



European fear of 'missing out' and narratives on China in Africa

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The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors.

KEY MESSAGES

- Africa has attracted a lot of attention in recent decades. China's rising footprint in the continent has resulted in increased engagement from other global powers, including the EU, leading to a 'competition'. It needs to be leveraged to speed progress on the continent.
- The COVID-19 pandemic adds yet another layer to the already complex topic of China's foreign policy. But it also offers an opportunity to carefully examine some of the dominant narratives on China-Africa and also appreciate the perspectives on the African side.
- Prevailing myths of Chinese engagement in Africa represent a caricatured view which is neither nuanced nor does justice to the wide range of experiences in this rapidly evolving relationship.
- The perceived need by the EU to rebalance relations with Africa is inexorably linked to the increased competition of interests in the continent, coming especially from China.
- In these debates, however, African countries should not be viewed as silent spectators as competition between world powers unfolds. They are keen to avoid getting caught in these rivalries, but have strategic levers at hand to push competing powers to cooperate for the development of their continent.



1. INTRODUCTION

Africa is being courted by world powers in search of growing markets and new opportunities. With this attention comes competition. Indeed, global rivalries have increasingly influenced how the continent is seen. China's rapidly growing footprint in particular has elicited increased engagement of other countries. However, the 'competition', as some perceive it, need not be a zero-sum game. It can be leveraged to speed progress on the continent.

In the past years, the European Union (EU) too has sought to reposition itself in Africa. Both the member states and the European Commission have called for a stronger strategic alliance between the EU and Africa, and are working to place Africa at the forefront of the EU's diplomatic and economic ties. This political push stems not only from a sense of urgency to turn the tide in the Europe-Africa partnership. It also expresses a collective European fear of 'missing out' as other emerging powers, particularly China, gain influence on the continent.

Many in Europe's capitals view the increasing African presence of China and other global powers with suspicion. In the case of China, the sentiment is exacerbated by the ongoing trade war between the United States and China and persistent narratives circulating within the EU sphere, bolstered by political discourse and the media. Recent events around the COVID-19 pandemic add yet another layer to the already complex debate.

In 2020, the world finds itself in a geopolitical struggle, not just for global hegemony, but also for economic recovery. Against this backdrop, Africa emerges as a strategic partner to both China and the EU. But for the EU, China is both a partner and a 'strategic rival'. In fact, competition between the two, with their very different models of governance, is intensifying. This is especially evident in their responses to the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Yet, the current crisis provides opportunities, too, to alter some misconceptions about Chinese and European engagement in Africa. Moreover, as African leaders and the African Union (AU) use the strategic levers they have at hand, they can push the competing powers to cooperate for the development of their continent. If it was not fully recognised before, Africans' proactive role in galvanising support and getting financial resources in response to the pandemic has dispelled presumptions of Africa as a passive spectator on the battleground for geopolitical competition.

This note debunks some of the dominant myths surrounding Chinese engagement in Africa and unpacks the evolving relationship between China and the African continent. It starts by looking closer at common European perceptions about China-Africa relations. It then provides a brief sketch of the historical underpinnings of China's engagement in Africa. Afterwards, it looks at how the notion of competition with rising global powers like China has influenced the EU's relations with African partners. Finally, African perspectives on the evolving relations with China are discussed, followed by a conclusion.

2. COMMON EUROPEAN PERCEPTIONS OF CHINA IN AFRICA

Many myths, fed by political discourse and the media, permeate European views of China's engagement in Africa. These depict China as interested chiefly in economic gain and political domination, and as a neo-colonial¹ or imperialist power.² At the same time, Europe sees its role in Africa as focused on good governance, viewing this as antithetical to the Chinese approach, which is understood as driven by strategic motives and 'dictatorship diplomacy'.³

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1. Our Foreign Staff. 2018. China raises fears of 'new colonialism' with \$60 billion investment across Africa, The Telegraph, 3 September. Ngandu, E. 2019. Is China the neocolonial power in Africa, Africa Times, 27 October.
 2. Lemaître, F. 2018. Sommet Chine-Afrique : « Pékin n'est pas néocolonialiste mais hégémonique », Le Monde Afrique, 3 September.
 3. Wissenbach, U. 2016. The EU's response to China's Africa safari: Can triangular co-operation match needs? In: Henson, S. and Yap, O. F. (eds), The power of the Chinese dragon, pp 250-267. Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature.



Like all good myths, those surrounding China's engagement in Africa have some basis in reality. For example, China typically refrains from interference in the domestic affairs of the countries it engages with – even those with poor governance track records.⁴ Nevertheless, generalisations like this one overlook key aspects of China's engagement in Africa, and are unhelpful for understanding the China-Africa relationship today.

Another myth about China-Africa relations is that of **China as a 'monolith'**, composed of well-coordinated parts acting according to precise plans and strategies.⁵ The reality is a lot more complex. Under the heading of 'China' we find a wide range of actors, big and small, public and private, national and subnational, each with their (often uncoordinated) actions and objectives. Moreover, there exists a high degree of improvisation and experimentation in China, conflicting with assumptions of a Chinese 'masterplan'. Recent research shows that in Chinese domestic policy processes, local agencies have substantial room to experiment and improvise within the directions provided by the central government. This "paradoxical mixture of top-down direction and bottom-up improvisation"⁶ is at odds with the view of China as a monolith.

A third myth regards China's motives for engaging with Africa; that is, China is said to pursue primarily **geopolitical objectives**. This perception is an outgrowth of China's strategic relationship with Egypt in the Suez Canal⁷ and with Djibouti, home to China's only overseas military base.⁸ But Chinese companies, like firms everywhere, are also driven by economic motivations. They seek to profit financially from their investments in Africa, both in resource-rich countries, such as Angola and Nigeria, and in countries where resources are less plentiful, such as Ethiopia and Kenya.

Even where it is acknowledged that Chinese investment pursues economic gains, China is considered an **'economic exploiter'** of Africa; this is the fourth myth. Chinese trade and investment are seen as the drivers of unequal trade patterns,⁹ taking advantage of exploitative working conditions and engaging in land grabbing.¹⁰ The Chinese government and companies do invest in and finance infrastructure development abroad in order to expand their own profits and export domestic overcapacity. In these exchanges, African countries are often perceived as ceding their natural resources to fuel China's growth, getting Dutch disease¹¹ in return. An influx of Chinese goods and

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4. Kurlantzick, J. 2006. Beijing's safari: China's move into Africa and its implications for aid, development, and governance, Carnegie Endowment Policy Outlook, 1 November. Lagerkvist, J. 2009. Chinese eyes on Africa: Authoritarian flexibility versus democratic governance. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*. 27(2):119-134.
 5. Garcia-Herrero, A. and Xu, J. 2019. China's investment in Africa: What the data really says, and the implications for Europe, Bruegel, Blog post, 22 July.
 6. Ang, Y. 2016. How China escaped the poverty trap, *Cornell Studies in Political Economy*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
 7. Rogers, J. 2009. From Suez to Shanghai: The European Union and Eurasian maritime security, Occasional Paper 77. Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies (ISS).
 8. Lons, C. et al. 2019. China's great game in the Middle East. Policy Brief. London: European Council on Foreign Relations.
 9. Garcia-Herrero, A. and Xu, J. 2019. China's investment in Africa: What the data really says, and the implications for Europe, Bruegel, Blog post, 22 July.
 10. Maldera, M. 2016. China and the African soil: The land-grab issue
 11. 'Dutch disease' refers to the loss of competitiveness that an economy experiences as a result of large inflows of foreign capital, for example, due to increased sales of natural resources. For application to the China-Africa case, see Chaponnière, J. 2013. China and Africa: The mining challenge. *Afrique contemporaine*. 248(4): 89-105. Pigato, M. and Gourdon, J. 2014. The impact of rising Chinese trade and development assistance in West Africa, Africa Trade Practice Working Paper 4. Washington, DC: World Bank.



services can then outcompete African goods in their own markets.¹² Furthermore, Chinese firms are criticised for exploiting Africa as a production platform, taking advantage of its low-wage labour and preferential access to the markets of Europe and the United States.¹³ Here, too, the reality is more nuanced. Imported goods can promote competition in domestic economies, and provide cheaper alternatives for African consumers. At the same time, imported equipment and machinery can allow Chinese companies in Africa to invest in new sectors for export but also, and chiefly, to serve African markets. Infrastructure projects do generate profits for Chinese construction companies, but they can also help unlock growth in Africa.¹⁴

A fifth myth regards political relations between China and African countries. China is presented as a **'governance spoiler'** undermining efforts by Europe and others to promote democratisation and good governance. China's relations with African states with dubious governance records¹⁵ is seen as an implicit endorsement of disregard for human rights and labour standards.¹⁶ In particular, China's role in conflict and post-conflict situations (e.g., in Sudan, Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo) has elicited strong criticism among Europeans.¹⁷

A sixth myth is the portrayal of China's aid as a tool to buy influence in Africa at the expense of the continent's traditional partners. Interestingly, this is in stark contrast to the way China portrays itself in the relationship: as an equal, a developing country itself. China sees itself in the role of a genuine **'development partner' rather than a 'donor'** with few strings attached,¹⁸ and an explicit non-interference policy. European observers express scepticism about the alleged Chinese 'unconditionality', as Chinese development finance is typically tied to spending on Chinese goods and services.¹⁹ Allegations of 'debt-trap diplomacy'²⁰ are widespread among European and other actors, though these have been challenged by experts and researchers alike.²¹

While these myths may have some truth, they create caricature-like narratives of Chinese engagement in Africa, without appreciation for the diversity of the actors involved. They also disregard the historical underpinnings on which China's engagement in Africa is based. Finally, many discussions about China's role in Africa overlook Africa's own influence. African governments and citizens seem practically absent from the scene. This denies the agency of African stakeholders in their own countries.

12. Giovannetti, G. and Sanfilippo, M. 2009. Do Chinese exports crowd-out African goods? An econometric analysis by country and sector. Niquet, V. 2006. La stratégie africaine de la Chine. Politique étrangère. 2: 361-374.
13. Brugière, P. 2013. Chinafrica: African workers share experiences at Chinese factories, The Observers, 27 March.
14. See, e.g., Calabrese, L. and Tang, X. 2020. Africa's economic transformation: The role of Chinese investment, Research Reports and Studies. London: Overseas Development Institute (ODI).
15. Kleine-Ahlbrandt, S. and Small, A. 2008. China's new dictatorship diplomacy: Is Beijing parting with pariahs? Foreign Affairs. 87(1): 38-56.
16. Okoye, U. 2017. In Africa, China's human rights concerns don't apply, Diplomatic Courier, 29 April. Osondu-Oti, A. 2016. China and Africa: Human rights perspective. Africa Development / Afrique et Développement. 41(1): 49-80.
- Shelton, G. and Kabemba, C. 2012. Win win partnership? China, Southern Africa and extractive industries. Johannesburg: Southern African Resource Watch (SARW).
17. Wissenbach, U. 2016. The EU's response to China's Africa safari: Can triangular co-operation match needs? In: Henson, S. and Yap, O. F. (eds), The power of the Chinese dragon, pp 250-267. Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature.
18. *ibid* and: Gavas, M. and Timmis, H. 2019. What does China's investment in Africa mean for Europe? Friends of Europe, 14 November. Kjøllesdal, K. and Welle-Strand, A. 2010. Foreign aid strategies: China taking over? Asian Social Science. 6(10): 3-13.
19. Wan, F. 2018. How 'unconditional' is China's foreign aid? Deutsche Welle, 15 May.
20. Chellaney, B. 2017. China's debt-trap diplomacy, Project Syndicate, 23 January.
21. For an in-depth review, see Brautigam, D. 2020. A critical look at Chinese 'debt-trap diplomacy': The rise of a meme. Area Development and Policy. 5(1): 1-14.

3. UNPACKING CHINA-AFRICA RELATIONS

China-Africa relations are usually regarded through a simplified and contemporary lens, while European actors consider their own ties with African nations as a given (though often ignoring the violent nature of colonial regimes). China too has extensive and increasingly diverse global ties, including in Africa. Just as China is not monolithic, it is not static in its approach to external action. It is adapting to changing landscapes on the African side, evolving its policy and going through learning curves. The specifics of these experiences are usually masked by convenient propagandistic portrayals of central control and party 'guidance'.

Looking back at China-Africa relations

Historical narratives are a projection of the present into the past. This is also true for China-Africa relations. The travels of Zheng He to Africa during the Ming dynasty are chronicled in idealised historiographies – not unlike those of Vasco da Gama. However, the roots of China's contemporary engagement in Africa are found in the anti-colonial struggle. This strongly ideological motivation remained prevalent from the 1950s until the mid-1970s, when China's Cultural Revolution put an end to international engagement. By supporting nations in their (socialist) anti-colonial struggle, China sought to propel a 'world revolution'.

During Maoist times, a sizable proportion of very modest state finance went to African projects. Medical teams were, as now, deployed to countries recognising the People's Republic of China. A key early infrastructure project was the TAZARA railway,

built between 1970 and 1975, which ensured port access to landlocked Zambia.²² Less well known are China's agricultural aid programmes, which date back to the 1950s and have included more than 44 African states.²³

Apart from solidarity with African states, China's support to African partners was driven by intense competition for diplomatic recognition between the then young People's Republic of China and the Republic of China (Taiwan). This was not unlike the competition between West and East Germany, albeit with a different power balance.²⁴ The policy, sometimes dubbed 'chequebook diplomacy', was successful from Beijing's perspective. Whereas 30 countries on the continent had formal relations with Taiwan at some point in their post-colonial history (some changing back and forth),²⁵ by 2019, the only country on the African continent recognising Taiwan was Eswatini. Over time, China consolidated this cooperation into a consistent self-portrayal as the paragon of South-South solidarity.

Policy evolution in China and the multitude of interests

Chinese relations with Africa – like the country's overall foreign policy – have evolved since Maoist rule, despite a rhetoric of continuity. After a period of high economic growth and increased external engagement during 'Opening Up' under Deng Xiaoping (1978-1989), the economy slowed and Chinese political reforms came to a halt by the time of the Tiananmen crackdown in 1989. External engagement increased again in the 1990s, under the so-called 'Going Out' policy, in which economic reforms gained new steam.

22. Monson, J. 2011. *Africa's freedom train: How a Chinese development project changed lives and livelihoods in Tanzania*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. Alden, C., Large, D. and Oliveira, R. 2008. *China returns to Africa: A rising power and a continent embrace*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

23. More than 44 African countries have hosted Chinese agricultural aid projects, developing more than 90 farms through aid projects over four decades. See Brütigam, D. and Xiaoyang, T. 2009. *China's engagement in African agriculture: 'Down to the countryside'*. *The China Quarterly*, 199(September): 686-706.

24. Anthony, R., Grimm, S. and Kim, Y. 2013. *South Africa's relations with China and Taiwan: Economic realism and the 'One China' doctrine*. Policy Briefing. Stellenbosch, South Africa: Centre for Chinese Studies (CCS).

25. Rich, T. and Banerjee, V. 2015. *Running out of time? The evolution of Taiwan's relations in Africa*, *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs - China aktuell*, 44(1): 141-161.



In the years since, pragmatism has prevailed in Beijing. Enterprises are incentivised to gain international experience. Often adopting a small-margin high-risk strategy, Chinese lending institutions finance expansion of Chinese firms into world markets, often via Africa, be it to ensure access to resources for China's manufacturing sector, to supply globally marginal markets with products made in China or through large infrastructure projects abroad. Initially, much of the labour force for these endeavours was said to have been brought from China. This guaranteed quick results and was easier for inexperienced Chinese companies to manage. Those elements have since changed in numerous places, given quota policies and African governments' demands for skills investments, alongside the rising cost of Chinese labour itself. Lately, an additional motivation is the projection of global power, especially since Xi Jinping took office in 2013.

Thus, like any other international actor, China's engagement in Africa today is driven by a blend of various policy rationales and vastly diverse interests, including those of party officials and diplomats, state-owned enterprises, private businesses and a rather large number of individuals who have established businesses in African countries. Political, economic and public diplomacy has developed in various layers, under the influence of a number of incentivised, but not necessarily centrally directed, actors. Particularly difficult to quantify – and manage – are the numerous individual entrepreneurs.

Additionally, the Chinese diasporas in many African countries are diverse, including, for example, Taiwanese businesspeople, contract workers, representatives of state-owned enterprises and traders, among many others. Their ambitions and motivations for settling in Africa are equally varied, ranging from simply eking out a living to ambitious

business expansion or escape from fierce economic competition back home.

Consequently, we can hardly speak of a 'Chinese community' in many African settings. China's relations with the Global South, too, have become increasingly complex and difficult for the state administration to coordinate. As showcased in the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC),



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China has since 2000 provided massive financial means beyond its traditional South-South cooperation model of technical support and training.²⁶ The traditionally strong internal administrative rivalry between, for example, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Commerce, as well as provincial self-interest linked to large state-owned companies, have produced an intricate mix of Chinese actors on the ground in African countries. Establishment of the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA) in April 2018, located under the State Council, and thus somewhat outside ministerial quarrels, is expected to centralise China's overseas aid activities. Thus far, however, much time has been

26. Grimm, S. 2012. The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC): Political rationale and functioning. Stellenbosch: Centre for Chinese Studies. Taylor, I. 2012. The Forum on China- Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). Routledge Global Institutions. London and New York: Routledge.

spent on the internal administrative setup, and it is not clear how much the CIDCA has structurally changed China's foreign aid management.²⁷

There has been a learning curve too, with the government responding to pressures from the African side. For instance, China became more proactive and engaged with regional organisations following African calls to better respect local priorities (the AU Commission has been a full member of FOCAC since 2011). Nevertheless, greater civil society engagement is a hard pill for Beijing to swallow, due to the limited role and political distrust of non-state actors within China itself. Nonetheless, it is making attempts to include philanthropic associations and other non-administrative and non-economic actors in its engagement. Though China still prefers to keep foreign relations bilateral, multilateral frameworks are being established with the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the New Development Bank of the BRICS countries.

Partners in progress, just like everyone else?

Since the 1980s, China has openly promoted economic linkages as a key rationale for its engagement in Africa. This logic gained new momentum in the 1990s. From the Chinese perspective, engagement in Africa should be 'win-win', meaning there is no shame in making profits from African endeavours. Development is seen as being promoted by commercial activities, fostered by (somewhat concessional) credit lines and support to Chinese companies active in Africa. Though initially focusing on hard infrastructure and extractives, manufacturing has gradually become

more important in China's Africa portfolio. Agricultural investments have also increased, not least thanks to smaller-scale endeavours of Chinese private enterprises.²⁸

To overcome challenges of loan repayments by African governments in hard currencies, some deals have been backed by resource revenues. For example, infrastructure projects have been implemented in exchange for shares in a country's mineral or agricultural wealth (e.g., oil in Angola and cocoa in Ghana). While some have hailed this as a refreshing departure from the 'aid narrative', it does bring new challenges, such as debt accumulation. Moreover, questions can sometimes be raised about who exactly gains from certain projects. Nevertheless, it is certainly true that debt rescheduling has often taken place.²⁹

Today, China is the largest trade partner to numerous countries on the continent and overall second only to the EU. Contract work, still a substantial part of Chinese engagement in Africa, is usually done through traditional lending (rather than resource-for-infrastructure deals). By some estimates China is the fifth largest investor in Africa.³⁰ However, industrial parks and special economic zones, meant to facilitate engagement of smaller Chinese companies, have shown mixed results. These zones, like other projects, are implemented by Chinese companies acting in their own commercial interests.

The Chinese government does arguably share an interest in the stability of the destinations where it invests or has large loans. From this viewpoint,

27. Sun, Y. 2019. One year on, the role of China International Development Cooperation Administration remains cloudy, Africa in Focus, Brookings, 30 April. Liu, W. and Janus, H. 2018. Next steps for China's new development agency, The Current Column. Bonn: German Development Institute (DIE). Janus, H. and Tang, L. 2017. China's 19th Party Congress: A stronger role for China in global development? The Current Column. Bonn: German Development Institute (DIE).

28. Shen, X. 2013. Private Chinese investments in Africa: Myths and realities. Policy Research Working Paper WPS 6311. Washington, DC: World Bank Group. Calabrese, L. 2019. Chinese OFDI in Africa. In: Dussel, P. (ed.), China's foreign direct investment in Latin America and the Caribbean. Boulder: Lynne Rienner.

29. In fact, it is estimated that in the 1980s and 1990s only about 14% of zero-interest loans were repaid to China. The majority were rescheduled, while some were cancelled. Acker, K., Brautigam, D. and Huang, Y. 2020. Debt relief with Chinese characteristics. Policy Brief 46. Washington, DC: China Africa Research Initiative, Johns Hopkins University.

30. United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). 2020. World investment report: International production beyond the pandemic, Geneva: United Nations, p.46.



Chinese engagement on peace and security could be perceived as complementary to the EU's own priorities, though admittedly there are some elements of competition, such as ideological differences.³¹ Both peace and security and minimally reliable governance are clearly beneficial to the Chinese government, as they help to ensure a secure investment climate. In this regard, China's engagement has included the opening of a marine base in Djibouti to protect crucial trade routes to Europe. Thus, the policy toolkit at China's disposal in its relations with Africa nowadays is very similar that of Western governments – from diplomacy and technical cooperation to various lines of finance and, increasingly, with consideration for the global commons and ecological policy,³² as well as peace and security and governance.³³ Nevertheless, China's so-called 'non-interference' policy remains markedly different from the EU's approach in which human rights concerns are highlighted.

In 2013, China stepped up its external outreach, unveiling the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI; formerly One Belt, One Road). A vast collection of mostly infrastructure projects, BRI is sometimes also called the 'New Silk Road'. The initiative has been presented as a cornerstone of China's foreign policy under President Xi Jinping. However, its details remain rather vague. BRI underwent several changes in its first years, morphing from initially connecting Western China and Central Asia into a Eurasian connectivity project, including maritime routes – also via the Arctic Sea. A subsequent expansion saw the addition of a 'digital silk road'. With the latest expansion, to include of 'all countries', including those in Africa, BRI seems to be turning into more of

an umbrella term for globalisation with a Chinese twist than a real project.

4. THE NOTION OF COMPETITION IN EU ENGAGEMENT WITH AFRICA

The history, frameworks and above all the narratives associated with European engagement in Africa are fundamentally different from China's. EU engagement rests on a history of direct bilateral relations between former colonial powers and the various countries and regions of Africa. Over the past half century, the EU has developed a dense and institutionalised system of partnership at different levels, combining trade relations, political dialogue and significant bilateral development aid channelled largely through government systems. This has been described as a form of 'collective clientelism', due to the power imbalances and conditional transfers enshrined in the model.³⁴

EU-Africa relations: A 'partnership' in progress

In recent years, this 'traditional' development cooperation model in Africa has come under increasing pressure, not least due to the declining importance of development aid over time. African economies have grown. They are exploring new export markets and partnerships, including a significant intensification of relations with China and other major powers.

Today, the EU too is attempting to turn a new page in its relationship with Africa.³⁵ Particularly, it is trying hard to move away from the traditional development narrative, which is increasingly understood as patronising and alienating to

31. Ursu, A. and Van den Berg, W. 2018. China and the EU in the Horn of Africa: Competition and cooperation? CRU Policy Brief. Wassenaar: Clingendael Netherlands Institute of International Relations.

32. Grimm, S. and Burgess, M. 2013. Greening Chinese-African relations? In: Xing, L. and Farah, A. O. (eds), *China-Africa relations in an era of great transformations*, pp. 71-86. Farnham: Ashgate.

33. Grimm, S. and Hackenesch, C. 2019. China and Rwanda: Natural allies or uneasy partners in regime stability. In: Hartmann, C. and Noesselt, N. (eds), *China's new role in African politics*, pp. 164-179. London: Routledge.

34. Ravenhill, J. 1985. *Collective clientelism: The Lomé Conventions and North-South relations*. New York: Columbia University Press.

35. Since 2007, the EU has pursued a renewal of its diplomatic partnership with Africa by engaging the AU through the Joint Africa-EU Strategy, gradually giving more space to a political continental partnership over its bilateral arrangements with individual countries through the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) Group of States.

African leaders. Late in its tenure, the previous EU administration launched an ambitious investment and job creation campaign for Africa. However, some have portrayed the move as a direct reaction to China's growing influence,³⁶ and criticised its largely unilateral approach and lack of consultation with African leaders. Indeed, under the same administration, the EU and individual member states started a range of initiatives meant to curb migration to Europe from Africa, which changed the tone of diplomatic relations with countries on the continent.



Official EU policy on China's global influence is generally careful and pragmatic, but its language has become more explicit over time.



Upon taking office in 2019, the Von der Leyen Commission started a diplomatic charm offensive towards Africa emphasising mutual respect and equal partnership, as well as Africa's importance to the EU's strategic interests. Member states are also working to change their narratives. France's Emmanuel Macron, for example, has on numerous occasions made statements distancing his administration from 'Françafrique', the strong postcolonial influence his country holds over francophone Africa.³⁷

The China factor: Competition and loss of control

While not always explicit, the perceived need to rebalance relations with Africa is inexorably linked to the increasing competition of interests on the continent. This notion of competition emerged in the EU's external narrative as the visibility of Chinese engagement in Africa increased over time. This went hand in hand with the gradual maturation of the EU's foreign policy architecture. In the past few years, in particular, the EU has sought to reinvent its global presence and build a new narrative beyond that of the EU as a benevolent hegemon.³⁸

The labelling of the Von der Leyen Commission as the 'geopolitical commission' is an explicit acknowledgement of the relative decline of an embattled EU. It conveys an imperative to either 'go big or go home' in European foreign relations. The EU's relentless – if somewhat inelegant – charm offensive towards Africa shows that Europe understands the need to reinvest in its traditionally perceived sphere of influence.

Official EU policy on China's global influence is generally careful and pragmatic, but its language has become more explicit over time. This reflects competition and rivalry in a number of areas, and calls to hold China accountable for its actions as a global power. A 2019 communication on EU-China relations outlines European concern that Chinese investments "[might compromise] efforts to promote good social and economic governance and, most fundamentally, the rule of law and human rights". Similar messages are commonly used by European actors to contrast their own value-driven engagement in Africa with 'less scrupulous' or even 'harmful' Chinese actions.³⁹

36. In his State of the Union address presenting this plan, former Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker made explicit reference to China's footprint in Africa. See also Harding, A. 2018. Juncker unveils EU's Africa plan to counter China, BBC News, 12 September.

37. Pibasso, A. 2020. Edito: avec Emmanuel Macron, la Françafrique plie sans rompre, Financial Afrik, 24 February.

38. The 2016 EU Global Strategy can be seen as a key milestone in the move towards a more strategic EU foreign policy.

39. European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. 2019. Joint communication on EU-China: A strategic outlook. Strasbourg: European Commission.



Increasingly, competition with China is a key consideration in EU engagement in Africa. The perception that the EU is losing ground has become engrained in the way European actors present the EU's external policies. It is not uncommon for European policymakers to express a sense of haste or a fear of 'missing out' when it comes to the partnership with Africa. Such concerns are often informally followed by references to China's readiness to fill the void, should Europe fail to pick up the pace.

This defensive and reactive approach among European stakeholders may not be the most effective way to secure European ties with African countries. Emphasising competition and trade-offs between the EU and Chinese presence tends to obscure the agency of Africans in developing their own partnerships. This inadvertently reduces the continent to the role of a passive onlooker in the 'new scramble' between competing powers, or to a development problem that needs to be solved by outsiders.⁴⁰ It also serves as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Focusing on the inherent advantages of one model over the other emphasises their incompatibility, ignoring the potential for evolution and rapprochement between the EU's and China's engagement in Africa.

5. IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT? UNDERSTANDING AFRICA'S OUTWARD LOOK

While debates continue on the qualitative differences between the European and Chinese approach, African perspectives on the matter, and the role of African actors, have received much less attention. Africa, a fast growing continent with a

youthful population embracing the global system, is an amalgam of 55 countries. Each has specific needs, which can be fulfilled through engagement with a range of partners.

Perhaps the foremost area of China-Africa engagement is infrastructure development. Chinese loans have helped fulfil the massive infrastructure needs on the continent. China is the biggest financier of Africa's infrastructure, providing at least US \$68 billion a year in loans for the purpose.⁴¹ China funds one in five infrastructure projects on the continent (about four times more than the EU), and builds about one in every three.⁴² These arrangements seem to work for African countries, 43 of which are members of the BRI.

Chinese engagement: Appreciated but with caveats

Chinese loans appeal to African leaders for several reasons. First, they offer the ability to conjure large sums for big infrastructure projects that other development partners avoid. Second, China's pragmatic business model seeks quick disbursement of loans, in contrast to the elaborate policy processes involved in arrangements with multilateral institutions or other bilateral development partners. Third, loans are usually negotiated directly with the African national governments. Fourth, projects are realised fast (though with implementation typically in the hands of a Chinese firm, i.e., tied aid). For African leaders facing the political imperative for 'visible' development in their country, this combination can be very attractive indeed.

Apart from improved infrastructure, research confirms that China's engagement has boosted employment in Africa.⁴³ China's positive portrayal

40. See Mahadeo, M. and McKinney, J. 2007. Media representations of Africa: Still the same old story? Voices from the Global South Issue 4. Belfast: Centre for Global Education. Karavas, G. 2020. How images frame China's role in African development. *International Affairs*, 96(3), May.

41. Ryder, H. 2020. China and the COVID-19 debt crunch: Is relief from China the answer to the debt woes of COVID-19? *The Diplomat*, 1 June.

42. Marais, H. and Labuschagne, J. 2019. If you want to prosper, consider building roads: China's role in African infrastructure and capital projects. *Deloitte Insights*, 22 March.

43. See, e.g., Oya, C. and Schaefer, F. 2019. Chinese firms and employment dynamics in Africa: A comparative analysis. IDCEA Research Synthesis Report. School of Oriental and African Studies: University of London. Calabrese, L. 2020. Chinese firms and employment dynamics in Angola and Ethiopia. Briefing Paper. London: Overseas Development Institute (ODI).



of Africa as a land of opportunity and the high-level political attention it gives to African leaders are also appreciated. These are among the factors explaining the generally favourable perception of Chinese engagement on the continent.⁴⁴

At the same time, concerns do remain about low quality of products and a lack of environmental stewardship.⁴⁵ Some loans have gone to fund 'white elephant' projects, with little value to the recipient country. The typical modus operandi of Chinese engagement is to negotiate directly with the ruling elite, though in many cases they do not represent popular the view or opinion. This has drawn pointed criticism from African civil society and experts alike.

Evolving African agency, with a learning curve

The meteoric rise of China's engagement in Africa over the past two decades has cemented ties between African countries and China, and provided opportunities for Africans to change their approaches to external partnerships. Recently, African governments successfully pushed back on or renegotiated deals with China to their advantage.

For instance, Tanzania pushed back against the Bagamoyo Port deal since the conditions were unfavourable to the country.⁴⁶ Ghana's recent bauxite deal, characterised as a resource-swap, is another example. Here, the Ghanaian government sought to minimise negative price shocks by fixing the price at which bauxite would be exported in repayment for the loan, while also including a local

content component to set up an aluminium refinery.⁴⁷ Also increasingly recognised is the value of the collective agency of African countries, as well as of having a clear and coherent strategy on China. In this regard, the AU is working towards a dedicated partnership strategy, reviewing how it engages with partners. It has called for harmonisation of partnerships and an increased role for the AU and a representative group of member states. At this point, the diversity of interests and power relations between African countries largely explain the state of play in regional and continental negotiations.⁴⁸

Apart from complex governmental interactions at different levels (national, regional and continental), African agency is diffused across actors in the business, civil society and local communities. These too influence decisions and outcomes of bilateral engagement.⁴⁹ In general, however, in negotiations with China, room for manoeuvre is expanding.

Recognising some of the imbalances in China-Africa relations, efforts are under way to promote more lesson-sharing between countries, for better negotiation of deals with China.⁵⁰ This counters assumptions of African ineptitude.⁵¹ China, too, is learning from past mistakes and seeking to improve its approach through greater flexibility and diversity.

For instance, it is shifting its focus from only turnkey projects to also include sharing and transferring skills and technology. There have been negotiations on debt forgiveness and loan restructuring, too, and

44. Lekorwe, M. et al. 2016. China's growing presence in Africa wins largely positive popular reviews, Africa Portal, 24 Oct.

45. Maru, M. 2019. Why Africa loves China, Poverty & Development, Opinion, Aljazeera, 6 January.

46. See, e.g., Hursh, J. 2019. A bump in the belt and road: Tanzania pushes back against Chinese port project, Center for International Maritime Security (GIMSEC), 2 December.

47. See Wingo, S. 2020. Resource-backed loans revisited: Infrastructure for aluminum in Ghana and Guinea. Washington, DC: Center for Advanced China Research (CACR).

48. Vanheukelom, J. et al. 2016. Political economy of regional integration in Africa: What drives and constrains regional organisations? Synthesis Report. Maastricht: ECDPM.

49. Van Staden, C. et al. 2018. In the driver's seat? African agency and Chinese power at the FOCAC, the AU and the BRI, Africa Portal, 21 September.

50. A pilot workshop on China-Africa negotiations was organised in Benin in October 2019. It brought together negotiators and senior policymakers from West African countries to exchange lessons and good practices from infrastructure, mining and oil projects with China.

51. Jili, B. 2020. Locating African agency in Africa-China relations, Africa is a Country, 20 April.



media reports suggest that the Chinese government is increasingly sensitive to the growing criticism of its lending practices.⁵²

Partnerships don't have to be 'either-or'

African countries are keen to avoid being caught in the rivalry between traditional partners and China. At the same time, Africa finds itself at centre stage in global politics and competition. Countries are increasingly positioning themselves to attract investment, while diversifying partners so as to reduce dependence on any single one. This, again, demonstrates the importance of taking African agency into account when discussing the geopolitical competition between global powers.⁵³

In a recent interview, Abdul Mohammed, chief of staff and senior political advisor to the AU High-Level Implementation Panel underscored the opportunity at hand: "Africa must position itself to play a weak hand effectively... [and prevail upon] Europe and China to cooperate on Africa and not pick unnecessary acrimonious fights over Africa".

Preference for the Chinese model for infrastructure development does not mean that African countries wish all assistance to be of this kind. Indeed, African policymakers acknowledge the strength of traditional partners in providing assistance in soft sectors, like health and education, because of the space they offer for policy dialogue. Traditional partners are also acknowledged as having a comparative advantage in technical assistance provision.⁵⁴ This suggests that African governments



Africa must position itself to play a weak hand effectively... [and prevail upon] Europe and China to cooperate on Africa and not pick unnecessary acrimonious fights over Africa".



seek different things when they engage with China or more traditional donors. Their preference cannot be reduced to a simplistic function of more aid or less, or fewer policy conditions or more. A more nuanced set of factors determines what type of intervention an African government may seek in a given context.⁵⁵

6. CONCLUSION

The health and economic crises unfolding with the COVID-19 pandemic have served as a global stress test. The outcome will determine how relations between Africa and multiple partners evolve. China's 'mask diplomacy', like its other global engagement, has elicited mixed reactions. While provision of personal protective equipment and other assistance to multiple African countries was

52. Nyabiage, J. 2019. Lender's remorse? China finds Africa projects require a growing wave of debt forgiveness, South China Morning Post, 11 August.

53. African countries can be said to be using the competition between global actors as a means to "(i) attract investments through forum shopping in a competitive environment, (ii) diversify economic partners to reduce dependency, (iii) tactically claim back their economic policy space, and (iv) for some, to escape at least temporarily from political isolation by getting more visibility and expanding networks". Soulé, F., 2020. 'Africa+1' summit diplomacy and the 'new scramble' narrative: Recentring African agency

54. Zeitz, A. 2018. Emulation or differentiation? China's development finance and traditional donor aid in developing countries. Oxford: University of Oxford.

55. Ibid.



generally well-received, some countries remain sceptical about the giver's motivations.⁵⁶ China's actions, and the fanfare surrounding them, have been portrayed mainly as gesture politics, rather than anything substantive.

Despite the announcement of a moratorium on some debt repayments, the 'debt trap' narrative is once again making headlines, given China's stark approach to debt renegotiations compared to its Western counterparts. At the same time, the mistreatment of African students in Guangzhou evoked an unprecedented backlash from several African countries.⁵⁷ Outrage over the incident can be understood as an extension of the Black Lives Matter movement for racial justice and decolonisation.⁵⁸

The EU, despite being severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, has stepped up its efforts to assist African countries in the spirit of solidarity. However, the EU's approach to engagement in Africa, while different from China's, remains informed by its past experience with China. Though China's mask diplomacy in Europe during the health crisis did bring isolated successes,⁵⁹ the regional bloc remains wary of Chinese influence. However, dependence on China makes a consistent policy stance difficult, as demonstrated by the diverging views expressed by European participants at the recent EU-China Summit.⁶⁰ EU experience with China's approach to international engagement inevitably spills over into EU foreign policy towards Africa, where the EU has a very real fear of 'missing out' and losing ground to China.

Africa's experiences collaborating with multilateral partners like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, as well as the EU, have been positive during the pandemic. This has strengthened African commitment to multilateralism. However, it also underscores the importance of balancing dependence on external partners with autonomous growth. Countries are already cooperating to face the current health crisis. Whether incentives align for cooperation towards economic growth in the wider region remains to be seen. Similarly, collective agency can help African negotiators achieve better deals and get the best of what is on offer from the different partners.

The pandemic has offered African leaders opportunities to rethink how China-Africa relations can be leveraged to advance Africa's own long-term goals.⁶¹ African countries are asserting themselves in unprecedented ways. They have generally been much quicker to put virus-control measures in place, compared to places like Europe, having learned from their own experiences during Ebola outbreaks. Moreover, African leaders, in response to popular pressure, have become increasingly vocal in their criticisms of not just China, but also traditional partners like the United States and the EU.⁶² Thus, the time appears ripe to move the conversation beyond superficial narratives, and take real account of the interests and perspectives of the other side. ■

56. Asiedu, K. 2020. China wants to help Africa fight coronavirus but not everyone is welcoming, Quartz Africa, 8 April.

57. See Sun, Y. 2020. COVID-19, Africans' hardships in China, and the future of Africa-China relations, Africa in Focus, Brookings, 17 April.

58. King, E. 2020. Europe seeks own response to Black Lives Matter: The death of George Floyd in Minnesota has breathed new life into anti-racism efforts across the Atlantic, Politico, 6 October.

59. Brattberg, E. and Le Corre, P. 2020. No, COVID-19 isn't turning Europe pro-China (yet), The Diplomat, 15 April.

60. Herszenhorn, D. and Barigazzi, J. 2020. EU leaders face tough time getting tough on China, Politico, 23 June.

61. Moghalu, K. 2020. China, Africa and the world after COVID-19, Businessday Research and Intelligence, 19 May.

62. Devermont, J. 2020. A seat at the table: African leadership in a post-Covid-19 world, Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), 12 June.



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