

Political Economy of China-Africa Engagement: From Tiananmen to Belt and Road Initiative

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ABSTRACT

While the fact that China-Africa relations date back roughly to the Tang Dynasty of 7th-10th Centuries, is itself an important critique to the established view that China's presence in Africa is a reaction to the claims of "America decline", three key events are central in the political economy discussion of this subject; Tiananmen Square experience of 1989, the entry of China into the World Trade Organization in 2001 and the New Belt and Road Initiative. This paper critiques and contributes to the burgeoning scholarship on Sino-Africa engagement. It problematizes the scholarship in this area as adopting a reductionist conventional approach to studying Sino-African relations, namely, within Sino-American competition, and as though Sino-African relations are characteristically binary; China gains, Africa loses. Set against this critique, the study to critically examine the interplay of African agency and China's evolving geopolitical strategy, particularly under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Employing a qualitative comparative case study methodology, the research explores the motivations influencing China's deeper ties with African nations, while highlighting the significant constraints posed by asymmetrical economic relations. The analysis traces the leadership transitions from Jiang Zemin to Xi Jinping, revealing how each regime has articulated differing but continually interlinked narratives surrounding China's global ambitions. It is established that since China's accession to the WTO her relations with Africa have been reconfigured, from both sides, as strategic and mutual than ideological and asymmetrical. Notable in this reconceptualization is how Xi's vision marks a departure toward a more assertive developmental agenda in Africa. By situating case studies from Ethiopia, Egypt, Ghana, South Sudan, and Kenya, the paper elucidates both the opportunities afforded by Chinese investments and the risks of entrenched dependency. The findings underscore the dual nature of this engagement and advocates for a rather nuanced understanding of entanglement where opportunities for development coexist with structural challenges, as opposed to reductionist analyses that sees China's presence in Africa as a reaction to American "decline". In conclusion, the study posits that the future trajectory of Africa's development will hinge on leveraging these complex relationships for greater autonomy and diversification within the global economy.

Keywords: China-Africa engagement, Political economy, African Agency, Neo-dependency

INTRODUCTION

Debates around the notions of "China rising" (Bergsten, 2009; Chestnut & Johnston, 2009; Straszheim, 2008; Kang, 2007) and "American decline" (Rachman, 2011; Kagan, 2012; Calleo, 2010; Cox, 2001) have often narrowed political economy analyses in International Relations and Political Science to focus almost exclusively on Sino-American relations or at best relations between other major powers with USA. Although this is expected because we live in a Foucauldian-Realist world where the power-knowledge duality drives intellectualism, critical approaches in both Political Economy and International Political Economy need to take these reductionist approaches seriously, if "other" relations must be perceived and analyzed as subjects, in their own right, for PE/IPE analyses. For Sino-African engagements, viewing China's presence in Africa

as a purely a reaction to American “decline” is ahistorical as it is reductionist (as I present in section 1.1). By reductionist, I mean that to treat China-Africa relations within purely Sino-American relations framework leads to the adoption of analytical framework in which what remains to be assessed is the extent of binary-ness; who loses? Who gains? Thereby failing to capture Sino-African relations as it exists in its “natural” and evolving ecosystem.

Even worse, with the re-emergence of Donald J. Trump to the U.S. presidency and his overt commitment to a neo-mercantilist political economy, “alternative” international relations—such as Sino-African engagements—risk being further marginalized. This marginalization will be entrenched by the a continued lack of scholarly attention to the political economy of Sino-African relations or from analyses that frame such relations primarily through the lens of U.S.-China rivalry. In such case scenarios, Sino-African ties are reduced to a mere extension of “China's strategic pivot” (Wang & Zou, 2014; Cohen, 2021; Gaudilliere, 2014; Popescu, 2013).

Based on this broader analytic vantage point, this paper examines the political economy of China-Africa engagement as a complex and evolving relationship shaped by strategic considerations, historical trajectories, and mutual interests and actual needs, yet also structured by global asymmetries that echo Africa’s past and contemporary experiences with Western powers, including with USA.

The paper analyzes this subject as an evolving engagement between especially between 1989 and 2025 and as reflecting a profound transformation in global South-South relations, reshaped by shifting geopolitical alignments, economic pragmatism, and the strategic reassertion of Africa as a crucial player in the multipolar world order. Analysis conducted here reveal that emerging from the post-Tiananmen diplomatic isolation of China in 1989, this relationship matured in post-2001, into a multidimensional partnership marked by deepening trade, infrastructure investment, and post-Cold Cold War re-ideologization, on the part of China, through narratives such as “win-win cooperation” and “mutual development.” The Paper therefore briefly traces this engagement through the three distinct leadership eras of Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping which have each imprinted unique ideological and strategic blueprints on this engagement—ranging from soft diplomacy and debt diplomacy to digital entrenchment and geopolitical assertiveness under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

In essence, the paper interrogates the structural and strategic contours of this partnership through a political economy lens. It foregrounds both African agency and China’s global ambitions; without necessarily reducing the analysis into the Sino-American IPE imperatives and frameworks. In doing so, it interrogates the dialectic of opportunity and dependency, asking not only how African states have responded to China’s overtures, but also how this evolving engagement shapes and is shaped by broader contestations within the global capitalist system. The study emphasizes that a nuanced understanding of China-Africa relations requires moving beyond simplistic dichotomies of benevolence or exploitation, instead viewing it as a dynamic and uneven terrain where development aspirations, sovereignty, and global power converge.

Background to China-Africa Engagement

To understand the political economy foundations of the contemporary Sino-African engagements, it is critical to understand the origins, but most importantly how it has unfolded in the last three and half decade, especially from Jiang Zemin’s era through to current Xi’s regime. This part foregrounds the analysis intended in this paper in that light.

The historical roots of China-Africa relations trace back over a millennium, particularly through maritime exchanges along the Indian Ocean trade routes. As early as the Tang dynasty (7th–10th centuries), Chinese ceramics, silks, and coins reached the East African coast via Arab and Persian intermediaries operating through ports such as Mogadishu, Kilwa, and Mombasa (Chaudhuri, 1985; Prestholdt, 2008). These early connections were primarily commercial and indirect but laid the foundations for cross-cultural encounters and a nascent Afro-Asian maritime corridor. By the 15th century, direct contact intensified during the Ming

dynasty's naval expeditions under Admiral Zheng He, whose fleet visited several ports along the Swahili Coast—including present-day Kenya and Tanzania—between 1405 and 1433 (Ibid). These expeditions were driven less by territorial ambition and more by the projection of Chinese prestige and the establishment of tributary relations, contributing to an enduring narrative of non-coercive Chinese engagement in Africa (Levathes, 1994; Wade, 2009). While the voyages of Zheng He were eventually curtailed due to shifting priorities in China's domestic policy, they have since been invoked in contemporary Chinese diplomacy to symbolize a deep-rooted and peaceful historical bond with Africa (Alden, 2007).

However, these pre-modern encounters, though significant for cultural symbolism, did not lead to sustained state-level political or economic relations. The re-emergence of China-Africa engagement occurred in the mid-20th century, catalyzed by the post-World War II decolonization wave. This modern phase was shaped by shared ideological struggles against imperialism and colonialism, positioning both China and newly independent African states as part of a broader Global South solidarity movement. China's support for African liberation movements in Algeria, Angola, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe during the 1950s–1970s underscored this ideological alignment (Snow, 1988; Ogunsanwo, 1974). A key symbolic moment was China's participation in the 1955 Bandung Conference, where Afro-Asian unity was emphasized as a counterforce to Western hegemony (Alden, 2007). This ideological commitment was further demonstrated through large-scale infrastructure projects such as the Tanzania-Zambia Railway (TAZARA), constructed between 1970 and 1975 with nearly \$500 million in Chinese aid. TAZARA was not only a logistical lifeline for Zambia's copper exports but also a strategic move to bypass apartheid-controlled trade routes in southern Africa, an approach which was far from accidental but strategic in so far as it embodied the underlying Beijing's vision of pan-African self-reliance (Monson, 2009).

Despite these symbolically rich engagements, the actual scale of economic relations between China and Africa remained modest during the Cold War. China's limited global integration, combined with Africa's alignment within Cold War bipolarity, constrained the depth of trade and investment. Exchanges were largely confined to political diplomacy, basic technical cooperation in agriculture and healthcare, and ideological solidarity rather than significant commercial ventures. Nonetheless, these early interactions laid a crucial foundation for the transformation of China-Africa ties in the post-Cold War era, which would increasingly be driven by commercial pragmatism, geopolitical strategy, and a reconfiguration of global power dynamics (Alden, 2007).

A turning point emerged after 1989, marking the beginning of a new strategic orientation under Jiang Zemin. Following the Tiananmen Square crisis, scholars assert that China-Africa post-Tiananmen Square incident arose out of China's loneliness, namely, she faced Western diplomatic isolation due to widespread media mediated anti-China with claims of unimaginable egregious crimes against humanity during the Tiananmen onslaught. This prompted China to seek political solidarity in the Global South—including Africa (Brautigam, 2009). During the 1990s, Chinese foreign policy gradually shifted from ideological outreach to pragmatic economic diplomacy, aligning with Deng Xiaoping's reform-era doctrine of "hide your strength, bide your time." Africa was not a central focus, but Beijing leveraged soft power—particularly medical diplomacy, technical cooperation, and infrastructure aid, and prior ties including narratives forged between 1400s – 1800s—to strengthen her ties Africa while countering Taiwan's diplomatic presence (Taylor, 2006). By the end of Jiang's tenure in 2002, China had signed over 40 bilateral cooperation agreements with African states, though trade volumes remained low, totaling just \$10 billion in 2000 (Brautigam, 2009).

Under Hu Jintao (2002–2012), the political economy of China-Africa relations underwent a significant transformation. China's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001 and the launch of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000 institutionalized a more structured, strategic approach to the continent. FOCAC summits became platforms for pledging billions in concessional loans, debt relief, and infrastructure financing. China's "Going Out" strategy, aimed at securing energy, raw materials, and new markets, found fertile ground in resource-rich African states such as Angola, Nigeria, and Sudan. Between 2000 and 2010, China-Africa trade increased tenfold, reaching \$127 billion by 2011 (World Bank, 2020).

Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) expanded into mining, oil, construction, and telecommunications, often backed by lines of credit from the China Exim Bank and China Development Bank. This period also witnessed growing criticism from Western analysts who labeled the model as “neo-colonial” or extractive, while many African governments welcomed the alternative financing and infrastructure which never cared about the capacity to pay back as it was based on infrastructure-for-resource paradigm of development financing.

The Xi Jinping era (2012– to date) has been marked by a deepening and broadening of the China-Africa engagement within Beijing’s vision of a multipolar world and a restructured global governance order. Xi’s signature Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, positioned Africa as a critical node in China’s global connectivity plans (Brautigam, 2009). Major investments in ports, highways, railways, and energy infrastructure intensified, including flagship projects such as Kenya’s Standard Gauge Railway and Djibouti’s port and free trade zone. Between 2015 and 2019, trade volumes peaked at over \$200 billion, with China becoming Africa’s largest trading partner and a dominant bilateral creditor (OECD, 2022). Xi’s administration also introduced new narratives of “win-win cooperation” and “South-South solidarity,” while consolidating China’s influence through soft power tools like the Confucius Institutes, media partnerships, and digital infrastructure.

However, from 2020 onwards, new dynamics have emerged. The COVID-19 pandemic stressed existing debt burdens, prompting criticism of China’s lending practices and demands for debt restructuring. Simultaneously, African agency in negotiating terms with China has grown, with countries like Zambia and Ghana pushing back on opaque contracts and seeking diversified partnerships. Meanwhile, China’s own economic slowdown and shifts toward domestic consumption under Xi’s “dual circulation” strategy are beginning to recalibrate its external investments, including in Africa. Recent FOCAC commitments have shown a notable reduction in financial pledges, moving toward smaller, targeted, and climate-sensitive investments, human capital development, and digital cooperation (Sun, 2022). Thus, the period from 1989 to 2025 reflects the evolution of China-Africa relations from post-Tiananmen solidarity diplomacy to a full-fledged, politically embedded, and commercially driven partnership. The relationship has matured across three leadership regimes—Jiang Zemin’s cautious outreach, Hu Jintao’s resource and trade surge, and Xi Jinping’s geopolitical and digital entrenchment—signaling a shift from symbolic ties to a complex political economy interface with global ramifications. This paper examines the political economy of this engagement, a research area that continues to experience paucity of scholarship.

China Joins the Capitalist Global System

China’s accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in December 2001 marked a transformative inflection point in the trajectory of its domestic development and international engagement, including its deepening relations with Africa. The move symbolized more than economic liberalization; it was an unequivocal affirmation of China’s commitment to operating within the structures of global capitalism (Lardy, 2002). WTO membership required Beijing to lower tariffs, open domestic markets to foreign competition, and adopt international trade and investment rules—reforms that fundamentally reconfigured its economic model from one primarily reliant on internal reforms to one increasingly tethered to external markets (Naughton, 2007). As a result, China’s manufacturing capacity surged, turning the country into the “factory of the world,” necessitating an aggressive search for export markets, investment opportunities, and, crucially, inputs to sustain its industrial machine. This pivot towards global expansion, embodied in the “going out” (zou chuqu) strategy launched in the late 1990s and intensified post-WTO, redefined China’s relationship with the Global South and, most markedly, with Africa.

Africa’s emergence as a strategic partner in China’s global reorientation was neither accidental nor merely opportunistic; it reflected a calculated reading of the continent’s resource endowments, diplomatic alignments, and economic vulnerabilities. Throughout the early 2000s, China’s energy consumption increased dramatically, with oil imports rising from 70 million tons in 2000 to over 250 million tons by 2006, positioning China as the second-largest consumer of oil globally after the United States (Zweig &

Jianhai, 2005). African countries, particularly Angola, Sudan, Nigeria, and Congo-Brazzaville, quickly became critical suppliers. But the relationship was never solely about resource extraction. Infrastructure development, an area often neglected by Western donors focused on governance reforms and social sectors, became a primary area of Chinese engagement. Beijing-funded projects—ranging from roads and railways to telecommunications and ports—resonated with African governments' national development priorities and projected China as a genuine partner in Africa's modernization (Brautigam, 2009). Thus, on the one hand, Africa was not merely a passive recipient; it actively shaped the contours of its relations with China by leveraging the new opportunities emerging from China's WTO-driven global expansion. On the other hand, African agency in the era of the new found ally, China, has only become more weaker and subordinate (Mason, 2017).

Importantly, China's entry into the WTO and its subsequent African engagements must be understood within the broader geopolitical context of the early twenty-first century. The unipolar dominance of the United States post-Cold War, coupled with Africa's peripheral position in the global economy, created a vacuum that China sought to fill—not by challenging the global order directly but by proposing alternative modalities of engagement. Unlike Western donors, whose aid and investments often came with stringent political and economic conditionalities—such as democratization, privatization, and human rights observance—China offered what it termed a policy of "non-interference" and "win-win cooperation" (He, 2007; Alden, 2007). For many African states wary of Western prescriptions and increasingly assertive about their sovereignty, this approach was both attractive and empowering. By the early 2000s, China-Africa trade had already begun to accelerate, rising from approximately \$10 billion in 2000 to \$39.7 billion by 2005 (Broadman, 2007), signaling a profound structural shift in Africa's external economic relations and challenging long-standing North-South economic hierarchies.

Yet, the nature of China's global expansion, especially in Africa, was neither linear nor unproblematic. It provoked significant debates both within Africa and globally about the implications of China's rise for African development trajectories, governance norms, and political agency. Critics argued that the burgeoning relationship risked replicating patterns of dependency reminiscent of Africa's colonial past, albeit with a new actor (Carmody, 2011). Others viewed China's role more positively, emphasizing the infrastructural and investment gaps that Chinese engagement helped to address. Nonetheless, the complexity of this interaction reflects broader tensions within China's own global strategy: while projecting itself as a champion of South-South cooperation, China simultaneously pursued interests characteristic of an emerging great power. Thus, China's WTO accession was not merely an economic event but a catalyst for a multidimensional, contested, and still-evolving presence in Africa—one that would only deepen, diversify, and complicate in the years following 2001.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the rapid growth of China-Africa engagement in the post-2002 period, much of the early discourse portrayed these ties in overly simplistic binaries—either as a "win-win" partnership heralding a new era of South-South cooperation, or as a new form of resource-driven neocolonialism. However, as the background introduces, such framings obscure the deeper political economy dimensions that underlie the evolution of these engagements. Understanding the China-Africa relationship requires interrogating the asymmetries of power, the strategic economic interests, and the institutional mechanisms that shape engagements on both sides. While China presents itself as a partner operating under principles of non-interference, mutual benefit, and respect for sovereignty, its growing influence in critical African sectors—such as extractives, infrastructure, telecommunications, and finance—raises important questions about agency, dependency, and structural transformation within African economies. The problem thus lies not in whether China's presence is "good" or "bad" for Africa, but in unpacking the political economy logics that inform and condition the outcomes of this engagement.

A central research problem is the need to critically assess how China's political economy imperatives—particularly the imperatives of securing resource access, market expansion, and global influence—align or

conflict with African development priorities. China's demand for commodities and infrastructure connectivity has undoubtedly injected much-needed capital into African economies; by 2019, China-Africa trade reached \$208 billion, making China Africa's largest trading partner (China-Africa Research Initiative, 2020). However, a closer examination reveals that much of this trade is heavily skewed: Africa primarily exports raw materials, while importing manufactured goods, reinforcing patterns of dependence that have historically hampered African structural transformation. Moreover, Chinese financing, often structured through concessional loans tied to Chinese contractors and suppliers, raises issues of debt sustainability, labor practices, and the capacity of African states to negotiate favorable terms. The political economy problem thus revolves around the interplay between African agency and China's strategic calculus in shaping the terms and outcomes of engagement.

Further complicating the problem is the evolving geopolitical context in which China-Africa relations are embedded. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, has extended the geographical and strategic scope of its African engagements beyond bilateral trade and investment towards embedding Africa into China's broader vision of global connectivity. African ports, railways, and industrial parks are increasingly integrated into Chinese-financed and Chinese-operated networks, raising concerns about long-term strategic dependency and sovereignty. Additionally, the institutionalization of China-Africa ties through platforms such as the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) formalizes relations, but also risks centralizing negotiation processes in ways that may diminish the bargaining power of weaker African states. These dynamics underscore the need to move beyond descriptive accounts of infrastructure deals or commodity flows, toward a political economy analysis that examines how structures of power, interest, and global capitalism are being reconfigured through China-Africa engagements.

Thus, the research niche this study addresses is the inadequacy of existing analytical frameworks to fully capture the complexity, asymmetry, and contradictions embedded in the China-Africa engagement. Traditional dependency theories, modernization frameworks, or simplistic partnership narratives each illuminate certain dimensions but fall short of providing a comprehensive understanding. A nuanced political economy approach is therefore necessary—one that recognizes African agency while critically examining the structural constraints imposed by global economic hierarchies and China's emergent role within them. Only by engaging with these deeper layers can scholars, policymakers, and practitioners better assess the developmental implications, risks, and opportunities inherent in the contemporary China-Africa relationship.

Objectives, Questions, and the Thesis

This paper aims to achieve three core objectives. First, it seeks to examine the evolving nature of China's grand strategy in Africa through three regimes; Jiang Zemin through to Xi Jinping to historically situate these engagements and discern change and continuity. Second, to critically examine the political economy underpinnings of China's post-2002 engagement with Africa, highlighting how structural interests, resource imperatives, and global strategy have shaped the nature and scope of interactions. Third, it endeavors to analyze the extent to which African states have exercised agency in negotiating their engagements with China, and the implications for their developmental trajectories. Fourth, the paper interrogates the long-term consequences of China-Africa relations on African economic transformation, state sovereignty, and global positioning within an increasingly multipolar world order. By situating the China-Africa dynamic within a broader theoretical and empirical framework, the paper intends to move beyond celebratory or alarmist discourses, offering a balanced and critical exploration grounded in political economy analysis.

In pursuit of these objectives, the paper is guided by three interrelated research questions: (1) What is the nature of China's grand strategy during the last three and a half decades (1989–2025) in respect to her engagement with Africa? (2) What are the primary political economy drivers behind China's engagement with Africa since its entry into the WTO? (3) How have African states navigated opportunities and challenges within the context of China's growing influence, and what factors condition their relative bargaining power? (4) What are the broader implications of China-Africa relations for Africa's economic diversification, governance structures, and insertion into the global economy? These questions, explored in

the results sections through to conclusion (fourth question), frame the investigation, allowing for a nuanced exploration of the motivations, strategies, and outcomes on both sides of the partnership. In addressing these questions, the paper draws upon both secondary literature and relevant empirical data to critically assess prevailing narratives and to foreground areas that require further scholarly inquiry.

The thesis advanced by this study is that China-Africa relations 1989 – 2025 are best understood as a complex and evolving political economy entanglement characterized by both opportunities for African agency and risks of structural dependency. While China's rise offers African states new avenues for economic engagement, it simultaneously reconfigures hierarchies of global capitalism in ways that reproduce old patterns of extraction and dependency, albeit under new terms.

The structure of the paper proceeds as follows: following the introduction, Section II presents the theoretical framework; Section III presents the research methodology; Section IV presents the findings of the study beginning with an examination of China's strategy in Africa through the lens of key national development plans and speeches (1989-present), before focusing on the evolution of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) Summits, and finally the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Africa's place within it and related BRI engagements such as Chinese investments in selected and leading or key African states beneficiaries of the BRI-and-allied projects.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The origins of political economy analysis in international relations can be traced to critical reactions against the dominance of traditional realist and liberal theories, especially during the mid-20th century. As decolonization unfolded and global economic inequalities persisted, scholars sought frameworks that could better explain the complex interplay between politics and economics across national borders. International Political Economy (IPE) thus emerged in the 1970s as a distinct field, rejecting the artificial separation of economics and politics characteristic of earlier theories. Among its leading proponents was Susan Strange, whose structuralist approach fundamentally reshaped the study of global relations. Strange identified four key structures—security, production, finance, and knowledge—that together determine the distribution of power in the international system (Strange, 1988). By emphasizing that control over these structures, rather than mere military might, shapes international outcomes, Strange laid the foundation for analyzing how emerging actors, including non-Western states and corporations, influence global patterns of wealth and authority. Her insistence that economic forces and structural power must be central to international analysis resonates strongly with contemporary studies of China-Africa engagements, where issues of production, finance, and knowledge transfers are at the heart of evolving partnerships.

Building on this foundation, understanding the contemporary dynamics of China-Africa relations requires a robust theoretical grounding in political economy approaches that interrogate power, dependency, and agency within global capitalism. This paper primarily draws on Dependency Theory, which critiques how historically entrenched global hierarchies continue to shape uneven development patterns between the Global North and Global South. Originating from Latin American scholarship (Cardoso & Faletto, 1979; Frank, 1967), Dependency Theory provides a valuable lens for analyzing Africa's insertion into global markets—whether through colonialism, Western-led globalization, or the more recent Chinese engagement. While China frames its involvement with Africa as South-South cooperation premised on mutual benefit and solidarity, dependency theorists caution that asymmetrical economic relations, patterns of resource extraction, and financial dependencies may simply represent a reconfiguration, rather than a transcendence, of global inequalities. In this sense, the paper critically explores whether China's expanding presence in Africa alleviates or entrenches structural dependency within an evolving world-system, and how African agency is exercised or constrained within this complex political economy.

At the same time, the paper incorporates insights from theories of African Agency in International Relations, which challenge portrayals of African states as passive recipients of external influence. This perspective, drawing from scholars such as Brown & Harman (2013) and Alden & Amponsah (2020), emphasizes that

African actors—whether state leaders, regional organizations, or civil society—possess strategic agency, albeit constrained. Agency is exercised through negotiation, selective partnerships, policy contestations, and efforts to shape the terms of engagement with China. Rather than depicting China-Africa ties as unidirectional or deterministic, this framework foregrounds the diversity of African responses, highlighting how political, economic, and institutional contexts within Africa condition outcomes. By blending dependency concerns with agency-centric analyses, the paper seeks to avoid both alarmist narratives of "new colonialism" and overly optimistic depictions of an equal South-South partnership.

Finally, the paper draws selectively from Global South International Political Economy (IPE) theories, particularly postcolonial critiques that interrogate the shifting geographies of power in the 21st century. Global South IPE frameworks (Shilliam, 2011; Acharya, 2018) encourage an analysis of how emerging powers like China navigate their dual status—as both beneficiaries of globalization and self-proclaimed leaders of alternative global orders. This tension is highly visible in China's Africa engagement: promoting narratives of solidarity while also pursuing strategic economic and geopolitical interests. Thus, the theoretical framework does not treat China's actions as ideologically neutral or singularly altruistic but situates them within the broader logic of global capitalist expansion, multipolar competition, and South-South relational complexities. Overall, this composite theoretical approach—melding dependency critique, agency perspectives, and Global South IPE—provides the analytical tools necessary to interrogate the evolving political economy of China-Africa relations in a nuanced, critical manner.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

This study employs a qualitative case study methodology to explore the evolving dynamics of China-Africa relations since the 2000s. The research is structured around five case studies, selected to represent key China allies. Five cases; Ethiopia (6th largest recipient of Chinese ODA), Kenya (so-called anchor state in the Horn of Africa, yet playing a balancing act between the neo-East/West politics, and has been a key BRI funding recipient; Ghana (top recipient of Chinese ODA 2013-2023), South Sudan (ever in conflict but ever a Chinese friend due to its oil?); and Egypt, one of the longest allies of China in Arab Africa. Together, these countries were chosen due to their significant and sustained engagements with China in the 21st century, which has had notable impacts on their economic and political landscapes. This comparative approach allows for a nuanced analysis of regional differences and commonalities in China's diplomatic and economic engagements, providing insight into the diverse responses African states have had to Chinese involvement.

The primary data collection for this study includes government reports, official agreements, FOAC declarations, and trade statistics between China and the selected African countries. These documents provide insight into the formal and institutional frameworks guiding the partnerships, including key economic agreements and diplomatic commitments. Additionally, semi-structured interviews with policymakers, Chinese diplomats, local experts, and representatives from multilateral institutions will form the core of the primary qualitative data. These interviews offer rich, first-hand perspectives on the dynamics of China-Africa relations, focusing on African states' strategic agency, policy decisions, and engagement with Chinese development projects. Secondary data sources, such as scholarly articles, international development reports, and news media analysis, will complement the primary data, providing broader context to the political, economic, and social implications of Chinese involvement in Africa. By incorporating these diverse sources, the study aims to provide a comprehensive and balanced perspective on China-Africa relations.

Data analysis will be conducted through thematic and comparative analysis. Thematic analysis will be used to identify recurring themes, such as dependency, agency, trade relations, investment patterns, and geopolitical strategies across the selected case studies. Comparative analysis will focus on the similarities and differences between the selected countries' responses to China's engagement, helping to elucidate how local political, economic, and institutional contexts shape the outcomes of these interactions. The study will draw upon Dependency Theory and theories of African agency in international relations to critically assess whether China's growing influence serves to deepen or alleviate Africa's dependency on global powers, while also recognizing the agency of African states in negotiating their place within this evolving

partnership. By applying these theoretical lenses to the empirical data, the research will contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex, multi-dimensional nature of China-Africa relations in the contemporary era.

RESULTS

China's Grand Strategy: Domestic Origins of an External Ambition

This sub-section responds to the paper's first guiding research question: (1) What is the nature of China's grand strategy during the last three and a half decades (1989–2025) in respect to her engagement with Africa? It situates China–Africa relations within the broader arc of China's evolving global grand strategy—one rooted in domestic imperatives and outwardly projected through carefully calibrated foreign policy, economic outreach, and global institution-building. The analysis traces how the leadership transitions from Jiang Zemin through Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping have successively deepened and redefined China's global ambitions, embedding Africa as a key partner in its long-term strategic calculus. Each leadership period has issued planning blueprints—ranging from Five-Year Plans and foreign policy White Papers to high-level speeches and strategic communiqués—that collectively articulate China's pursuit of national rejuvenation, economic modernization, energy and resource security, and multipolar global influence. Rather than viewing China's African engagement as an isolated or opportunistic endeavor, this section demonstrates that it is an integral part of a coherent, long-term strategy that fuses domestic development goals with international political economy realignment.

Jiang Zemin

The groundwork for China's global outreach, including its future strategic engagement with Africa, was laid under President Jiang Zemin, whose administration oversaw a critical transition from internal consolidation to external expansion. Central to this phase was the formulation of the “Going Out” (走出去) strategy, first articulated in the Tenth Five-Year Plan (2001–2005). This development plan marked the formal state endorsement of internationalization, encouraging Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and private firms to seek markets, resources, and investment opportunities abroad (Chen, 2023; Zhou, 2019). The strategy was not an incidental policy shift but a calculated pivot meant to secure China's rising industrial needs in energy, raw materials, and trade access, in line with its domestic modernization agenda as articulated in Deng Xiaoping's earlier reforms (Breslin, 2013).

Africa featured in this strategy not as a central pillar but as a strategic testing ground for Beijing's evolving model of South-South cooperation. The launch of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000 symbolized this turning point (Taylor, 2010). Though the first FOCAC summit in Beijing was relatively modest in scope, it institutionalized a diplomatic platform that would outlive Jiang's administration and evolve into a powerful tool for strategic engagement (Shinn & Eisenman, 2023). China's Africa policy during this era emphasized political symbolism, mutual solidarity, and rhetorical equality—carefully echoing the anti-colonial and anti-Western sentiments that resonated with many African elites (Alden, 2007). Yet beneath this diplomacy, Chinese firms—backed by state support—were beginning to explore contracts in road construction, energy exploration, and telecommunications, particularly in resource-rich but capital-poor states such as Sudan, Angola, and Zimbabwe (Zhang, 2015; Corkin, 2013).

Jiang's 1997 speech to the 15th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) emphasized “national rejuvenation through science and education” and “socialist modernization through opening-up” (CPC, 1997). Though primarily oriented toward domestic transformation, these themes implicitly justified China's external engagements. In diplomatic terms, Africa became a proving ground for these ambitions. Jiang's outreach was also shaped by geopolitical motives. In the post-Cold War world, China sought to consolidate support from the Global South in international forums such as the United Nations, especially on

issues like Taiwan's status and the principle of non-interference (Large, 2008). African states, with their significant voting bloc, were critical to this calculus.

China's 2000 White Paper on "China's National Defense" and its first White Paper on Foreign Aid (early drafts of which emerged during this period) signaled a soft expansion of influence through aid and military diplomacy. These policy documents framed foreign assistance not as charity, but as mutual development—an ethos that resonated with African governments wary of conditionalities attached to Western aid (Brautigam, 2009; Kitissou, 2007). Although aid flows to Africa remained modest in the early 2000s, Jiang's government laid the institutional foundations for the more aggressive economic diplomacy that would characterize the Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping eras.

In summary, Jiang Zemin's regime initiated China's global orientation by creating the policy infrastructure and ideological framing for engagement with the Global South, including Africa. Africa's importance during this phase was instrumental rather than central—it served as a region through which China could build diplomatic legitimacy, test commercial expansion, and establish a presence in resource sectors (Tull, 2006). Yet this early engagement sowed the seeds of deeper integration, and its effects would amplify under subsequent regimes. The "Going Out" strategy thus constitutes the first coherent articulation of China's grand strategy in which Africa, though not yet prioritized, was already viewed as geopolitically and economically useful.

Hu Jintao

The administration of Hu Jintao marked a significant maturation of China's global strategy, transitioning from exploratory engagement to a structured and assertive international posture. While Jiang Zemin's "Going Out" strategy laid the groundwork, Hu's leadership provided the ideological consolidation and institutional embedding of China's international ambitions—what scholars often identify as the construction of a "peaceful development" narrative (Zhao, 2009). Within this framework, Africa evolved from a testing ground to a critical arena of China's quest for strategic depth, energy security, and geopolitical influence.

Hu's global vision was shaped by the articulation of the "Harmonious World" (和谐世界) doctrine, introduced at the 2005 UN Summit and later elaborated at the 17th Party Congress in 2007. This philosophy presented China as a responsible rising power committed to non-hegemonic global engagement, emphasizing mutual development, win-win cooperation, and multipolarity (Ding, 2008; Wang & Blyth, 2013). Africa, with its rich natural resources, growing markets, and postcolonial solidarity, provided a compelling canvas for this vision. Hu's era thus framed Africa as essential to China's global repositioning—not only as a supplier of commodities but as a partner in constructing an alternative to Western-led global governance (Alden & Alves, 2009).

A pivotal moment in China-Africa relations under Hu was the 2006 Beijing Summit of the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), widely seen as the institutional coming-of-age of China's Africa policy. At this summit, China announced a new type of strategic partnership, committed to doubling aid by 2009, offering \$5 billion in concessional loans and credit lines, and canceling debt for heavily indebted African countries (FOCAC, 2006; Taylor, 2011). This signaled a shift from symbolic diplomacy to robust economic statecraft, tightly integrated with China's own development banks and policy instruments such as the Export-Import Bank of China and the China-Africa Development Fund (Brautigam, 2009).

Unlike previous decades when Chinese engagement with Africa was largely political and ideological, Hu's administration emphasized economic pragmatism and resource diplomacy. China's annual trade with Africa rose from around \$10 billion in 2000 to over \$166 billion by 2011, driven by oil imports from Angola, Nigeria, and Sudan, as well as infrastructure projects spanning roads, railways, and energy sectors (Davies, 2008; Sun, 2014). Many of these projects were implemented under infrastructure-for-resources arrangements—where Chinese firms financed and built infrastructure in exchange for long-term resource

extraction rights (Corkin, 2013). This model not only secured strategic inputs for China's industrial expansion but also reinforced its global development image.

Hu's strategic doctrine also reinforced non-interference and political neutrality, a cornerstone of China's appeal to African governments. This principle allowed Beijing to partner with regimes ostracized by the West, such as Sudan and Zimbabwe, arguing for sovereignty and development over democracy and human rights (Taylor, 2006; Large, 2008). This position was not merely rhetorical but embedded in policy statements such as the 2006 China's Africa Policy Paper, which formalized Beijing's commitment to mutual benefit, respect for local conditions, and South-South cooperation (State Council, 2006).

Furthermore, China under Hu expanded its soft power projection in Africa through Confucius Institutes, media partnerships, medical teams, and agricultural demonstration centers. These initiatives sought to build people-to-people ties while reinforcing a benign image of China as a "development partner" rather than a neo-colonial power (Kurlantzick, 2007; Li, 2010). Importantly, this era witnessed growing Chinese diaspora communities across African urban centers, contributing to a denser web of transnational interactions that often bypassed Western channels.

Yet Hu's African strategy was not without criticism. Concerns about neocolonial tendencies, environmental degradation, labor relations, and the displacement of local industries surfaced both within African civil society and international policy circles (Mason, 2017; Rotberg, 2008). Nonetheless, Beijing largely dismissed such critiques as Western hypocrisy and reiterated its non-interference stance—an approach that many African governments found preferable to conditional Western aid (Tan-Mullins et al., 2010). In essence, Hu Jintao's leadership transformed Africa from a peripheral partner to a strategic cornerstone of China's broader global reordering. Africa was no longer simply a source of raw materials or diplomatic support but became a theatre for implementing China's alternative development diplomacy, expanding state-capitalist models, and testing the viability of a post-Western global order. The policies and partnerships institutionalized during this period laid the foundation for the ambitious, more assertive strategies of the Xi Jinping era.

Xi Jinping

Xi Jinping's ascent to power in 2013 marked a decisive shift in China's international engagement—from a cautious, development-focused global actor to a systemic challenger of the Western-led order. Central to this repositioning has been the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), unveiled in 2013, which signified China's most ambitious global connectivity and development strategy to date. Africa occupies a pivotal role in this initiative—not only as a beneficiary of infrastructure financing but as a laboratory for China's emerging "community of shared future for mankind" (人类命运共同体) doctrine (Callahan, 2016; Benabdallah, 2020).

Unlike previous periods where African engagement was somewhat reactive or resource-driven, Xi's approach embeds Africa within a comprehensive geo-economic and geo-strategic blueprint. The BRI links Africa into broader maritime and overland corridors—especially the Maritime Silk Road, which integrates East African ports such as Djibouti, Mombasa, and Dar es Salaam into global shipping networks extending from the South China Sea to the Mediterranean (Rolland, 2017). Through this, China's strategy moves beyond bilateral trade or aid diplomacy and into the domain of strategic infrastructure, digital sovereignty, and security partnerships (Nyadera & Agwanda, 2021).

Xi's Africa policy retains the pillars of mutual benefit and non-interference emphasized under Hu Jintao, but it is institutionally more robust and ideologically more confident. At successive FOCAC Summits—notably those in 2015 (Johannesburg) and 2018 (Beijing)—China pledged over \$60 billion in financial packages for Africa, framed not as charity but as "productive cooperation" aligned with African Union development agendas such as Agenda 2063 (FOCAC, 2018; Brautigam, 2020). These summits reflect a growing

convergence between African state interests and China's quest to cultivate policy coordination, industrial capacity cooperation, and south-south solidarity.

One of the defining features of Xi's Africa strategy is the scale and scope of infrastructure diplomacy. Chinese firms, backed by state financing mechanisms like the China Exim Bank and the Silk Road Fund, have constructed railways (e.g., Addis Ababa–Djibouti), ports (e.g., Bagamoyo and Lamu), industrial parks, and digital infrastructure under the “Digital Silk Road” (Gagliardone, 2019). These investments go beyond economic considerations; they embed African countries into Chinese supply chains, norms, and governance logics—what some scholars call a “Beijing Consensus 2.0” (Nye, 2019).

Moreover, Xi has elevated security cooperation with African states, especially around counter-terrorism, peacekeeping, and maritime surveillance. The establishment of China's first overseas military base in Djibouti in 2017 underscores the continent's strategic relevance to China's evolving military doctrine of “far seas protection” (Zhang, 2019). Although officially framed as logistics support for UN peacekeeping and anti-piracy missions, the base reflects China's shift toward securing global interests via military presence—blurring the lines between commerce, diplomacy, and hard power.

Equally important is the ideological narrative that Xi has championed. The BRI is not just a material project but a discursive challenge to Western hegemony. Through slogans such as “win-win cooperation” and “mutual respect,” China offers African states an alternative development model rooted in infrastructure-led growth without conditionalities on governance or human rights (Tan-Mullins et al., 2020). This ideological packaging resonates with many African leaders frustrated by donor fatigue, structural adjustment legacies, and perceived Western paternalism.

However, the Xi era has also brought growing scrutiny and backlash. Critics point to the debt sustainability risks, especially in countries like Zambia and Ethiopia, where opaque loan terms and limited fiscal space raise concerns of debt-trap diplomacy (Jones & Hameiri, 2020). Moreover, Chinese-financed projects have at times led to labor tensions, environmental degradation, and social backlash, prompting calls for better alignment with local priorities and regulatory frameworks (Brautigam, 2020; Mohan & Lampert, 2019).

Despite these challenges, China has responded by adjusting its rhetoric and recalibrating its practices. Recent FOCAC meetings emphasize “small and beautiful” projects, private sector-led growth, and enhanced collaboration in health (e.g., COVID-19 vaccine diplomacy), digital governance, and green energy (Sun, 2022). This flexibility indicates China's adaptive strategy in Africa—balancing geopolitical ambitions with reputational management and evolving African agency. Sumarily, under Xi Jinping, Africa is no longer a passive recipient of Chinese benevolence or merely a supplier of natural resources. It is a critical theatre for testing China's new internationalism, its model of global governance, and its narrative of a “multipolar future” that challenges Western liberal norms. Through the BRI and beyond, Africa plays a central role in the re-scripting of global order from the perspective of a rising, confident, and globally ambitious China. Regime comparison is done in the table below.

Table 1: Summary of China's Grand Strategy for Africa

Category	Jiang Zemin (1989–2002)	Hu Jintao (2002–2012)	Xi Jinping (2013–Present)
Strategic Vision	Re-engagement & global reintegration	Consolidation of South–South cooperation	Grand strategy and global leadership under the BRI
Core Doctrine	Economic diplomacy & political goodwill	Peaceful rise and harmonious world	Community of Shared Future for Mankind (命运共同体)
Africa's Role	Diplomatic buffer and symbolic solidarity	Strategic partner for resource access and market expansion	Central node in global connectivity and ideological diversification

Category	Jiang Zemin (1989–2002)	Hu Jintao (2002–2012)	Xi Jinping (2013–Present)
FOCAC Role	Inaugural phase (2000) – diplomatic platform	Institutionalization and financial expansion (2006–2012)	Strategic consolidation, BRI integration, and multilateral elevation
Mode of Engagement	Aid, symbolic projects, high-level visits	Large-scale infrastructure, concessional loans, state-backed investments	BRI projects, military diplomacy, digital governance, and green development
Aid and Loans	Modest grants and zero-interest loans	\$20B+ packages; focus on infrastructure and concessional loans	\$60B+ pledges (2015, 2018); small & sustainable project pivot (2021–2022)
Infrastructure Diplomacy	Roads, hospitals, stadiums (symbolic)	Railways, dams, airports (development-oriented)	Multi-sectoral: ports, railways, industrial parks, telecoms, digital Silk Road
Security Cooperation	Minimal; focus on diplomacy and peace rhetoric	Some support for peacekeeping	Djibouti base, counter-terrorism, joint patrols, expanded military training
Ideological Framing	Non-interference & Third World solidarity	Mutually beneficial development	Multipolarity, South-led global governance, anti-Western undertones
Africa's Agency	Passive recipient	Emerging partner in win-win rhetoric	Negotiated stakeholder; varied agency in negotiation, contestation
Criticisms and Challenges	Limited impact, symbolic over substantive	Debt concerns, labor issues, elite capture	Debt-trap diplomacy claims, local resistance, digital authoritarianism
Notable Milestones	FOCAC founded (2000), Jiang's 1996 tour to Africa	2006 Beijing FOCAC Summit, Angola and Sudan oil-for-loan models	BRI (2013), Djibouti base (2017), vaccine diplomacy (2020), digital expansion

Source: Author's Own Analysis.

Primary drivers of political economy of China-Africa Engagement

This subsection addresses the study's second research question: What are the primary political economy drivers behind China's engagement with Africa since its entry into the WTO? It unpacks the motivations and imperatives guiding China's deepening relations with African states, as well as the corresponding incentives shaping African engagement with China. By focusing on key thematic areas—namely politics and diplomacy, finance and debt, energy (especially oil), infrastructure, telecommunications, and global development ambitions—this section examines how mutual interests and structural asymmetries intersect to produce a complex web of cooperation. From China's side, strategic objectives such as resource security, market expansion, geostrategic positioning, and the projection of soft power are central; from Africa's side, priorities include infrastructure deficits, capital access, and a desire for policy autonomy beyond traditional Western partnerships. Empirical analysis draws from continental blueprints such as the African Union's Agenda 2063, the Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa (PIDA), and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), alongside national-level engagements in the case study countries—Egypt, South Sudan, Kenya, Ghana, and Ethiopia. These five countries illustrate both the diversity of African contexts and the varied modalities of Chinese engagement across different political regimes, economic structures, and resource endowments. The discussion is structured around two broad thematic lenses to capture the multilayered drivers of this evolving political economy entanglement.

Primary Interests and Needs of China

China's political economy engagement with Africa since its accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 has been shaped by a convergence of domestic development imperatives and strategic global ambitions. With rapid industrialization and export-led growth in the early 2000s, China's leadership recognized that sustained economic expansion required reliable access to raw materials, new markets for surplus production, diversified energy sources, and political partnerships across the Global South. Africa, with its resource endowments, growing markets, and diplomatic influence in multilateral institutions, emerged as a central theatre in China's global strategy—particularly under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013. The BRI rearticulated these ambitions by positioning Africa as a vital node in a China-centered infrastructural and trade architecture, which has since become one of the most visible embodiments of China's "going out" (走出去) development strategy.

One of China's foremost imperatives in engaging Africa is securing long-term access to energy resources and strategic minerals. As the world's largest energy consumer since 2009, China accounts for over 26% of global energy demand, with more than 72% of its oil consumption now dependent on imports (IEA, 2023). African countries—particularly Angola, South Sudan, Nigeria, and the Republic of Congo—have become critical suppliers, collectively contributing about 18–20% of China's oil imports annually (US Energy Information Administration, 2022). This dependency explains China's deep entrenchment in conflict-prone but oil-rich states like South Sudan, where the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) continues to operate through joint ventures, despite significant instability (Large, 2013; Patey, 2017). Similarly, China is heavily invested in Africa's cobalt, copper, and rare earth mineral markets—particularly in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where China controls over 70% of cobalt production, essential for electric vehicle (EV) batteries and high-tech manufacturing (OECD, 2021; Kelly et al., 2022).

Closely tied to resource acquisition is China's export of surplus capital, labor, and industrial capacity through large-scale infrastructure development. Between 2013 and 2022, Chinese contractors signed construction contracts worth over \$385 billion in Africa, with transport, energy, and ICT infrastructure comprising the majority of investments (McKinsey, 2017; Boston University Global Development Policy Center [GDP Center], 2022). These projects—such as Kenya's Standard Gauge Railway, Ethiopia's Addis Ababa–Djibouti Railway, and Egypt's New Administrative Capital Light Rail—serve dual purposes. Economically, they provide markets for Chinese SOEs like China Communications Construction Company (CCCC) and China Railway Group Limited (CREC). Strategically, they advance Beijing's goal of integrating Africa into its global connectivity vision. Xi Jinping has repeatedly framed the BRI as a "project of the century," aiming to develop a "Eurasian-African" transport and trade corridor that will reduce China's reliance on Western-dominated sea lanes and multilateral systems (NDRC & MOFA, 2015; Rolland, 2017). Africa's geographic position—particularly Egypt (via the Suez Canal) and Kenya (as a maritime gateway to the hinterland)—makes it indispensable to this vision.

Furthermore, China's engagement in Africa responds to growing domestic pressures for food and land security. With 1.4 billion people and only 7% of the world's arable land, China faces increasing concerns over food imports and supply chain disruptions (World Bank, 2022). As such, China has supported agricultural demonstration centers, land lease agreements, and agri-tech investments in countries like Ethiopia and Sudan (Buckley, 2013; Bräutigam & Zhang, 2013). While fears of "land grabbing" are often overstated, agricultural cooperation nonetheless reflects China's interest in diversifying its food supply chains and securing long-term access to overseas agricultural production.

A further driver is technological and digital geostrategy, with China positioning itself as a dominant player in Africa's telecommunications, e-commerce, and surveillance infrastructure. Companies like Huawei and ZTE have laid thousands of kilometers of fiber-optic cables across the continent, constructed e-governance platforms in Ghana, and deployed smart-city and facial recognition systems in Kenya and Zimbabwe (Gagliardone, 2019; Shen, 2018). These digital engagements serve both commercial and strategic goals:

creating dependence on Chinese ICT ecosystems and advancing China's model of "cyber-sovereignty," in contrast to Western internet governance norms (Deibert, 2020).

China's financial diplomacy further cements its political economy influence. Through the China Exim Bank and China Development Bank, Beijing has provided over \$160 billion in loans to African countries between 2000 and 2020, often at concessional or semi-concessional terms (Brautigam, 2020). Countries like Kenya, Ethiopia, Egypt, and Ghana have received billions in Chinese loans for flagship projects. While these loans support Africa's infrastructure needs, they also create leverage for Beijing, especially when tied to Chinese firms, labor, and materials in turnkey agreements. In strategic terms, these financial flows are part of China's attempt to internationalize the renminbi (RMB) and reduce dependency on Western capital markets (Gallagher & Myers, 2020).

Finally, China's engagement in Africa is also shaped by geopolitical ambition and global governance realignment. African states represent the largest voting bloc in the United Nations, and their support has been instrumental in bolstering China's international legitimacy—particularly on contentious issues such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and global trade reform. The repeated affirmations of the "One-China Policy" in FOCAC declarations and African Union communiqués illustrate the soft power returns China accrues from economic engagement (He, 2007; Alden & Large, 2019). China's construction of African Union headquarters, peacekeeping deployments in Mali and South Sudan, and expansion of Confucius Institutes across the continent further reflect this diplomatic and ideological investment. Overall, China's engagement in Africa is not driven by a single motive but by a sophisticated blend of material needs, strategic calculations, and global aspirations. From oil and cobalt to railways and fiber-optics, China's outreach addresses pressing domestic imperatives while reconfiguring global power asymmetries. Africa, in this context, is not just a supplier or recipient—but a crucial space in China's 21st-century rise as a global political economy power.

Primary Interests and Needs of Africa

Africa's engagement with China since the latter's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 has been significantly shaped by the continent's urgent development needs, long-standing structural deficits, and the search for strategic partnerships that are less constrained by political conditionalities. Central to this engagement is the continent's overwhelming infrastructure financing gap, which has remained a major bottleneck to growth and regional integration. According to the African Development Bank (AfDB, 2018), Africa requires between \$130 billion and \$170 billion annually in infrastructure investment, yet suffers from a financing shortfall of \$68 billion to \$108 billion. Traditional Western lenders and multilateral institutions have struggled or been unwilling to fill this gap, often imposing conditionalities related to governance and market liberalization that many African governments view as intrusive. China's infrastructural engagement—especially under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—has provided an alternative model of development cooperation that is project-focused, state-to-state, and framed within a South–South solidarity discourse. Empirical examples such as Kenya's Standard Gauge Railway (SGR), financed by China Exim Bank at over \$4.7 billion, and Ethiopia's Addis Ababa–Djibouti railway demonstrate how Chinese infrastructure financing has been mobilized to support national and regional development strategies like Kenya Vision 2030, Ethiopia's Growth and Transformation Plans (GTP I & II), and the African Union's Agenda 2063.

The energy sector represents another pillar of Africa's partnership with China, driven by the continent's acute energy poverty. The International Energy Agency (IEA, 2022) reported that more than 600 million people in sub-Saharan Africa lacked access to electricity as of 2021, rendering energy generation and distribution a continental priority. China has emerged as a leading partner in Africa's energy transformation, financing hydroelectric, thermal, and solar projects that are integral to national electrification plans. In Ghana, the China-financed Bui Dam contributes over 400 MW to the national grid and has become a critical component of the country's broader energy diversification strategy. Ethiopia's Gibe III hydroelectric project, constructed with Chinese support, similarly enhanced the country's power generation capacity, while Kenya's Garissa Solar Plant, developed by the China Jiangxi Corporation for International Economic and

Technical Cooperation, exemplifies the growing focus on renewable energy in Chinese-African cooperation. In oil-rich but fragile contexts like South Sudan, China's involvement in energy extraction is not only economic but strategic. With over 90 percent of South Sudan's public revenue derived from oil exports (World Bank, 2023), China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and Sinopec have become indispensable actors in both production and post-conflict reconstruction.

Beyond physical infrastructure and energy, Africa's partnership with China is also driven by aspirations for technological transformation and digital leapfrogging. With internet penetration rates and ICT infrastructure still developing across much of the continent, Chinese firms such as Huawei and ZTE have capitalized on the demand for affordable, large-scale digital solutions. These companies are not only providing backbone telecom infrastructure but are also engaged in national digital economy strategies. Kenya's Digital Economy Blueprint (2019), Egypt's Vision 2030, and Ghana's e-Transform Project all emphasize ICT as a critical enabler of sustainable development. Huawei, which operates in over 40 African countries, has been central to initiatives like Kenya's Safe City project, Egypt's smart city development in the New Administrative Capital, and Ghana's government digitization efforts (Sun, Jayaram, & Kassiri, 2020). These interventions reflect a growing demand for modernized public services, surveillance capacities, and digital financial inclusion mechanisms, areas in which African governments see Chinese technology as practical, cost-effective, and politically compatible.

Another fundamental motivation for African engagement with China lies in the realm of political economy and international diplomacy. China's doctrine of non-interference and its strong emphasis on sovereignty have resonated with many African leaders, particularly in contexts where Western development assistance has been linked to liberal governance reforms. In fragile or post-authoritarian states such as South Sudan and Ethiopia, Chinese development assistance has provided critical support for regime stability and national development without overt political conditionalities. The 2018 Ethiopia-China Strategic Comprehensive Partnership, which brought in large-scale financing for industrial parks and railways, was pursued at a time when Addis Ababa faced Western criticism over political repression and civil unrest. Similarly, in South Sudan, Beijing's engagement is seen as not only a commercial interest in oil but also a diplomatic strategy that reinforces Juba's sovereignty amidst international scrutiny. This preference for non-intrusive partnerships has allowed African states to pursue developmental goals while managing domestic political dynamics on their own terms.

At a continental level, African institutions increasingly view China as a crucial partner in their pursuit of strategic autonomy and multipolarity in global governance. The African Union's Agenda 2063, a flagship vision for a prosperous and integrated Africa, places emphasis on structural transformation, connectivity, and regional industrialization. China's support for transnational infrastructure and its alignment with the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) have positioned it as a key enabler of these ambitions. The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), established in 2000 and bolstered by successive action plans and summits, institutionalizes this partnership and has delivered over \$60 billion in pledges for African development between 2015 and 2021 (FOCAC, 2021). This institutionalization allows African states to engage China collectively, thereby reinforcing the idea of mutual benefit and policy alignment. Nationally, states like Ghana have articulated strategies such as the "Ghana Beyond Aid" agenda, which aligns with Chinese concessional financing for industrial parks, infrastructure, and energy projects that promote domestic value addition and reduce dependency on Western aid models.

Generally, the evidence on interests and needs presented here showcase those African countries are not passive recipients in the China-Africa engagement but are active agents pursuing their own developmental priorities through engagement with Chinese institutions, companies, and financing mechanisms. Whether through massive infrastructure projects in Kenya and Ethiopia, oil-sector stabilization in South Sudan, smart urban planning in Egypt, or industrial policy experimentation in Ghana, African governments are leveraging China's rise to close developmental gaps, assert policy sovereignty, and position themselves within a new global order marked by the waning dominance of the West. These motivations are rooted in empirically

evident needs, strategically crafted policies, and evolving continental ambitions that give structure and substance to Africa's contemporary political economy relationship with China.

China Africa Engagement in Action

FOCAC

The Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), inaugurated in 2000 during Jiang Zemin's presidency, represents a critical institutional innovation in China's Africa policy and a strategic turning point in Sino-African multilateral relations. As China emerged from a decade of post-Tiananmen diplomatic isolation and reoriented its foreign policy under the "Going Out" strategy, FOCAC was designed to project a new image of China as a cooperative global partner, committed to South–South solidarity. Though initially modest in financial scale, FOCAC allowed China to frame its engagement with Africa as collective and multilateral, presenting an alternative to Western donor-recipient frameworks characterized by conditionality. The early summits—particularly the 2000 Beijing and 2003 Addis Ababa meetings—emphasized diplomatic equality, economic partnership, and mutual non-interference, thus resonating with African states' post-colonial aspirations for autonomy and recognition. For countries like Nigeria and Ethiopia, which had already begun bilateral cooperation with China in sectors like oil and infrastructure, FOCAC offered a formalized space to deepen these ties while balancing engagements with the West. Algeria, long a proponent of multipolarity and a champion of non-aligned diplomacy, responded favorably to China's principled approach, viewing it as consistent with its strategic autonomy. Meanwhile, South Africa's post-apartheid regime sought to reposition itself globally and used FOCAC to re-engage China as a pivotal partner within the developing world.

During Hu Jintao's tenure (2002–2012), FOCAC transformed from a symbolic platform into a developmental and financial engine of China–Africa relations. This period marked a significant shift toward material commitments, with the 2006 Beijing Summit representing a watershed moment: China pledged \$5 billion in loans and aid, launched the China–Africa Development Fund, and announced plans for Special Economic Zones (SEZs) across select African countries. Hu's leadership, shaped by the broader narrative of China's "peaceful rise," used FOCAC to consolidate African partnerships through a rhetoric of mutual benefit, non-conditionality, and infrastructure-led development. This strategic posture found traction in countries like Cameroon and Ethiopia, both of which became central to Chinese infrastructural diplomacy. In Ethiopia, FOCAC enabled the financing of large-scale projects such as the Addis Ababa light rail and the Ethiopia–Djibouti railway, helping position the country as a hub in China's logistics corridor ambitions in the Horn of Africa. Cameroon, strategically located in Central Africa, received Chinese investment in energy and telecommunications, though concerns over elite capture and transparency began to emerge. Nigeria, buoyed by its oil wealth, negotiated oil-for-infrastructure deals that blurred the line between state and commercial diplomacy, while simultaneously using FOCAC to attract investment in transport and agriculture. In South Africa, China's narrative of a shared developmental path gained traction within the ANC government, leading to deeper integration of Chinese firms into the mining and telecom sectors. Scholars such as Deborah Brautigam and Ian Taylor have argued that this period saw the normalization of state-led capitalism as a model for Africa's development—albeit one that reinforced state-centric modes of decision-making and offered limited space for civil society participation or environmental safeguards.

Under Xi Jinping, FOCAC became deeply embedded within China's broader geopolitical vision, serving as a platform for aligning African engagement with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Global Development Initiative (GDI), and China's reimagining of the global order. The 2015 Johannesburg and 2018 Beijing Summits were particularly notable for the unprecedented scale of financial commitments—\$60 billion in combined loans, aid, and investment pledges—as well as the rhetorical elevation of Africa as a "partner in a shared future for mankind." Xi's administration has used FOCAC to project China as a responsible global leader, expanding the agenda to include digital infrastructure, security cooperation, and public health. Countries like South Africa and Ethiopia became central nodes in this new wave of engagement. South Africa, as a co-chair of FOCAC and a BRICS member, assumed a strategic intermediary role, echoing China's discourse on South–South cooperation and taking on agenda-shaping responsibilities in areas such

as industrialization and ICT development. Ethiopia remained a recipient of large-scale Chinese loans and technology transfers, but also a site of rising anxiety over debt sustainability and political interference—concerns echoed in countries like Cameroon, where opposition voices have questioned the long-term costs of Chinese-funded infrastructure. Algeria, despite its strong historical ties with China, maintained a more cautious engagement, prioritizing political alignment and mutual support in multilateral forums over deep financial entanglement. Nigeria, facing declining oil revenues and mounting fiscal pressure, began renegotiating Chinese loan terms and demanding greater local content in project implementation. These trends signal a subtle shift in African agency, with several governments—especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic—becoming more vocal about renegotiating the terms of engagement. The 2021 Dakar FOCAC Summit reflected these recalibrations, with China reducing the scale of financial pledges but committing to “small and beautiful” projects, greater localization, and people-to-people exchanges.

Overall, FOCAC has evolved into a critical pillar of China's African diplomacy, allowing the Chinese state to institutionalize its engagement while maintaining strategic flexibility. Across the Jiang, Hu, and Xi administrations, FOCAC has expanded from a diplomatic tool into a financial and developmental apparatus that complements China's broader global strategy. Yet it has also become a site of contestation, both within Africa and globally. While African states have leveraged FOCAC to diversify their partnerships, build infrastructure, and attract investment, the platform's asymmetries remain evident in decision-making, financing terms, and strategic agenda-setting. Scholars such as Sanusha Naidu and Lina Benabdallah argue that the durability of FOCAC will depend not only on China's economic power but also on its willingness to adapt to growing African demands for transparency, sustainability, and agency in co-defining the future of China–Africa relations.

BRI and Related Engagements in Selected African Countries

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), officially launched in 2013 under Xi Jinping, represents China's most ambitious global infrastructure and connectivity strategy to date, seeking to create a sprawling web of trade corridors, digital pathways, and geopolitical alliances across Asia, Europe, and Africa (Zhou, 2019; Summers, 2016). Although Africa was not a primary geographical axis in the original Silk Road Economic Belt or the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, Xi's articulation of the BRI quickly evolved to include the African continent as a “natural extension” of the maritime route (Chen, 2020). To fully appreciate Africa's embeddedness in the BRI, it is essential to situate the initiative within the cumulative foreign policy trajectories of previous Chinese regimes. Jiang Zemin's “Going Out” policy laid the foundation by encouraging Chinese enterprises to internationalize (Alden, 2007), while Hu Jintao's infrastructure-led diplomacy under the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) created the institutional and logistical precedents for what would later be consolidated under BRI (Taylor, 2011; Corkin, 2013). These antecedents allowed Xi to present BRI not as a rupture, but as the logical culmination of two decades of evolving China–Africa relations—repackaged within a grand civilizational and geopolitical narrative of “win-win cooperation” and “community of shared destiny” (Benabdallah, 2021). Africa's inclusion in the BRI has been marked by both opportunity and complexity. Among the five focus countries, Ethiopia and Kenya have emerged as central BRI nodes in the Horn of Africa corridor (Sun, 2014; Kitano & Harada, 2016).

Ethiopia

Ethiopia represents one of the most emblematic cases of China's expansive footprint in Africa through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and other complementary modalities of economic and political engagement. Often described as a “gateway to the Horn of Africa,” Ethiopia has emerged as a regional anchor for China's infrastructural and geopolitical ambitions. From 2013 to 2023, Ethiopia ranked as the sixth-largest recipient of Chinese aid in Africa, receiving approximately \$236 million in official development assistance—exclusive of concessional loans and commercial investments (Bräutigam, 2020; AidData, 2022). This financial influx underscores China's dual strategy of soft power and state-capacity building, especially in authoritarian developmental states where centralized planning and state-led growth are prioritized over democratic governance (Zhang & Alon, 2021; Cheru & Obi, 2010).

At the heart of this engagement lies a portfolio of landmark infrastructural undertakings, most notably the Addis Ababa–Djibouti Railway—a \$4 billion standard-gauge electrified railway financed predominantly by the Export–Import Bank of China and constructed by Chinese engineering firms, including China Railway Engineering Corporation (CREC) and China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC). Operational since 2018, the railway serves as a critical trade corridor linking Ethiopia’s landlocked capital to the Djibouti port, a strategic maritime hub that also hosts a Chinese naval base (Sun, 2019; Corkin, 2020). This integration of economic infrastructure with geostrategic logistics mirrors Beijing’s broader BRI logic: connect inland markets with maritime chokepoints, while embedding long-term commercial and political dependencies (Rolland, 2017; Zeng, 2022).

China’s role in Ethiopia also transcends economic imperatives to encompass symbolic statecraft. The African Union headquarters in Addis Ababa, constructed at a cost of \$200 million and completed in 2012, was gifted by the Chinese government and stands as a monumental testament to China’s cultural diplomacy and desire to position itself as Africa’s premier development partner (Benabdallah, 2020). While framed as a gesture of solidarity, such projects are strategically designed to amplify China’s influence in multilateral African diplomacy and diminish the discursive hegemony of Western institutions (Shinn & Eisenman, 2023).

An equally significant site of Chinese engagement is the Eastern Industrial Zone (EIZ) located in Dukem, just outside Addis Ababa. Funded through the China-Africa Development Fund and occupied by over 80 Chinese manufacturing firms, the zone represents China’s push to externalize its industrial overcapacity while leveraging African labor and access to global markets (Brookings Institution, 2023; Tang, 2020). The EIZ exemplifies a “production enclave” model that aligns with BRI’s ambitions to create supply-chain nodes across the Global South. However, these industrial zones have also become flashpoints for contestation—particularly over labor rights, technology transfer, and the limited backward linkages to the local economy (Brautigam & Tang, 2012; Gadzala, 2010).

While Ethiopia’s developmentalist government under the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), and later under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, has leveraged Chinese financing to pursue ambitious infrastructure modernization, the country’s rising debt profile has prompted concern. According to the IMF (2020), China accounts for over 25% of Ethiopia’s external debt, raising alarms about fiscal sustainability, especially given that loan repayments often coincide with periods of macroeconomic instability and civil conflict (IMF, 2020; Jones & Hameiri, 2020). Moreover, the Chinese model of financing—typically implemented through state-to-state contracts and executed by Chinese state-owned enterprises—has faced criticism for sidelining local contractors, enforcing opaque procurement practices, and undermining institutional accountability (World Bank, 2018; Mawdsley, 2018).

In political economy terms, Ethiopia’s embrace of Chinese funding and BRI-related infrastructure serves both instrumental and ideological purposes. Domestically, it allows the government to project infrastructural success and state legitimacy, particularly in urban areas and growth corridors. Internationally, it signals a strategic pivot away from conditional Western aid, embracing a developmental alternative that prioritizes sovereignty, regime stability, and economic pragmatism (Taylor, 2016; Mohan & Lampert, 2013). However, this engagement is not without contradictions. Ethiopia’s reliance on China has generated dependencies that may constrain policy autonomy, particularly in negotiating debt relief or industrial policy reforms. At the same time, China’s ability to maintain a non-interventionist posture amid Ethiopia’s internal conflicts—such as in Tigray—has sparked debates about the ethical dimensions of Beijing’s developmental diplomacy.

Egypt

Egypt’s integration into China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) underscores the political economy logic that defines Beijing’s engagement with strategically located African states. As the Arab world’s most populous country and a custodian of the Suez Canal—a key node in global maritime trade—Egypt occupies a pivotal geostrategic position in the BRI’s 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. It was among the earliest African states

to sign a formal cooperation agreement with China under the BRI framework, aligning with Beijing's broader strategy of forging infrastructural and diplomatic corridors linking East Asia to Europe via the Middle East and Africa (Rolland, 2017; Liu & Lim, 2018). China's early support for Egypt following the destabilizing aftermath of the 2011 Arab Spring—at a time when many Western partners hesitated—further solidified Cairo's turn eastward. Between 2015 and 2017, Egypt received approximately US\$1.03 billion in Chinese loans to fund various infrastructure initiatives, while simultaneously hosting more than 1,900 Chinese workers on project sites (Sheehan, 2020; Hillman, 2018).

This financial and technical engagement has materialized in a series of high-profile, state-centric projects that reflect China's infrastructure diplomacy model. Chief among them is the New Administrative Capital, a flagship endeavor situated outside Cairo and widely promoted as a symbolic convergence of Chinese capital, Egyptian ambition, and BRI aspirations (Xia, 2020). China State Construction Engineering Corporation (CSCEC), one of the largest state-owned construction firms globally, plays a leading role in the capital's development—demonstrating Beijing's practice of channeling development finance through its national champions, thus securing both influence and contract control (Bräutigam, 2020). Likewise, the Chinese-managed industrial zone in the Gulf of Suez exemplifies China's preference for enclave development models focused on logistics, energy, and manufacturing, often insulated from local economic linkages (Foster et al., 2009). The proposed electric train connecting the New Capital to Cairo and Chinese investments in the Western Desert further reflect China's embeddedness in Egypt's national development planning, as aligned with Egypt Vision 2030.

The diplomatic dimension of Egypt–China relations has paralleled this economic entrenchment. President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and President Xi Jinping have repeatedly exchanged affirmations of shared civilizational legacies and strategic partnership, positioning both nations as pillars of ancient cultures modernized through infrastructural resurgence (Benabdallah, 2020; Liu, 2021). These rhetorical exchanges are not merely ceremonial; they reinforce a mutual political logic that prioritizes state sovereignty, regime stability, and development-first governance—a convergence that appeals to authoritarian resilience in both capitals (Heydemann, 2016). As Egypt's alignment with China deepened, joint ventures such as the proposed \$4.4 billion Hamrawein coal power plant on the Red Sea—awarded to a consortium including Shanghai Electric and Dongfang Electric—signaled the growing scope of BRI-linked industrial cooperation (Kuo, 2019). However, the project's indefinite suspension in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic illustrates the fragility of externally driven megaprojects, especially under global crises. It also points to rising contestations within Egypt around sustainability, debt, and shifting energy priorities—echoing critiques observed in other African BRI cases.

In the broader context of China–Africa relations, Egypt exemplifies the strategic reciprocity that defines BRI diplomacy: China leverages capital, technology, and rhetorical solidarity to secure infrastructure corridors and diplomatic influence, while host states like Egypt seek alternative financing and geopolitical leverage amid declining Western enthusiasm. Yet this reciprocity is asymmetrical—with project design, loan conditionalities, and contractual implementation largely determined by Chinese institutions. Egypt's case thus reflects a larger political economy trend in BRI engagements: the interplay of regime legitimation, infrastructure-led development, and constrained local agency within a shifting global order (Jones & Zeng, 2019; Mohan & Tan-Mullins, 2019).

Ghana

Ghana's evolving relationship with China reflects a distinctive fusion of aid, trade, and infrastructure investment grounded in the logic of **developmental pragmatism** and the geostrategic ambitions of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). As the highest African recipient of Chinese aid between 2013 and 2023, Ghana has become emblematic of the shifting balance of influence in West Africa, where China increasingly rivals traditional Western donors in scale, speed, and ideological flexibility (Bräutigam, 2020; AidData, 2022).

Under the BRI, Ghana has become a key partner in China's infrastructure diplomacy. Signature projects include the Tamale Interchange, the Pokuase Interchange in Accra (West Africa's first four-tier interchange), and multiple rural electrification and water supply systems, especially in the Volta and Northern regions. These projects, financed through Chinese concessional loans and executed by firms like Sinohydro and China Railway Construction Corporation (CRCC), serve as both physical and symbolic markers of China's developmental presence in Ghana (Sun, 2019; IMF, 2020).

The most controversial and geopolitically consequential deal, however, was the Sinohydro bauxite-for-infrastructure agreement signed in 2018. Under this resource-backed arrangement, China would construct \$2 billion worth of infrastructure in exchange for Ghana's future bauxite production—a model first tested in Angola. While framed as a “win-win” barter avoiding direct indebtedness, the deal raised transparency, environmental, and sovereignty concerns, especially over its implications for the Atewa Forest Reserve, a biodiversity hotspot (IMANI Africa, 2019; Mahama, 2021).

Ghana has also signed on to China's Digital Silk Road, collaborating with Huawei to expand broadband access, surveillance technology, and e-government platforms. While these investments have improved digital inclusion, they have also provoked debates about cybersecurity, data sovereignty, and the consolidation of executive power through surveillance capabilities (Zeng, 2022; Benabdallah, 2020).

Trade between Ghana and China grew exponentially between 2013 and 2023, with China becoming Ghana's largest trading partner. By 2021, bilateral trade stood at over \$7 billion, with Ghana exporting gold, oil, cocoa, and timber, and importing electronics, machinery, steel, and manufactured goods. However, the trade relationship remains heavily asymmetric, with China exporting far more than it imports from Ghana, reinforcing Ghana's commodity dependence and trade vulnerability (UNCTAD, 2021; World Bank, 2023).

On the investment front, China has made inroads in energy, telecommunications, construction, and mining. The development of thermal plants, rural electrification through the China-Africa Development Fund (CADF), and Chinese-built industrial parks reflect Beijing's strategy of embedding capital while securing strategic assets. Notably, Chinese companies are active in gold mining, often operating through joint ventures or small-scale licenses—though some have been implicated in illegal mining practices (known locally as *galamsey*), raising tensions and prompting government crackdowns (Afriyie, Ganle & Adomako, 2016; Ghana Chamber of Mines, 2022).

Ghana's political elite has embraced Chinese development financing as a non-conditional alternative to Western loans. This shift aligns with what scholars call the “developmental sovereignty” narrative, where African states seek infrastructure-driven modernization without structural adjustment or governance benchmarks (Taylor, 2016; Mohan & Lampert, 2013). For successive administrations—from John Mahama's NDC government to Nana Akufo-Addo's NPP administration—Chinese finance has been instrumental in funding election-linked projects, national infrastructure plans, and flagship programs like “One District, One Factory.”

However, this dependence has also deepened Ghana's debt vulnerability. By 2022, Ghana faced a sovereign debt crisis and entered into a debt restructuring process under the IMF, with China as one of its major bilateral creditors. Although Chinese loans comprise a smaller share of Ghana's total debt than Western multilateral institutions, Beijing's bilateral lending—especially through supplier credit and commercial loans—has complicated debt negotiations due to the fragmentation of Chinese lenders (IMF, 2022; Jones & Hameiri, 2020).

Critics argue that while Chinese infrastructure has improved Ghana's physical connectivity, it has done little to strengthen institutional capacity, enhance industrial transformation, or address youth unemployment. The focus on hard infrastructure has not been matched by investments in skills development, value addition, or long-term policy reform (Mawdsley, 2018; Whitfield, 2019). Moreover, the opacity of Chinese contracts,

limited local participation in procurement, and the dominance of Chinese firms have raised concerns about economic sovereignty and elite capture.

Despite these challenges, Ghana has maintained a relatively balanced foreign policy posture. It continues to engage with the U.S., EU, and multilateral donors while leveraging China's development model. This reflects a broader political economy strategy of diversification, whereby African governments use geopolitical competition to extract rents, negotiate better terms, or delay reform (Brown, 2012; Harman & Brown, 2013).

Ghana's engagement with China, particularly under the BRI framework, is therefore best understood not merely as aid dependency but as a strategic development compact—albeit one marked by power asymmetries, institutional trade-offs, and contestations over sovereignty. For your study, Ghana provides a rich case of how African states instrumentalize Chinese finance to pursue domestic development goals while navigating the risks of debt exposure, environmental degradation, and shifting global power.

South Sudan

South Sudan, emerging as the third-largest recipient of Chinese aid in Africa between 2013 and 2023, exemplifies a critical site for understanding the political economy of China–Africa relations under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). While South Sudan is not typically at the center of infrastructure-led BRI publicity campaigns, its strategic oil wealth, geopolitical location in the Nile Basin, and post-conflict reconstruction needs have made it a crucial, albeit underexamined, partner in China's broader BRI ambitions. China's engagement in the country represents a case of resource-backed diplomacy, in which aid, investment, and soft-power projection coalesce to secure long-term economic and strategic interests—particularly in the extractive sector (Sun, 2014; Corkin, 2020).

Prior to South Sudan's independence in 2011, the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) had already secured a foothold in the region as part of its stakes in Sudanese oil fields. Post-independence, China rapidly repositioned itself diplomatically and economically, recognizing the new state and reaffirming its commercial and infrastructural partnerships (Large, 2013). Between 2013 and 2023, South Sudan received over \$300 million in aid from China, much of which supported humanitarian assistance, basic infrastructure, and technical cooperation (Brautigam, 2023). This aid trajectory, though modest in volume compared to larger economies like Egypt or Nigeria, has been deeply significant in sustaining South Sudan's oil exports, fiscal stability, and international recognition amid civil conflict and economic fragility.

The centrality of oil to this partnership cannot be overstated. South Sudan's economy is almost entirely dependent on oil, which accounts for over 90% of government revenues. China remains its primary investor and buyer, with CNPC retaining substantial stakes in oil production consortia. This heavy dependency has created a resource-risk nexus that defines China's presence in the country. During the 2013–2018 civil war, Beijing's unusual deployment of peacekeepers under the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS)—a divergence from its traditional non-interventionist posture—reflected the need to safeguard energy assets (Alden & Large, 2019). Indeed, China's BRI strategy in fragile states like South Sudan is not limited to physical infrastructure; it includes security interventions, diplomatic mediation, and institutional presence, all designed to ensure unimpeded access to strategic commodities and transportation corridors (He, 2019).

Despite South Sudan not being a formal signatory to all BRI infrastructure megaprojects, its inclusion in the “Maritime Silk Road” periphery and as a potential logistics link to East African ports, notably through Lamu Port–South Sudan–Ethiopia Transport (LAPSSET) corridor discussions, reveals China's long-term infrastructural calculus (Kimenyi & Lewis, 2016). Chinese aid has supported roadworks connecting Juba to oil-producing regions, government building rehabilitation, and limited energy infrastructure—all tied either directly or indirectly to the stability of the oil supply chain. However, these projects are often implemented

through opaque contracts, with minimal public scrutiny or local capacity development, raising concerns about accountability and elite capture (Patey, 2017).

Politically, China's BRI-aligned engagement in South Sudan reflects an elite-to-elite model, where support is channeled through central authorities with limited conditionalities. President Salva Kiir's administration has actively courted Chinese financing as an alternative to Western conditional aid frameworks, often leveraging China's diplomatic support in multilateral fora in return. This reciprocal loyalty was visible in South Sudan's support for China's positions on Hong Kong and Xinjiang at the UN General Assembly, a pattern consistent with Beijing's use of development partnerships to consolidate South-South solidarity narratives under the BRI (Zhang, 2020). At the same time, China's model has been criticized for reinforcing South Sudan's rentier state structure, where political elites monopolize oil rents while ordinary citizens face deepening humanitarian crises and underdevelopment (de Waal, 2015).

Although some Chinese initiatives—such as medical aid, technical training, and agricultural pilot projects—have extended beyond oil, these remain secondary to the core logic of extractive engagement. Much of the infrastructure supported by China serves to facilitate oil production, transport, and state capacity in areas relevant to revenue security. Local communities in oil-producing regions have protested pollution, land dispossession, and lack of compensation, highlighting the social and environmental trade-offs embedded in China's development footprint (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Nevertheless, the South Sudanese state, dependent on Chinese capital and diplomatic backing, has shown limited willingness to hold Chinese firms accountable, reflecting broader tensions between sovereignty, state fragility, and external influence in BRI engagements (Power et al., 2022).

Kenya

Kenya stands as a pivotal anchor state in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), serving both geopolitical and infrastructural imperatives on the eastern flank of Africa. Its strategic location along the Indian Ocean, and its status as East Africa's most integrated transport and financial hub, have made it a central node in Beijing's vision for intercontinental connectivity. China's engagement in Kenya intensified during the presidency of Mwai Kibaki (2002–2013), whose administration pivoted toward “Look East” policies in response to waning Western aid and political conditionalities (Rotich, 2020). The Kibaki era not only welcomed Chinese investment but also set the stage for the proliferation of BRI-linked infrastructure under his successors. What has since unfolded is a pattern of large-scale, debt-financed infrastructure projects, elite diplomatic alignment, and an evolving political economy marked by asymmetrical interdependence.

Among the flagship BRI projects in Kenya, the Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) between Mombasa and Nairobi, launched in 2014 and completed in 2017, remains the most visible. Funded through a \$3.6 billion loan from China's Exim Bank and constructed by China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC), the SGR has been heralded as a transformative corridor for trade within the Northern Corridor (Sun, 2021). However, the project also symbolizes the controversies of BRI engagements: overpricing, opacity in procurement, and underperformance in economic returns (Olander, 2019). While the Kenyan government justified the SGR on grounds of decongesting roads and boosting logistics, the cost-to-benefit ratio remains questionable, with cargo uptake below projections and persistent losses requiring state subsidies (Mwangi, 2022). Nevertheless, China has remained committed to expanding the railway. President William Ruto's 2023 visit to Beijing culminated in new agreements to extend the SGR from Naivasha to Kisumu and eventually to Malaba on the Uganda border—an ambition initially shelved due to funding shortfalls and shifting donor confidence (Daily Nation, 2023).

Another major BRI-linked project is the Nairobi Expressway, a public-private partnership between the Kenyan government and the China Road and Bridge Corporation. The \$668 million, 27-kilometer elevated highway was completed in 2022 and has become both a model and a lightning rod for Chinese infrastructure diplomacy in Africa (Kamau, 2022). Operated under a Build-Operate-Transfer model, the project allows CRBC to recoup investments through tolling for over 27 years. While the expressway has improved urban

mobility, critics argue that it privileges elite motorists over mass transit users and deepens socioeconomic exclusions in infrastructure access (Karanja, 2023).

Beyond transport infrastructure, China's footprint in Kenya spans energy, housing, health, and industrial parks. These include the Thika Superhighway (an early Kibaki-era project), the Lamu Port under the LAPSSET corridor, and various road and urban development initiatives in cities like Eldoret, where dual carriageways are being built under new Sino-Kenyan agreements (Kimenyi & Lewis, 2016). President Ruto's renewed engagements in 2023 and 2024 underscore a return to China as financier of last resort. This resurgence comes as Kenya faces tightening liquidity, ballooning debt obligations, and reduced access to concessional loans from traditional Bretton Woods institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF, which have downgraded Kenya's creditworthiness (Standard & Poor's, 2023). In this vacuum, China has reemerged as a willing partner—albeit now more cautious and inclined toward PPPs and phased funding structures rather than the earlier enthusiasm for sovereign lending.

The political economy of Kenya–China BRI engagements is thus characterized by a duality: while China is instrumental in plugging Kenya's infrastructure deficit, it also locks the country into debt obligations, foreign-dominated supply chains, and policy entanglements that narrow fiscal sovereignty. Unlike earlier Western models of development assistance premised on governance reform and transparency, China's engagements are generally insulated from domestic accountability mechanisms, operating through high-level state-to-state frameworks that reinforce executive dominance in procurement and negotiation processes (Cheeseman, 2019). At the same time, Chinese projects are increasingly embedded in the political cycles of Kenya. From the Kibaki administration's infrastructural nationalism to the Uhuru Kenyatta government's Vision 2030 alignment with BRI, and now to Ruto's hustler-centered development strategy, Chinese investments have been politically appropriated for domestic legitimacy and electoral optics.

Yet, resistance and critique have grown in tandem. Civil society organizations have challenged environmental degradation, labor rights violations, and the displacement of informal traders during project implementation. The Kenyan judiciary has, in some instances, acted as a counterweight, as in the 2020 ruling that declared the SGR contract illegal for not adhering to public procurement laws (High Court of Kenya, 2020). These contestations expose the friction between Chinese infrastructure diplomacy and democratic governance institutions in African contexts.

Discussion: Agency of African States – Navigating Developmental Opportunity Amidst Dependency Risk

This sub-section revisits the study problem and central thesis. It handles the third question stated in section 1.3: How have African states navigated opportunities and challenges within the context of China's growing influence, and what factors condition their relative bargaining power?

From the data presented so far, the political economy of China–Africa engagement from 1989 to 2025 is best interpreted not through a binary lens of whether China's influence is "good" or "bad" for the continent, but through the more complex and nuanced framework of entanglement, thereby confirming this study's thesis. African states navigate a dynamic terrain where China's presence offers both critical opportunities for developmental acceleration and significant risks of structural dependency. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and mechanisms like the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) exemplify this duality: on the one hand, they channel urgently needed capital, infrastructure, and technology into Africa's development plans, but on the other, they reconfigure sovereignty, fiscal independence, and industrial policy space in ways that can reproduce external dependency. What emerges is a pattern of strategic engagement, not passive reception. African states—particularly those under study such as Kenya, Ethiopia, Ghana, Egypt, and South Sudan—have displayed differentiated responses shaped by regime needs, domestic development planning, and shifting geopolitical alliances. For instance, Ethiopia's state-led developmental model has leveraged Chinese industrial park investments and SEZs to spur manufacturing growth, aligning them with the national Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP II), though at the cost of rising external debt and

concerns over industrial sovereignty (Geda, 2023). In Egypt, the strategic integration of Chinese capital into the Suez Canal Economic Zone has amplified President el-Sisi's infrastructure-heavy political project while deepening Cairo's alignment with Beijing's maritime ambitions (OECD, 2021). Ghana's bauxite-for-infrastructure agreement, which sought to sidestep traditional financing constraints, has sparked domestic contestation over transparency and sovereignty—yet it simultaneously illustrates Accra's active diplomacy in mobilizing multipolar finance for Agenda 2063 goals (IMANI, 2020). Kenya's standard gauge railway (SGR), a flagship BRI project, has enhanced logistical integration but has also strained the national debt profile and raised questions of value-for-money and operational sustainability (World Bank, 2021). In South Sudan, the oil-backed infrastructure deals with China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) have enabled limited state-building amid conflict, but largely entrenched elite-driven, externally-financed rentierism (International Crisis Group, 2022).

These varied engagements suggest that African agency is not absent, but conditional—strategic rather than structural, and often elite-mediated rather than institutionally entrenched. As argued by Carmody and Taylor (2011), China's rise has presented African states with renewed room to maneuver, particularly in circumventing traditional Bretton Woods conditionalities. However, this bargaining power is mediated by several structural constraints: high debt exposure, institutional capacity gaps, and intra-African political fragmentation. The structural logic underpinning many China–Africa engagements resembles what Mason (2016) has described as “asymmetrical interdependence”: China's offer of infrastructure and no-strings-attached loans appeals to African states seeking rapid development and sovereignty preservation, but it also reproduces commodity dependence, current account imbalances, and governance opacity—features reminiscent of older dependency frameworks. Moreover, the Chinese approach, while avoiding overt political interference, often centers around elite pacts and opaque negotiation frameworks, raising concerns about domestic accountability. Yet, to view African states merely as victims in this equation would be analytically flawed. As Bach (2013) and Kasera (2025) posits, Africa has become a “frontier” of global experimentation—not just for external actors like China, but also for African states testing new developmental alliances, institutional hybrids, and models of political legitimacy. The Nairobi Expressway project in Kenya, for example, illustrates this frontier dynamic: a state-capital-city infrastructure project governed through public-private partnership with a Chinese state-owned firm, yet largely shielded from public oversight and financed through transnational tolling regimes.

In this context, the agency of African states lies in their capacity to negotiate the terms, scale, and direction of external engagements. While structural factors condition bargaining power, agency manifests in choices about project selection, investment targeting, and diplomatic alignment. Egypt's strategic balancing of Western and Chinese capital, Ghana's legal and civic contestation over resource-backed loans, Ethiopia's industrial localization efforts, and Kenya's debt restructuring initiatives all reflect nuanced political economy calculations. Therefore, rather than framing China's role in Africa as benevolent or exploitative, the appropriate analytical frame is one of political economy entanglement—where opportunity and constraint coexist, and where outcomes are shaped by both the strategic rationalities of Chinese actors and the domestic political logics of African states. It is this interplay, rather than any singular “China effect,” that ultimately determines the developmental trajectory and sovereignty configurations of African states in the contemporary global order.

Conclusion: Broader implications of China-Africa Engagement on Africa's Development

This conclusion section explores the paper's fourth and final question: (4) What are the broader implications of China-Africa relations for Africa's economic diversification, governance structures, and insertion into the global economy?

The evolving landscape of China-Africa relations between 1989 and 2025 reveals not a binary of benefit or harm, but a deeply entangled political economy dynamic in which African states actively navigate developmental opportunities amid significant structural constraints. As this study has demonstrated, China's expansive presence in Africa—driven by Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects, Forum on China-Africa

Cooperation (FOCAC) frameworks, and state-directed investment in infrastructure, extractives, digital economies, and industrial zones—has reshaped the material and institutional contours of African development. However, the broader implications of this engagement are contingent on how African countries leverage this relationship to foster economic diversification, strengthen governance structures, and reposition themselves in the global economy. Evidence from Ethiopia’s industrial park development, Egypt’s logistics diplomacy, Ghana’s resource-backed financing, Kenya’s infrastructural turn, and South Sudan’s oil-for-loans framework shows differentiated outcomes. Where there has been proactive strategic alignment—anchored in institutional capacity, long-term planning, and diversified partnerships—some African states have managed to extract relative developmental gains. Yet, where state capacity is weak or political regimes prioritize short-term elite survival, Chinese engagement has often exacerbated patterns of fiscal vulnerability, enclave infrastructure, and elite-centric governance that undermine inclusive development.

The potential for economic diversification under China-Africa engagement remains both promising and precarious. While Chinese investment has unlocked much-needed physical infrastructure—ports, roads, railways, industrial parks—it has not necessarily catalyzed structural transformation or integrated local economies into higher value-added segments of global supply chains. For many African economies, especially resource-rich but institutionally fragile states, export profiles remain heavily dependent on primary commodities destined for China, replicating old dependencies under new patrons. The institutional architecture of these engagements, often characterized by opaque contracting, limited local content requirements, and parallel financing mechanisms, tends to bypass or weaken domestic governance institutions. This challenges the long-term sustainability of development gains and raises questions about accountability, regulatory oversight, and civic participation. As Robert Mason (2017) and Carmody and Taylor (2011) argue, the Chinese model of engagement—although distinct from Western conditionality—nonetheless generates new hierarchies of dependence and elite entrenchment, shaped by what Daniel Bach (2013) calls “frontier governance”: zones of infrastructural experimentation, legal ambiguity, and hybrid sovereignty.

In terms of Africa’s insertion into the global economy, China’s rise offers both a corrective to Western hegemony and a new axis of geopolitical alignment. Africa’s trade with China now surpasses its trade with Europe or the United States, and China’s infrastructural footprint has made it a central player in shaping Africa’s logistical and digital futures. Yet, this global repositioning risks being shallow and extractive if African states fail to articulate a collective vision for industrial policy, regional integration, and knowledge-based development. The asymmetry in technology transfer, the limited spillovers from Chinese special economic zones, and the externalization of strategic control over ports, data infrastructure, and mineral resources constrain Africa’s capacity to ascend global value chains on its own terms. Nevertheless, African agency remains a crucial counterweight. Countries like Kenya and Ethiopia, despite their debt challenges, have used Chinese engagement to fast-track urban modernization and manufacturing aspirations. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), if institutionally reinforced, provides a platform through which Africa can negotiate as a bloc and internalize some of the value lost to external actors.

In a nutshell, the broader implications of China-Africa relations lie not in the deterministic nature of Chinese presence but in the contingent outcomes shaped by African policy choices, leadership vision, and governance architectures. This study thus affirms its thesis that the China-Africa engagement is best understood as a dynamic and evolving political economy entanglement, not reducible to narratives of neocolonialism or developmental salvation. It is a space of strategic ambiguity—where opportunity and dependency are co-constitutive, and where African futures are still being negotiated within, against, and beyond the shadow of Chinese capital.

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Author Contribution

OAK conceived, researched, wrote, revised and submitted the article.

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