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Beyond China's Self-Interest in Africa: Learning from Engagement

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Although China's engagement with Africa is predominantly based on its self-interest to counter the West, the strengthened cooperation between China and Africa suggests that self-interest is not the only determinant of China's African policy. Moreover, China is making tangible contributions to African modernization.
- While China has achieved significant and commendable results in its cooperation with Africa, challenges and shortcomings remain. Importantly, China has recognized these issues and responded accordingly, demonstrating its willingness and ability to learn and adapt through ongoing engagement.
- The EU should abandon its paternalistic stance and focus on genuinely understanding Africa's needs. It has to adopt a responsive approach, learning and adapting to foster more effective cooperation.

Keywords

*China-Africa
Relations*

*Third World
Policy*

*Economic
Engagement*

Self-Interest

*Trade
Imbalance*

*EU-China
Competition*



Introduction

The economic and trade relations between China and Africa have a long-standing history that can be traced back to the *Han Dynasty* at the earliest. These relations reached their peak during the Ming Dynasty, particularly during Zheng He's maritime expeditions, a period relatively well-documented in *historical records*. However, the Qing Dynasty's isolationist policies and internal turmoil precipitated a near cessation of China-African economic exchanges.

Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, China's Africa policy gradually developed a coherent strategic objective. At its core – albeit with the risk of oversimplification – it aimed to *counter the West*. In this context, “the West” is a dynamic term, primarily referring to Western hegemonism and imperialism. Prior to the *Sino-Soviet split*, this counterbalance was chiefly directed at the United States; however, following the

complete rupture of Sino–Soviet relations in 1969, the focus shifted towards countering Soviet social-imperialism. As Sino-Soviet relations began to thaw in the 1980s, “the West” returned to predominantly signify American hegemony, an interpretation that endures today. Hence, China’s policy towards Africa is by and large premised on self-interest, aiming to unite African nations in a collective resistance to Western hegemonic practices.

Nonetheless, the depth and intimacy of contemporary China-Africa relations cannot be adequately explained if China had unreservedly exploited Africa solely for its self-interest. At the opening ceremony of the Beijing Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2024, China announced that it *elevated* its bilateral relations with all African countries maintaining diplomatic ties to strategic relations, redefining China-Africa relations as an *all-weather* community with a shared future for the new era. It is anticipated that cooperation between China and Africa will continue to deepen and strengthen, demonstrating increasing strategic alignment and mutual development so as to “*safeguard common interests and international fairness and justice.*”

Hence, it can be argued that a large proportion of African nations are, to a certain extent, *satisfied* with the current state of China-Africa cooperation. The pertinent question, then, is how China manages to balance its own interests with the needs and concerns of Africa. This paper commences with a brief historical illustration of China’s overall strategy towards Africa guided by the *Third World policy* to counter the West, then it succinctly assesses the achievements and shortcomings of China’s economic engagement with Africa to demonstrate that China does not solely pursue self-interest; rather, it is capable of recognizing deficiencies within China-African economic exchanges and proposing corresponding solutions. In other words, China is learning and responding, offering insights into the potential implications for European-African relationship.

A glimpse of China’s engagement with Africa under the Third World Policy

The Third World policy is generally believed to have been first articulated by Mao Zedong in a *1974 conversation* with Zambian President Kenneth Kaunda, later systematically elaborated by Deng Xiaoping at the Sixth Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly. Deng formally outlined the “*Three Worlds*” framework, stating: “The United States and the Soviet Union constitute the First World. Developing countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and other regions form the Third World. Developed countries situated between these two groups belong to the Second World.”

However, scholarly research by George Yu, a prominent professor of China-Africa studies, revealed earlier origins of this policy dating back to *the 1950s*. During the Korean War, China began cultivating relationships with Third World nations – in particular (South and South

east) Asian and African countries – as a strategic response to American military pressure and political containment. The 1955 Bandung Conference marked a definitive shift in this direction, inaugurating a new era of strengthened China-Africa relations and establishing a crucial diplomatic foundation for future engagement.

As China entered the 1960s, the intensifying Sino-Soviet split compelled Beijing to simultaneously address pressures and threats from both the United States and the Soviet Union. During this period, China identified *strategic opportunities* in Africa's accelerating decolonization process, viewing newly independent states as potential partners in its stance *against both superpowers*. This strategic outlook led to significant advancements in China's engagement with Africa during the early 1960s. However, the onset of the Cultural Revolution redirected China's focus towards domestic affairs. The imperative to manage internal societal upheaval to some extent superseded concerns about Western threats, resulting in China's notable *withdrawal* from engagement with Africa during the latter half of the 1960s. The *Sino-Soviet border conflict* of 1969 marked the apex of tensions between Beijing and Moscow. Consequently, as China entered the 1970s and pursued rapprochement with the United States, countering *Soviet revisionism* emerged as the primary strategic objective for China's engagement with Africa.

During this period, as previously alluded to, the Third World policy was comprehensively articulated. Its objectives extended beyond merely uniting Third World countries to resist and contain First World hegemony; the theory also advocated for collective efforts to *transform* the international political and economic order – a pursuit that continues to hold significant relevance in contemporary China-African relations. In the 1980s, as Sino-Soviet tensions eased and China's developmental focus shifted towards economic priorities, the strategic significance of Africa – and the Third World more broadly – relatively diminished. Correspondingly, China *transitioned* from a unilateral aid-based approach to a model predicated on mutual economic interests. In short, prior to the 1990s, within the framework of China's Third World policy, Africa was consistently perceived as a strategic bulwark against Western hegemonism. Hence, it can be argued that China's African policy was largely rooted in a self-interested strategy of protection against potential Western threats.

The *1989 Tiananmen crackdown* inflicted an unprecedented crisis on China's foreign relations. Confronted with overwhelming Western condemnation, China discovered a nuanced diplomatic response from African nations. Despite not explicitly supporting China, they notably refrained from directly criticizing China's suppression. According to Ian Taylor, a leading scholar in China-Africa studies, African nations' strategic restraint stemmed from *three interconnected* motivations: protecting domestic political elites' interests against democratization, expressing Third World solidarity against Western interventionism, and preserving critical developmental aid relationships with China. This stance reinforced Africa's image as a reliable partner of China in the Third World to counter Western hegemony and helped pave

the way for the establishment of FOCAC as an *institutional expression* of this collective objective.

Of course, as China's economy grew, its strategic interests in Africa correspondingly evolved. Beyond the initial geopolitical objective of confront Western hegemony, China increasingly viewed Africa's vast natural resource reserves as a *critical mechanism* for addressing its energy insecurity. The economic engagement between China and Africa had thus been substantially motivated by securing stable and sustained access to African natural resources. Moreover, China's interests also include fortifying a united front of *human rights* against Western censure and diplomatic containment of *Taiwan*.

To recapitulate, since its establishment, the PRC's engagement with Africa has predominantly been driven to serve its self-interests, particularly in the context of geopolitical counterbalancing against Western hegemony. This characterization does not imply that self-interest is the sole determinant of China's African policy, but rather emphasizes that China's fundamental strategic calculus in crafting African engagement has been deeply rooted in national interests. However, this perspective represents an incomplete understanding of the China-Africa relationship. If China were solely concerned with its own interests, then, it would be difficult to account for the notable deepening of China-Africa cooperation by 2024. As observed by *George Yu* in 1977, "China's successes have not been because China was China or China willed them; they have been due in large part either to the response to a specific need or to the capture of a common aspiration."

Here I concur with *Arkebe Oqubay and Justin Yifu Lin*'s exposition of contemporary China's strategy towards Africa: "to create a paradigm of globalization that is favorable to China while benefiting partner countries." In this regard, *The Economist* is correct in stating that "it is nonsense to claim [China] is motivated by altruism." However, it cannot be denied that to a certain extent China does assume international responsibilities as a major power in *contributing to Africa's development*, making the assertion that China is "ruthlessly self-interested" somewhat overstated. To avoid falling into the prevailing discussion of how China leverages its cooperation with Africa to *counter the West* as elucidated above, the following analysis aims to first illustrate China's contributions to China-African economic relations, and then highlight the flaws and limitations that have emerged in their cooperation based on data presentation. It shows that China is aware of the deficiencies embedded in its economic engagement with Africa and is learning and implementing corrective measures to enhance cooperation.

China's achievements in its economic engagement with Africa

From the Chinese perspective, its engagement within the FOCAC framework reflects a determined effort to fully support Africa's economic development and industrialization. As

outlined in the [2021 white paper](#):

"In the new era, China has scaled up assistance to Africa within the limits of its capabilities. Foreign aid from 2013 to 2018 totaled RMB 270 billion. Of this sum, 45 percent went to African countries in the form of grants, interest-free loans and concessional loans. From 2000 to 2020, China helped African countries build more than 13,000 km of roads and railway and more than 80 large-scale power facilities, and funded over 130 medical facilities, 45 sports venues and over 170 schools. ... China has been Africa's largest trading partner for the 12 years since 2009. The proportion of Africa's trade with China in the continent's total external trade has continued to rise. In 2020, the figure exceeded 21 percent."

These represent only a fraction of the achievements in China-Africa economic cooperation, which also extends to areas such as financial collaboration, infrastructure development, industrialization support, and the digital economy. While insightful, data from a singular perspective may fail to comprehensively capture the entire reality, particularly in terms of how China's contributions have been perceived within Africa. Based on the findings from [Round 8 \(2019/2020\) public attitude survey](#) conducted by Afrobarometer, a pan-African and non-partisan research network, it reveals the general African perception of China's economic engagement.

Overall, China's influence on Africa has been largely considered positive. However, contrary to the common perception that China's influence in Africa is [steadily increasing](#), the proportion of those viewing China's influence as positive declined from 65% to 60% compared to the findings of Round 7 (2014/2015). This decline was observed in ten out of the sixteen surveyed countries. More importantly, when asked, "How much influence do you think China's economic activities in [our country] have on our economy," the proportion of respondents indicating "a lot or some" dropped from 71% to 56%. Among the sixteen surveyed countries, fifteen experienced a decline, with Cabo Verde being the only exception where the figure remained unchanged. Dr. Joseph Asunka, CEO of Afrobarometer, stated in [an interview](#) that "it's not entirely clear what is behind these declining trends in perceived influence. It is possible that as people become more accustomed to China's visible presence in their countries, its activities stand out less to them."

Regarding China's loans and development assistance, 24% of respondents across 18 countries believed that China imposes more requirements, while 41% perceived that China imposes fewer requirements compared to other donor countries. In Ethiopia and Kenya, where China is the largest trade partner, 60% and 68% of respondents, respectively, believed that China imposes fewer requirements. As commented by the former president of Senegal, [Abdoulaye Wade](#), "A contract that would take five years to discuss, negotiate, and sign with the World Bank takes three months when we have dealt with Chinese authorities." Regardless of China's strategic intentions, from the Chinese perspective, this represents a tangible and efficient

contribution to Africa’s economic development. As Deborah Brautigam concluded in her book, *The Dragon’s Gift: The Real Story of China in Africa*, “China’s rise in Africa is cause for some concern, but it need not evoke the level of fear and alarm raised by some who have condemned China’s aid and engagement as destabilizing, bad for governance, and unlikely to help Africa to end poverty. Many of the fears about Chinese aid and engagement are misinformed, the alarm out of proportion.”

For China, this can be seen as an impressive achievement, with its economic cooperation and assistance to Africa receiving recognition and yielding results. However, this does not imply perfection, as there remain numerous challenges and shortcomings within the China-Africa economic relationship that require attention and resolution.

Shortcomings and ramifications

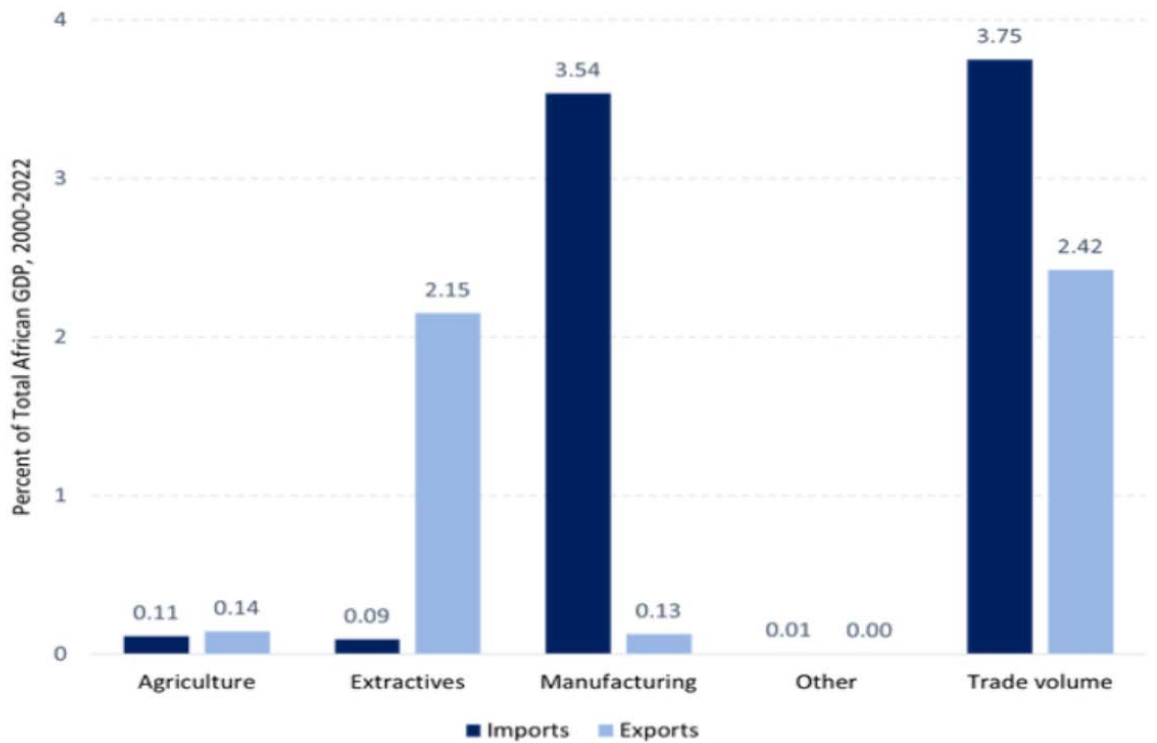
It is important to note that this discussion will not delve into the common Western narrative accusing China of engaging in *predatory lending* practices aimed at *seizing African assets*, particularly natural resources. As *The Economist* observed, “the bigger failing in the West’s view of China-Africa is conceptual. At times it reduces China’s role to that of a giant construction company. And when not simplifying, the West exaggerates, ascribing more calculation to Beijing than it deserves, as in broad and misleading accusations that it deliberately pursues ‘debt-trap diplomacy.’” Moreover, this discussion does not seek to provide an exhaustive list of shortcomings. Rather, it focuses on one of the most persistent and significant challenges – trade asymmetry – to explore how China has learned from and responded to it.

Africa-China *Trade Balance* from 2000 to 2022



Source: Boston University Global Development Policy Center, 2024. Data Source: UNCTAD Comtrade.

Africa's *Exports and Imports* to China by Sector



Source: Boston University Global Development Policy Center, 2024. Data Source: UNCTAD Comtrade.

As demonstrated in the above charts, while Africa's exports to China experienced steady growth until around 2013, they subsequently declined and have struggled to recover. In contrast, China's exports to Africa have shown a consistent upward trajectory, steadily increasing and significantly outpacing Africa's exports. This widening gap has led to a worsening trade deficit for Africa, which, after remaining relatively balanced in the early 2000s, began to deteriorate sharply post-2013. Despite minor fluctuations, the deficit has persisted, underscoring the deepening asymmetry in China-Africa trade relations, with Africa increasingly reliant on Chinese imports while struggling to expand its exports to China. In terms of Africa's exports and imports to China by sector, China extensively exports manufactured goods to Africa in exchange for the continent's natural resources of which four commodities – petroleum crude oil, refined copper, iron ore and concentrates, and aluminum ores and concentrates – accounted for nearly *two-thirds* of Africa's export to China by trade value in 2022. This highlights a structural imbalance in China-Africa trade, as China capitalizes on its manufacturing advantages to export relatively low value-added goods in exchange for Africa's raw materials which contributes to mitigating China's *energy insecurity*.

For Africa, in the short term, the provision of higher-quality and more affordable goods may lower living costs and enhance living standards in Africa. However, in the long run, this approach is likely to exacerbate the existing trade imbalance and significantly impede Africa's industrialization and modernization efforts, ultimately undermining the foundational

objectives of China-Africa cooperation.

The increasing prevalence of competitive Chinese goods among African consumers carries significant structural economic implications. As African consumers gravitate towards these products, domestic production demand correspondingly diminishes. This demand reduction directly impacts investment trajectories, potentially inducing industrial stagnation or systematic displacement of local productive sectors. It is worth mentioning that the fundamental essence of industrialization lies in vertical industrial progression – a strategic advancement from primary raw material processing to sophisticated manufacturing and innovative technological development. The erosion of investment interest fundamentally undermines this trajectory, effectively halting critical infrastructure such as personnel training, technological research, and developmental initiatives. Consequently, the aspirational pathway towards upstream industrial advancement becomes significantly compromised.

For developing economies, particularly those in the African context, such dynamics represent a presumably existential challenge to sustainable economic development as it exacerbates existing trade imbalances, creating a potentially cyclical economic vulnerability. Moreover, the corresponding investment contraction caused by the consequential demand reduction may also directly influence labor market dynamics and reduce employment opportunities. The resultant unemployment pressures compel workforce segments to migrate towards lower-tier industrial sectors, characterized by precarious employment conditions and minimal wage security. This structural shift presents a profound challenge to human capital evolution – a critical component of comprehensive industrialization – consequently constraining potential economic transformation.

Learning from engagement

China has identified the trade imbalance and responded accordingly. It has proactively adjusted and restructured its trade with Africa. According to the [2021 White Paper](#), exports of mechanical, electrical, and high-tech products make up over 50% of China's total exports to Africa. Additionally, China has increased imports of non-resource products from Africa and granted zero-tariff treatment to 97 percent of taxable items from the 33 least-developed African countries, aiming to improve access for African agricultural and manufactured goods to the Chinese market. In this regard, China's increased imports of African agricultural products, alongside its support for agricultural modernization, constitute a [key strategy](#) in reducing Africa's trade deficit and advancing its economic transformation. According to the [General Administration of Customs of the PRC](#), in the first seven months of 2024, China's agricultural imports from Africa reached 25.35 billion yuan, up 7.2%, outpacing overall growth of agricultural imports. Imports of sesame, tobacco, and macadamia nuts from Africa surged by 38.8%, 32.7%, and 106.2%, each exceeding 40% of China's total imports in these categories. More critically, the Beijing Action Plan (2025-2027) released at the 2024 FOCAC dedicates an

entire section to accelerating agricultural modernization in Africa with a focus on enhancing agricultural cooperation and facilitating technology transfer. These merely represent a small part of China's responsive approach to addressing the flaws in its economic cooperation with Africa. The latest Beijing Action Plan also encompasses a sophisticated strategy for supporting holistic socioeconomic development in African nations including education and talent development, infrastructure development, and technological cooperation.

Nonetheless, the aforementioned illustrations neither suggest that all policies will be fully implemented, nor guarantee that they will be effective. What they do reveal is that China is learning from its engagement with Africa, rather than exploiting the continent solely for its own purposes. China has shown an ability to identify the deficiencies and is willing to address them through cooperative efforts with Africa. While China's actions are not purely altruistic, they demonstrate its capacity to *learn and respond* to evolving circumstances.

Implications for Europe

With the elevation of the characterization of China-Africa relations to an all-weather community for shared future, the EU has grown increasingly vigilant about rising competition with China in Africa, in particular in the realm of *critical raw materials* – an area where the EU has been striving to *reduce its over-dependence* on China, whose presence in Africa continues to expand. This concern is indeed valid; however, it would be an oversimplification to frame this as a *competition* between the EU and China for influence in Africa. The deepening of China's cooperative relationships with African nations does not necessarily preclude or exclude the EU's potential for meaningful collaboration with the continent. This misconception fundamentally stems from its failure to perceive *African agency* (as well as African states) as an **equal** actor in international affairs. This mindset is one that the EU must *transform*. Moreover, the ongoing reality of China's continued deepening of cooperation with Africa can, in fact, provide strategic guidance for EU-Africa collaboration – essentially, to learn and adapt.

The EU's preoccupation with outcompeting China in Africa is perfectly manifested in its launching of *Global Gateway*, which “helps to tackle the most pressing global challenges, from fighting climate change, to improving health systems, and boosting competitiveness and security of global supply chains.” In 2021, Ursula von der Leyen, President of European Commission, stated that Global Gateway is *different from* other initiatives for development – it aims to demonstrate that “a democratic, value-driven approach can deliver on the most pressing challenges. ... It is a new strategic approach to investment.” She further claimed in 2024 that Global Gateway is about offering *better choices*. Many European scholars acknowledged that Global Gateway is aimed at *countering Chinese influence* in the African continent. And, more explicitly, “this massive investment program is a *clear counter* to China's strategic encroachment through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).”

However, in discussions of this initiative, there is a notable absence of meaningful dialogue about Africa as a substantive participant. Instead, the discourse predominantly centers on the potential benefits the EU might derive from the program.

African states are not constrained to a binary choice between the EU and China, and more precisely, they are not passive recipients of assistance or conditions. Rather, African states are independent, equal international actors capable of making decisions by carefully weighing their own interests. This is reflected in the aforementioned Afrobarometer [public survey](#), which found that 59% of respondents recognized China's influence in Africa as positive – only 1% higher than that of the United States despite China's extensive efforts in propaganda. This narrow margin suggests that, according to [Dr. Joseph Asunka](#), “[African] citizens’ ratings of each country may have less to do with the specific actions or investments of each – about which ordinary Africans may have limited information – but instead reflect an overall sense of whether external powers are generally **contributing to the well-being** of the respondent’s country. [emphasis added]” Hence, whether cooperating with the EU or China, Africans’ decisions are ultimately guided by their own inclinations.

More importantly, African states seek to [utilize](#) their cooperative relationships with China as a leverage to reframe their relationship with Europe. As [Obert Hodzi](#) observed, “African countries are demanding a paradigm shift to their donor-recipient relationship with the EU, which they claim is underpinned by European paternalism in Africa.” His subsequent argument may provide fundamental insights into why Africa has opted to forge a close partnership with China:

*“Reframing external perceptions of Africa constitutes one of the main objectives of the pan-African agenda to have relations with external actors based on **equality**. ... The African solutions to African problems that China has rhetorically adhered to by not prescribing solutions to Africa’s challenges epitomizes **the ideal** of an Africa able to resolve its problems and one that is **an equal partner** on the global stage. Thus ... the [African Union] and its member states are emboldened by China’s development trajectory and insistence on states’ sovereign right to determine their own development path and set their development priority areas without EU interference. [emphasis added]”*

To put it simply, if the EU seeks to sustain and enhance its influence in Africa, it must [refrain from imposing conditions](#), focusing less on didactic lessons such as good governance and human rights. This does not imply abandoning these principles – after all, no one would reject genuine good governance or the protection of human rights. Rather, it calls for a recalibration of priorities, with a greater focus on [listening to Africa’s actual needs](#) and address them accordingly. Just as China has learned and adapted through its engagement with Africa, the EU needs to also embrace a process of learning and adjustment. More importantly, China-Africa cooperation appears to have already outlined a viable direction for the EU’s necessary transformation.

[1] It is important to recognize the limitations of treating Africa as a single entity here, given the vast diversity among different African countries. However, examining aggregate figures provides a broad understanding of overarching trends and is a practical approach for a concise analysis.



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