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Complex Partnership of Africa-China Relations in the Era of Globalization: Rethinking the Economic Engagement: 1960-2022

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Abstract

In the contemporary landscape of international relations, few partnerships have attracted as much global attention and scholarly debate as the evolving relationship between China and Africa. This multifaceted alliance has undergone significant transformation, yielding profound implications for both Africa and the wider international system. This article examines the dynamics of Africa-China relations within the broader context of globalization. It traces the roots of their economic cooperation to the 1950s and 1960s, a period marked by the decolonization of several African states. The central argument of this study is that the shared history of anti-imperialism and a mutual commitment to the principles of sovereignty laid the foundation for diplomatic engagement between China and Africa. While China, particularly under the leadership of Chairman Mao Zedong, extended ideological and material support to African nations in their struggles against imperialism and neo-colonialism, African countries, in turn, have embraced Chinese investments as strategic tools for addressing infrastructural deficits and promoting industrialization. This engagement, however, occurs in a context where Chinese interests in resource extraction, infrastructure development, and manufacturing are also advanced. Adopting a qualitative research design and employing thematic analysis, this study situates Africa-China relations within the processes and complexities of globalization. It concludes that while the partnership has presented considerable opportunities, it is imperative to address its associated challenges. Balancing economic interests with sustainability, safeguarding political sovereignty, and fostering cultural understanding are essential for deepening and sustaining mutually beneficial diplomatic ties between Africa and China.

Keywords: Complex, Partnership, Globalization, Africa-China, Economic Engagement

Introduction

The conduct of international relations within the global system is a complex endeavour. This complexity arises from the divergent national interests pursued by individual states, compelling conflicting state actors to identify strategic partners in the twenty-first-century international landscape (Molokwu & Uchime, 2020). Such partnerships manifest at various levels, state, regional, sub-regional, and continental, encompassing economic, cultural, and socio-political dimensions. Among these multifaceted relationships, Africa-China relations stand out as a particularly intricate dynamic that must be examined through both continental and state-centric frameworks.

Africa-China relations refer to the economic, political, and social interactions between the African continent and the People's Republic of China. Over the past few decades, this relationship has expanded significantly, spanning trade, investment, development aid, and diplomatic engagements. Oseghale and Bartholomew (2009, p. 120) argue that China's emergence as one of the fastest-growing industrial economies offers an instructive yet underappreciated lesson for African states. Conversely, Ayuba (2009) contends that Sino-African relations have been episodic, shifting dramatically from active engagement in the 1960s and early 1970s to relative neglect in the 1980s.

A shared historical trajectory of anti-imperialism binds African nations and China. However, while most African countries gained independence in the 1960s, China's economic transformation and rise as a global power began earlier, in the 1950s. Wuam (2018) observes that by the mid-twentieth century, East Asian nations, including China, already surpassed their African counterparts in state capacity, institutional development, human capital formation, and physical capital accumulation. China's subsequent emergence as a global political and economic force presented Africa with unprecedented opportunities to unlock its economic potential. Nevertheless, Molokwu, Uchime, et al. (2022) caution that while China's rapid ascent and deepening engagement with Africa offer significant prospects for economic development, they also entail considerable risks.

China's earliest interactions with Africa trace back to the mid-fifteenth century or earlier (Uchime, 2025). However, these connections were disrupted by European colonial conquest and occupation, which subjugated both Africa and China under imperial domination for an extended period (Molokwu, Uchime, et al., 2023). Although China and Africa experienced colonization at different times during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, their relationship was revitalized during the liberation movements of the 1960s.

Africa-China Relations: Historical Context and Contemporary Realities

Indeed, China's intention to compete with Western powers on the African continent led to the emergence of the Red Dragon policy in the 1960s. This initiative marked a pivotal moment, as it propelled the construction of ambitious infrastructure projects, notably the Zambia-Tanzania Railway (TAZARA). Alongside such large-scale projects, China extended various forms of assistance to African states, including the provision of technical expertise, medical personnel, scholarships, and other development aid. For instance, the 1,100-mile-long railway traversing Tanzania was constructed to facilitate the export of copper from landlocked Zambia to the Tanzanian port of Dar es Salaam, strategically designed to bypass apartheid-era South Africa. It is within this geopolitical framework that Africa-China relations can be understood: a complex

and evolving partnership that engaged newly independent African states while tactfully avoiding direct confrontation with Western colonial powers.

African States and China's Relations

The history of Africa-China relations spans several centuries, but formally intensified in the early 1950s, as many African nations achieved independence from colonial rule. Coinciding with this period was China's emergence as a global power, undergoing its industrial transformation under the leadership of the Communist Party, headed by Mao Zedong. Both China and newly independent African states shared a mutual aspiration to resist Western imperialism and pursue self-directed national development. During the 1950s and 1960s, China provided critical ideological and political support to Africa's liberation movements. Chinese leaders such as Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong consistently expressed strong opposition to colonialism and imperialism, demonstrating solidarity with African nations by advocating for their self-determination and decolonization.

Although China in the 1960s lacked the extensive economic resources wielded by Cold War superpowers, it nonetheless invested considerable diplomatic and ideological energy into supporting African nations. Drawing from its own experiences with colonial oppression and revolution, China forged strategic alliances with emerging African states. This period also saw African countries coalesce around the Non-Aligned Movement, which provided a neutral platform through which Africa-China relations flourished despite the ongoing Cold War hostilities. Accordingly, both the pre- and post-Cold War phases of Chinese engagement with Africa were instrumental in cementing strong diplomatic ties between the two parties. The relationship notably deepened in the 1970s, as China reaffirmed its commitment to supporting African resistance against European neo-colonialism.

In the present era, Africa-China relations have become an increasingly prominent feature of global geopolitics (Uchime, Molokwu, et al., 2021). This dynamic is often perceived as an alternative to the historically dominant influence of Europe and the United States on the continent. Indeed, the growing Chinese presence and investment in African markets have, in many instances, surpassed those of Western nations. Today, China is widely regarded as the most significant trading partner of several African states. This trend is reflected in Africa's recent economic improvements, which are driven mainly by Chinese demand and investment, particularly in the oil, mining, and infrastructure sectors. These investments have contributed to the creation of enabling environments for private-sector-led growth across Africa (Uchime, 2025; Eyeh, Molokwu, Uchime, et al., 2023).

Consequently, the impact of Africa-China relations has been mutually beneficial, especially in terms of economic development. Trade and investment have played a pivotal role in increasing Africa's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which rose from an average of 3.3 percent between 1999 and 2001, to 4.2 percent from 2001 to 2004, and further to 5.4 percent in 2005 (Molokwu & Uchime, 2020). This growth was driven in part by rising commodity prices, themselves influenced by Chinese demand and investment. As Oseghale and Bartholomew (2009, p. 120) observe, Sino-African trade increased from approximately \$10 billion in 2000 to around \$40 billion by 2006. Today, China ranks as Africa's third-largest trading partner, following the United States and France.

However, oil has constituted a significant portion of trade between China and African states, with the continent supplying approximately one-third of China's oil imports. Conversely, China has made substantial investments across Africa, driven by economic and strategic interests, including access to natural resources, expansion into new markets, and the pursuit of geopolitical influence. One of the key areas where Chinese investment has flourished is infrastructural development. China has financed and constructed numerous projects, such as roads, railways, ports, and telecommunications networks, thereby helping to address Africa's infrastructure deficits.

Furthermore, China's investment strategy in Africa is largely motivated by its demand for natural resources to sustain its rapidly growing economy. Resources such as oil, minerals, and timber play critical roles in China's industrial production and have significantly contributed to its economic growth, enhanced connectivity, and facilitated regional integration. Given these developments, a broader examination of the complex nature of Africa-China relations is necessary to understand how globalization has influenced this evolving partnership.

Globalization and Africa-China Relations

Contemporary scholars contend that globalization has played a pivotal role in shaping the contours of Africa-China relations. Over the past few decades, China has exhibited an increasing capacity to strengthen its cooperation with African countries, particularly through trade and investment. Scholars such as Okpeh O. Okpeh (2009), Molokwu, Uchime, and Chukwudi (2021), and Oseghale (2009) argue that China's emergence as a major global economic power has led to a deepening of its engagement with African states as part of its broader trade and investment strategy. This engagement has manifested in growing trade volumes, infrastructure development, and increased cultural exchanges.

Oseghale and Bartholomew (2009) note that from the late 1980s to the early 1990s, China's interests in Africa expanded significantly, particularly in areas such as trade, investment, and the transfer of technical, industrial, and scientific expertise. Chinese firms began awarding contracts to African engineering companies, facilitating the transfer of skilled labour, and establishing joint ventures and equity partnerships on the continent. Similarly, African businesses responded in kind, fostering stronger ties that eventually culminated in the establishment of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC).

While the Chinese presence has undoubtedly transformed Africa's economic landscape, bringing opportunities and challenges, many scholars argue that the relationship remains largely asymmetrical, favouring China. Opinions are divided: some interpret China's engagement as a form of neo-imperialism or economic exploitation, while others view it as a catalyst for African development. Ayode (2015) emphasizes that this divergence stems from differing interpretations of China's role in Africa. Two dominant schools of thought have emerged: one sees China's presence as exploitative, motivated primarily by access to Africa's natural resources, markets for Chinese goods, and outlets for surplus capital, and the other views it as a mutually beneficial opportunity for economic development. According to Okpeh (2009), proponents of the former position argue that China's interest is centered on securing vital resources such as oil to sustain its industrial growth and population, while simultaneously flooding African markets with manufactured goods.

China's demand for natural resources has grown exponentially in tandem with the expansion of its manufacturing sector, significantly deepening Sino-African relations. China now holds more investment portfolios in Africa than any other country. Notably, Africa is China's second-largest source of crude oil after the Middle East, with Angola, Equatorial Guinea, Nigeria, the Republic of Congo, and Sudan serving as its largest African suppliers. Additional oil-exporting countries include Algeria, Gabon, Chad, Kenya, Liberia, and Libya. Alessi and Xu (2015) further observe that, beyond oil, Africa also exports other raw materials to China, including iron ore, various metals, and other commodities, alongside a smaller volume of food and agricultural products.

China's Strategic Engagement in Africa: Arms, Telecommunications, Mining, and Energy

China's policy of non-interference in the domestic affairs of African states has significantly bolstered economic ties between China and numerous African countries. In regions across North, Central, Southern, and Northeast Africa, nations such as Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, Rwanda, Burundi, Angola, among others, have benefited from China's provision of small and light weaponry. This military support, however, has often exacerbated violence in conflict zones. For instance, in 2005, Sudan received 34 Chinese jet fighters and \$100 million worth of Shenyang fighter aircraft, which were deployed in combat against the non-Muslim southern region of the country (Uchime, Molokwu & Ewa, 2024).

a. Telecommunications Industry

China's expanding presence in Africa's telecommunications sector forms part of a broader strategic engagement aimed at enhancing its global influence and securing access to Africa's raw materials. Telecommunications, along with mining, construction, and energy, represent the four strategic pillars underpinning China-Africa relations. China's telecommunication investments are strategically concentrated in key hubs such as Egypt, Algeria, Nigeria, Tunisia, Kenya, and South Africa.

Leading Chinese firms, Huawei Technologies, Zhongxing Telecom Ltd. (ZTE), China Telecom, and Alcatel Shanghai Bell (ASB), are central to this expansion, with Huawei and ZTE notably linked to Chinese intelligence entities. According to Natkin (2022), Chinese telecom firms have long recognized the potential of developing countries as markets, leveraging competitive pricing to establish footholds where Western companies often hesitate to invest.

In Kenya and Ethiopia, Chinese telecommunication firms are prominent, with their products widely adopted not only in these countries but across the continent. In Nigeria, for instance, Chinese-manufactured Android phones consistently outsell global competitors such as Samsung and Apple. Natkin further observes that many telecom deals involving Chinese vendors tend to occur in oil-producing countries, suggesting a coordinated strategy whereby Chinese oil firms pave the way for broader economic and eventually political engagement.

China's economic involvement in Africa's telecom sector has been underpinned by substantial financial investment. The top five African telecom markets for Chinese companies, Algeria, Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, and South Africa, account for roughly 60 percent of China's telecom assets on the continent. Beyond these, Nigeria and Angola have become increasingly vital to China's telecommunication development strategy.

b. Mining Sector

Mining constitutes another crucial component of China's investment strategy in Africa, often accompanied by infrastructure development, including roads, ports, and railways. China currently controls approximately 7 percent of Africa's total mineral production. A notable example is China Molybdenum's acquisition of the Tenke Fungurume copper and cobalt mine in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), a deal valued at nearly \$4 billion between 2016 and 2019.

In Ghana, environmental controversies have arisen over Chinese bauxite mining in the Tano-Offin Forest Reserve. Additionally, the Jinchuan Group, a major Chinese enterprise, controls three mines across the Copper belt region in the DRC, South Africa, and Zambia. The company is a leading producer of nickel, platinum, cobalt, and copper in Africa. Other prominent Chinese mining firms operating on the continent include Sinosteel, East Asia Metals Investment, Jinqian Iron and Steel, China MinMetals, Zijin Mining, and PMG. These companies have secured major extraction agreements with African states, contributing to the deepening of Africa-China economic relations.

c. Energy Sector

In recent years, China has emerged as one of the most active foreign investors in Africa's energy sector. Initially focused on Sudan, where the state-owned China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) held a majority stake in the Greater Nile Oil Project (GNOPC) alongside Sudan's Sudapet, Malaysia's Petronas, and India's ONGC Videsh since 1997, China has since expanded into nearly 20 African countries, spanning both upstream and downstream operations.

In Nigeria and Angola, China aggressively prioritized offshore oil investments. It has also ventured into politically volatile states such as Chad, Mauritania, Niger, Ethiopia, Kenya, Madagascar, Uganda, and Equatorial Guinea. The Chinese strategy often involves forming joint ventures with national oil companies, allowing closer proximity to political decision-making. Such partnerships include Sudapet (Sudan), Sonatrach (Algeria), Sonangol (Angola), and the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC).

Major Chinese oil companies in Africa include the China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) and Sinopec, supported by affiliates such as the China National Oil and Gas Exploration and Development Corporation (CNODC), PetroChina, BGP International, and the China Petroleum Engineering and Construction Group (CPECC). These firms have engaged in significant acquisitions and long-term oil extraction across the continent.

A landmark event occurred on January 9, 2006, when CNOOC announced a \$2.3 billion purchase of a 45 percent stake in Nigeria's OML 130 deepwater oilfield, its first African venture and the largest Chinese investment on the continent at that time. A few months later, Sinopec secured offshore deepwater oil blocks in Angola in a deal worth \$2.4 billion, outcompeting several global firms (Lei, 2005).

By the year 2000, China's oil imports from Africa had reached new heights, soaring to 307,000 barrels per day (bpd)—an unprecedented 174 percent increase over previous years. Angola became China's largest African supplier at 174,000 bpd, followed by Sudan (43,000 bpd) and Congo-Brazzaville (19,000 bpd).

In 2001/2002, Chinese oil companies made significant inroads across the North-West African/Maghreb region and the Gulf of Guinea. The China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), along with its privatized affiliate PetroChina and engineering arm CPECC, established operations in Algeria, Libya, Niger, Morocco, and Chad, despite Chad maintaining diplomatic relations with Taiwan at the time. Subsequently, CNPC expanded its footprint to Mauritania and Mali. Meanwhile, Sinopec, CNPC's major competitor, extended its operations into Algeria, Angola, Egypt, Gabon, and Nigeria. The scale and strategic depth of Chinese investment in Africa led Professor Wu Lei to assert that Chinese state-owned energy companies are effectively becoming the new torchbearers of China's foreign policy. This is particularly evident in Africa, where the line between commercial interests and political considerations is deliberately blurred to keep competitors uncertain about Beijing's intentions for securing new energy sources and extending its political influence (Lei, 2005).

Who Benefits from Africa-China Relations?

Addressing the question of who benefits more from Africa-China relations remains a complex undertaking. Many African scholars argue that the relationship is asymmetrical and disproportionately favours China. Conversely, Chinese analysts maintain that the engagement is both symbolic and mutually beneficial. Despite possible imbalances, there is scholarly consensus that Africa has played a vital role in China's foreign policy since the end of the Chinese Civil War in 1949. During the 1950s, China offered support to various African liberation movements, and the Chinese foreign minister made the first official diplomatic visit to the continent. In 1971, votes from African countries were instrumental in securing the People's Republic of China (PRC) its seat in the United Nations General Assembly and Security Council, replacing representatives of the Chinese Nationalist government. By 2023, nearly all African countries that previously recognized Taiwan had shifted their allegiance to the PRC. Notable among them are Burkina Faso, Malawi, Liberia, and Senegal, with Eswatini being the only African country still maintaining formal ties with Taiwan as of 2023.

In November 2023, the first tri-annual Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) summit was held in Beijing. FOCAC was designed to enhance collaboration between China and African states and to advance China's strategic interests on the continent. At the 8th FOCAC summit in Dakar, Senegal, President Xi Jinping announced China's donation of one billion doses of COVID-19 vaccines to African countries. This initiative aimed to safeguard the African population against the global pandemic that originated in Wuhan, China.

Moreover, Africa remains China's largest trading partner and leading debtor on the continent. As Krippahl (2024), citing A. Adekunle, observes, the extensive investments and credit lines extended to Africa over the past two decades have fuelled accusations of China practicing "debt-trap diplomacy." It has been argued that China's strategy seeks to burden African nations with unsustainable debt to enhance Beijing's leverage. While there is little evidence that China intentionally aims to ensnare Africa in a debt trap, its resource-for-infrastructure model, popularly known as the "Angola model," has nonetheless created financial distress for several African economies. Consequently, it is fair to characterize Africa-China relations as both symbolic and economically significant, with mutual benefits to both parties, despite evident structural inequalities.

Conclusion

Reassessing Africa-China engagements within the context of globalization reveals both opportunities and challenges. Scholars and policy analysts remain divided, with some viewing China's presence in Africa as a new form of economic imperialism. While scholars have argued that China has leveraged its economic might to exert undue influence on the continent, potentially undermining Africa's development agendas, this work, however, contests such assertions, arguing instead that both China and Africa have derived considerable benefits from their economic cooperation.

Nonetheless, it is not surprising that African nations have gained significantly from Chinese investments and credit facilities, turning China into Africa's largest trading partner. China's strategic economic initiatives have had a dominant impact on Africa, prompting some analysts to perceive the relationship as tilted in favour of China. Whether viewed through academic or policy lenses, China's emergence as a global economic power has taken many by surprise. Its adept use of the opportunities presented by globalization has radically reshaped international alliances and enabled it to assume a leading role in fostering economic partnerships across Africa.

Ultimately, in contrast to traditional Western partners, recent global developments, including evolving diplomatic alignments and economic opportunities, have tilted in favour of Africa-China relations. China stands out as one of the few global powers offering unconditional support to Africa's development through initiatives in infrastructure, telecommunications, mining, and energy. Africa, in turn, has reciprocated by embracing China as its largest and most strategic trading partner.

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