Tracking U.S. Global Alignment in the United Nations General Assembly

Abstract

This analysis goes over the long-term transformation of U.S. diplomatic influence in multilateral institutions, particularly the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). By analyzing historical voting data and ideological trends, this project quantifies how closely countries align with the U.S. over time, constructing a Diplomatic Risk Index (DRI) to identify volatility and divergence, and building a predictive model to forecast future alignment behavior. These tools can help support policymakers, investors, and international coalitions in understanding where the U.S. is gaining or losing global support, and where diplomatic partnerships may be at risk.

Background

The United States has historically been a dominant force in shaping global policy through international forums like the UNGA. In the decades following World War II, U.S. leadership was marked by high alignment levels from both allies and developing nations. However, this influence has gradually diminished. While the U.S. remains central to global governance, shifts in geopolitical alliances, regional power dynamics, and diverging policy preferences have resulted in reduced consensus and coalition-building power.

Where global agreement with U.S. positions at the UN once consistently exceeded 60%, it has now dipped below 30% in recent years. This downward trend is particularly pronounced among countries outside of formal alliances like NATO. As global power becomes more fragmented, U.S. influence is increasingly challenged not just by adversaries, but also by neutral and even allied states on specific issues, including human rights, climate change, and peacekeeping. While traditional monitoring tools track votes and alliances, they rarely allow for granular, time-sensitive insights into which countries are drifting, and why. This analysis aims to fill that monitoring gap.

Data and Preprocessing

This project draws from two datasets: AgreementScoresAll_Jun2024.csv, which contains dyadic similarity scores between the U.S. and other UNGA members, and IdealpointestimatesAll_Jun2024.csv, which includes ideological coordinates and direct measures of U.S. alignment for each country-session.

Initial preprocessing steps included the removal of null values from the agreements dataset, particularly where missing ideal points or vote counts would compromise analysis. The idealpoints dataset was also cleaned, with missing values in USAgree removed and unrelated alignment columns, such as those tracking similarity with Russia or China, dropped entirely. Countries were matched with their unique country codes to facilitate grouping and aggregation. These steps ensured the datasets were suitable for time-series and country-level comparative analysis.

Exploratory Data Analysis

The first stage of exploratory analysis focused on participation. Countries with the most votes, like Russia, the United States, and Sweden, have deep historical engagement in the UNGA. In contrast, countries like South Sudan and Kiribati had low voting totals due to late entry or diplomatic marginalization. These extremes highlight the importance of considering data coverage in subsequent analyses.

I then examined global patterns in U.S. alignment over time. The average global USAgree score has steadily declined from postwar highs through the Cold War, bottoming out in the 1990s before a slight recovery in the 2010s and early 2020s. Alignment is significantly higher among NATO countries than non-NATO states, indicating persistent bloc-level loyalty even as broader U.S. support weakens. A scatterplot of USAgree scores against ideological positioning (IdealPointAll) shows a clear positive correlation, countries ideologically closer to the U.S. tend to vote more frequently with it. This trend is especially strong among NATO countries.

Autocorrelation analysis further explored alignment stability over time. Countries like Brazil, Colombia, and New Zealand exhibit high lag-1 autocorrelation scores, suggesting that once aligned with the U.S., they tend to stay that way. Conversely, countries such as Kiribati and San Marino demonstrate highly volatile alignment patterns. This variability is meaningful for risk analysis because diplomatic unpredictability can disrupt trade, security partnerships, and multilateral negotiations.

Diplomatic Risk Index (DRI)

To capture the complexity of diplomatic volatility, I developed a Diplomatic Risk Index that includes three components: the change in alignment from first to most recent session, the volatility of that alignment over time, and the ideological distance from the U.S. ideal point. All components were normalized to ensure comparability, and the index was computed as a simple average of the three.

Countries with the highest DRI values include Nicaragua, Venezuela, Iran, and Cuba, long-time U.S. adversaries with consistently oppositional voting patterns. However, the presence of countries like South Africa, Germany, and the United Kingdom on the high-risk list underscores that even historically allied or neutral states may now pose diplomatic challenges due to shifts in domestic politics or issue-specific divergence. These findings illustrate how traditional alliance labels may no longer be sufficient for tracking diplomatic risk.

Predictive Model: Forecasting Alignment with XGBoost

To complement the index, I built a forward-looking predictive model using the XGBoost regression framework. The goal was to predict a country's future USAgree score using its past behavior and ideological features. I used the following input features: current USAgree, change

in USAgree, recent alignment volatility (rolling standard deviation), and ideological distance from the U.S.

After cleaning and preparing the dataset, I split it into training and test sets using an 80/20 split. The model yielded strong results, with an R^2 score of 0.831 and a root mean squared error (RMSE) of 0.081. Feature importance analysis showed that current alignment was by far the most predictive variable, followed by volatility and ideological distance. These results reinforce the notion that diplomatic behavior is often path-dependent, once a country moves into or out of alignment, it tends to stay on that trajectory unless disrupted by a major event.

A scatterplot comparing predicted and actual alignment scores confirmed the model's accuracy, particularly for mid- to low-alignment countries. Some high-alignment countries were slightly underestimated, but the model remained robust overall. This predictive capacity is useful for anticipating which countries are at risk of shifting away from the U.S., a critical capability in the face of rapid geopolitical change.

Risk and Policy Implications

The results validate the pre-registered hypothesis that U.S. alignment is declining globally and becoming more volatile among non-NATO countries. Countries like Ireland, Brazil, and Turkey have seen substantial declines, reflecting both regional realignments and frustration with U.S. foreign policy. Meanwhile, alignment has increased in countries like Israel, Spain, and several Pacific island states, suggesting areas of growing influence.

These patterns carry several policy implications. Countries with volatile or declining alignment may be less reliable partners in trade negotiations, defense coalitions, or multilateral sanctions. Policymakers could use the DRI to flag these countries for closer diplomatic engagement, reconsider strategic partnerships, or design targeted aid and policy interventions. For example, a high DRI score could prompt U.S. agencies to initiate backchannel diplomacy, increase embassy staffing, or leverage multilateral forums to reassert influence.

From a commercial perspective, international investors and firms can use this information to anticipate regulatory risks, shifts in market access, or reputational exposure. If a country is trending away from U.S. alignment, it may be more likely to oppose U.S.-backed trade regimes or impose barriers aligned with rival geopolitical blocs.

Assumptions and Limitations

This project makes several assumptions worth acknowledging. First, it assumes that past voting behavior is a reliable indicator of future alignment, which holds in many cases but may be disrupted by regime change, conflict, or foreign intervention. Second, it treats ideological distance as a proxy for foreign policy divergence, even though countries may vote strategically rather than ideologically. Third, the equal weighting of DRI components may not reflect their true relative importance.

Additionally, the analysis excludes qualitative factors such as diplomatic statements, domestic political context, and leader-to-leader relationships. These could be incorporated in

future iterations using natural language processing of UN speeches, international news, or public diplomacy efforts. Time-series forecasting models could also enhance predictive accuracy by capturing structural breaks or regime shifts.

Next Steps and Conclusion

Future development will focus on expanding the model to incorporate qualitative data and refine DRI weighting based on predictive relevance or expert judgment. Adding new variables, such as economic interdependence, regional security threats, or human rights alignment, could enhance sensitivity and generalizability. Furthermore, linking voting behavior to real-world outcomes, such as treaty ratification or foreign aid disbursement, would strengthen causal claims.

In conclusion, this project demonstrates that tracking UNGA alignment with the U.S. can yield actionable insights for understanding diplomatic risk. By combining descriptive metrics, risk indexing, and predictive modeling, this research offers a scalable framework for anticipating shifts in the global diplomatic order. Whether informing foreign policy, multinational strategy, or global governance, these tools help illuminate where the U.S. is gaining ground, and where it stands to lose influence next.

References

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