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Between Investment and Influence:
Reassessing China-Africa Relations.



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INTRODUCTION

China's expanding presence in Africa is still evolving with consequential developments in the continent's international economic relations. Bilateral trade rose from roughly \$295.6 billion in 2024 to \$348 billion in 2025, making China Africa's largest trading partner for the sixteenth consecutive year. In the meantime, Chinese firms have financed and built major transport, energy, and digital infrastructure across the continent (World News Agency, 2026). This scale of engagement has produced sharply competing interpretations. Some frame China as an indispensable development partner supplying financing that Western donors have been unable or unwilling to match, while others describe a new dependency, in which Africa exports raw commodities, imports finished goods and borrows heavily from a single dominant creditor.

The debate is often cast as whether China is practicing a new colonialism, but this framing needs qualification. Classical colonialism involved territorial occupation and direct political administration, conditions largely absent here. The more precise question is whether Chinese engagement produces neo-colonial or structural dependency, in which African states remain formally sovereign while their economic choices are increasingly shaped by external capital (Nkrumah, 1965). This article argues that China's role in Africa is neither a purely selfless partnership nor a deliberate program of recolonization. It combines commercial ambition, geopolitical strategy, and genuine development cooperation, and the outcome for any given country depends less on China's intentions than on the negotiating capacity of African governments themselves.

THE SCALE AND STRUCTURE OF ENGAGEMENT

China's relationship with Africa spans trade, investment, infrastructure finance, technology, and diplomacy, anchored institutionally by the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) and, since 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative. Since the 2024 Beijing Summit, China has extended zero-tariff access to its market for goods from the fifty-three African countries with which it maintains diplomatic relations. This has corrected the long-standing pattern in which Africa exports raw materials and imports finished goods (MFA, 2024). Chinese investment is also diversifying toward pharmaceuticals, food processing, and renewable energy rather than extraction alone. Overall, Beijing remains one major external investor among several rather than a uniquely dominant one, behind Europe and the United States in overall FDI stock (UNCTAD, 2025).

THE CASE FOR PARTNERSHIP

Chinese-financed infrastructure, including Ethiopia's Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway, Kenya's Standard Gauge Railway, and Africa's largest solar installation in Namibia, has addressed infrastructure deficits that Western and multilateral lenders have struggled to

close at comparable speed (Global South Research Foundation, n.d.). Proponents also note that the popular narrative of systematic Chinese 'debt-trap diplomacy' lacks strong empirical support.

Researchers have found little evidence that China seizes strategic assets after defaults, and Chinese lenders have in practice restructured or suspended repayment terms for countries such as Angola and Zambia (Democracy in Africa, 2025; Effah & Adu Amoah, 2026). Chinese engagement has expanded Africa's range of economic partners beyond its traditional reliance on Europe and North America. FOCAC's 2025-2027 action plan explicitly commits to supporting African industrialization and value-chain development alongside the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) (MFA, 2024).

THE CASE FOR DEPENDENCY

The dependency framing rests on the same underlying facts read differently. Chinese financial institutions extended more than 1,300 loans worth over \$182 billion to African governments between 2000 and 2023. By 2020 Chinese lenders held roughly 12% of Africa's \$696 billion external debt stock (Democracy in Africa, 2025). Zambia's 2020 sovereign default became a widely cited symbol of debt-financed development risk. Additionally, research has documented substantial underreported or opaque Chinese lending, though the evidence does not establish that debt crises are engineered to seize assets (AidData, 2022).

The Democratic Republic of the Congo's Sicominex agreement illustrates the underlying structural risk directly. The original 2008 deal exchanged a majority stake in major copper-cobalt reserves for infrastructure financing, but only a fraction of the promised funds were disbursed, forcing a 2024 renegotiation that raised China's investment commitment to \$7 billion and increased Congo's equity share (Mining Weekly, 2024). Generally, Africa continues to export primary commodities while importing manufactured goods from China, a pattern that, if left unaddressed, risks reproducing the commodity dependence. This is what Nkrumah (1965) associated with neo-colonialism regardless of formal sovereignty.

GEOPOLITICS AND SOFT POWER

Beyond economics, China's Africa strategy serves clear geopolitical objectives. Africa's states form one of the largest voting blocs in international organisations, and Beijing has paired its economic diplomacy with soft power.

Confucius Institutes expanded from one center in 2005 to more than fifty across the continent, and Chinese scholarships for African students now reportedly exceed comparable programs offered by the United States and United Kingdom combined (Africa.com, n.d.). Economic weight also converts into diplomatic alignment. Eswatini, the

only African state still recognising Taiwan, was excluded from China's 2026 zero-tariff policy and later saw neighboring states reportedly denying overflight permission to Taiwan's president under Chinese pressure (IOL/The Star, 2026).

China's first overseas military base, opened in Djibouti in 2017 beside American, French, and Japanese installations, and its 2022 Global Security Initiative extended this influence into hard security. This reinforced Beijing's ambition to be seen as a co-guarantor, rather than merely a beneficiary, of African stability (Al Jazeera, 2017; Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2026).

AFRICAN AGENCY AND THE PATH FORWARD

The decisive variable in this relationship is not China's intentions but the institutional and negotiating capacity of African governments. A poorly negotiated agreement can entrench dependency, while on the other hand, a well-negotiated one can generate infrastructure, employment, and technology transfer. Evaluating any investment, Chinese or otherwise, should lead to the asking of concrete questions. Does the project create sustainable local employment and transfer skills? Is local processing built into the contract? Is the associated debt transparent and sustainable? Does it deepen African participation in regional value chains rather than merely Chinese ones? Applying these standards consistently to every investor, and coordinating negotiating positions through the AfCFTA, would allow African states to capture more value from foreign investment rather than simply accepting more of it.

Consistent with this shift, Chinese lending to Africa has declined sharply from its mid-2010s peak, with one analysis describing a 46% year-on-year drop in new commitments as large opaque loans give way to smaller, more selective projects (Rio Times Online, 2026). This, it is believed is reinforced by rising global competition for African critical minerals and a plethora of bidders to choose from. (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2026).

CONCLUSION

The more useful question is therefore not whether China is colonizing Africa, but what kind of relationship African states are building with China. Chinese engagement is neither purely benevolent nor a calculated program of recolonization. It combines commercial interest, geopolitical ambition, and genuine developmental cooperation, and its ultimate character is conditional on the institutional capacity of the African governments involved.

If African states continue simply exporting raw materials, importing manufactured goods, and borrowing without securing productive returns, Chinese engagement could reproduce familiar patterns of dependency under a new external patron. If instead

governments use Chinese capital to build domestic industry, transfer technology, and integrate economies through the AfCFTA, the relationship could meaningfully advance African economic transformation.

The appropriate response is neither uncritical acceptance nor blanket rejection of Chinese engagement. Africa needs to engage with China on more strategic terms that are applied with equal rigor to every external power competing for influence on the continent. The fact that China has begun placing bases on African soil shows its long term intent to protect its interests and Africa must tread cautiously.

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