M1b replicates this but by distinguishing former colonial powers from other advanced economies. M2a and M2b extend this M1b analysis by incorporating a triple interaction between sovereignist claims, partner regions, and the availability of trade alternatives. They differ only in the operationalization of the latter, using *Asian trade alternatives* in M2a and *HHI extra-regional trade* in M2b.

M0 does not support H_0, thus confirming our expectation that sovereignist claims do not influence the overall propensity for external engagements. Sovereignist leaders continue engaging externally, but prioritize different partners. This claim is supported by subsequent models. Interestingly, in M1a, the interactions between sovereignist claims and partner regions are not statistically significant at the conventional $p<0.05$ level for any region, including advanced economies. This suggests that sovereignist leaders do not systematically de-westernize their external engagements.

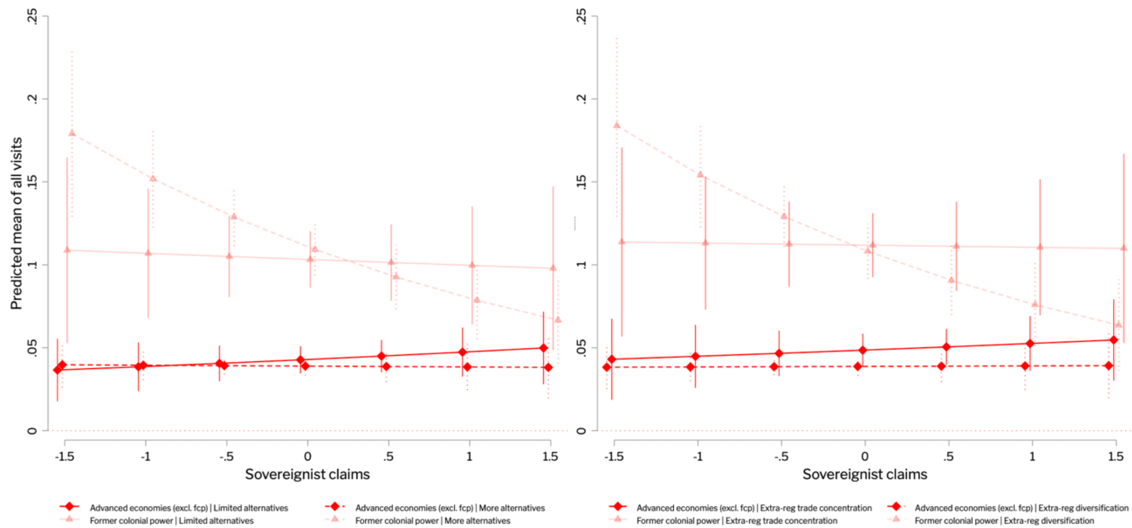
However, when distinguishing former colonial powers from other advanced economies in M1b, the interaction between sovereignist claims and former colonial powers turns statistically significant. **Figure 2** illustrates this effect, showing predicted visit frequencies by each partner region at varying levels of sovereignist claims. This supports H1b, indicating that at higher levels of sovereignist rhetoric leaders specifically reduce engagement with former colonial powers, rather than with other western advanced economies as hypothesized in H1a.

Figure 2. Sovereignist claims and predicted visits



Finally, M2a and M2b show that, regardless of how trade alternatives are operationalized, they play a crucial role in conditioning the retraction effect observed in the previous models, as hypothesized in H2. In this regard, **Figure 3** illustrates the impact of low versus high availability of trade alternatives (with *Asian trade alternative* on the left and *HHI extra-regional trade* on the right) on engagement with former colonial powers and other advanced economies, at varying levels of sovereignist claims (see the appendix for predictive margins of other regional categories). The figure shows that when trade alternatives are limited (low levels of Asian presence on the left, or high trade partner concentration on the right), an increase in sovereignist claims does not lead to a decline in the engagement with former colonial powers. Across both operationalizations, this reduction only occurs when viable alternatives exist.

Figure 3. Sovereignist claims and predicted visits at different levels of trade alternatives



Another notable pattern in our findings is the prominence of intra-African visits. These are not secondary, but integral to sovereignist legitimation strategies, as this pattern aligns with pan-African narratives that strengthen sovereignist legitimacy by embedding sovereignty claims in regional solidarity and African unity. By signalling that incumbents are respected regionally, and by emphasizing belonging to, and leadership within, a shared regional community, these visits can reinforce leaders' legitimacy. For sovereignist leaders in particular, this form of legitimation is certainly attractive, just as the anti-colonial logic, as it reconciles sovereignty rhetoric with international activism by positioning the latter within an Africa-centred framework.

Overall, these findings remain robust when the dependent variable is replaced with *Outgoing visits*. To address the concern that the observed effects may be driven exclusively by Francophone countries and their specific discontent with France, we also replicate the analysis on a sub-sample excluding Francophone countries. The effects persist, confirming that the distancing dynamic extends beyond the Francophone context, though they are somewhat weaker than in the full sample, as confidence intervals of the downward dotted

lines often overlap, suggesting that the French-African postcolonial relationship may nonetheless represent the most acute manifestation of this broader pattern (see the appendix for full results).

Conclusion

Recent research on regime legitimation found that claims to legitimacy can help rulers not only survive in power, but also turn pressure to their advantage (Grauvogel and von Soest 2014). Our study contributes to this literature by examining how political leaders use external engagements to reinforce their domestic legitimacy and, crucially, how they design those engagements. Specifically, we centred partner selectivity as the key operative dimension of this design and of our investigation. Rather than simply engaging or disengaging from the international arena, sovereignist leaders selectively calibrate with whom they are seen engaging, balancing their self-assertion rhetoric around national sovereignty with the reputational and material needs that external legitimation activities can serve.

Empirically, by looking at the African continent, our analysis confirms that sovereignist leaders do not differ from others in their overall propensity to engage with outside partners, but rather in their choice of such partners. Contrary to expectations of a systematic de-westernization trend, our findings suggest a selective pattern: sovereignist leaders primarily distance themselves from former colonial powers, while maintaining ties with other advanced economies. As such, this pattern seems to point more to a preference for multi-alignment (Ben Hammouda 2024), which offers greater flexibility in global engagement, except with one actor perceived as the least legitimate. These findings carry important implications for understanding contemporary regime legitimation in Africa, in the Global South, and beyond. While economic diversification is underway, leaders remain aware of the reputational and political advantages associated with maintaining certain Western partnerships. This also underscores that external legitimation is not merely about economic transactions but also about the symbolic and reputational capital that certain partnerships can bring.

While our empirical analysis focused on Africa, similar dynamics appear also elsewhere. For example, the prominence of intra-regional visits is a finding that also emerged in Jordan's patterns (Balci 2024). More generally, the (re)design of external engagement patterns by sovereignist leaders to reinforce their standing is something that can be spotted beyond the African context, though in those cases the literature has more often analysed it through the lenses of populism or nationalism rather than the broader sovereignist concept they are both manifestations of. In Latin America, Hugo Chávez instrumentalized regional summits and bilateral visits to frame his rule as part of an anti-imperialist (primarily anti-US) struggle (Wajner and Roniger 2019). In Europe, Orbán has portrayed ties with Russia and China as proof of sovereign independence from EU pressure (Visnovitz and Jenne 2021). These comparisons suggest that African sovereignist leaders' recalibration of external engagements for domestic legitimization can be part of a wider pattern, though the drivers of partner

choice foregrounded in our research carry distinct postcolonial and pan-African inflections, thus leaving to future research the task of adapting and applying them to other regions.

Methodologically, this study advances this literature by adopting an alternative approach for the large-scale study of legitimation processes, not based on expert-coded data but on observational data such as visits. Given the limitations of existing expert-coded datasets on external legitimation, our empirical strategy builds on the growing visits literature to provide a replicable and scalable alternative. While international visits do not encompass the full range of external legitimation mechanisms, they represent deliberate and visible actions that reflect the public image leaders seek to project.

Future research could expand on this approach by incorporating defensive external legitimation strategies, for instance through the textual analysis of leaders' speeches. Understanding these mechanisms is important not only for scholars of political legitimacy but also for policymakers and international actors who, even if unintentionally, through their external engagements may end up reinforcing foreign regimes in ways that are often much deeper and more consequential than generally acknowledged.

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The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Data availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article and its supplementary materials.

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Appendix

p. ii **Descriptive statistics**

p. iii **Figure A0**. Network graph of all visits 1990-2022

p. iv **Figures A1-A2**. Asian trade alternatives and HHI extra-regional trade concentration

p. v **Table A1**. Main manuscript's Table 2 with all controls displayed

p. viii **Table A2**. Main manuscript's Table 2 with *Outgoing visits* as dependent variable

p. xi **Figure A1**. Predictive margins of M1a's interaction effect between sovereignist claims and partner regions

p. xi **Figure A2**. Full predictive margins of M2a's interaction effect between sovereignist claims, partner regions, Asian trade alternatives

p. xii **Figure A3**. Full predictive margins of M2a's interaction effect between sovereignist claims, partner regions, HHI extra-regional trade

p. xiii **Figures A4-A5**. Predictive margins of outgoing model's interaction effects

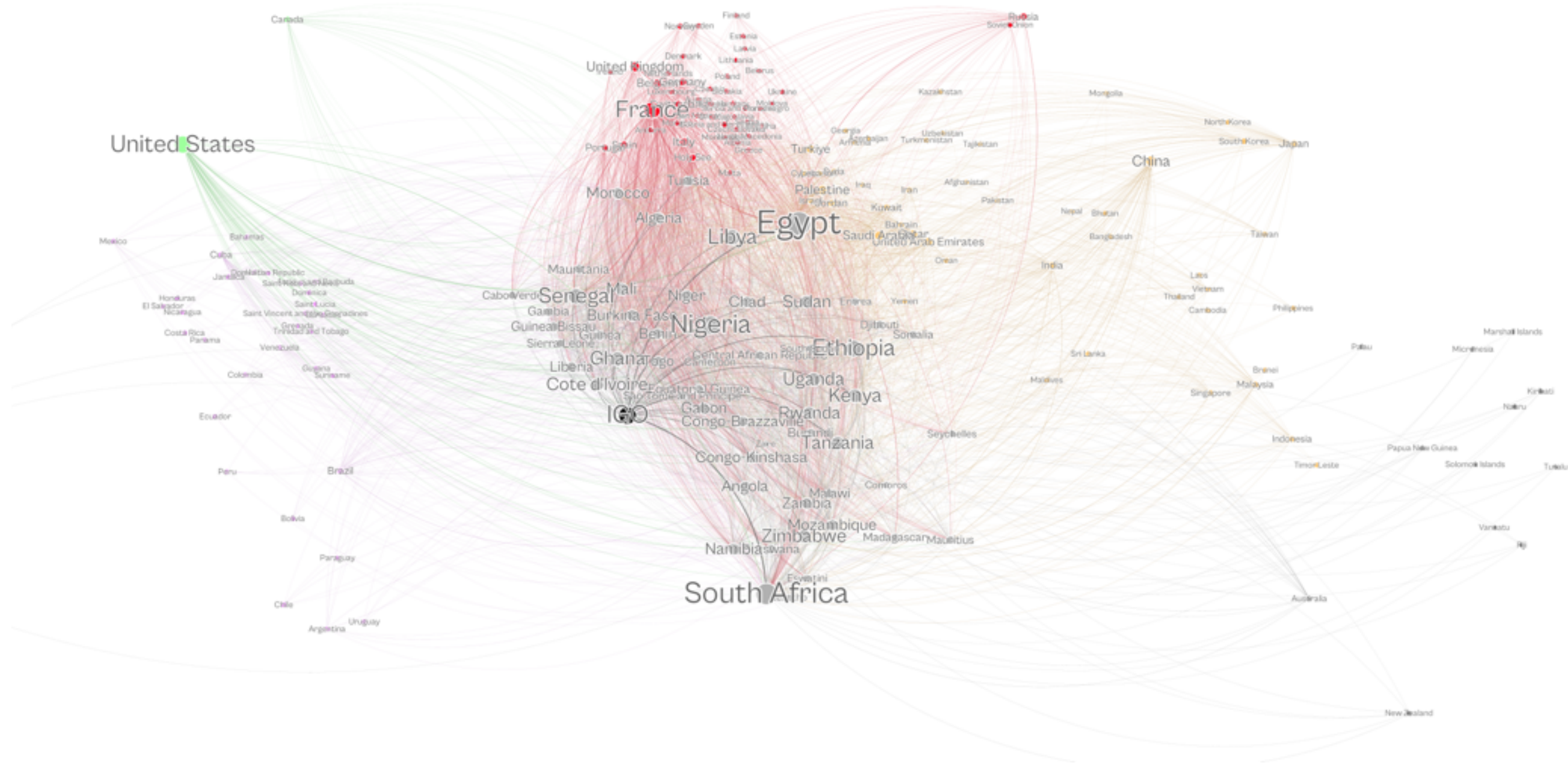
p. xiv **Table A3**. Alternative model specifications

p. xvii **Figures A6-A8**. Replication of main manuscript's Figure 3-4 with Table A3's M4, M5, M6 (non-Francophone sample)

Descriptive statistics

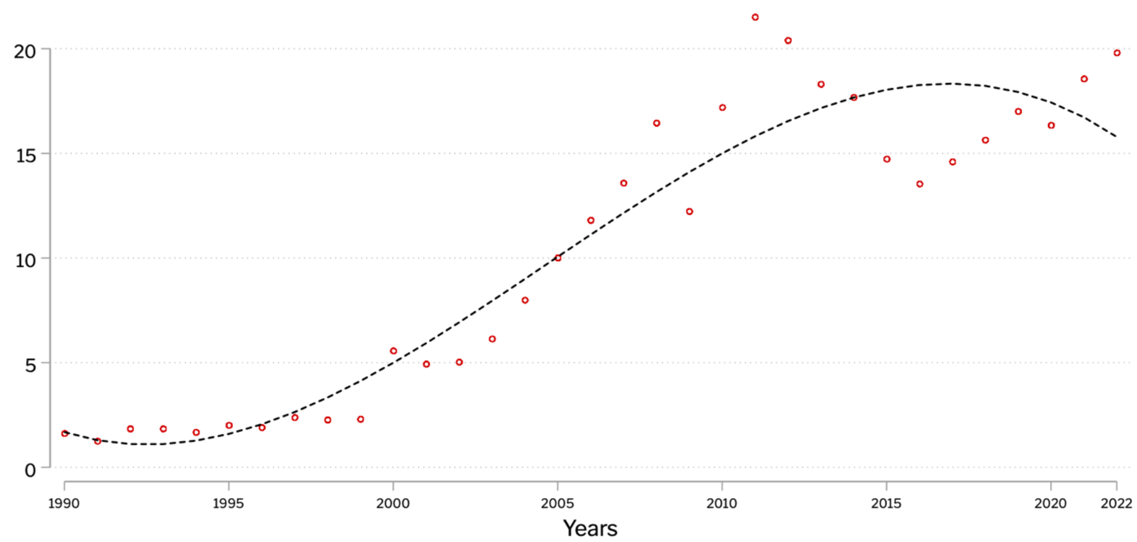
	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	min	max
All visits	312835	.099	0.451	0	11
Outgoing visits	312835	.057	0.305	0	10
Sovereignist claims	312322	-.145	0.665	-2.07	3.19
Asian trade alternatives	312835	10.469	7.029	1.019	21.519
HHI extra-regional trade concentration	303186	.427	0.214	.2	.909
GDP African country $_{(log)}$	312835	22.861	1.626	18.65	26.973
GDP partner $_{(log)}$	312835	24.248	2.195	18.451	30.65
Distance (logged kms)	303971	8.569	0.692	0	9.858
Bilateral trade (% GDP)	312835	.34	3.048	0	287
Bilateal aid (% GDP)	312835	.027	0.351	0	51
Arms imports	312835	1.484	50.809	0	5933
Alliance	312835	.234	0.423	0	1
GDP growth	279614	3.866	7.502	-50.339	149.973
GDP pc $_{(log)}$	296002	7.076	0.971	5.184	9.695
Conflict	303601	.255	0.436	0	1
Age leader	310123	60.486	11.432	21	95
Multiparty election	312664	.159	0.366	0	1
First term	312664	.353	0.478	0	1
Democracy	312835	.379	0.193	.068	.802
Global influence	312835	1.642	3.743	0	29.519
Personalist legitimation	312493	.659	1.058	-2.313	3.439
Performance legitimation	312493	.445	1.041	-2.556	2.886
Procedural legitimation	312493	.425	1.052	-3.222	3.17
Previous visit	312835	.066	0.249	0	1

Figure A0. Network graph of all visits 1990-2022

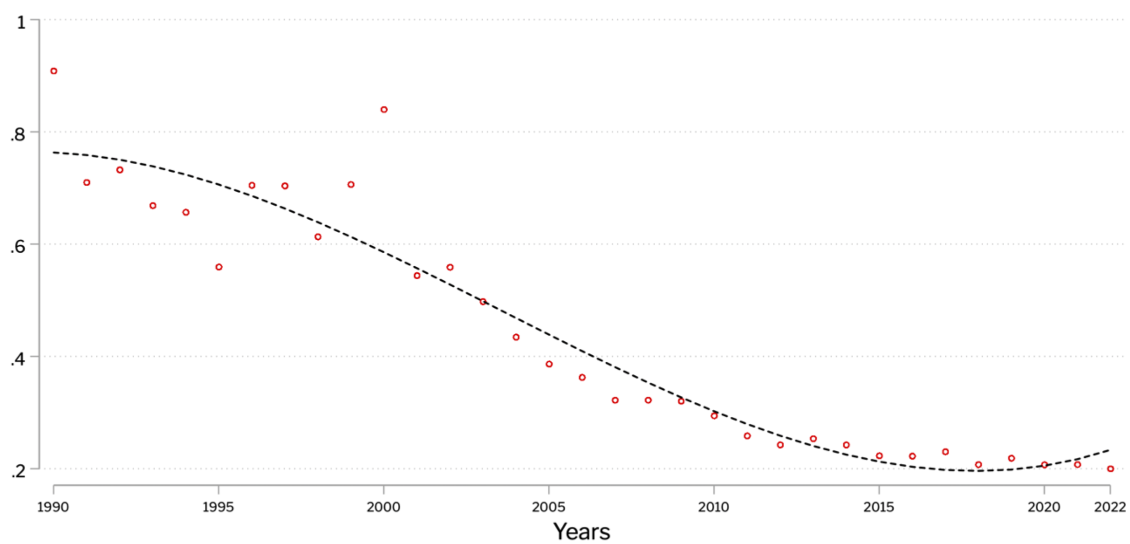


Figures A1-A2. Asian trade alternatives and HHI extra-regional trade concentration

A1. Mean Asian trade alternatives per year



A2. Mean HHI extra-regional trade concentration per year



Notes. This variable is calculated with *hhi5* stata command and multiplied by 1,000 to improve its readability

Table A1. Main manuscript's Table 2 with all the controls displayed.

DV: All dyadic visits (count)	(1) M0	(2) M1a	(3) M1b	(4) M2a	(5) M2b
Sovereignist claims $_{(t-1)}$	0.125	0.243	0.257	0.228	0.312
	(0.084)	(0.162)	(0.163)	(0.226)	(0.267)
Partner regions (ref. cat. Others)					
- Africa	2.188***	2.169***	2.232***	2.226***	2.005***
	(0.180)	(0.180)	(0.187)	(0.193)	(0.193)
× sovereignist claims $_{(t-1)}$		-0.079	-0.080	0.018	-0.156
		(0.167)	(0.167)	(0.215)	(0.247)
× Asian trade alternatives $_{(t-1)}$ OR HHI extra-regional trade $_{(t-1)}$				-0.009	0.198
				(0.013)	(0.465)
- Advanced economies (incl. fcp)	0.577***	0.533***			
	(0.118)	(0.119)			
× sovereignist claims $_{(t-1)}$		-0.312*			
		(0.173)			
- Advanced economies (excl. fcp)			0.344***	0.110	0.689***
			(0.116)	(0.135)	(0.173)
× sovereignist claims $_{(t-1)}$			-0.253	-0.108	-0.343
			(0.180)	(0.186)	(0.349)
× Asian trade alternatives $_{(t-1)}$ OR HHI extra-regional trade $_{(t-1)}$				-0.012	0.267
				(0.017)	(0.608)
- Former colonial powers			1.336***	0.971***	1.821***
			(0.138)	(0.169)	(0.179)
× sovereignist claims $_{(t-1)}$			-0.521***	-0.221	-0.853***
			(0.183)	(0.253)	(0.286)
× Asian trade alternatives $_{(t-1)}$ OR HHI extra-regional trade $_{(t-1)}$				-0.024	0.911
				(0.016)	(0.604)
- Asia (including Russia)	0.919***	0.909***	0.917***	0.796***	1.032***
	(0.130)	(0.130)	(0.132)	(0.172)	(0.167)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
× sovereignist claims $_{(t-1)}$		-0.088	-0.093	-0.168	-0.035
		(0.180)	(0.181)	(0.274)	(0.335)
× Asian trade alternatives $_{(t-1)}$ OR HHI extra-regional trade $_{(t-1)}$				0.007	-0.132
				(0.020)	(0.661)
Asian trade alternatives $_{(t-1)}$ OR HHI extra-regional trade $_{(t-1)}$				-0.030***	1.336***
				(0.009)	(0.274)
- Africa × Asian trade alt $_{(t-1)}$ OR HHI extra-regional trade $_{(t-1)}$				-0.003	0.331
				(0.007)	(0.243)
- Adv econ (excl. fcp) × Asian trade alt $_{(t-1)}$ OR HHI extra-regional trade $_{(t-1)}$				0.023***	-0.799***
				(0.008)	(0.290)
- Former colonial powers × Asian trade alt $_{(t-1)}$ OR HHI extra-regional trade $_{(t-1)}$				0.034***	-1.257***
				(0.009)	(0.300)
- Asia × Asian trade alt $_{(t-1)}$ OR HHI extra-regional trade $_{(t-1)}$				0.011	-0.333
				(0.009)	(0.301)
Sovereignist claims $_{(t-1)}$ × Asian trade alt $_{(t-1)}$ OR HHI extra-regional trade $_{(t-1)}$				0.003	-0.097
				(0.015)	(0.509)
Control variables					
GDP African country $_{(log, t-1)}$	0.504	0.512	0.531	0.292	0.595***
	(0.320)	(0.321)	(0.323)	(0.216)	(0.210)
GDP partner $_{(log, t-1)}$	0.219***	0.220***	0.222***	0.226***	0.228***
	(0.015)	(0.015)	(0.015)	(0.015)	(0.015)
Distance (logged kms)	-0.440***	-0.442***	-0.444***	-0.443***	-0.439***
	(0.061)	(0.061)	(0.061)	(0.060)	(0.060)
Bilateral trade (% GDP) $_{(t-1)}$	0.009***	0.009***	0.006**	0.007**	0.007**
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Bilateal aid (% GDP) $_{(t-1)}$	0.099***	0.095***	0.053***	0.054***	0.054***
	(0.026)	(0.027)	(0.014)	(0.016)	(0.018)
Arms imports $_{(t-1)}$	0.000***	0.000***	0.000***	0.000***	0.000***
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Alliance $_{(t-1)}$	0.465***	0.478***	0.428***	0.482***	0.574***
	(0.101)	(0.103)	(0.109)	(0.082)	(0.080)
GDP growth $_{(t-1)}$	-0.003	-0.003	-0.003	-0.001	-0.001
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)

GDP pc (log, t-1)	-0.260	-0.270	-0.305	-0.140	-0.441
	(0.360)	(0.361)	(0.363)	(0.301)	(0.294)
Conflict	-0.102**	-0.102**	-0.104**	-0.145***	-0.153***
	(0.049)	(0.049)	(0.049)	(0.055)	(0.054)
Age leader	-0.001	-0.001	-0.001	-0.001	-0.000
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Multiparty election	-0.031	-0.031	-0.031	-0.050	-0.045
	(0.035)	(0.035)	(0.035)	(0.037)	(0.037)
First term	-0.017	-0.018	-0.020	-0.035	-0.032
	(0.041)	(0.041)	(0.041)	(0.049)	(0.044)
Democracy (t-1)	0.930***	0.937***	0.914***	1.103***	1.200***
	(0.300)	(0.300)	(0.300)	(0.285)	(0.270)
Global influence (t-1)	0.069***	0.069***	0.072***	0.068***	0.068***
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)
Personalist legitimation (t-1)	-0.027	-0.027	-0.031	0.000	-0.018
	(0.041)	(0.041)	(0.040)	(0.042)	(0.042)
Performance legitimation (t-1)	0.117**	0.117**	0.122**	0.120*	0.132**
	(0.059)	(0.059)	(0.059)	(0.062)	(0.063)
Procedural legitimation (t-1)	-0.071	-0.071	-0.079	-0.091	-0.104
	(0.069)	(0.069)	(0.070)	(0.075)	(0.075)
Previous visit (t-1)	1.205***	1.201***	1.165***	1.162***	1.157***
	(0.057)	(0.057)	(0.055)	(0.055)	(0.054)
Constant	-22.150***	-22.223***	-22.472***	-17.841***	-23.870***
	(5.273)	(5.289)	(5.328)	(3.220)	(3.243)
Observations	262,508	262,508	262,508	262,508	262,508
Country FE (54)	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Year FE (32)	YES	YES	YES	NO	NO
Pseudo R-squared	0.343	0.344	0.348	0.342	0.343

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. Robust standard errors in parentheses clustered at the country level. All models are estimated with the ppmlhdfe stata command, with *days* as exposure variable.

Table A2. Main manuscript's Table 2 with *Outgoing visits*

DV: All dyadic visits (count)	**(1) M0**	**(2) M1a**	**(3) M1b**	**(4) M2a**	**(5) M2b**
Sovereignist claims $_{(t-1)}$	0.047	0.195	0.208	0.357	0.069
	(0.109)	(0.165)	(0.166)	(0.290)	(0.226)
Partner regions (ref. cat. Others)					
- Africa	2.256***	2.229***	2.318***	2.334***	1.989***
	(0.183)	(0.188)	(0.193)	(0.212)	(0.232)
× sovereignist claims $_{(t-1)}$		-0.189	-0.190	-0.246	-0.076
		(0.149)	(0.148)	(0.270)	(0.235)
× Asian trade alternatives $_{(t-1)}$ OR HHI extra-regional trade $_{(t-1)}$				0.007	-0.242
				(0.017)	(0.619)
- Advanced economies (incl. fcp)	0.848***	0.814***			
	(0.118)	(0.124)			
× sovereignist claims $_{(t-1)}$		-0.202			
		(0.173)			
- Advanced economies (excl. fcp)			0.619***	0.333*	1.111***
			(0.125)	(0.172)	(0.186)
× sovereignist claims $_{(t-1)}$			-0.145	-0.205	-0.028
			(0.188)	(0.281)	(0.320)
× Asian trade alternatives $_{(t-1)}$ OR HHI extra-regional trade $_{(t-1)}$				0.008	-0.201
				(0.019)	(0.729)
- Former colonial powers			1.664***	1.368***	2.097***
			(0.138)	(0.189)	(0.204)
× sovereignist claims $_{(t-1)}$			-0.403**	-0.360	-0.493*
			(0.164)	(0.308)	(0.271)
× Asian trade alternatives $_{(t-1)}$ OR HHI extra-regional trade $_{(t-1)}$				-0.002	0.266
				(0.019)	(0.747)
- Asia (including Russia)	1.033***	1.037***	1.046***	0.777***	1.359***
	(0.128)	(0.130)	(0.133)	(0.199)	(0.187)
× sovereignist claims $_{(t-1)}$		0.069	0.065	-0.112	0.253
		(0.190)	(0.191)	(0.349)	(0.287)

× Asian trade alternatives $_{(t-1)}$ OR HHI extra-regional trade $_{(t-1)}$				0.018	-0.394
				(0.021)	(0.778)
Asian trade alternatives $_{(t-1)}$ OR HHI extra-regional trade $_{(t-1)}$				-0.022*	1.017***
				(0.011)	(0.382)
- Africa × Asian trade alt $_{(t-1)}$ OR HHI extra-regional trade $_{(t-1)}$				-0.010	0.478
				(0.011)	(0.368)
- Adv econ (excl. fcp) × Asian trade alt $_{(t-1)}$ OR HHI extra-regional trade $_{(t-1)}$				0.030***	-1.121***
				(0.010)	(0.373)
- Former colonial powers × Asian trade alt $_{(t-1)}$ OR HHI extra-regional trade $_{(t-1)}$				0.029***	-1.070***
				(0.011)	(0.395)
- Asia × Asian trade alt $_{(t-1)}$ OR HHI extra-regional trade $_{(t-1)}$				0.024**	-0.841**
				(0.012)	(0.417)
Sovereignist claims $_{(t-1)}$ × Asian trade alt $_{(t-1)}$ OR HHI extra-regional trade $_{(t-1)}$				-0.014	0.360
				(0.017)	(0.615)
Control variables					
GDP African country $_{(log, t-1)}$	-0.404	-0.402	-0.386	0.017	0.239
	(0.456)	(0.457)	(0.462)	(0.225)	(0.215)
GDP partner $_{(log, t-1)}$	0.377***	0.376***	0.381***	0.389***	0.391***
	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.013)	(0.014)	(0.014)
Distance (logged kms)	-0.429***	-0.427***	-0.429***	-0.428***	-0.425***
	(0.058)	(0.059)	(0.059)	(0.059)	(0.059)
Bilateral trade (% GDP) $_{(t-1)}$	0.005	0.005	0.002	0.002	0.002
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Bilateal aid (% GDP) $_{(t-1)}$	0.086***	0.085***	0.043***	0.034**	0.034*
	(0.027)	(0.027)	(0.015)	(0.016)	(0.018)
Arms imports $_{(t-1)}$	-0.000***	-0.000***	-0.000***	-0.000***	-0.000***
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Alliance $_{(t-1)}$	0.434***	0.430***	0.364***	0.515***	0.594***
	(0.132)	(0.139)	(0.138)	(0.112)	(0.110)
GDP growth $_{(t-1)}$	-0.003	-0.003	-0.003	-0.001	-0.001
	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)
GDP pc $_{(log, t-1)}$	0.465	0.463	0.425	-0.016	-0.239
	(0.520)	(0.522)	(0.528)	(0.331)	(0.321)

Conflict	-0.029	-0.028	-0.031	-0.068	-0.075
	(0.061)	(0.061)	(0.061)	(0.067)	(0.067)
Age leader	-0.006**	-0.006**	-0.006**	-0.006	-0.005
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.004)
Multiparty election	-0.121***	-0.121***	-0.121***	-0.149***	-0.146***
	(0.034)	(0.034)	(0.034)	(0.038)	(0.038)
First term	0.010	0.010	0.007	-0.009	-0.006
	(0.039)	(0.039)	(0.039)	(0.048)	(0.046)
Democracy $_{(t-1)}$	1.014***	1.011***	0.986***	1.225***	1.307***
	(0.312)	(0.313)	(0.312)	(0.282)	(0.277)
Global influence $_{(t-1)}$	0.041***	0.041***	0.044***	0.040***	0.039***
	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)
Personalist legitimation $_{(t-1)}$	-0.034	-0.035	-0.040	-0.046	-0.058
	(0.054)	(0.054)	(0.054)	(0.053)	(0.054)
Performance legitimation $_{(t-1)}$	-0.029	-0.029	-0.023	-0.026	-0.017
	(0.087)	(0.087)	(0.086)	(0.095)	(0.095)
Procedural legitimation $_{(t-1)}$	0.056	0.056	0.046	0.003	-0.005
	(0.117)	(0.117)	(0.119)	(0.120)	(0.119)
Previous visit $_{(t-1)}$	1.202***	1.204***	1.148***	1.140***	1.134***
	(0.062)	(0.062)	(0.061)	(0.061)	(0.060)
Constant	-10.266	-10.282	-10.475	-16.855***	-21.218***
	(7.158)	(7.161)	(7.253)	(3.256)	(3.170)
Observations	262,508	262,508	262,508	262,508	262,508
Country FE (54)	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Year FE (32)	YES	YES	YES	NO	NO
Pseudo R-squared	0.300	0.301	0.306	0.302	0.302

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. Robust standard errors in parentheses clustered at the country level. All models are estimated with the ppmlhdfe stata command, with *days* as exposure variable.

Figure A1. Predictive margins of M1a's interaction effect between sovereignist claims and partner regions

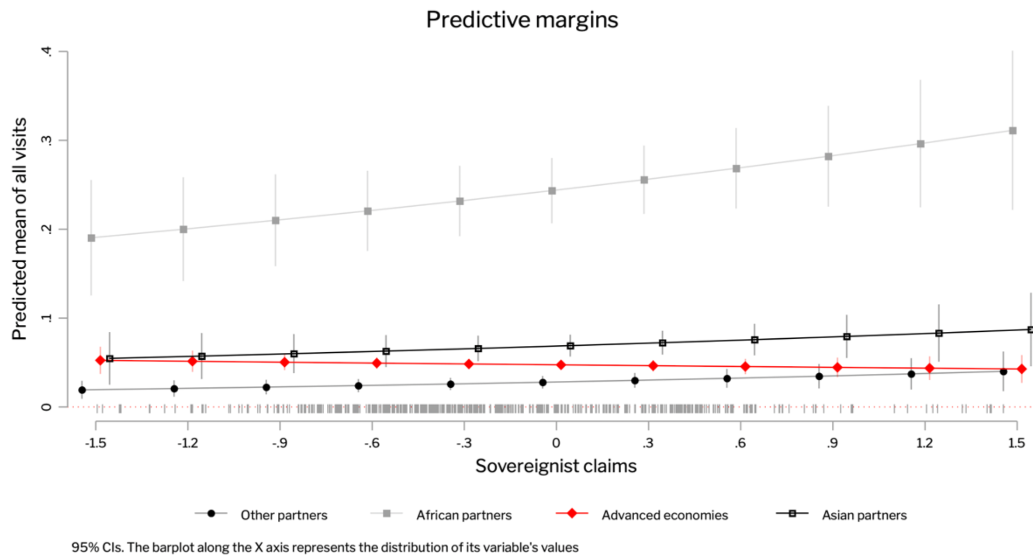


Figure A2. Full predictive margins of M2a's interaction effect between sovereignist claims, partner regions, Asian trade alternatives

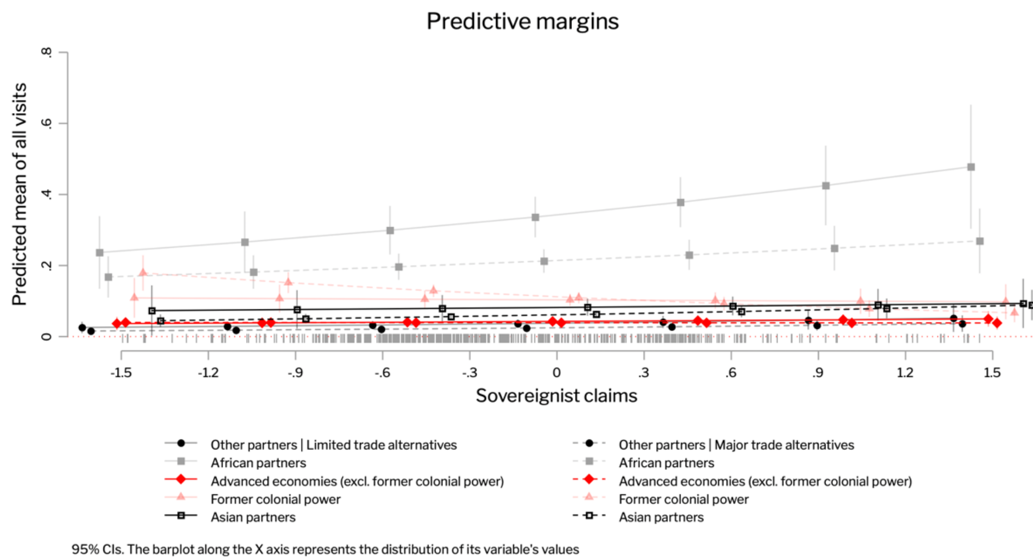
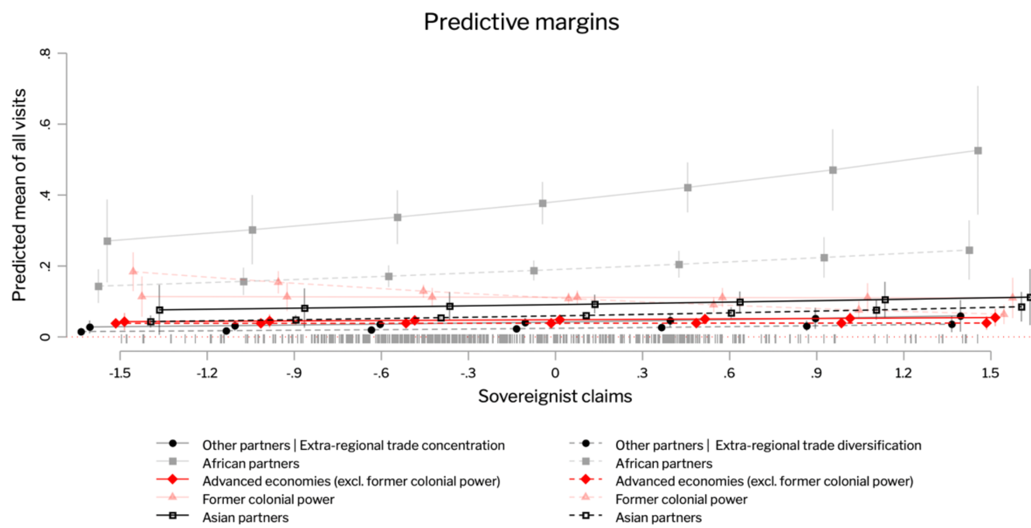
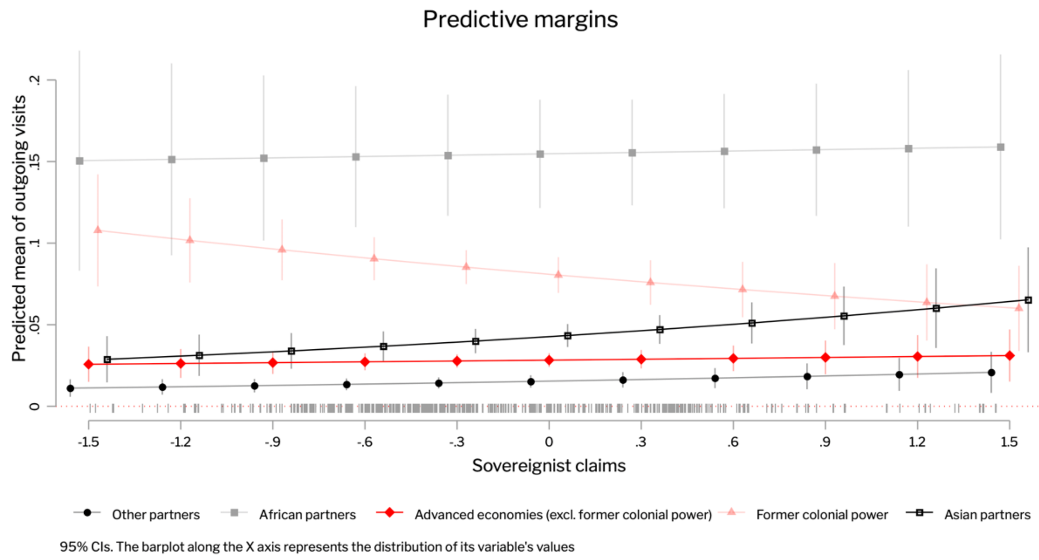


Figure A3. Full predictive margins of M2a's interaction effect between sovereignist claims, partner regions, HHI extra-regional trade.



Figures A4-A5. Predictive margins of outgoing model's interaction effects

A4. Replication of main manuscript's Figure 3 on Outgoing model's M1a



A4. Replication of main manuscript's Figure 4 on Outgoing model's M2a-M2b

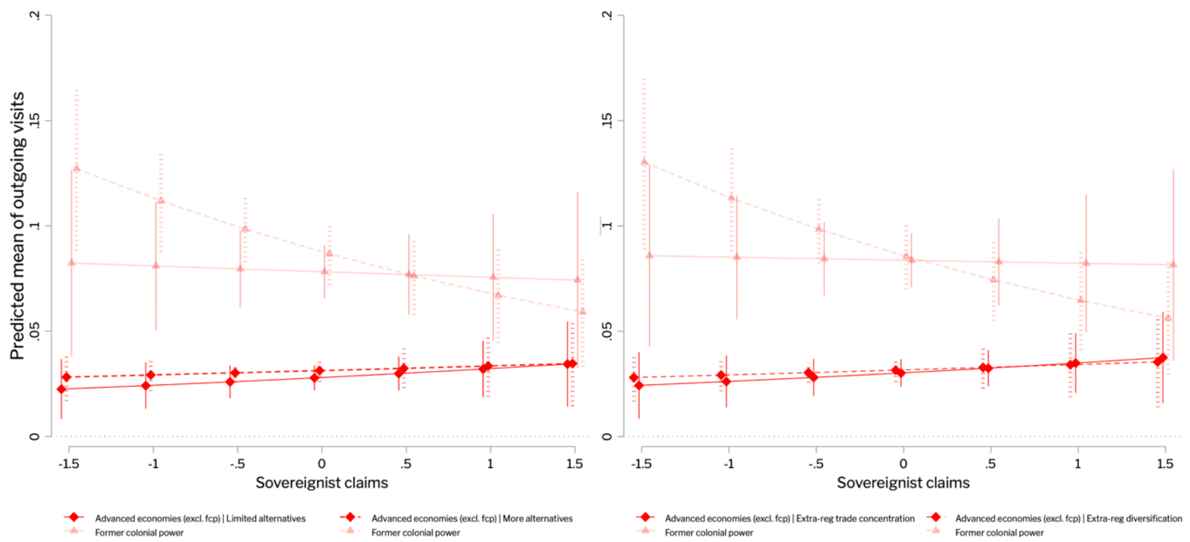


Table A3. Alternative model specifications

Model 3a-3c are stepwise models which introduce the controls in blocks, before reaching 3c which is the same model as main manuscript's M1b. Models 4-6 replicate the main manuscript's M1b, M2a, and M2b respectively, on a sub-sample of non-former French colonies to test whether in non-Francophone countries the effects hypothesised in H1b-H2a-H2b are still confirmed.

DV: All dyadic visits (count)	(1) M3a	(2) M3b	(3) M3c	(4) M4	(4) M5	(5) M6
Sovereignist claims $_{(t-1)}$	0.152	0.236	0.257	0.070	-0.033	0.161
	(0.163)	(0.173)	(0.163)	(0.163)	(0.261)	(0.327)
Partner regions (ref. cat. Others)						
- Africa	2.370***	2.239***	2.232***	2.040***	2.086***	1.755***
	(0.181)	(0.189)	(0.187)	(0.213)	(0.229)	(0.225)
× sovereignist claims $_{(t-1)}$	-0.021	-0.082	-0.080	0.165	0.260	0.068
	(0.159)	(0.167)	(0.167)	(0.166)	(0.239)	(0.303)
× Asian trade alternatives $_{(t-1)}$ OR HHI extra-regional trade $_{(t-1)}$					-0.009	0.253
					(0.017)	(0.613)
- Advanced economies (excl. fcp)	0.987***	0.347***	0.344***	0.247*	0.051	0.551***
	(0.119)	(0.117)	(0.116)	(0.142)	(0.176)	(0.202)
× sovereignist claims $_{(t-1)}$	-0.231	-0.253	-0.253	-0.096	-0.054	-0.070
	(0.179)	(0.180)	(0.180)	(0.223)	(0.244)	(0.439)
× Asian trade alternatives $_{(t-1)}$ OR HHI extra-regional trade $_{(t-1)}$					-0.003	-0.044
					(0.021)	(0.791)
- Former colonial powers	2.062***	1.340***	1.336***	1.109***	0.922***	1.337***
	(0.161)	(0.138)	(0.138)	(0.148)	(0.203)	(0.204)
× sovereignist claims $_{(t-1)}$	-0.437**	-0.518***	-0.521***	-0.275	0.099	-0.814**
	(0.180)	(0.182)	(0.183)	(0.258)	(0.335)	(0.376)
× Asian trade alternatives $_{(t-1)}$ OR HHI extra-regional trade $_{(t-1)}$					-0.034*	1.372*
					(0.019)	(0.727)
- Asia (including Russia)	1.038***	0.920***	0.917***	0.720***	0.631***	0.816***
	(0.131)	(0.132)	(0.132)	(0.153)	(0.208)	(0.165)
× sovereignist claims $_{(t-1)}$	-0.071	-0.094	-0.093	0.010	-0.209	0.244

	(0.170)	(0.181)	(0.181)	(0.239)	(0.334)	(0.374)
× Asian trade alternatives $_{(t-1)}$ OR HHI extra-regional trade $_{(t-1)}$					0.020	-0.564
					(0.022)	(0.720)
Asian trade alternatives $_{(t-1)}$ OR HHI extra-regional trade $_{(t-1)}$					-0.030***	1.341***
					(0.010)	(0.309)
- Africa × Asian trade alt $_{(t-1)}$ OR HHI extra-regional trade $_{(t-1)}$					-0.006	0.470
					(0.009)	(0.334)
- Adv econ (excl. fcp) × Asian trade alt $_{(t-1)}$ OR HHI extra-reg trade $_{(t-1)}$					0.020**	-0.691*
					(0.010)	(0.365)
- Former colonial powers × Asian trade alt $_{(t-1)}$ OR HHI extra-reg trade $_{(t-1)}$					0.019*	-0.545
					(0.011)	(0.395)
- Asia × Asian trade alt $_{(t-1)}$ OR HHI extra-regional trade $_{(t-1)}$					0.008	-0.294
					(0.010)	(0.319)
Sovereignist claims $_{(t-1)}$ × Asian trade alt $_{(t-1)}$ OR HHI extra-reg trade $_{(t-1)}$					0.008	-0.227
					(0.019)	(0.668)
Control variables						
GDP African country $_{(log, t-1)}$	0.247**	0.511	0.531	0.122	-0.042	0.284
	(0.116)	(0.366)	(0.323)	(0.474)	(0.338)	(0.329)
GDP partner $_{(log, t-1)}$	0.306***	0.222***	0.222***	0.239***	0.241***	0.243***
	(0.014)	(0.015)	(0.015)	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.019)
Distance (logged kms)	-0.426***	-0.442***	-0.444***	-0.464***	-0.464***	-0.460***
	(0.057)	(0.061)	(0.061)	(0.071)	(0.070)	(0.070)
Bilateral trade (% GDP) $_{(t-1)}$	0.009***	0.006**	0.006**	0.004	0.005	0.005
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)
Bilateal aid (% GDP) $_{(t-1)}$	0.078***	0.057***	0.053***	0.069***	0.060***	0.056**
	(0.015)	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.021)	(0.022)	(0.025)
Arms imports $_{(t-1)}$	0.000***	0.000***	0.000***	0.000***	0.000***	0.000***
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Alliance $_{(t-1)}$	0.396***	0.417***	0.428***	0.464***	0.483***	0.609***
	(0.109)	(0.112)	(0.109)	(0.143)	(0.119)	(0.109)
GDP growth $_{(t-1)}$		-0.002	-0.003	-0.005	-0.002	-0.003
		(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
GDP pc $_{(log, t-1)}$		-0.276	-0.305	0.275	0.342	0.014

		(0.411)	(0.363)	(0.558)	(0.455)	(0.444)
Conflict		-0.103**	-0.104**	-0.071	-0.106	-0.119
		(0.051)	(0.049)	(0.070)	(0.080)	(0.077)
Age leader		-0.000	-0.001	-0.002	-0.001	-0.001
		(0.002)	(0.003)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)
Multiparty election			-0.031	-0.065	-0.078	-0.076
			(0.035)	(0.048)	(0.050)	(0.050)
First term			-0.020	-0.066	-0.075	-0.075
			(0.041)	(0.052)	(0.074)	(0.063)
Democracy $_{(t-1)}$			0.914***	1.011**	1.346***	1.419***
			(0.300)	(0.432)	(0.387)	(0.372)
Global influence $_{(t-1)}$		0.071***	0.072***	0.068***	0.066***	0.065***
		(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Personalist legitimation $_{(t-1)}$			-0.031	-0.064	-0.027	-0.050
			(0.040)	(0.046)	(0.053)	(0.049)
Performance legitimation $_{(t-1)}$			0.122**	0.197***	0.214***	0.221***
			(0.059)	(0.074)	(0.080)	(0.080)
Procedural legitimation $_{(t-1)}$			-0.079	-0.063	-0.100	-0.130
			(0.070)	(0.094)	(0.098)	(0.098)
Previous visit $_{(t-1)}$	1.261***	1.172***	1.165***	1.160***	1.154***	1.147***
	(0.054)	(0.055)	(0.055)	(0.071)	(0.075)	(0.073)
Constant	-19.927***	-21.906***	-22.472***	-16.994**	-13.455***	-19.839***
	(2.787)	(5.941)	(5.328)	(7.513)	(4.938)	(4.926)
Observations	284,364	262,508	262,508	161,912	161,912	161,912
Country FE (54)	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Year FE (32)	YES	YES	YES	NO	NO	NO
Pseudo R-squared	0.339	0.347	0.348	0.357	0.350	0.351

*** $p<0.01$, ** $p<0.05$, * $p<0.1$. Robust standard errors in parentheses clustered at the country level. All models are estimated with the ppmlhdfe stata command, with *days* as exposure variable.

Figures A6-A8. Replication of main manuscript's Figure 3-4 with Table A3's M4, M5, M6 (non-Francophone sample). They confirm H1b, H2a, H2b, but these effects are weaker than in the full sample, as confidence intervals of the downward dotted lines often overlap.

Figure A6. M4's interaction effect, replicating main manuscript's Figure 3

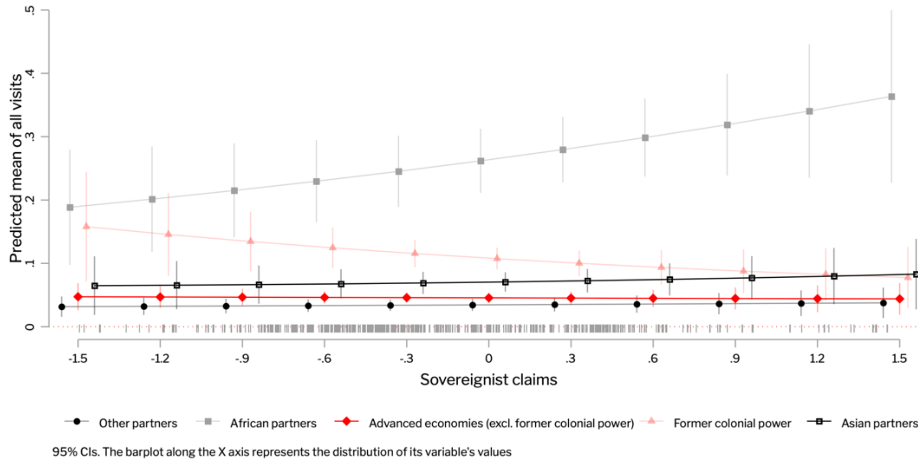


Figure A7. M5's interaction effect, replicating main manuscript's Figure 4a

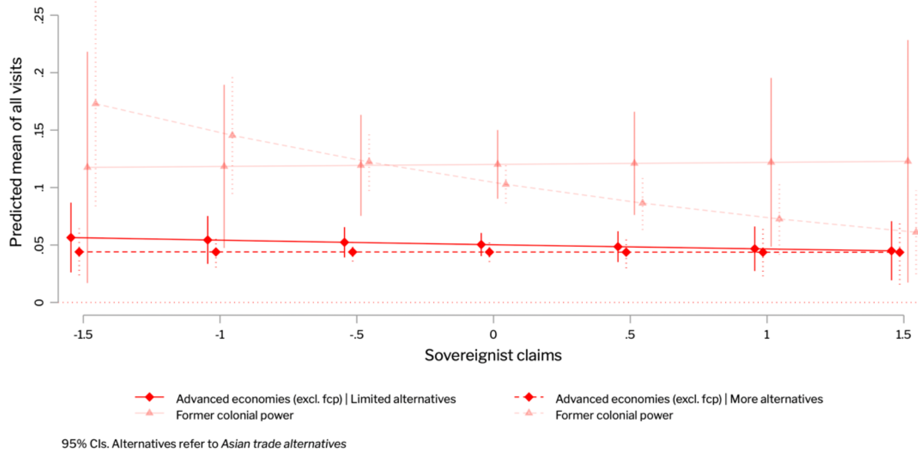
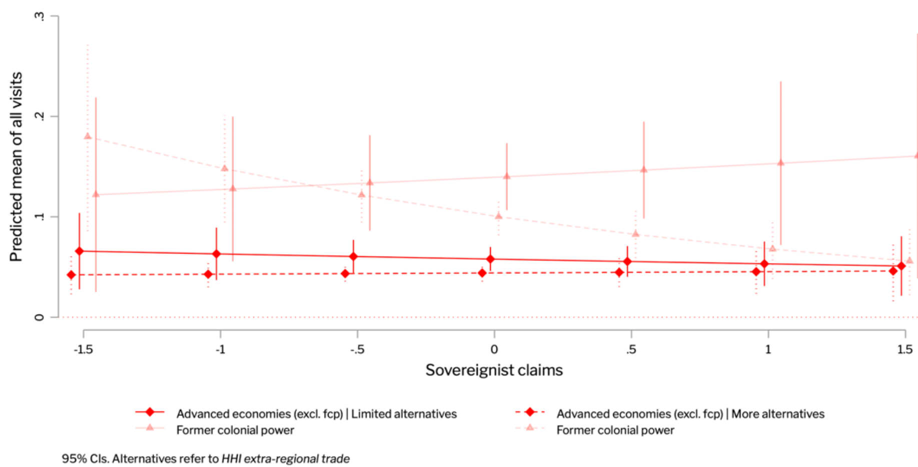


Figure A8. M4's interaction effect, replicating main manuscript's Figure 4b



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