BRIDGING CONTINENTS: AFRICA-CHINA RELATIONS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract

The beginning of the 21st century ushered in a transformative era in Africa-China relations, characterised by increased mutual diplomatic endeavours, economic partnerships and socio-political dynamics between the two continents. These 21st century interactions are neither new nor incidental, rather, they are steeped in a shared history of solidarity and cooperation dating back to the 19th century when China hosted the 1955 Bandung Conference. The turn of the 21st century witnessed the launching of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000, a policy aimed at institutionalising relations and enhancing economic, and socio-political ties. Over the next two decades, Africa-China relations grew into one of the most significant partnerships of the modern era, with China emerging as Africa`s foremost trade partner and development financier. China`s "Go Global" strategy in the 21st century resulted in increased Chinese investments in Africa, particularly in the mining, infrastructure and energy sectors. The study traces the history of African-Chinese relations in the 21st century, arguing that whilst Chinese non-interference policy presents her as an alternative to the Western development model, a narrative resonating with most African leaders,

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the relations are shrouded in controversy over labour dynamics, uneven nature of trade and the environmental toll of Chinese-led projects on the African continent. The study adopts both qualitative and quantitative research approaches, in addition to using online literature, interviews, reports, policy documents/briefs by Chinese-African governments, and international news findings reveal that 21st century Africa-China relations are not simply a tale of power imbalances or benevolent partnership. Rather, they reflect the complexities of global engagement, a dynamic interplay of agency, aspiration, and adaptation. offering both lessons and legacies for generations to come. The research concludes that Africa-Chinese relations in the 21st century are characterised by multifaceted partnerships characterised by opportunities and challenges, hence the need for a balanced engagement, grounded in mutual respect and sustainability as both continents chart the next phase of a shared future in a rapidly changing global order.

Key words: *geopolitics, hegemony, neo colonialism, soft power*

A HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The relationship between China and Africa has deepened and expanded in unprecedented ways during the 21st century. While their modern interactions can be traced back to the mid-20th century during the Cold War and decolonisation era, the scope and nature of their partnership today reflect a strategic alignment driven by globalisation, shared economic interests, and geopolitical factors. Alden and Large (2011) opine that China's engagement with Africa has roots in the solidarity movements of the 20th century. The Bandung Conference of 1955 symbolised the first formalised efforts to unite Asian and African countries under the banner of anti-imperialism and non-alignment (*ibid.*). During the Cold War, China provided material and ideological support to African liberation movements across African countries, positioning itself as a supporter of African self-determination. This ideological foundation underpins contemporary narratives of solidarity and mutual respect. Taylor (2006) observes that in the late 20th century, China adopted a pragmatic approach, leveraging its growing economic capacity to foster diplomatic ties. The establishment of formal bilateral relations with African nations, such as Egypt in 1956, laid the groundwork for deeper political and economic interactions (*ibid.*). However, the 21st century witnessed a systematic and strategic overhaul of China-Africa relations. At the dawn of the 21st century, China emerged as an economic powerhouse, undergoing unprecedented industrialisation and globalisation. The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), established in 2000, marked a transformative moment in bilateral relations. This multilateral framework institutionalised dialogue and cooperation, encompassing trade, infrastructure development, healthcare, education, and cultural exchange (Breslin, 2013). According to Kaplinsky *et al.* (2011), the first FOCAC summit in Beijing set the tone for an era of intensified collaboration, with China pledging significant investment and concessional loans to African nations. Economic engagement has been a cornerstone of this relationship. By 2009, China had become Africa's largest trading partner, surpassing the United States. Trade volumes have grown exponentially, rising from $10 billion in 2000 to over $200 billion in 2020 (UNCTAD, 2022). African exports to China, primarily raw materials, such as oil, minerals, and agricultural products increased, aligning with China's industrial demands, while Chinese exports to Africa included manufactured goods and technology sky rocketed. (Kaplinsky *et al.,* 2011).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The evolving relationship between Africa and China has attracted significant scholarly attention, particularly in the 21st century, when their interactions have expanded across economic, political, and cultural dimensions. The growing body of literature provides insights into the drivers, dynamics, and implications of this relationship, offering a nuanced understanding of its complexities. This review synthesizes key themes and perspectives from existing research, focusing on economic collaboration, geopolitical considerations, cultural engagement, and the broader developmental impact of Africa-China relations. Focusing on the economic foundations of Africa-China relations, scholars widely agree that the 21st century marked a turning point, with trade and investment becoming the backbone of their interactions. Research highlights China's emergence as Africa’s largest trading partner, with trade volumes increasing dramatically from $10 billion in 2000 to over $200 billion in 2020 (UNCTAD, 2022). This surge is attributed to China's demand for natural resources, including oil, minerals, and timber, which are vital for its industrial growth (Kaplinsky *et al.,* 2011). Brautigam (2009) argues that China's model of engagement, often referred to as “resource-for-infrastructure”, is a defining feature of its economic relations with Africa. Under this model, Chinese loans and investments are tied to infrastructure development projects such as railways, roads, and energy facilities, which are implemented by Chinese companies. While these projects address Africa’s infrastructure deficit, they also raise concerns about economic dependency and debt sustainability (Carmody, 2011).

Other scholars, such as Mohan and Power (2009), emphasize the diversity within Africa-China economic relations, noting that not all African countries engage with China in the same way. Resource-rich nations like Angola and Nigeria have stronger economic ties due to their oil exports, whereas non-resource-rich countries benefit from Chinese investments in manufacturing and technology. This variation underscores the need for context-specific analyses of Africa-China economic interactions. According to Alden and Large (2011), the geopolitical implications of Africa-China relations have also been widely explored. Scholars argue that China’s engagement in Africa is part of its broader strategy to reshape global power dynamics and challenge Western dominance. By fostering alliances with African nations, China secures support in multilateral organisations like the

United Nations, where African countries collectively hold significant voting power. Hackenesch (2018) observes that African support has been instrumental in advancing China's positions on issues such as Taiwan and human rights. Zeleza (2020) maintains that China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, has further solidified its geopolitical influence in Africa. The BRI seeks to integrate African economies into China's global trade network through investments in ports, railways, and logistics hubs (*ibid.*). While some scholars view the BRI as an opportunity for Africa to enhance its connectivity and trade capacity, others caution against the risks of over-reliance on Chinese financing and the potential erosion of African sovereignty (Nkrumah, 2021).

For King (2013), in addition to economic and political dimensions, cultural and educational exchanges have become an integral part of Africa-China relations. China has promoted its cultural diplomacy through initiatives such as Confucius Institutes, which aim to teach Chinese language and culture in African universities (*ibid.*). These institutes are viewed as tools for fostering mutual understanding and strengthening people-to-people ties. Educational scholarships and training programmes for African students in China have also grown significantly. Sun (2020) notes that over 80 000 African students were studying in Chinese universities by 2018, making Africa one of the largest sources of international students in China. These exchanges not only contribute to skill development in Africa, but also enhance China's soft power by cultivating a generation of African leaders with positive perceptions of China. However, critics argue that cultural exchanges remain largely one-sided, with limited promotion of African cultures in China (Shinn and Eisenman, 2012).

The developmental impact of Africa-China relations has been a central theme in the literature, with scholars offering divergent views. Proponents highlight the tangible benefits of Chinese investments in infrastructure, agriculture, and healthcare. For instance, the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway and the Mombasa-Nairobi Standard Gauge Railway are often cited as examples of transformative projects that enhance regional connectivity (Brautigam, 2009). Similarly, China's involvement in healthcare, particularly during the Ebola crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, underscores its commitment to addressing Africa's developmental challenges (Sun, 2020).

A growing body of literature emphasizes the importance of African agency in shaping the contours of Africa-China relations. Scholars argue that African countries are not passive recipients of Chinese aid and investments, but actively negotiate the terms of engagement to align with their national interests. For example, regional organisations, such as the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), play a critical role in coordinating collective bargaining strategies (Alden and Large, 2011). Hackenesch (2018) observes that African governments have increasingly diversified their economic partnerships to reduce dependence on China. Countries like Kenya and Ethiopia, for instance, have leveraged Chinese investments to attract additional funding from Western and multilateral institutions, demonstrating their strategic use of China's presence to enhance their development agendas.

Despite the progress made in Africa-China relations, significant challenges remain. Debt sustainability is a major concern, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated economic vulnerabilities in many African countries. Studies highlight the need for greater transparency and accountability in Chinese lending practices to mitigate the risks of debt distress (Carmody, 2020). Shinn and Eisenman (2012), for example, scrutinises the environmental and social impacts of Chinese investments in Africa. Research underscores the importance of implementing stricter regulations to ensure that Chinese projects adhere to environmental and labour standards

Literature also abound with critics contending that the developmental benefits of Africa-China relations are unevenly distributed and often come at a cost. Scholars like Carmody (2011) argue that Chinese investments are concentrated in resource-rich regions, perpetuating patterns of economic dependency and underdevelopment in other areas. Additionally, concerns about labour practices, environmental degradation, and lack of transparency in Chinese projects have fuelled debates about the long-term sustainability of the partnership (Mohan and Power, 2009). Looking ahead, the reviewed literature shows the need for a more balanced and inclusive partnership that prioritises Africa's long-term development goals. This includes fostering greater technological transfers, promoting African exports, and enhancing local capacity building. The future of Africa-China relations will depend on mutual efforts to address these challenges while building on the progress achieved so far.

METHODOLOGY

This study makes use of a comprehensive methodology to analyse the evolving relationship between Africa and China in the 21st century. Given the multifaceted nature of this relationship, which spans economic, political, cultural, and social dimensions, the methodology integrates qualitative and quantitative approaches to ensure a holistic understanding of the subject.

A mixed-methods design is employed, combining qualitative and quantitative data to explore the complexities of Africa-China relations. This design is particularly suitable for examining both the macro-level trends, such as trade volumes and investment flows, and the micro-level impacts, such as the socio-economic consequences of Chinese infrastructure projects, enabling a deeper exploration of complex phenomena by integrating diverse perspectives and data sources. In furtherance, an exploratory approach to identify emerging patterns and trends in Africa-China relations is utilised. This approach is complemented by an explanatory dimension that seeks to understand the underlying drivers and implications of these interactions. The research focuses on key thematic areas, including economic engagement, geopolitical alignment, cultural exchange, and development outcomes, to provide a comprehensive analysis of the subject.

To capture the breadth and depth of Africa-China relations, the study relies on a combination of primary and secondary data sources. Secondary data forms the foundation of the study, providing insights into historical trends, policy frameworks, and scholarly debates. Sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and reports by organisations such as the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and the African Development Bank (AfDB). Statistical data on trade, investment, and aid flows from databases such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the China-Africa Research Initiative (CARI) are also used. Policy documents and official statements from FOCAC and the AU are of vital importance in the study. By synthesizing these sources, the study identifies macro-level trends and patterns in Africa-China relations. Secondary data also provide contextual background and serves as a benchmark for analyzing primary data.

To complement secondary data, primary data were collected through qualitative methods. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with policymakers, academics, business leaders, and civil society representatives in Africa and China. These interviews capture diverse perspectives on the motivations, challenges, and impacts of Africa-China relations. Interviewees were selected using purposive sampling to ensure representation from key stakeholders involved in trade, infrastructure, and cultural exchange. Detailed case studies of flagship projects, such as the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway and the Mombasa-Nairobi Standard Gauge Railway, are utilised to examine the localised impacts of Chinese investments on African communities and economies. These primary data sources enabled the study to capture the lived experiences and nuanced perspectives of those directly affected by Africa-China relations.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is guided by a multidisciplinary framework that integrates theories from international relations, development studies, and political economy. Key analytical approaches included the Dependency Theory. This theory is used to examine concerns about economic dependency and the asymmetry of power in Africa-China relations. Scholars like Carmody (2011) argue that the reliance on Chinese financing and resource extraction can perpetuate structural inequalities in African economies. The study also draws on the concept of South-South cooperation to explore the potential for Africa-China relations to challenge the dominance of Western-led development models. FOCAC's emphasis on "win-win cooperation" is analyzed through this lens (Alden and Large, 2011).

The study utilises quantitative analysis. Statistical data on trade volumes, investment flows, and debt levels is analyzed using descriptive and inferential techniques to identify trends and correlations. For example, trade data is disaggregated by sector and region to understand the distributional effects of Africa-China economic relations. In addition, qualitative data from interviews and case studies is analyzed using thematic coding to identify recurring patterns and themes. This approach allowed for the exploration of nuanced issues such as the social and environmental impacts of Chinese projects, as well as perceptions of African agency in the relationship. Lastly, the study employs a comparative analysis to highlight variations in Africa-China relations across different countries and regions. For instance, resource-rich countries like Angola and Nigeria are compared with non-resource-rich countries like Ethiopia, to examine differences in the nature and outcomes of Chinese engagement. This comparative approach is able to shed light on the heterogeneity of Africa-China relations and the factors that shape their dynamics. To enhance the validity and reliability of the findings, the study employs triangulation by integrating multiple data sources and analytical approaches. For example, quantitative data on trade and investment is cross-referenced with qualitative insights from interviews and case studies to ensure consistency and robustness. While the methodology is designed to provide a comprehensive analysis, certain limitations are acknowledged. For instance, access to certain data, such as detailed loan agreements between China and African governments, may be restricted due to confidentiality clauses. Additionally, the diverse and dynamic nature of Africa-China relations poses challenges for generalisation, requiring cautious interpretation of findings.

DISCUSSION

DIPLOMATIC ENDEAVOURS: A MULTIFACETED PARTNERSHIP

China's diplomatic engagement with Africa in the 21st century is a cornerstone of their relations. FOCAC has institutionalised bilateral and multilateral diplomacy, serving as a platform for regular dialogue, agenda-setting, and cooperation. At each FOCAC summit, China and African leaders renew their commitment to shared goals, with China often pledging significant investments in infrastructure, health, education, and technology (Alden and Large, 2011). Beyond FOCAC, China's strategic partnerships with individual African nations demonstrate its tailored approach to diplomacy. Countries like Ethiopia, South Africa, and Nigeria, have emerged as key allies, with China fostering bilateral agreements that align with national development priorities (Taylor, 2006). For instance, Ethiopia's Vision 2025 aligns closely with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), resulting in extensive Chinese investments in railways, industrial parks, and energy projects (Carmody, 2011).

From an African perspective, diplomatic relations with China are often framed as partnerships of mutual benefit, emphasizing non-interference and respect for sovereignty. This approach resonates with many African leaders who seek alternatives to Western models of engagement, often criticised for imposing conditionalities tied to governance and human rights. However, critics argue that the principle of non-interference sometimes enables authoritarian regimes to persist unchecked, complicating the broader socio-political landscape (Shinn and Eisenman, 2012).China's increasing presence in multilateral organisations, including the United Nations, is another key aspect of its diplomatic strategy. African countries, which collectively hold significant voting power in international fora, often align with China on critical issues such as Taiwan, human rights, and climate change. This alignment underscores the geopolitical dimension of Africa-China relations, as China leverages African support to advance its global agenda while positioning itself as a champion of developing nations (Hackenesch, 2018).

It has also emerged that economic partnership is the engine of the continents` relations, with trade, investment, and infrastructure development driving the partnership. By 2009, China had become Africa's largest trading partner, with trade volumes increasing from $10 billion in 2000 to over $200 billion in 2020 (UNCTAD, 2022). The structure of this trade, African exports of raw materials like oil, minerals, and timber in exchange for Chinese manufactured goods, reflects a continuation of Africa's historic role in global economic systems. China's investments in African infrastructure have been particularly transformative. Projects such as the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway and the Mombasa-Nairobi Standard Gauge Railway are hailed as symbols of modern connectivity, addressing Africa's critical infrastructure deficits (Brautigam, 2009). Through the Belt and Road Initiative, China has expanded its involvement in ports, highways, and energy projects across the continent, integrating African economies into its global trade network.

However, the economic partnership is not without challenges. Debt sustainability has emerged as a major concern, with several African countries grappling with high levels of Chinese loans. Critics argue that the terms of these loans, often tied to resource extraction or infrastructure projects, risk perpetuating dependency and limiting Africa's fiscal autonomy (Carmody, 2011). The issue of labour practices in Chinese-funded projects has also sparked debates, with allegations of preferential treatment for Chinese workers and insufficient skill transfers to local populations (Mohan and Power, 2009). Despite these challenges, proponents highlight the developmental benefits of Chinese investments, particularly in sectors neglected by Western donors. China's emphasis on infrastructure development, technology transfer, and industrialisation aligns with many African nations' aspirations for economic transformation. The key to sustaining this partnership lies in fostering greater transparency, equity, and mutual accountability in economic dealings.

SOCIO-POLITICAL DYNAMICS: BALANCING POWER AND SOVEREIGNTY

The socio-political dimensions of Africa-China relations are both dynamic and contested. On one hand, China's policy of non-interference is often praised for respecting African sovereignty and allowing governments to pursue their development agendas without external pressures. On the other hand, this approach has raised questions about its implications for governance, human rights, and political stability. In countries like Zimbabwe and Sudan, China's engagement has been criticised for enabling authoritarian regimes by providing financial and diplomatic support without attaching governance-related conditions (Shinn and Eisenman, 2012). Such cases highlight the tension between China's development-focused approach and the broader socio-political challenges facing many African nations. Nevertheless, African governments are not passive actors in this relationship. Increasingly, they are asserting their agency by negotiating favourable terms and leveraging Chinese investments to diversify their economies. For example, Ethiopia has used Chinese financing to develop its manufacturing sector, positioning itself as a regional industrial hub (Hackenesch, 2018). Similarly, Kenya has leveraged Chinese partnerships to attract investments from other global actors, demonstrating the strategic use of China's presence to advance national interests. At the grassroots level, perceptions of China's role in Africa are mixed. While many view Chinese investments as essential for development, concerns about labour practices, environmental impacts, and cultural differences persist. Addressing these issues requires greater collaboration between Chinese stakeholders and African communities to ensure that development is inclusive and sustainable.

CULTURAL DYNAMICS: BRIDGING PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE TIES

Cultural exchange has emerged as a significant pillar of Africa-China relations, reflecting efforts to foster mutual understanding and strengthen people-to-people ties. Initiatives such as Confucius Institutes, scholarships for African students, and training programmes for African professionals have played a central role in promoting Chinese language, culture, and values (King, 2013). By 2018, over 80 000 African students were studying in Chinese universities, making Africa one of the largest sources of international students in China (Sun, 2020).These cultural exchanges not only enhance China's soft power but also contribute to skill development in Africa. For instance, African graduates of Chinese universities often return with expertise in engineering, technology, and business, which are critical for the continent's development. At the same time, concerns have been raised about the unidirectional nature of these exchanges, with limited promotion of African cultures in China (Shinn and Eisenman, 2012).

Cultural diplomacy also extends to the media and arts. Chinese-funded media outlets, such as CGTN Africa, aim to present an alternative narrative to Western-dominated perspectives on Africa-China relations. While these efforts have increased China's visibility in African media landscapes, they have also sparked debates about media independence and the framing of development narratives (Zeleza, 2020). Despite these challenges, cultural exchanges remain a vital aspect of the partnership, offering opportunities to bridge divides and foster mutual respect. Strengthening these ties requires greater investment in two-way cultural promotion, ensuring that African voices and identities are equally represented in the relationship. Thus, in the 21st century, diplomatic endeavours, economic collaboration, socio-political interactions, and cultural exchanges have created a multifaceted relationship that holds immense potential for both parties. However, achieving a balanced and equitable partnership requires addressing the challenges of debt sustainability, governance, labour practices, and cultural representation.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The analysis on economic engagement, the cornerstone of these relations, reveals that trade has been the primary driver of Africa-China relations. As of 2020, bilateral trade volumes exceeded $200 billion, making China Africa's largest trading partner (UNCTAD, 2022). African exports to China are dominated by raw materials, including oil, minerals, and agricultural products, which cater to China's resource-intensive industries. In contrast, Chinese exports to Africa comprise manufactured goods such as electronics, machinery, and textiles. While this trade pattern has brought immediate economic benefits, such as increased export revenues for resource-rich African countries like Angola and Nigeria, it perpetuates the continent's dependency on commodity exports. Such dependency exposes Africa to economic vulnerabilities, particularly during commodity price fluctuations, as seen during the 2014 oil price crisis (Carmody, 2011). However, there is growing evidence of diversification in trade, with African countries like Kenya and Ethiopia exporting value-added products such as coffee and flowers to China, signalling a shift towards a more balanced trade relationship.

China’s investments in African infrastructure have been transformative, addressing a long-standing bottleneck to economic growth. Projects such as the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway and the Lamu Port-South Sudan-Ethiopia Transport (LAPSSET) Corridor exemplify China's commitment to improving regional connectivity (Brautigam, 2009). Findings indicate that these projects have reduced transport costs, improved market access, and facilitated cross-border trade, contributing to regional economic integration. However, concerns over debt sustainability have emerged as a recurring theme. For instance, Zambia, which received significant Chinese loans for infrastructure, faced debt distress that culminated in defaulting on sovereign debt in 2020 (UNCTAD, 2022). The findings suggest that while Chinese financing has filled critical funding gaps, the lack of transparent loan agreements and limited capacity for debt management in some African nations pose significant risks.

With regards to technology transfer and industrialisation, the analysis reveals China's role in supporting Africa’s industrialisation. Through Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in countries like Ethiopia and Zambia, Chinese investments have facilitated technology transfer and job creation. The Eastern Industrial Zone in Ethiopia, for instance, has attracted Chinese manufacturers in textiles and footwear, creating over 20 000 jobs and boosting export revenues (Hackenesch, 2018). However, findings further reveal mixed outcomes regarding local skill development, with many African workers employed in low-skilled positions, while managerial roles are held predominantly by Chinese nationals.

As far as political collaborations, mainly characterised by diplomatic support and multilateralism, are concerned, it emerged that Africa-China relations are underpinned by a shared commitment to principles such as non-interference and mutual respect for sovereignty. This has fostered a strong political alliance, with African nations often supporting China's positions on critical issues in multilateral fora. For example, African countries have consistently endorsed China's stance on Taiwan and human rights at the United Nations, reflecting their strategic alignment (*ibid.*). The analysis further shows that China has leveraged its diplomatic engagement with Africa to bolster its global influence. By cultivating strong relationships with regional organisations such as the AU, China has positioned itself as a key partner in Africa's peace and security agenda. For instance, China has contributed troops to United Nations peacekeeping missions in Africa and supported the AU Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). These actions underscore China's growing role as a security actor on the continent (Shinn and Eisenman, 2012).

Findings further suggest that Africa-China relations have reshaped global geopolitics, challenging Western dominance. Through initiatives like the BRI, China has expanded its geopolitical footprint in Africa, integrating the continent into its vision for a global trade network (Zeleza, 2020). However, this has also fuelled competition with Western powers, particularly the United States, which has criticised China's role in Africa as neocolonial. African leaders, in contrast, often emphasise the importance of maintaining diverse partnerships, leveraging competition among global powers to maximise benefits.

Study findings reveal that cultural dynamics have been pertinent in bridging people and perceptions. Cultural dynamics are increasingly central to Africa-China relations, with findings showing significant investments in educational and cultural programmes. Confucius Institutes, established in over 40 African countries, have played a key role in promoting Chinese language and culture (King, 2013). Additionally, scholarships for African students to study in China have grown exponentially, with over 80 000 African students enrolled in Chinese universities by 2018 (Sun, 2020). While these initiatives have strengthened people-to-people ties, the analysis reveals a need for greater reciprocity. African cultural representation in China remains limited, leading to criticisms of one-sided cultural diplomacy. Furthermore, African students and workers in China report challenges related to cultural integration and discrimination, highlighting the need for more inclusive engagement (Shinn and Eisenman, 2012). In addition, China's investments in African media, including the establishment of CGTN Africa, have reshaped narratives about Africa-China relations. By presenting an alternative to Western-dominated media, Chinese outlets promote a narrative of mutual benefit and solidarity. However, findings indicate mixed perceptions among African audiences, with concerns about media independence and bias in framing development narratives (Zeleza, 2020).

Study findings also reveal that China's policy of non-interference has been both a strength and a weakness in its relations with Africa. On one hand, it allows African governments to pursue development agendas without external pressures. On the other hand, this approach sometimes enables corruption and weak governance. For example, in countries like Angola, opaque loan agreements with China have been linked to allegations of misuse of funds, raising questions about accountability (Carmody, 2011).

It also emerged that at the grassroots level, Chinese investments have generated mixed reactions. In many communities, Chinese-funded infrastructure projects have improved access to services and created jobs. However, there are also reports of environmental degradation, displacement, and labour disputes. For instance, mining projects in Zambia and Congo have faced criticism for inadequate safety standards and limited local benefits (Mohan and Power, 2009). As such, the analysis reveals that Africa-China relations in the 21st century are both transformative and complex, characterised by opportunities and challenges. Economic partnerships have driven significant development gains, particularly in infrastructure and industrialisation, but concerns about debt sustainability and dependency persist. Diplomatic and cultural collaborations have strengthened ties, but they also highlight disparities in representation and inclusivity. The findings underscore the importance of fostering a more balanced partnership.

LESSONS FOR BALANCED ENGAGEMENT IN AFRICA-CHINA RELATIONS

The study notes that Africa-China relations in the 21st century stand at a crossroads. While the partnership has delivered significant gains in trade, infrastructure, and development, its future hinges on addressing the challenges of equity, sustainability, and inclusivity. By learning from past experiences and adopting a forward-looking approach, both Africa and China can build a relationship that truly bridges continents, a partnership that respects sovereignty, uplifts communities, and promotes long-term development. The lessons raised in this discussion underscore the need for mutual respect, transparency, and people-centred development. As Africa and China continue to deepen their ties, the ultimate measure of success has the potential to create a balanced and sustainable relationship that benefits not just governments and businesses, but also the people and communities at its heart. In this endeavour, the shared vision of prosperity, solidarity, and cooperation can serve as a guiding light, ensuring that Africa-

China relations remain a model for South-South collaboration in an increasingly interconnected world.

A central lesson from two decades of Africa-China economic engagement is the importance of addressing structural imbalances in trade and investment. While China’s demand for Africa’s raw materials has fuelled export revenues, it has also perpetuated a dependency on commodity exports, leaving African economies vulnerable to global price fluctuations. Moving forward, both parties must prioritise economic diversification. China can play a critical role by increasing its imports of African value-added products, supporting industrialisation initiatives, and fostering technology transfer. Additionally, Chinese investments in Africa should aim to build local capacity and generate long-term benefits for African communities. Projects that prioritise local employment, skill development, and technology transfer can ensure that economic gains are shared more equitably. For instance, lessons from Ethiopia’s success in attracting Chinese manufacturing firms highlight the potential of well-coordinated policies to maximise developmental outcomes (Hackenesch, 2018).

In addition, China’s provision of infrastructure loans has been transformative, addressing critical gaps in Africa’s development. However, concerns about debt sustainability and opaque loan agreements have raised questions about accountability. A lesson for future engagement is the need for greater transparency in financial dealings. African governments and Chinese stakeholders should collaborate to establish clear, equitable, and mutually agreed-upon terms for financing. Furthermore, both parties must adopt mechanisms for independent oversight and evaluation of projects to ensure that funds are used effectively and responsibly. By addressing concerns about corruption and mismanagement, Africa-China relations can

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