Our Friend or Foe? Exploring Common Grounds for China-Africa Relations

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China’s presence in Africa has a long history of cordial interaction spanning from ancient to contemporary times. The history of China-Africa relations is held in high esteem by the two sides, as both share a history of foreign invasions and of solidarity for a common destiny. However, new narratives promoted by antagonists of China’s presence in Africa are constructed to portray China in a negative light without recourse to history. Arguably, the Chinese exploration of Africa can be said to have started many centuries before the arrival of Europeans on the continent. To challenge and counter the Eurocentric narratives, China has consistently provided historical and empirical facts, which prove that its interest in Africa is mutually beneficial and hinged on friendly relations.

This research examines China’s role in Africa, and whether it may be construed as that of a friend or a foe. It explores several arguments about China’s motive for its involvement in Africa and the underlying ontological realities. It further synthesizes Africa’s strategic development interest as well as the prospects and challenges therein. It also delves into a comparative study of the historical relationship between Africa and the West on one side, and China and Africa on the other. The integration and critical analysis of several relevant scholarly contributions create the nexus between various studies on China’s role in Africa and on the consequent impact on Africa.

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China-Africa Mutual Engagement and Emerging Issues

Africa has increasingly become a centre of international politics following the emergence of China as a strategic player in infrastructure investment, signaling a challenge to the traditionally dominant donors such as America and Europe. Thus, the role of China in Africa has come under intense scrutiny by scholars and policymakers around the world. More so, scholarly publications on China-Africa relations have been centred on three broad thematic areas: development aid, foreign policy, and trade and investment. Until recently, academic publications on China-Africa relations have been dominated by scholars from European-American academic institutions, which seem to have marginalized African and Chinese writers in the mainstream epistemology of China-Africa studies. However, there is an increase in both Chinese and African scholarships collaborating concertedly to reframe and redefine the malignant narratives and discourses on the relations between China and Africa. As Munyaradzi Mawere and Costain Tandi commented, public opinion on China-Africa relations is constructed in terms of understanding the opportunities and challenges associated with development. Moreover, African analysts and academics tend to investigate the pattern of the relationship using the binary lens of interdependence and dependency. Hence, the binary divide appreciates interdependence in terms of China and Africa both benefiting in friendly win-win relations, while the other sees dependency as Africa’s perpetual dependence on China for infrastructure investment.¹


The provision of foreign aid to Africa is not exclusively associated with Euro-American countries. China’s role in the facilitation of foreign aid to Africa can be traced to the 1950s. According to Giles Mohan and Marcus
Power, the 1950s witnessed the rise of South-South cooperation. Thus, this led to the heightened commitment from China to support Africa’s development. Chinese engagement with Africa during the period promoted the ideological foundation of mutual cooperation, shared history, common destiny and mutual support.2 For instance, China provided scholarships to thousands of African students to study in China in what Philip Snow described as “the poor helping the poor.”3 Subsequently, the relationship witnessed an increase in loans, grants, technical support, and enhanced efforts for massive and integrated infrastructure development in Africa. To this end, the debates about the motive of Chinese foreign aid in Africa became a central discourse of international political economy.4

Most critical debates on Chinese foreign aid to Africa are expressing panic and desperation hinged on the global influence that China exerts in international development. As a result, some scholars have been driven into bias and deliberate subjectivity without the propensity to ethics and the need for an in-depth analysis. As Mark Kapchanga argued, in response to the acceptance of China’s policy in Africa, Western capitalist countries have resorted to policy adjustments to persuade, appeal to, and sometimes bully African states with threats of foreign assistance withdrawal.5 In order to salvage its fading influence in Africa, Western players in international development are attempting to court and integrate China into the larger community of aid donors. The gesture is targeted at formulating a consolidated framework that will bring China-Africa relations under global institutional regulations. This, African observers believe, is unnecessary and will affect the free flow of capital into the continent.6

Additionally, China is accused of indulging autocratic leaders who perpetuate human rights abuses, corruption and bad governance through debt diplomacy. However, China insists on its stance for non-interference in domestic affairs of other sovereign states as a guiding principle for mutual respect. The so-called debt trap diplomacy has been popularized by the Euro-Americans to malign China’s departure from the exploitative capitalist system which promotes win-lose tendencies between Africa and the West. Deborah Brautigam, Director of the China-Africa Research Initiative, John Hopkins University, took a different stance and debunked the idea of debt trap diplomacy peddled by the West against China. She opined that the misgiving originates from the “perplexing and overblown fear” about China’s progressive and peaceful rise. Rather than focusing on competition, China sticks to the value of cooperation, which is entrenched in the ideological beliefs of China as a state. Sun Yat-sen, a Chinese nationalist leader, once said: “Mankind’s path to great harmony does not lie in competition, but mutual assistance.” It is on the strength of this that China pursues mutuality for global prosperity instead of the destructive path of competition.

China’s trade and investment in Africa has continued to increase since the end of the Cold War. The changing dynamics is that China has set up various special economic zones across Africa to facilitate manufacturing and business operations. The spread of small- and medium-scale Chinese businesses have also been witnessed in many African cities.

Politically, African countries constitute over a quarter of the United Nations membership, and their partnership with China, a permanent member of the UN Security Council (UNSC), has created an extraordinary

alliance. China and Africa tend to support each other on international issues of mutual interest. More so, China has enjoyed substantial support from Africa for its UNSC membership and for the one-China policy which aims at denying Taiwan recognition as a country independent from mainland China. Recently, all but one of African states have aligned with the one-China policy, thereby strengthening China’s diplomatic solidarity on the continent.¹¹

Despite China’s increased trade and investment in Africa, the Western media has been critically audacious against China. For instance, according to statistics from China’s Ministry of Commerce on China-Africa trade in 2018, China’s exports to Africa reached an impressive US$104.91 billion, an increase of 10.8%, while China’s imports from Africa increased by 30.8% amounting to US$99.28 billion.¹² Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi asserts that contrary to the accusations, China has injected a significant amount of capital into Africa without any hidden motive or political strings attached. He further decried that, instead of accolade, accusing fingers are being pointed at China for its alleged debt trap diplomacy. Wang further played down Western commentators’ sarcasm and maintained that Africans are the only qualified people to speak about Sino-African cooperation.¹³ In this way, Wang’s argument concurs with the result of a 2016 poll conducted by the Pan-African Research Network, which indicated that two-thirds of Africans gave a favourable endorsement to China’s role in Africa. There is no doubt that Africa has been and will continue to be a prominent theatre of global politics. Hence, it is not surprising that China-Africa relations have generated such heated debate due to the struggle by the conceptual West to uphold its hegemonic foothold on the continent.¹⁴

investments in power, rail, telecommunication, broadcasting and banking sectors have been executed or are ongoing in several African countries. Consequently, Africa is experiencing economic growth. This is motivated by China’s commitment to a global effort to improve the development of Third World countries, to fight against poverty and contribute to world peace.

According to Francis Kornegay, Senior Fellow at the University of South Africa, and Chris Landsberg, Professor at the University of Johannesburg, Chinese interest in Africa is predominantly economic rather than geopolitical in nature.\(^{15}\) However, the challenge for Africa is the lack of a “common position” in its strategic engagement with the outside world. The fault line is attributed to the inherent colonial fragmentation and neo-colonial alignments with former colonizers. It is this fragmentation that depicts Africa as a weak geopolitical space that is vulnerable to exploitation. Nonetheless, China’s impressive rhetoric emphasizes equality, friendship and mutuality, thus, helping to galvanize China-Africa cooperation.\(^{16}\)

Therefore, China’s engagement can best be described as having provided an alternative to the Western model of development in Africa. The trend of globalisation brought about the interplay of international politics in which China and the conceptual West are both actively engaged in Africa. Due to Africa’s experience and historical misnomer orchestrated by colonial and neo-colonial exploitation, China appears as a credible and favorable strategic partner for Africa. Notwithstanding, the literature on China-Africa relations is generally impaired by an inability to distinguish whether Chinese investment is regularly motivated solely by China’s national economic interest or used for mutual advantages. As Barry Sautman and Hairong Yan contend, it is undeniable that mutuality entails that China also benefits from its relationship with Africa without being perceived as an exploiter.\(^{17}\)

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Existing Misunderstandings about China-Africa Relations

China has become a key player in Africa, having moved from a rear position to overtaking Europe and the Unites States. The peaceful rise of China to global fame has been quite astonishing to many observers. It is assessed by many scholars that, in order to sustain its growth and global influence, China needs Africa as a strategic partner. With increasing engagement, the relationship has ushered in a new dynamic and a shift away from the dominant Western control of foreign aid in Africa. China’s approach of anti-hegemony and South-South solidarity has posed a formidable challenge to the traditional donors.18

Although much has been written about China-Africa relations, there seems to be a consensus that China’s niche is its lack of interest in colonization and interference in the domestic affairs of African states. This position is buttressed by Admiral Zheng He’s naval expedition during the era of the Ming Dynasty as very central to the discourse on China-Africa cooperation. Zheng He was a great Chinese admiral and diplomat whose maritime voyages took him to the Indian Ocean, but especially to the coastal towns of East Africa, which is well acknowledged in the annals of history as an important landmark in China-Africa relations. This historical narrative is regarded as the climax of the Chinese’s determination to cultivate relations with Africa during the pre-revolutionary era. Furthermore, historical evidence suggests that this early 15th century contact was basically a friendly diplomatic gesture and not intended to colonize the continent. Classical literature and archaeological evidence have also provided proof that Chinese ancient coins and porcelain fragments dating back to 960-1279 were found at Zanzibar and the Swahili coast of eastern Africa. The discovery proved that China-Africa relations predate the transatlantic slave trade and colonial rule. This further reinforces the argument that China was not and is not interested

in the colonization of Africa as is often claimed by its opponents. Therefore, the choice of amicable words by the Chinese is deeply rooted in the history of friendship between China and Africa. Chinese political leaders from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping and their counterparts in Africa have used this enchanting narrative across the board to create awareness of the brotherhood and common destiny for both the Chinese and the African people.

The second phase of Chinese engagement with Africa had its climax during the decolonization era of the 1950s. China was credited to have pioneered and promoted the emergence of the idea of South-South cooperation. Zhou Enlai visited Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Ghana, Mali, Guinea, Sudan, Ethiopia and Somalia to mobilize efforts towards
mutual cooperation and solidarity between China and Africa. According to Amitav Acharya, the Bandung Conference in 1955 tried to institutionalize these relations. During the conference, Asian and African countries reached the consensus to denounce colonialism and racism, and voiced their reservation concerning the Cold War tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States. Thus, Wen Jiabao chronicled that the 1950s and 1960s marked the formalization of diplomatic exchanges between China and the newly decolonized African states. Since then, China’s foreign policy has relied on the five key principles of mutual coexistence: mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other’s internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence.

The postcolonial era of China-Africa relations witnessed China offering interest-free loans and extending grants to support African states in the building of infrastructure. As Suisheng Zhao narrated, by the 1970s, most African countries had gained independence and become active in international politics, especially at the United Nations. Leveraging on the overwhelming votes of African countries, the government of the People’s Republic of China was recognized as the sole legitimate representative of China at the UN Security Council. The role played by the African states to secure China’s recognition as a permanent member of the UN Security Council was greatly applauded by Mao Zedong, who was acclaimed to have said that African brothers lifted China into the United Nations. Subsequently, the late 1970s saw the economic reforms in China initiated by Deng Xiaoping, which began the opening-up of China to the rest of the world. The period of opening-up went hand in hand with the rise of Chinese state-owned enterprises, private companies and the inflow of foreign direct

investments.\textsuperscript{22}

The post-Cold War era, especially from the 2000s onward, marked another milestone in China-Africa relations when it witnessed a huge outflow of Chinese capital into Africa's infrastructure and critical economic sectors. Western elements critical about the sudden economic growth and relations between China and Africa tagged the period as the “Chinese economic invasion.” Such an overly critical judgement of the “Chinese phenomenon” in Africa is mostly artificially constructed, based on mere speculation drawn from Africa’s past colonial and neocolonial history.

Thus, the general preconception about the role of China in Africa is fabricated, using an anticipatory economic fear, or “economophobia”, of economic relations with a foreign state in anticipation of exploitation and domination. Although this fear cannot be backed by substantial empirical evidence, it is chiefly based on the unjustified expectation that in the long run the Chinese activities in Africa will impact negatively on the continent. This claim is absurd since China has also made comparably huge investments in the US and Europe. Why are the US and Europe not accused of being entrapped by Chinese investment? Although the media in Europe and EU institutions have incessantly raised concern over Chinese influence in the Balkans and Eastern Europe, the perspectives about Africa is demeaning. The narrative about Africa’s debt entanglement is generated to promote the idea of Western saviorism and African victimhood.

\textbf{China in Africa: Act of Compassion and Friendship}

Africa’s colonial experience and the agonies associated with underdevelopment resonate with China’s century of humiliation. Hence, Chinese solidarity and friendship towards Africa is seen as shared experience for a common destiny. The friendship, as rightly asserted by both Africa and China, is aimed at supporting each other’s dream for self-reliance,

and for political and economic sovereignty. In addition, China’s principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of African states and its respect for sovereignty has endeared China to Africa particularly. China has also continued to preach the political sermon of an “all-weather friend” in contrast to the constant bullying from the West. These narratives have continued to uphold and grease the wheels of China-Africa relations over the years.23

The reality of China’s cooperation with African countries has been hampered by the overwhelming criticism against African leaders for bad government policies, corruption and shrewd business practices. This has forced China to review its approaches over the years to enhance accountability and exonerate itself from unnecessary malignant media blackmail. Meanwhile, China has also rejected the accusations that its cravings for energy, minerals and timber are the key element that drives its relations with Africa. Although China sources some of its oil imports from Africa, it is not sufficient to argue that Chinese relations with Africa is ultimately hinged on a frantic demand for natural resources. Notwithstanding, Africa has benefited hugely from Chinese aid, foreign direct investment and some degree of technology transfer. These have been recognized as a positive contribution to eradicating the huge infrastructural deficit in Africa. Chinese contributions to Africa are numerous, as expressed in high-level exchanges, critical infrastructure building, debt cancellation, the establishment of Confucius Institutes, the granting of export credit, foreign aid, technical and military assistance and loans. In addition to the establishment of diplomatic relations and resident embassies in almost all the countries of Africa, it has also coordinated humanitarian relief across Africa during health epidemics and natural disasters.

China’s humanitarianism towards the people of Africa has been highly commended. For instance, China played an indispensable role during

the Ebola crisis in the West African countries of Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia. The impact was felt and treated as an act of compassion from a “brother.” Even those with a critical view of China acknowledged that China’s response to the Ebola virus epidemic in West Africa was quick and timely, which was not only successful but also one of its largest medical humanitarian assistance operations carried out abroad. China contributed 500 PLA personnel to Liberia and Sierra Leone from 2014 to 2015. The personnel established treatment and diagnostics centers, trained local medical staff and facilitated transportation for relief materials, all of which cost Beijing over $120 million. China’s support exemplifies the “Sino-African brotherhood sharing weal and woe, through thick and thin, and gives testimony to China’s policy of ‘sincerity, real results, affinity, and good faith’ towards Africa.”

In the same manner, China and Africa’s interests can be described as win-win cooperation and partnership. In the aftermath of the global economic meltdown, many Western donor nations were forced to cut down their foreign aid and assistance to Africa, while China continued to provide the needed infrastructure investments. During that period, China announced the cancellation of 168 debts owed by 33 African countries. This singular act further reaffirmed China’s role as an all-weather friend to Africa. There is no other best way to describe China’s kindness than in a popular Nigerian adage: “A friend in need is a friend indeed.”

Conversely, it is expedient to state that China’s continued commitment to Africa’s infrastructure and humanitarian needs is underpinned in the

South-South philosophy of mutual cooperation. China sees itself as a Third World country driven by the empathy to mutually help, share and support others while it attains peaceful development for the common good of global humanity.

**Comparison of Chinese and Western Presence in Africa**

Over the years, Africa has become China’s strategic partner with mutual benefits accruing on both sides. On the one hand, China has a great need for energy imports to drive its industrial sector, while Africa is endowed with huge energy resources, and on the other hand, unrelentless infrastructure investment and the vast market potential in Africa creates symbiotic and mutually interdependent relations. China’s infrastructure-related foreign aid has revolutionized Africa’s delapidated and in some cases non-existent infrastructure. The popularity of China in Africa has conversely led to international rivalry, accusations and counter accusations. Some examples cited for China’s support for authoritarian leaders include cases from Zimbabwe, Angola, Uganda, Sudan and others. Whereas it is correct that China builds relations without discrimination, it is also very true that this behavior is rooted in the Chinese principle of non-inference in the domestic affairs of other states. China’s adherence to this principle is also one of the reasons China is endeared to Africa.

The relationship between China and Africa has continued to flourish, while economic and diplomatic ties between the West and Africa are in decline, due to interference and claims of bullying. The perceived disrespect for the national sovereignty of African states, and the maligning stereotypical image of Africa has contributed to Africa’s search for alternative development partners. Unlike the West, Africans generally view Chinese engagement in Africa as mutually respectful, supportive, beneficial and friendly.

China is obviously winning the political and economic game in Africa while the West is subtly being displaced. The Western approach to diplomacy in Africa has been embarrassingly paternalistic, demeaning and impacting the
sense of public diplomacy negatively. For example, former French President Nicolas Sarkozy was quoted as saying during his visit to Senegal in 2007, that Africa is underdeveloped because Africans are endemically incapable of innovation.\textsuperscript{29} Such an attitude has created considerable nationalistic resentment by the African people towards their Western donors. No Chinese leader in the past or present has ever made such demeaning statements regarding Africa. The West’s insensitive treatment of Africa as subservient, incapable of self-transformation and charting its own development path, is at the center of Africa’s “looking east” philosophy. Empirical evidence suggests that criticism heaped on China is frequently attributed to skewed Western ideological standards rather than to China’s way of doing things. Not minding the foregoing contentions, on the whole, most Africans hold positive views about China. Africans see China as persuasive and friendly, while they regard the West as heavy-handed, coercive and invasive. China’s policy of non-interference and minimal conditionalities have over the years unsettled its Western counterparts whose policy toward Africa is seen as intrusive in the domestic affairs of African states.

China supports indigenous initiatives of African states for infrastructure development and implementation, unlike the top-to-bottom approach by other foreign donors. However, some issues have also been raised towards China, such as accusation connected to the fear that China will turn Africa into a dumping ground for cheap finished goods. Critics argue that this would be detrimental to Africa’s industrial growth, which China supports by developing special economic zones in Africa to encourage industrial manufacturing. Also, some commentators have posed the question why China would not rely on developing local skills for various infrastructure projects across Africa, rather than import migrant labour from China when such can be sourced on the African continent. For instance, the Kenyan Standard Gauge Railway built by the Chinese has come under heavy criticism from civil society groups and the

national media for lopsided employment practices, with claims that more Chinese workers were engaged than locals. The government of Kenya has refuted such allegations and provided statistics that indicated that only 841 Chinese were employed compared to 2,679 Kenyans. Besides, there is also the perception that Chinese-built infrastructure projects in Africa lacked the required engineering standards and quality compared to the West.

In spite of the overly exaggerated accusations against the Chinese, Africa's public opinion on China has two strands consisting of the political elite and the ordinary citizens. The political elite is divided between opposition parties who view China with misgivings, and the ruling party which intimately embraces China as a friend at the macro level. At the micro level, the ordinary citizens feel akin, but are skeptical of the potential impact of China-Africa relations on their jobs and business competitiveness. It is important that African governments take responsibility to address accountability issues and any misgivings arising from the public perception about China in their respective countries.

The role of African state actors in ensuring smooth relations and the maximization of benefits for their respective states is often generalized by most literature. Therefore, the role of defining and pursuing the national interest of Africa lies with the individual states. As a rational actor, China, like any other country, seeks to maximize its advantage in its relations with African states. Some of the highlights about the weaknesses of African foreign policy towards China is linked to the lack of a deliberate, coherent and coordinated regional interest. Rather, they are often spontaneous and opportunistic. China's foreign policy towards Africa is strategically well thought-through, and based on its grand strategy, whereas Africa's policies towards China are rather incoherent. Africa's policy approach to relations

with China is deficient, disorganized, spontaneous and not strategic. Hence, it is pertinent for Africa to accept its own responsibility and brace up to play a more pragmatic role in strengthening its institutions instead of blaming China.

**Conclusion**

By and large, this article argues that there is a divide on the role of China in Africa. One side sees it positively while the other negates its impact. Although there is an outrageous claim that China is recolonizing Africa, it is necessary to state that, while China-Africa relations span precolonial, colonial and postcolonial epochs, there is no evidence to suggest that China is interested in colonizing Africa. The relationship is anchored on mutuality, friendship, compassion, and win-win cooperation. China has earned accolades for the numerous infrastructure investments across the continent as well as for humanitarian assistance, especially during the Ebola crisis. Unlike China, the West receives resentment from Africans due to alleged racism, exploitation, interference and bullying.

China-Africa relations hold a lot of promises and benefits for both. As is evident, the partnership is premised on comparative advantages and profits for both Africa and China. For Africa, a huge market and abundant mineral resources are what it has to offer, while China brings in development assistance for critical infrastructure sectors, technology transfer, scholarships and cultural exchanges. Suffice it to say, no good relationship exists without compromises and concessions.

China and Africa have found common ground for mutual cooperation and common prosperity. Africa benefits from infrastructure, tourism, security, humanitarian support and trade, while China enjoys international solidarity, market access, raw material supply, and a favorable environment for foreign investment on the continent. In brief, China is Africa’s friend, and not a foe, as is often claimed by its rivals.