

Revisiting Geopolitical Alignment

Fabio Enrico Traverso

GSEFM - TU Darmstadt
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Abstract

In a multipolar global order, properly measuring countries’ geopolitical alignment is an ever-important research objective. This paper assesses empirically the behaviour of several countries through their UNGA voting patterns. I show that, in order to understand the relative positioning of countries with respect to competing hegemons, existing alignment measures need to be complemented with a new one.

1 Introduction

In the aftermath of WWII, the Allies founded the United Nations. This new organisation was expected to be the core of a new international order based on collegiality and representation of all nations.¹ At the core of the UN lies its General Assembly, which votes on non-binding resolutions that allow countries to signal their position on international issues. Researchers in International Relations have worked a number of statistical procedures to analyse patterns of UNGA voting.² The most successful development in this field has been Bailey, Strezhnev, and Voeten [2017](#), wherein the authors employ a spatial ordinal model and compute a distribution of countries’ ideal points by year. By taking the ideal points distance (henceforth IPD) between country pairs, researchers can use these estimates to proxy for the geopolitical distance between countries. In the nascent field of geoeconomics, IPD has been used to assess the impact of geopolitical tensions on economic relations, such as trade flows and FDI.³ Another relevant application has been estimating countries’ relative geoeconomic positioning. In this particular framework, the discussion has focused on estimating country-wise statistics that integrate geopolitics and economics.⁴ This paper shows that the current use of IPD is conceptually flawed and proposes an alternative methodology that allows overcoming these flaws. The contribution of this paper is improving upon established estimations of countries’

¹Not all countries are members of the UN and, especially at its 1945 inception, it was a fairly exclusive organisation. See e.g. Hanhimäki [2015](#) and Luard [1982](#).

²See Bailey, Strezhnev, and Voeten [2017](#)’s discussion of the UN voting data literature.

³See Gopinath et al. [2025](#), Goldbach and Nitsch [2026](#).

⁴See Aiyar and Ohnsorge [2024](#), Airaudo et al. [2025](#), Baur et al. [2025](#).

geopolitical alignment during the Cold War and the current China-USA hegemonic rivalry. Section 2 discusses the sources, Section 3 presents the main evidence and Section 4 concludes.

2 Data

To measure geopolitical distance, I use data from Bailey, Strezhnev, and Voeten 2017. The sample of interest is restricted to Great Britain, Türkiye, France, India and Yugoslavia.⁵ These countries have made heterogeneous strategic choices vis à vis the USA and USSR. Such differences, which will be discussed more in depth in Section 3, prove useful to appreciate the nuances captured by the new measure here proposed.

IPD, despite its success in empirical applications, is only a proxy of actual geopolitical alignment. Furthermore, especially since the end of the Cold War, it displays smaller variation over time, which is a consequence of what has been defined the long period of *Pax Americana* and the relative global stability that such equilibrium implied.⁶ Furthermore, the UN were established in the mid 20th century, so that there is no data coverage prior to 1946. Broner et al. 2025 have proposed using signed treaties as a proxy for international alignment. Despite its apparent appeal as a more time varying variable than IPD⁷, treaties signing presents some potential drawbacks as a proxy for geopolitical agreement. First of all, treaties are heterogeneous in nature-purpose and therefore, beyond economic ones, it is not straightforward to infer their expected effect on economic relations. Second, treaties are stipulated once and, with exceptions, result in agreements that take effect for a long time and cannot be easily undone.⁸ In sum, treaties do not capture the dynamic effect of changes in geopolitics that can happen in the short run.

I propose using IPD instead of signed treaties, but with a new approach that will be outlined in the next Section.

3 Empirics

3.1 Alignment Measures

Assuming two competing hegemonies, how does a country align between them? Airaud et al. 2025 propose the following method: given a country i and two hegemonies j, k in year t ,

$$seg_{ijkt} = \frac{IPD_{ijt} - IPD_{ikt}}{IPD_{ijt} + IPD_{ikt}} \quad (1)$$

⁵For historical reasons and to improve comparability, Yugoslavia is analysed only in the Cold War era.

⁶See Layne 2018

⁷And, of course, data availability prior to 1946.

⁸See Simmons and Hopkins 2005, Lupu 2013.

where IPD_{ijt} , stands for the IPD between country i and j in year t , estimated by Bailey, Strezhnev, and Voeten 2017 through UNGA voting data. seg_{ijkt} is by construction bounded to the $[-1; 1]$ interval. A value of 1 (resp. -1) indicates i is perfectly aligned with country j (resp. k), while a value of 0 implies perfect equidistance. Despite its conceptual appeal and straightforward interpretation, seg_{ijkt} presents several shortcomings:

- It only tells whether country i is equally far from j and k , but not whether i is equally close or distant from j and k .
- seg_{ijkt} does not take into account the relative position of other countries with respect to j and k . In other words, it is uninformative on the distribution of Ideal Points in a given year.
- In a geopolitical context with more than two hegemons⁹, computing any measure of equidistance with one-dimensional data such as Ideal Points is not possible.

I propose the following alternative:

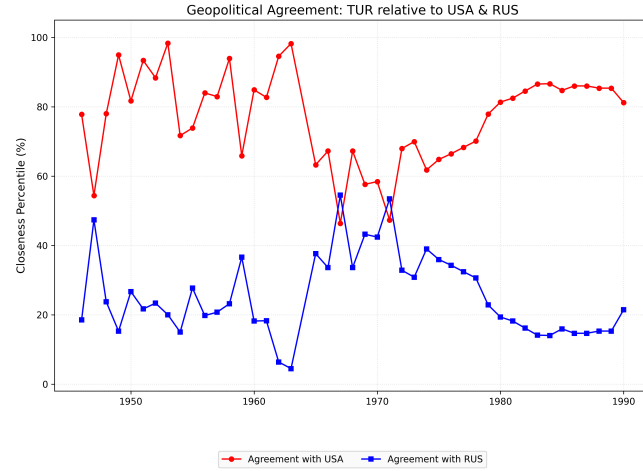
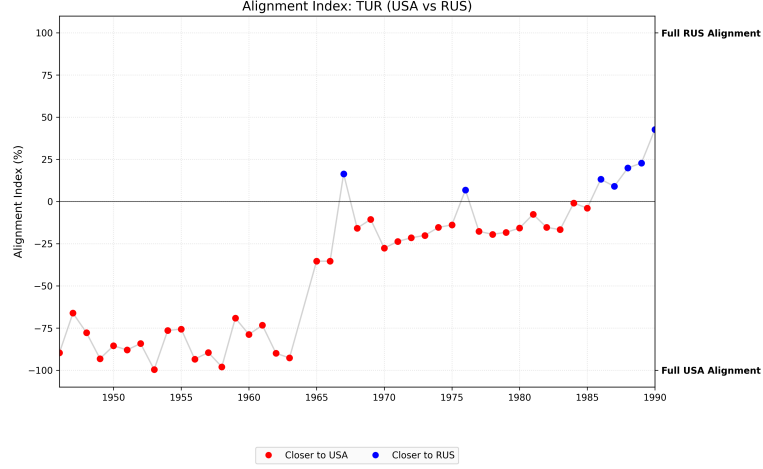
- Given a hegemon j and a country i in year t , compute IPD_{ijt} for all $i \neq j$ in year t .
- Rank countries in descending order of IPD_{ij} , so that the geopolitically furthest country from j is assigned a value of 1, the second 2, ...
- Normalizing the ranking by the number of total countries in year t .

This new measure, called "Agreement Percentile" (hencefort AP_{ijt} , overcomes all the shortcomings of seg_{ijkt} . I will illustrate how the new index is more revealing of geopolitical relations by illustrating the USA-USSR rivalry during the Cold War and the current USA-China competition.

3.2 Cold War

In this section, I show the alignment behaviour of five countries during the Cold War: Türkiye, Great Britain, India, France and Yugoslavia. Each specific case highlights comparatively the performance of the seg_{ijkt} and AP_{ijt} measures. As it will be clearer throughout the section, the Cold War was not a static conflict, but rather an evolving set of political-military dynamics that justifies looking at the geopolitical behaviour of the US Allies and other, more diplomatically independent countries.

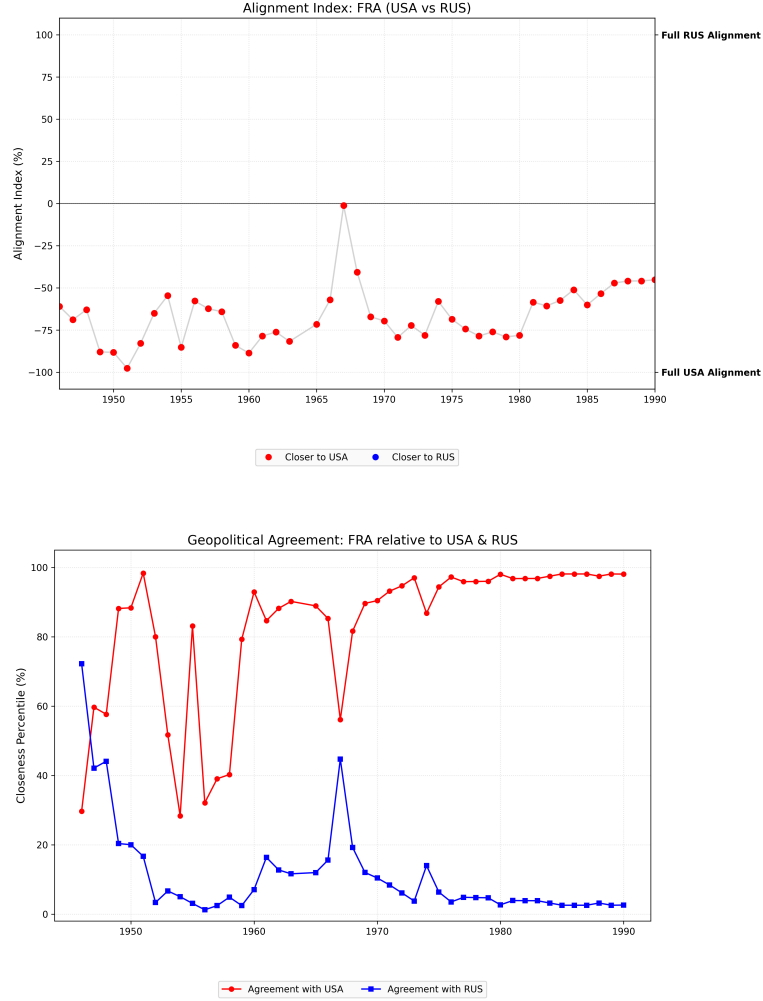
⁹As some scholars such as Peters 2023 argue is the case for the current world order



Türkiye is often mentioned as a paradigmatic example of middle power.¹⁰ According to the Alignment Index time series, Türkiye's strategic shift took place in the early 1960s, at the end of the Cuban missile crisis. In fact, the Turkish government notoriously worried about relying unconditionally on the American defence system and feared being easily used as a bargaining chip by the USA.¹¹ Analysis of AP_{ijt} shows that Türkiye's diplomatic divergence from the United States was rather short-lived and lasted for only about a decade.

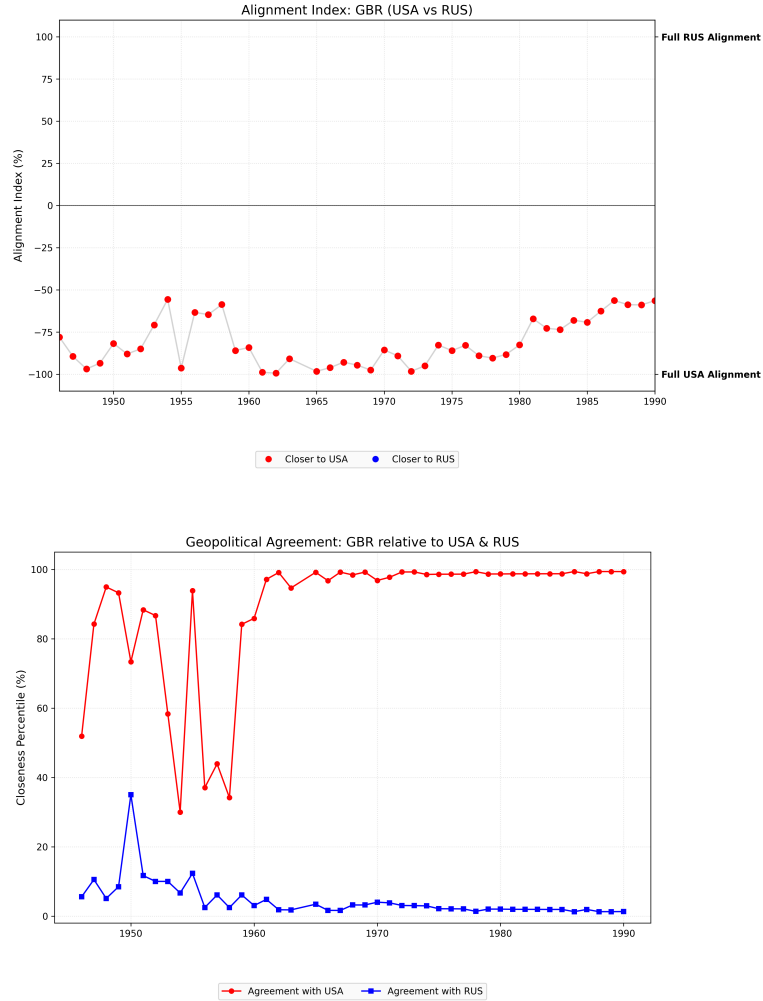
¹⁰See for instance Oğuzlu 2023, Gulmez 2020

¹¹See Hale 2012, page 110.

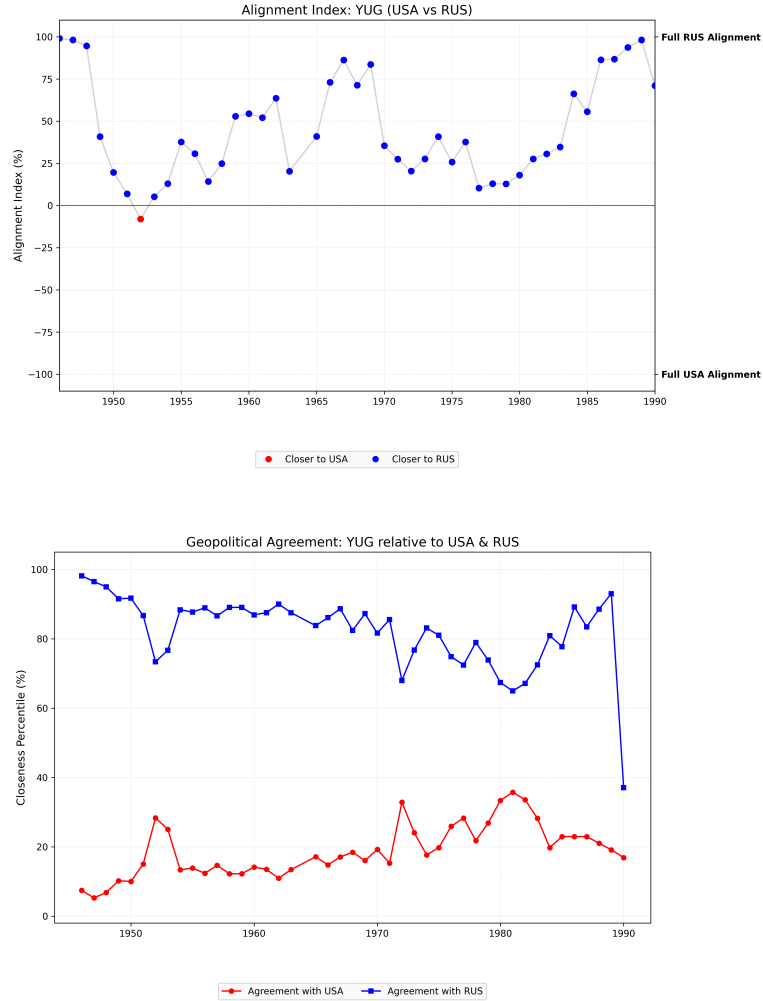


France and the USA have been firm allies since the American War of Independence, but their diplomatic relations have been characterised by diverging perspectives on several topics, such as the role of NATO in Europe, the Vietnam War and the Suez crisis.¹² Such oscillations and the subsequent appeasement are better captured by AP_{ijt} , rather than seg_{ijkt} .

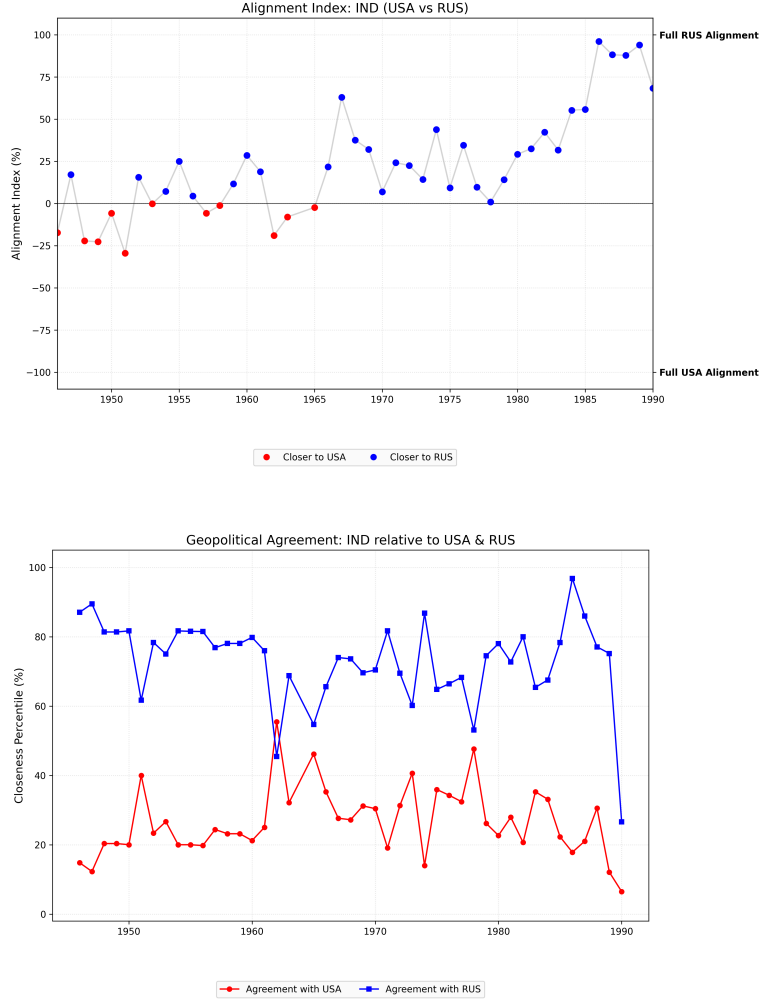
¹²See Statler 2016



The United Kingdom and the USA have diverged dramatically in terms of UNGA voting patterns until the end of the 50's. In the meanwhile, Great Britain never really moved closer to the USSR, except than in 1950. While the Alignment Index shows a gradual increase towards the USSR in the second half of the Cold War, AP_{ijt} reveals a different story: especially since 1960 the United Kingdom has been voting as aligned to the USA and as far from the USSR as possible.



Yugoslavia was a founding member of the Non Aligned Movement: despite its socialist institutional setting, it tried and managed to detach from the direct influence of the USSR. The Alignment Index time series seems to support the finding. However, AP_{ijt} reveal that Yugoslavia kept voting fairly close to Russia and far from the USA throughout the Cold War.

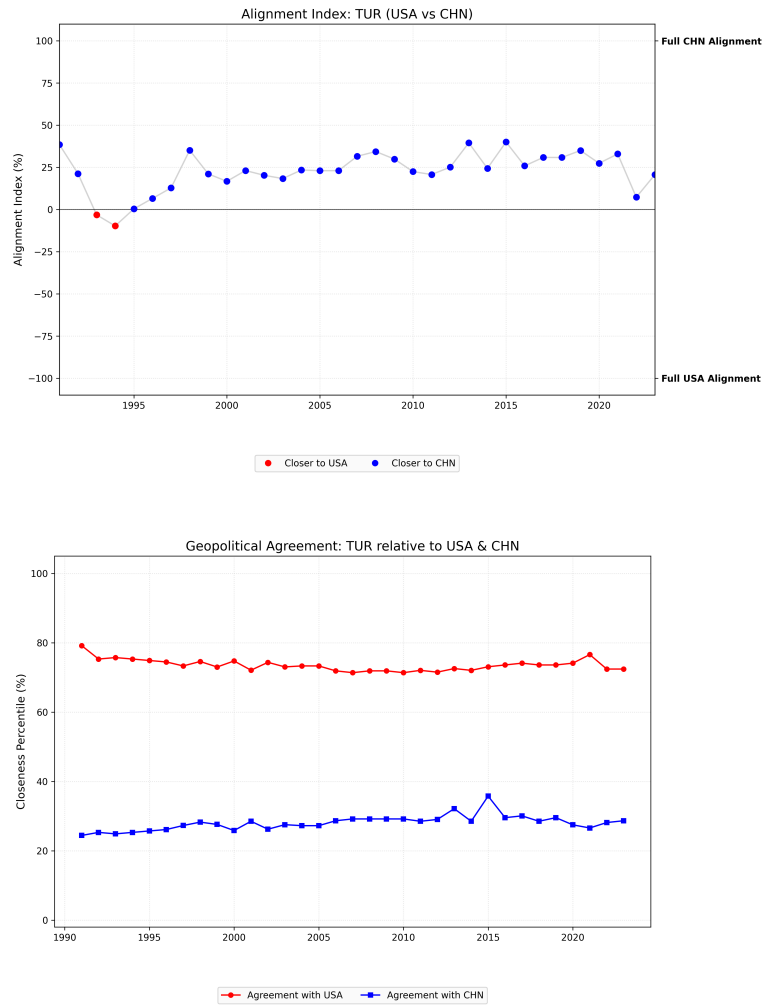


India is the largest country among the members of the Non Aligned Movement. It has never formed an alliance with either the USA nor the USSR. According to the Alignment Index, the former British colony has stayed roughly equidistant from the two superpowers, although looking at AP_{ijt} reveals that India has almost always been voting closer to the USSR, which contradicts what is usually discussed in the literature.¹³

¹³See Pant and Super 2015

3.3 Post Cold War

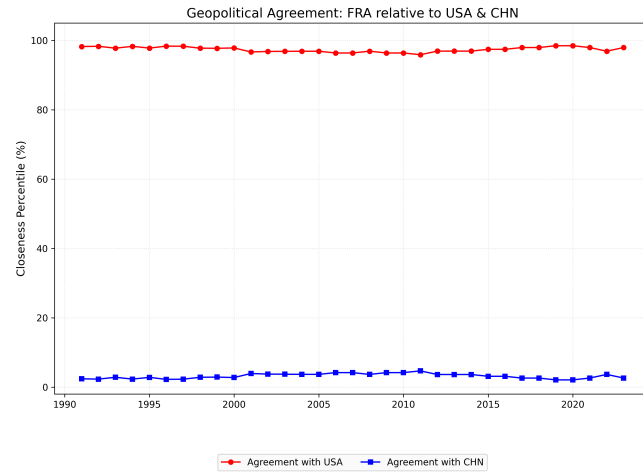
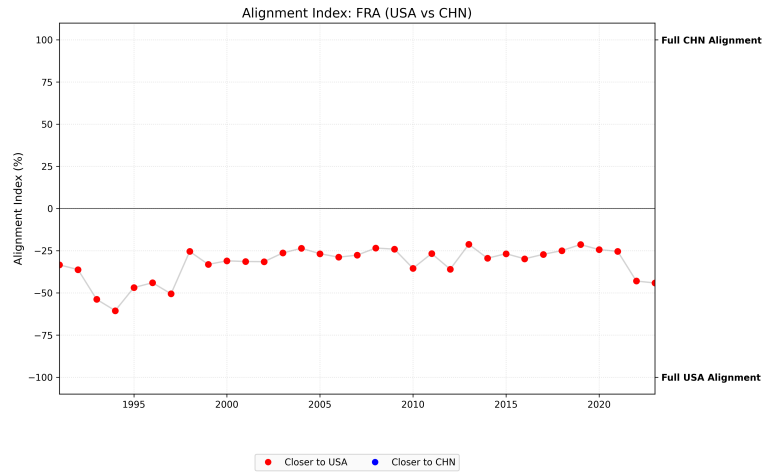
The rise of China has put the USA's hegemonic position in doubt after a decade of appeasement following the fall of the Soviet Union.¹⁴ It is now very clear that China and USA are competing hegemons and countries have to decide their alignment in a fashion resembling, with the due differences, that of the Cold War.¹⁵ Therefore, the patterns of countries' relative alignment between the USA and China can help assessing the performance of the AP_{ijt} compared to seg_{ijkt} .



¹⁴See Broner et al. 2025

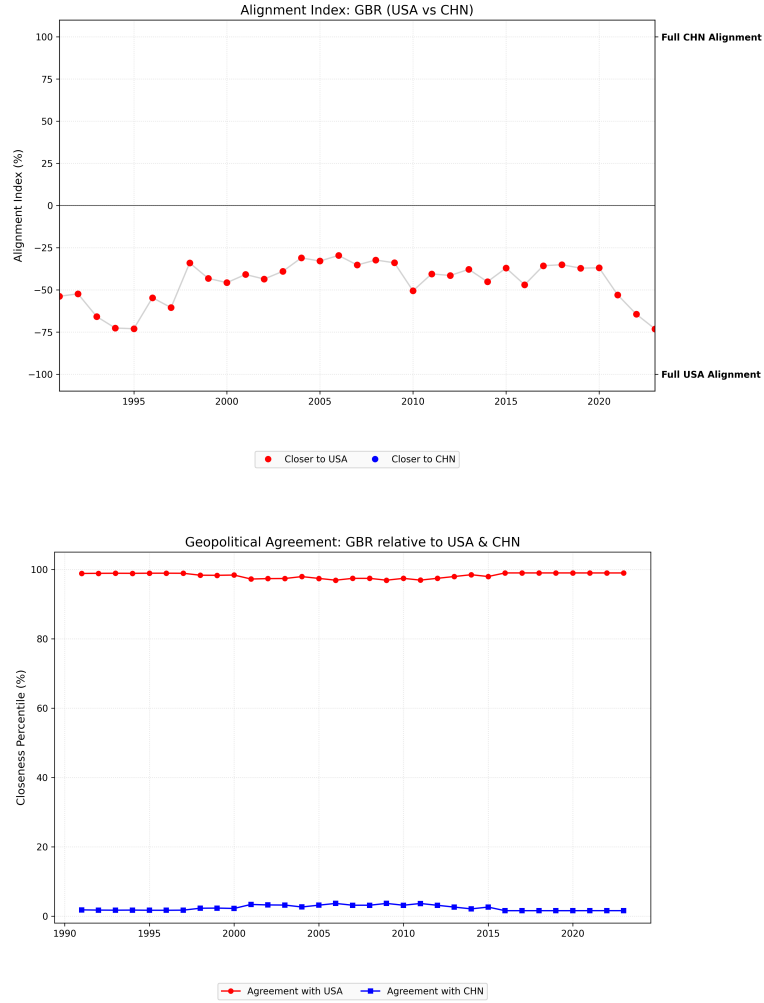
¹⁵See Brands and Gaddis 2021

While seg_{ijkt} shows Türkiye tends to vote closer to China, the AP_{ijt} reveal quite the opposite: Türkiye's votes are consistently closer to the USA's.

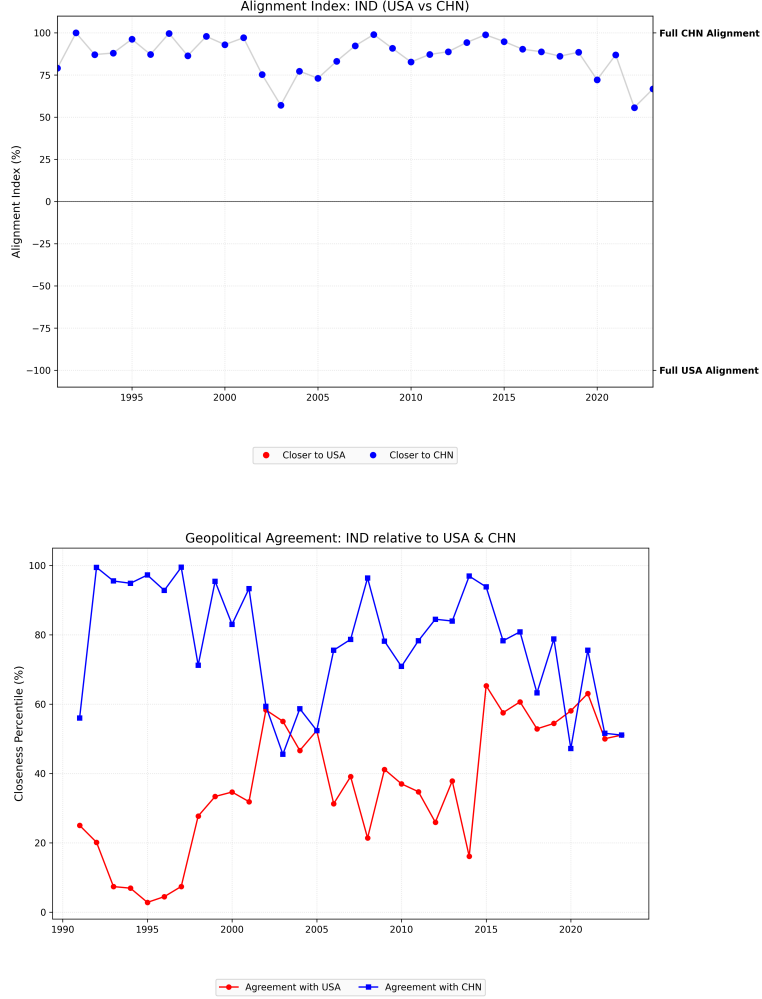


Post Cold War, France has been a stable ally of the USA, despite significant tensions over important events such as the Iraq war.¹⁶

¹⁶See the famous paper by Michaels and Zhi 2010 on the economic consequences of the France-USA divergence.



Similarly to France and Türkiye's cases, the United Kingdom has remained very closely aligned to the USA. The implied divide between NATO allies and China would not be captured by the Alignment Index, whereas the AP_{ijt} show very clearly this geopolitical gap.



India's non-alignment continued well beyond the Cold War, although showing a closer alignment with China than the USA, until very recently. The complex dynamics of India's non-aligned voting patterns are simply not captured by the Alignment Index, unlike with AP_{ijt} .

4 Conclusion

The USA and China are the pulling forces of International Relations in the 21st century, forcing allies to signal their alignment. Other, more independent, countries like India choose sides strategically and on an opportunity basis. This paper proposes a new measure of geopolitical alignment. The two case

studies here presented, the Cold War and the current USA-China rivalry, shed light on the superiority of the AP_{ijt} with respect to seg_{ijkt} . Future work could consist of assessing whether AP_{ijt} varies significantly when taking into account the specific nature of the UNGA voting session. Another useful application would be exploiting the non-symmetric nature of AP_{ijt} to reassess the impact of geopolitical distance on trade and investment flows. Similarly, the concept of geoeconomic vulnerability developed by Aiyar and Ohnsorge 2024 can be reinterpreted in novel ways by using the AP_{ijt} .

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