The Political Economy of Sino-African Relations: Reconciling Chinese-Style Development with the Western Aid Paradigm

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Abstract: Western analysts perceive aggressive Chinese foreign investment as a grave threat to sustainable development in the Global South. China's more centralized and uncompromising strategies have the potential to lock recipient countries into a cycle of increasing unserviceable sovereign debt. On the other hand, they have often seen successes where the Washington Consensus had not. This paper seeks to explain why China's monetary and financial systems are uniquely placed to offer the Global South – and Africa in particular – an alternative model for development. It also places reasonable doubt on Chinese investment as a monolithic expansionist project, emphasizing China's constant need for new markets and Africa's long-term ties to Asia and its export-oriented model. By examining the empirical realities of Chinese investment against dominant Western schools of thought, this article concludes that the two aid paradigms may be reconcilable, and that policy coherence between China and the West is possible and desirable. Also, as noted by the many scholars now reevaluating the issue with a focus on African agency, African governments will have to develop the bargaining power and policy ownership to guide the conversation in a regionally specific and Africa-centric direction.

Among the core principles of liberalism there is positive interdependence. Development in one community propagates through the economic system to the benefit of all. However, even liberal optimists recognize that under the current development paradigm, not all people have equal claim to wealth, peace, and security. The search for a mutually advantageous development model continues, and has become one of the international community's most pressing collective action problems. It has been complicated by emerging powers such as China, whose increasing hegemony in the Global South has caused tensions with the major Western powers. The Four Asian Tigers and China have challenged the idea that "only markets could pick winners," and have implemented more centralized, uncompromising, and apolitical strategies, both domestically and abroad, in places like Africa.[1] This trend has concerned Western policymakers, who feel neo-imperialism, debt, and political concessions threaten African sustainable development. This paper aims to examine the history and political economy of Chinese aid in Africa, as well as emerging theoretical perspectives, to suggest how this dilemma might be overcome. It concludes that Chinese and Western aid are not as incompatible as they first appear, that reconciliation between these two models is already happening, and that China, the West, and Africa all have a role to play in finding a path forward for economic development.

History of Sino-African Relations

China's development model for the Global South grew out of 20th century multilateralism. For Africa, relations with China date back to the 1955 Bandung Conference, which symbolized a common struggle for liberation from colonial rule, and a shared status as

[1] Daniel Drache, A. T. Kingsmith, and Duan Qi, *One Road, Many Dreams: China's Bold Plan to Remake the Global Economy* (Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2019): 196. The Four Asian Tigers - Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan - were the economic miracle of the 1990s, developing rapidly through acceptance of greater risk and targeted provision of credit to key sectors.

developing nations.[2] China, meanwhile, recognized Africa's role as a major voting bloc in the United Nations institutions, and hoped to capitalize on it to settle disputes over Taiwan.[3] In the 1990s, Beijing hoped to take advantage of African economic reform through joint ventures – by developing an early and active presence in Africa, China could secure a large share in an emerging market for manufactured goods.[4] This entanglement of economic and political interests continued into the 21st century. At the 2006 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), China began to promote an infrastructure-based development model, in stark contrast to the United States (US)'s unpopular interventionist foreign policy demonstrated by, for example, the war in Iraq.[5] By the 2018 FOCAC China had developed a coherent "Five-No" policy in Africa, the antithesis of Western-style development including non-interference, non-conditionality and, supposedly, no seeking selfish political gains.[6]

China's most recent development innovation is the massive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Focusing on infrastructure, high technology, green technology, and international cooperation, the BRI aims to link manufacturing hubs and urban centres to reduce transportation costs, generate demand, and raise employment.[7] For example, China has begun construction on a multi-billion dollar trans-African railway which would connect Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and Ethiopia, among others, to the coastal city of Mombasa. Its Indian Ocean ports would provide

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[2] Olayiwola Abegunrin and Charity Manyeruke, *China's Power in Africa: A New Global Order* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-21994-9, 12.; Tukumbi Lumumba-Kasongo, "China-Africa Relations: A Neo-Imperialism or a Neo-Colonialism? A Reflection," *African and Asian Studies* 10, no. 2-3 (January 2011): 234-266, https://doi.org/10.1163/156921011X587040, 242.

[3] Thompson Ayodele and Olusegun Sotola, "China in Africa: An Evaluation of Chinese Investment" (working paper, Lagos, Nigeria: Initiative for Public Policy Analysis Working Paper Series, 2014): 1-20, https://ippanigeria.org/articles/China%20-Africa%20relation_Workingpaper_final.pdf, 4.

[4] Ian Taylor and Yuhua Xiao, "A Case of Mistaken Identity: 'China Inc.' and Its 'Imperialism' in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Asian Politics & Policy* 1, no. 4 (September 2009): 709-725, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1943-0787.2009.01149.x, 710-712.

[5] Horace Campbell, "China in Africa: Challenging US Global Hegemony, " *Third World Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (2008): 89-105, https://doi.org/10.1080/01436590701726517, 92.

[6] Abegunrin and Manyeruke, China's Power in Africa, 19.

[7] Drache, Kingsmith and Qi, One Road, Many Dreams, 6 and 11.

China with a massive trade expansion opportunity into East Africa. While the potential of such a project is enormous, completed sections have already pushed debt in countries, such as Kenya, above 50% of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP). As of 2017, Kenya had already spent $3.2 billion on railway lines and recently obtained an additional $3.6 billion from China in the form of long-term loans. The railway stands to drastically reduce transportation costs – and times – across the country, but many African experts, including Kwame Owino, the executive director of the Institute of Economic Affairs, suspect the benefits are being overstated.[8]

The problem is that the Beijing Model of development has arisen independently of and in direct conflict with the Washington Consensus. Among the concerns of Western analysts are the displacement of African producers by Chinese manufacturers, poor Chinese labour and environmental practices, and the asymmetry of Sino-African trade.[9] China's low-cost goods have flooded into the African market, but it has not itself been purchasing African manufactured products. Economists have pointed to the textile industry as a possible fledgling in many African countries, which has been crippled by Chinese competition.[10] On the surface, this is a manifestation of pre-existing ideological tensions between Export Oriented Industrialization (EOI) and Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI). The United States has recently been perceived as retreating from the neoliberal dogma of structural adjustment programs to novel forms of ISI. Complicating these debates, however, are the political tensions between China and the West, and the apparent incompatibility of their development philosophies. To challenge this notion and to begin constructing a reconciliatory framework for development, it is worth examining the political economy of Chinese investment in detail.

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[8] Drache, Kingsmith, and Qi, 57-58.

[9] Fanru Cheru and Arkebe Oqubay, "Catalysing China-Africa Ties for Africa's Structural Transformation," in *China-Africa and an Economic Transformation*, 2019, 282-309, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198830504.003.0014, 283.

[10] Abegunrin and Manyeruke, 33.

Origins and Rationales of Chinese Investment Strategies

China's unique financial and monetary systems have contributed to its investment model. Its highly regulated and centralized banking sector can rely on "deep Chinese capital markets" to pursue large-scale projects involving greater risk.[11] China's banking system is more flexible than most Western liberal economies due to the absence of competing interests, more resourceful due to central state financing, and heavily regulated by the China Banking Regulatory Commission.[12] As a result, China can "write lower interest rates and longer grace periods" and access "low-paid contract labour" to outbid its competitors in the aid industry.[13] Outside of the banking system, Chinese development assistance is led by its State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs), whose public-private dual identity provides less "short-term profit pressure." This enables them to invest with longer time horizons and at greater risk than Western firms.[14] In addition to financing, China provides its development partners with workers, maintenance, parts, and assembly services. This mass mobilization and low-interest financing reflect China's own development process aided by Japanese loans.[15]

The intensity and legitimacy of Chinese investment are the result of its soft power campaign – part of the Xi Jinping government's pushback against American hegemony. Though the US continues to hold a controlling share of global soft power, there is a reason why its success relative to China's has waned in Africa. Daniel Drache, A. T. Kingsmith and Duan Qi write, "while American and other Western observers fall into the trap of assuming that freedom, civil liberties and democracy are more desired than economic stability, poverty eradication and

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[11] Drache, Kingsmith and Qi, 9. Recipients of World Bank energy finance have an average risk rating of 5.50 while those funded by Chinese banks average 5.63. This difference is even more skewed when considering 10 recipients of Chinese aid which the World Bank does not finance at all, which have an average risk rating of 6.

[12] Drache, Kingsmith and Qi, 81.

[13] Drache, Kingsmith and Qi, 87-88.

[14] Gernot Pehnelt, "The Political Economy of China's Aid Policy in Africa," *Jena Economic Research Paper*, no. 2007-051 (August 2007), http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1022868, 9.

[15] Ayodele and Sotola, China in Africa, 5.

prosperity, Beijing's soft power influence increases in the regions most devastated by decades of economic exploitation and instability."[16] This is not exclusively due to the scale of Chinese activity. Rather, China has managed to pull millions of its own citizens out of poverty, giving it the credentials to claim authority in the realm of development.[17] It has demonstrated a willingness to restructure and extend debt, reduce interest, and, in some cases, perform massive debt cancellations.[18] China uses these cancellation schemes to reward closer economic or political ties.[19] Such rewards appear to be working, especially with regards to Taiwan. The Dominican Republic cut ties with the island after a $3.1 billion loan from China, and Nigeria evicted Taiwanese trade missionaries after receiving a $40 million Chinese pledge.[20]

These soft power gains are convenient given that China engages in Africa partially out of necessity. To maintain its high-speed economic growth despite rapidly saturating foreign markets, China needs sources of raw materials and destinations for manufactured products. This is especially important given that China's political system is legitimized by sustained growth.[21] The BRI is not just a development project but a "multi-year stimulus package to boost exports."[22] Furthermore, China's late entry into the system of trade multilateralism has forced it to ignore political factors. Simply put, "China has higher opportunity costs of morality […] than the traditional powers" since it faces well-established Western aid institutions and markets heavily penetrated by Western firms.[23]

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[16] Drache, Kingsmith and Qi, 114.
[17] Drache, Kingsmith and Qi, 26.
[18] Drache, Kingsmith and Qi, 64.
[19] Pehnelt, "The Political Economy of China's Aid Policy in Africa," 3.
[20] Abegunrin and Manyeruke, 13-14.
[21] Taylor and Xiao, "A Case of Mistaken Identity," 715.
[22] Drache, Kingsmith and Qi, 19.
[23] Pehnelt, "The Political Economy of China's Aid Policy in Africa," 8.

The concern of many policy experts is that China is trapping its African partners in a "cycle of debt and easy credit."[24] Debt needs to generate the economic growth to service itself, and BRI infrastructure projects do not necessarily create sufficient value. If China offers countries loans beyond their ability to repay, the resulting debt could lead to foreign exchange shortages, constraining a nation's ability to obtain capital imports and limiting growth potential in export markets.[25] The Western tactic to prevent such debt crises is aid conditionality. However, the World Bank can only impose conditions it has the power to implement given "the bargaining power of borrowers."[26] Loan providers like China which operate outside the World Bank's parameters provide African states with an alternative, forcing Western aid institutions to reduce conditions. Diego Hernandez, a political economist at Heidelberg University, found that every 1% increase in Chinese aid leads to an average of 15% fewer conditions on World Bank loans.[27]

Is this to say that Chinese aid is a threat to Western aims? Such a conclusion assumes conditionality is uniquely effective, which is hard to justify. Tony Killick, a senior research fellow at the Overseas Development Institute, estimated that compliance with International Monetary Fund (IMF) conditionality is only 53%.[28] Political scientist Horace Campbell points out that conditionality has not significantly raised conditions for those Africans living in poverty and has, in fact, increased exploitation by draining capital through debt repayment, structural

[24] Drache, Kingsmith and Qi, 23.

[25] Drache, Kingsmith and Qi, 198. This is highly reminiscent of the crisis Latin American governments faced in the 1970s after turning to ISI. To obtain capital these countries needed to either increase exports – which they could not, having neglected traditional export industries and insufficiently developed new manufacturing industries – or take out loans. The greater the scale of industrialization the more capital imports are required, generating a vicious cycle of debt often financed by inflation. Growth is therefore constrained by high levels of unserviceable debt.

[26] Diego Hernandez, "Are 'New' Donors Challenging World Bank Conditionality?" *World Development* 96 (August 2017): 529-549, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2017.03.035, 531.

[27] Hernandez, "Are 'New' Donors," 544.

[28] Tony Killick, "Principals, Agents and the Failings of Conditionality," *Journal of International Development* 9, no. 4 (June 1997): 483-495, https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1099-1328(199706)9:4%3C483::AID-JID458%3E3.0.CO;2-S, 486.

adjustment, and privatization.[29] Moreover, aid providers have not obeyed and enforced their own conditions. "It is hard to point to many examples where Washington or London cancelled a programme because transparency norms were ignored or violated."[30] Drache, Kingsmith, and Qi argue that the Canada-EU Trade Agreement and the Trans-Pacific Partnership are no more transparent than trade deals signed by China. These treaties were negotiated without public consultation or other accountability mechanisms, and their extremely broad scopes allow fine details to be negotiated secretly.[31] Finally, while China has lowered the number of conditions imposed by the West, AID Data found in 2017 that Western aid has become no less effective, calling into question the usefulness of conditionality.[32] Clearly, the current antagonism and attempted suppression of Chinese alternative development is not the ideal policy arrangement.

Scholarly Perspectives on Sino-African Trade Relations

Simplice Asongu of the African Governance and Development Institute provides a useful classification of the opinions of policy experts within three theoretical schools. First is the Pessimistic or Neocolonial School, which observes that the Beijing model de-emphasizes democracy and promotes state capitalism.[33] By crowding out African industries, Chinese activities contradict the accepted paradigm that industrialization is critical to development. Consider also Wells College political scientist Tukumbi Lumumba-Kasongo's definition of a neocolonial economy: one which promotes "the interest of foreign capital that dominates a

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[29] Campbell, "China in Africa: Challenging US Global Hegemony," 99-101.

[30] Drache, Kingsmith, and Qi, 98.

[31] Drache, Kingsmith, and Qi, 137. Incomprehensibility, especially in the realm of multilateral agreements, is often not a mistake but a tool that allows written documentation to exude an air of legitimacy while substantive ideas are agreed upon after the fact by key individuals.

[32] Axel Dreher et al., "Aid, China, and Growth: Evidence from a New Global Development Finance Dataset," *AIDData: A Research Lab at William & Mary*, Working Paper 46 (October 2017), http://docs.aiddata.org/ad4/pdfs/WPS46_Aid_China_and_Growth.pdf, 23-26.

[33] Simplice A. Asongu, "Sino-African Relations: A Review and Reconciliation of Dominant Schools of Thought," *Politics & Policy* 44, no. 2 (April 2016): 351-383, https://doi.org/10.1111/polp.12152, 384.

particular region."[34] To support this definition, scholars note that most African exports to China consist of oil and natural resources, with very little product diversity. This reflects China's economic needs, but does not direct Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) to African sectors most in need. 95% of Chinese aid packages require that materials and labour used in infrastructure development be purchased from China, an example of its increasing domination over African value chains.[35] Lumumba-Kasongo's counterargument is that China would have to establish a "monopolistic ruling class […] of Africans trained and educated in […] Chinese institutions" to be neo-imperialist. [36] However, China is already doing so through the establishment of Confucius Institutes and increased engagement in the African media and communications industry. Pessimists also draw upon examples of Chinese misconduct. For example, the new African Union headquarters were constructed in collaboration with Chinese engineers and a $200 million Chinese investment. The building's computers were later found to be uploading African Union files and hidden microphone recordings to servers in Shanghai.[37]

Meanwhile, the Optimistic or Balance-Development School feels that Chinese unconditionality and non-interference is less severe than Western policy, and that China has the potential to provide Africa with "economic dynamism [and] entrepreneurial talent."[38] On the whole, they claim that the relationship has been mutually beneficial and sustainable. Campbell falls into this camp, claiming that Chinese relations are distinguishable from Western ones by the lack of a "tradition of Chinese colonialism, genocide, and occupation," as well as China's historic role supporting "African liberation."[39] While true, this argument is simplistic, focusing too much on historical ties and not enough on the present nature of Chinese investment. Better

[34] Lumumba-Kasongo, "China-Africa Relations," 246.
[35] Lumumba-Kasongo, 254-256.
[36] Lumumba-Kasongo, 258.
[37] Abegunrin and Manyeruke, 21-22.
[38] Asongu, "Sino-African Relations," 364-365.
[39] Campbell, 100.

would be to point to the similarities between the Beijing Model and China's own rapid industrialization, the success of the Four Tigers, and BRI projects which have begun to show signs of success. Another optimist argument is the paradox of Africa – while its size and diversity have given it enormous potential, transportation costs and poor infrastructure have limited the impact of trade liberalization and tariff reduction. Infrastructure investment like that of China is, therefore, the best way to encourage regional integration, lower production costs, increase consumption, and make available diverse forms of labour. It would also provide African nations with the collective bargaining power they desperately need to promote their political and economic interests. [40]

Finally, the Accommodation School pragmatically notes that growing Sino-African relations are unavoidable consequences of globalization.[41] The reason antagonism and resistance are ineffective is that China and the West both have neo-colonial ambitions. China is applying the same norms as Washington with greater success. Chinese investments are consistent with market principles, including increased trade liberalization, risk assessment, and export promotion. The conflict between the models is, therefore, political and not economic. China simply falls on the other side of various value debates: national or human rights, state or individual rights, and economic or political rights. Given that rapid consensus on these debates is unlikely, the question of Chinese aid should be treated as an opportunity to learn. As Gernot Pehnelt, Chair of Economic Policy at Friedrich Schiller University Jena, writes, "competition in the 'aid industry' […] might enhance the efficiency of all aid programs."[42] The solution may not be policy consensus but an individual policy of tolerance exercised by both China and the West.

[40] Abegunrin and Manyeruke, 51, 135, and 139.
[41] Asongu, 366.
[42] Pehnelt, 13.

The implication of this analysis of schools of thought and the political economy of Chinese aid is that the path towards policy coherence is not as inaccessible as it appears. China has already begun to restructure its formal development institutions, the China Development Bank and the BRICS Bank, with sufficient transparency to satisfy Western norms.[43] These shifts may be the product of circumstance – despite its absolute strength, China is a middle-income country, and indicators like the manufacturing employment ratio suggest it may soon experience deindustrialization.[44] The rate of growth of Chinese FDI has slowed, reflecting cautiousness, the impact of trade wars, concerns over bad debt, and domestic criticism.[45] Pehnelt writes, "in the longer term China cannot escape the issue of 'governance,' because this is the essential precondition for maintaining stable economic relationships."[46]

Examining light manufacturing industries in China, whose rising labour costs have the potential to increase relocation and FDI into Africa to the tune of 8.5 million jobs, suggests one collaborative approach.[47] How could these firms be encouraged to relocate? It is unlikely to occur through rapid technological development, as machinery is unaffordable to small African firms and requires significant long-term maintenance. Rather, Justin Yifu Lin and Jiajun Xu suggest encouraging relocation through the use of "anchor firms."[48] Chinese SOEs are perfect for this role given their high risk tolerance, high capital reserves, and centralized leadership structure. Additionally, they recommend siphoning African states' limited resources into clearly demarcated regions and sectors. This level of planning requires political cohesion and commitment – which Western models emphasize – and "basic connective infrastructure," which

[43] Drache, Kingsmith, and Qi, 211.
[44] Drache, Kingsmith, and Qi, 93.
[45] Abegunrin and Manyeruke, 48.
[46] Pehnelt, 14.
[47] Justin Yifu Lin and Jiajun Xu, "China's Light Manufacturing and Africa's Industrialization," in *China-Africa and an Economic Transformation*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019): 265-281, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198830504.003.0013, 267-272.
[48] Lin and Xu, "China's Light Manufacturing," 275-276.

China is keen on providing.[49] Immediate economic needs sustained by long-term political stability have inspired the "Moyo Conjecture," a policy proposal which advocates subscribing to the Beijing Model in the short run to promote economic capacity and the Washington Consensus in the long run to ensure political rights. These rights, Asongu points out, require a sustainable middle class, which the Beijing Model has been better at providing quickly.[50]

Increasingly, however, scholars have put the onus to act on African political leaders. Fanru Cheru, senior Researcher at Leiden University, and Arkebe Oqubay, special adviser to the Ethiopian Prime Minister, look with interest at the example of Ethiopia, where a long-term development vision combined with strong government capacity and control of economic policy, has most successfully catalyzed Chinese investment into growth.[51] Most importantly, Ethiopia has developed the bargaining power to construct a vision not dictated by its lenders. Variation in the impact of aid comes down to "strategic approach and policy ownership." Both are needed to resolve Sino-African trade imbalances, debt-servicing, the limited effect of knowledge transfer programs, and the FOCAC's unused potential as a forum for Africa to coalesce and actively engage China.[52] This last point highlights the issue of translating investment into long-term strategic engagement – Africa needs to convert its resource wealth into negotiating power against China, and coordinate relations through the African Union to maximize gains.[53] Olayiwola Abegunrin, a Howard University professor, and Charity Manyeruke, a professor from the University of Zimbabwe, conclude that it is "clearly in the interest of Africa to play one side against the other," and "African countries should and must demand … complete transparency and accountability."[54] While governments could take on the role of advocates, Campbell feels it

[49] Lin and Xu, 278.
[50] Asongu, 369.
[51] Cheru and Oqubay, "Catalysing China-Africa Ties," 296.
[52] Cheru and Oqubay, 299-301.
[53] Ayodele and Sotola, 12.
[54] Abegunrin and Manyeruke, 47 and 208.

is African civil society members that will have to be the prime movers.[55] China and the West can also contribute to policy cohesion by encouraging African unity and leadership.

Conclusion

The China-Africa partnership is uneven, diverse, and dynamic. Despite its potential to erode the Western aid paradigm and its threat to African political and financial stability, the Beijing Model has also proven to be sustainable, risk-tolerant, and effective. China's advocacy for a unique multilateral economic strategy comes at a time of increased global protectionism, soft power asymmetry, and tensions in the global division of labour. However, this paper suggests that antagonistic trends are both ineffective and unsustainable. The West has been forced to back down on aid conditionality and readjust its attitude regarding the relative primacy of political and economic concerns. China has been forced to modify its development institutions and practices to better comply with Western norms. Policymakers must adapt to these changing circumstances so that the philosophy of aid keeps up with reality and continues to emphasize Africa's development needs. As Asongu writes, "reconciling schools of thought on Sino-African relations may go a long way toward changing the narrative on rivalry between China and the West into a discourse of complementarity."[56] With any collective action problem complementarity and policy cohesion are key to success, and mutually beneficial economic development is no different.

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[55] Campbell, 102.
[56] Asongu, 370.

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