China's African policy: Dynamics, Challenges and Prospects

Mohamed El Amine DJAFRI
University of Algiers 3, Algeria, amine_djafri@yahoo.fr

Naima BOURENANE
University of Algiers 3, Algeria,bouranane.naima.dz@hotmail.com

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Abstract:

This article examines China's Africa policy across historical, economic, security, diplomatic, and cultural dimensions, asking what foundations drive it and what opportunities and risks it creates for African states; the hypothesis posits that the Sino-African partnership represents a historic development opportunity while carrying dangers of dependency and weak local integration. A critical analytical approach draws on recent academic literature, institutional reports, and three case studies—Ethiopia, Angola, and Algeria—and the article is structured into six sections: historical-ideological foundations, the economic dimension, security and diplomacy, soft power, the case studies, and opportunities and challenges. The main findings indicate that the economic pillar dominates through massive trade, infrastructure financing, and special economic zones yet generates debt burdens and trade imbalances, while security engagement via UN peacekeeping and the Djibouti base projects global power but tests non-interference, and cultural soft power expands influence through Confucius Institutes and health diplomacy. Ultimately, the partnership's sustainability hinges on African states' capacity to negotiate balanced agreements and strengthen governance for autonomous, inclusive development.

Keywords: *China–Africa relations; economic diplomacy; security engagement; soft power; dependency.*

*** Corresponding author: Mohamed El Amine DJAFRI, amine_djafri@yahoo.fr**

Introduction:

Since the dawn of the 21st century, the People's Republic of China has emerged as a central actor in international relations, contributing to the reshaping of several global balances. Among the arenas where this rise is most powerfully manifest, Africa occupies a distinctive position, both: due to its wealth of natural resources and the strategic importance, Beijing accords to it. China's Africa policy is not a transitory or accidental phenomenon; rather, it is part of a long-term historical trajectory that combines ideological heritage, economic pragmatism, and geopolitical ambitions.

The deepening of the Sino-African partnership has sparked extensive debate in academic, political, and media circles. While some see it as an unprecedented opportunity for development on a continent facing immense needs in infrastructure and financing (Bräutigam, 2020), others view it as a new form of dependency, sometimes described as a "debt trap," where China exploits the fragility of African institutions to consolidate its influence (Alden, 2008). Between these two contradictory perspectives, a more balanced reading emerges; Africa appears as a space for the projection of Chinese power and a laboratory for new forms of South-South cooperation.

Beijing's Africa policy is embodied in several complementary pillars: it is primarily grounded in economics through trade and direct investment, but it also encompasses security and diplomatic dimensions, as evidenced by the establishment of a military base in Djibouti and China's increasing participation in peacekeeping operations under the hospices of the United Nations (Lammich, 2025). Alongside this, China seeks to enhance its cultural and ideological presence—known as "soft power"—through the expansion of Confucius Institutes and the provision of scholarships to African elites.

Based on this, a fundamental problem emerges: What are the foundations of Chinese policy in Africa? What are the economic, security, and cultural dynamics driving it? Furthermore, what are the opportunities and challenges this policy presents to African countries?

To answer these questions, this research adopts a critical analytical approach based on a review of recent academic literature (Brautigam, 2020; Lammich, 2025; Iaquilla, 2021, et al.), in addition to institutional reports and field analyses. The study is divided into six sections: following the introduction, the first section addresses historical and ideological foundations; the second focuses on the economic dimension; the third covers the security and diplomatic dimension; followed by the fourth regarding soft power. The fifth section presents three practical case studies (Ethiopia, Angola, and Algeria). The sixth section is dedicated to the opportunities and challenges posed by the Sino-African partnership. The study concludes with a general summary and an outlook on future prospects.

1. Historical and ideological foundations

The history of Sino-African relations cannot be understood without placing it within the broader framework of Cold War dynamics and 20th-century geopolitical shifts. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Beijing has sought to build alliances within what was known as the "Third World," particularly with newly independent states, in order to break diplomatic isolation and bolster the legitimacy of its political model. Africa, with its liberation movements and post-colonial transitions, thus represented fertile ground for this strategy.

a. Ideological Solidarity and Support for Liberation Movements

During the 1960s and 1970s, China sought to present itself as an alternative to the two opposing blocs in the Cold War. It provided financial and military support to several national liberation movements, particularly in southern Africa, such as the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO) and the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa. This ideological solidarity was based on the idea of a shared struggle against Western imperialism and served to bolster the international legitimacy of the Maoist regime (named after the Chinese leader Mao Zedong), on the International level (Alden, 2008).

This stance helped solidify China's image as an ally of African peoples in their pursuit of independence and sovereignty. Unlike traditional colonial powers, China had no colonial past in Africa, which enhanced its credibility among Africans.

b. The Principle of Non-Interference

Beginning in the 1980s, with the economic opening initiated by Deng Xiaoping, China refocused its foreign policy on domestic development, but it adhered to a fundamental principle: non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries. A principle formulated within what is known as the “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence” and resonated widely in Africa, where many political systems rejected Western interventions that linked aid to democratic transition or respect for human rights (Bratigam, 2020).

Respect for national sovereignty has become a cornerstone of China’s African policy. This largely explains why some African leaders prefer partnerships with Beijing, given that they are less restrictive than the ones imposed by Western institutions such as the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank.

c. Institutionalizing the Partnership: The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC)

The year 2000 marked a turning point with the establishment of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), a multilateral framework encompassing China and almost all African states (except those that still recognize Taiwan) (Bräutigam, 2020). The forum represented a shift in Beijing’s African policy from sporadic bilateral relations to a broader institutional framework, through

regular summits and three-year action plans covering trade, investment, security, and cultural cooperation.

The forum represents evidence of China's desire to reshape its relationship with the African continent within a collective framework, while simultaneously seeking to reform global governance structures. Through slogans such as "equal cooperation" and "mutual benefit," Beijing has attempted to differentiate itself from the Western approach, which is often perceived as hierarchical and paternalistic (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2024b).

d. Towards Strategic Continuity

These historical and ideological foundations demonstrate a relative consistency in Chinese policy towards Africa over the decades. While its tools have evolved—from ideological support to economic engagement—the core principles have remained: solidarity, sovereignty, and equal partnership. These pillars continue to form the symbolic and rhetorical backdrop upon which China's economic, diplomatic, and security initiatives on the continent are built.

2. The economic dimension

The economy is undoubtedly the most important axis in China's policy towards Africa. Since the beginning of the third millennium, Beijing has intensified its efforts to boost trade, finance strategic infrastructure projects, and invest in vital sectors such as energy, transportation, and communications. This trend reflects, on the one hand, China's growing need for natural resources, and on the other hand, the desire of African countries to diversify their partners away from former colonial powers and Western financial institutions.

a. China-Africa Trade: Tremendous Growth

Trade between China and Africa has witnessed unprecedented growth over the past two decades. From a value of less than $10 billion before 2000, it surged to over $250 billion in 2021, making China the continent's largest trading partner (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2024a).

This growth is based on two fundamental dynamics: on the one hand, Africa exports raw materials such as oil, minerals, and timber to China, and on the other hand, it imports manufactured goods from China, including machinery, textiles, and consumer goods.

Although this relationship is often criticized for its unequal nature—Africa's exports are limited to raw materials while it imports value-added products—it has nevertheless provided stable markets for African countries and affordable goods for their people. However, the dependence of these economies on raw materials exposes them to the volatility of global prices and limits their economic flexibility (Alden, 2008).

- Direct Investments and Special Economic Zones

China has not only purchased raw materials but has also invested extensively in African economies. Chinese direct investment has surged from a few hundred million dollars in the 1990s to over $40 billion cumulatively by 2020 (Bräutigam, 2020). These investments are concentrated in the energy, infrastructure, construction, and telecommunications sectors.

One of the most notable innovations introduced by Beijing is the creation of special economic zones, inspired by the Shenzhen model. Such zones have been established in Nigeria, Ethiopia, Zambia, and elsewhere, aiming to attract Chinese and local companies by offering tax incentives and a streamlined regulatory framework.

These zones are seen as a potential vehicle for technology and expertise transfer, but their effectiveness remains a subject of debate. Some researchers point to the limited involvement of local stakeholders and their weak contribution to strengthening Africa's industrial base (China Africa Research Initiative [CARI], 2023).

- The Role of Infrastructure

The infrastructure sector is the most prominent indicator of China's presence on the continent. Chinese companies have been involved in building roads, railways, dams, ports, and stadiums, often financed by concessional loans from the Export-Import Bank of China or the China Development Bank.

A prime example is the Addis Ababa-Djibouti railway, inaugurated in 2016, which connects landlocked Ethiopia to the strategic port of Djibouti. This project exemplifies China's approach of combining financing, technical expertise, and implementation by its national companies (China Railway, CREC), while simultaneously promoting regional integration and opening new avenues for trade.

Although these projects meet a pressing need in African countries that have long suffered from weak infrastructure, they raise questions about their financial viability and the resulting debt burdens, especially since some of them have not achieved direct economic returns in the short term.

b. The "Debt Trap" Debate

The massive loans provided by China to African countries have sparked widespread debate about whether they constitute a "debt trap" through which Beijing seeks to control strategic assets. The case of Hambantota port in Sri Lanka (AfroPolicy, n.d.)– outside of Africa – is often cited as an example of this argument.

However, recent field studies paint a more balanced picture13 (Bräutigam, 2020) showing that China has frequently rescheduled or canceled debts when countries defaulted, prioritizing the maintenance of stable political relations over direct acquisition ofinvestment assets. Furthermore, most of Africa's debt originates from international financial markets, not solely from Chinese loans (China Africa Research Initiative [CARI], 2022).

Therefore, the debt issue is real and concerning, but it is not an exclusive consequence of Chinese financing. African governments bear a primary responsibility for managing and effectively utilizing these loans.

c. Diversification Towards Digitalization and Renewable Energy

While the first phase of China's economic presence in Africa focused on extracting raw materials and building infrastructure, a new phase characterized by diversification has begun. Beijing is investing heavily in the digital sector through companies like Huawei and ZTE, which are deploying 4G and 5G networks. Despite concerns about cybersecurity and digital sovereignty, these companies offer competitively priced technological solutions.

Chinese investments in renewable energy have also expanded, with solar and hydroelectric projects in Zambia, Kenya, and Egypt, in line with China's "eco-civilization" slogan and its desire to improve its international image15 (Reuters, 2024). However, China continues to invest in fossil fuels such as oil and coal, revealing a duality in its energy strategy.

d. A Dual-Dimensional Relationship

In short, the economic dimension of China's African policy presents significant opportunities but also poses formidable challenges. On the one hand, Africa benefits from unprecedented funding to develop its infrastructure and bolster its growth. On the other hand, it faces the risk of becoming overly dependent on a single partner, which could limit its economic autonomy.

The solution appears to lie in the ability of African states to negotiate collectively and leverage competition among international partners (China, the European Union, the United States, Turkey, India, etc.) to maximize their gains and safeguard their economic sovereignty.

3. Security and Diplomatic Dimension

Although economics forms the basis of China's African policy, the security and diplomatic dimensions have gained increasing importance over the past two decades. Beijing, historically cautious about military engagement beyond its borders, has gradually expanded its presence on the African continent in response to both strategic imperatives and the needs of African states. This shift reflects China's ambition to solidify its position as a global power capable not only of trade and investment but also of contributing to the stability of the international order.

a. Military cooperation and peacekeeping operations

Since the beginning of the millennium, China has emerged as one of the largest contributors to UN peacekeeping operations in Africa. It has deployed thousands of troops, police, and experts to missions in South Sudan, Mali, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. This engagement represents a shift in Chinese doctrine, as Beijing has historically avoided foreign military interventions.

Through this role, China seeks to achieve multiple objectives:

• To enhance its image as a responsible power contributing to collective security,

• To protect its investments and citizens working in conflict zones,

• To provide its army with field experience in different international environments16 (Lammich, 2025).

b. The Military Base in Djibouti: A Symbol of Strategic Expansion

The opening of China's first overseas military base in Djibouti in 2017 marked a significant turning point. While Beijing describes it as a "logistics facility" dedicated to supporting anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden and peacekeeping missions, it in reality represents a step toward strategic positioning in a highly geopolitically sensitive region.

This base is particularly important because it is located in an area that already hosts bases for other major powers such as the United States, France, and Japan. This allows China to protect its trade routes through the Red Sea and the Suez Canal, and to ensure the security of its energy supplies. It also symbolizes Beijing's ability to project military power beyond its immediate borders.

c. Bilateral Relations and the Role of the African Union

Diplomatically, China has been keen to develop strong bilateral relations with most African countries through high-level visits and the signing of cooperation agreements in various fields. President Xi Jinping has given Africa a special place on his foreign policy agenda, undertaking several official visits to countries in both the north and south of the continent.

In addition, Beijing has intensified its cooperation with the African Union. It financed and constructed the new AU headquarters in Addis Ababa, which was inaugurated in 2012. This demonstrates China's desire to engage with Africa notonly through individual countriesbut also through its continental institutions, in line with its rhetoric of an "equal partnership" based on mutual respect.

d. The "Community with a Shared Future" Discourse

China has imbued its diplomatic policy toward Africa with an ideological dimension through the "community with a shared future" slogan put forward by President Xi Jinping. This concept asserts that the destinies of China and Africa are intertwined, and that their partnership is based on equality and mutual benefit, in opposition to what is perceived as Western hegemony.

This discourse contributes to strengthening China's soft power and garnering African support for Beijing's positions in international forums, particularly withinthe United Nations, where African states represent a significant voting bloc.

e. Limits and Paradoxes

However, this security and diplomatic engagement reveals some contradictions. While China adheres to the principle of non-interference, its military presence in Djibouti and its involvement in peacekeeping missions raise questions about its commitment to this principle. Furthermore, its defense of national sovereignty may appear to conflict with its practices of protecting its economic interests in conflict zones.

These paradoxes lead some observers to view Chinese security policy as a form of classic realpolitik disguised by rhetoric of partnership and equality. Nevertheless, for many African leaders, China remains a less prescriptive and more flexible partner than Western powers.

The security and diplomatic dimensions of China's African policy are emerging as a new facet of its global rise. Through military contributions and a strategic presence in Djibouti, as well as its active diplomacy, Beijing is attempting to present itself as a comprehensive power that promotes stability and defends a multipolar world order.

4. Soft power and cultural influence

The cultural and ideological dimension is one of the strategic pillars of Chinese policy in Africa. In addition to trade, investment, and diplomacy, Beijing is keen to expand its influence through soft power tools, a concept coined by Joseph Nye (1990) (Nye, 1990) to denote the ability of states to influence others through culture, values, and institutions, rather than through direct military or economic force.

a. Confucius Institutes and Educational Diplomacy

Since the beginning of the millennium, China has expanded its network of Confucius Institutes in universities and major African cities. These institutes aim to teach the Chinese language and culture, and promote academic exchange. By 2023, there were more than 60 active institutes across Africa, covering both the north and south of the continent (China Africa Research Initiative [CARI], 2022).

In addition, Beijing offers thousands of scholarships annually to African students to pursue their studies at Chinese universities in fields such as engineering, medicine, and social sciences. In doing so, China is working to cultivate a new generation of African elites steeped in Chinese culture, capable of serving as a bridge in future relations between the two sides.

b. Health Diplomacy: The COVID-19 Pandemic as a Case Study

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted China's position as a key player in global health, particularly in Africa. It sent millions of doses of Sinopharm and Sinovac vaccines, along with medical equipment and expert teams, to several African countries. Despite criticism regarding the transparency of data related to

these vaccines, this move reinforced China's image as a supportive and effective partner, especially given the slow Western response (Le Monde, 2024).

This health assistance is part of a broader track that predates the pandemic, as China has been building hospitals and sending medical missions to the continent for decades.

c. Media and Alternative Narratives

Beijing is also investing in the media sector to promote its own narrative in Africa. It has established channels and newspapers specifically targeting African audiences, such as CGTN (China Global Television Network) and Daily Africa. These platforms aim to highlight the shared successes of China and Africa while simultaneously offering an alternative to Western media, which China describes as biased (AfroPolicy, n.d.).

Chinese companies have also signed agreements with local media organizations and provided training programs for African journalists, seeking to expand their influence in shaping public opinion.

d. The Limits of Chinese Soft Power

Despite this momentum, China's soft power strategy in Africa faces several limitations. Some argue that these initiatives are overly state-run, diminishing their credibility and making them more of a propaganda tool than a cultural bridge. Furthermore, linguistic and cultural barriers persist, making Chinese cultural influence less entrenched than the Western linguistic and cultural legacy associated with colonialism.

Moreover, some Chinese economic projects have created social tensions, particularly in small-scale businesses, where the Chinese presence is sometimes perceived as direct competition for local labor. This weakens the positive impact of Chinese soft power.

The cultural, health, and media dimensions are integral components of China's policy in Africa. Through language, education, health, and media, Beijing seeks to present itself as a civilizational and humanitarian ally, not merely an economic power. However, the impact of this strategy remains relative, and its success hinges on China's ability to overcome the challenges associated with mutual trust and genuine cultural integration.

5. Case Studies

To illustrate the diversity and complexity of Chinese policy in Africa, it is useful to examine some prominent examples. Three cases – Ethiopia, Angola, and Algeria – highlight China's logic in adapting to different national contexts, where the economic, diplomatic, and strategic dimensions intersect.

a. Ethiopia: A Model of Chinese-Sponsored Industrialization

Ethiopia is one of the most prominent countries that has benefited from Chinese funding and investment. Thanks to its geographical location and large population, it has attracted strategic infrastructure projects, most notably the Addis Ababa-Djibouti railway line, which opened in 2016. This line has connected landlocked Ethiopia to the vital port of Djibouti, enabling it to boost its exports.

China has also established special industrial zones in Ethiopia, most notably around the capital, Addis Ababa, where Chinese textile and manufacturing companies have settled, making the country a rising industrial power in East Africa.

However, this experience faces challenges, primarily the high level of debt to China and the weak transfer of technology to local actors, which has resulted in relatively limited integration of the Ethiopian economy into global value chains.

b. Angola: The "Oil for Infrastructure" Model

Angola presents a different case, where cooperation was based on the principle of oil-backed loans. Following the end of the civil war in 2002, the country required extensive reconstruction, and China provided financing in exchange for guaranteed oil supplies.

This model facilitated the rapid modernization of infrastructure (roads, hospitals, housing) and simultaneously secured for China a major energy source, making Angola its largest African oil supplier for years.

However, this model has faced widespread criticism due to its over-reliance on oil, which has left the Angolan economy vulnerable to global price fluctuations. Questions have also been raised about transparency and corruption associated with these contracts.

c. Algeria: A Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

Algeria is a strategic partner of China in North Africa. Since its independence in 1962, the two countries have forged strong ties, which have expanded significantly over the last two decades.

Chinese companies have participated in major projects such as the East-West Highway, social housing, and hospitals. Cooperation has also expanded in the energy sector, including oil and gas projects, as well as a growing interest in renewable energy.

On the military front, China has strengthened its cooperation with Algeria through arms deals and the exchange of expertise. Algeria is one of the few countries that has elevated its relationship with China to a "comprehensive strategic partnership," reflecting the political and diplomatic dimension of the relationship.

However, this partnership also faces criticism regarding unfair competition from Chinese companies, weak technology transfer to local actors, and the lack of genuine integration in production chains.

These three studies reveal that Chinese policy is not a monolithic model, but rather a collection of diverse approaches tailored to national contexts:

- Ethiopia as a model of infrastructure-led industrialization.
- Angola as an example of resource-linked financing.
- Algeria as a multidimensional strategic partnership.

Nevertheless, common challenges remain: high debt levels, weak integration of local actors, and negative perceptions of the Chinese presence in some communities.

6. Opportunities and Challenges for Africa

China's rise in Africa opens up a wide range of opportunities, but it also poses major structural challenges for African states. This contrast reflects the nature of contemporary international relations, where partnership with China is presented as a potential alternative to Western hegemony, but at the same time carries new risks.

a. Opportunities Offered by the China-Africa Partnership

- Access to Large and Rapid Financing

Chinese loans and investments are a key driver for financing infrastructure projects in Africa. Compared to Western banks and institutions, which impose lengthy and complex procedures, Beijing demonstrates a capacity for rapid response. This has enabled the construction of roads, railways, ports, and power plants in record time.

- Diversifying International Partners

Thanks to cooperation with China, Africa is reducing its over-reliance on former colonial powers and international financial institutions. This gives it greater room for diplomatic and economic maneuvering, especially in a global context with multiple centers of power (India, Turkey, Russia, the European Union, etc.).

- Technology Transfer and Modernization

The Chinese partnership has contributed to the introduction of new technologies, particularly in the fields of telecommunications (Huawei, ZTE) and energy (Sinopec). Although technology transfer is still limited, it offers African countries an opportunity to access the digital age and renewable energy at affordable prices.

b. Challenges and Risks

- Financial and Trade Dependence

The accumulation of debt to China is a major risk, especially as some countries struggle to repay it. Furthermore, the structure of trade—where Africa

exports raw materials and imports manufactured goods—perpetuates the economic dependence it experienced in its relations with the West.

- Lack of Transparency and Governance

Contracts signed with Chinese companies are frequently criticized for their lack of transparency and accountability. This opens the door to corruption and undermines the legitimacy of local governments, potentially leading to social and political tensions.

- Weak Integration of Local Actors

In many projects, Chinese companies and labor are relied upon more than local ones, limiting job creation and knowledge transfer opportunities for the African workforce.

c. Shared Responsibility

China is not solely responsible for these challenges. Much of the success or failure of the partnership depends on the ability of African governments to negotiate firmly, prioritize development, and ensure good governance. Without deep institutional reforms, opportunities could morph into new forms of dependency.

China's policy in Africa presents both a historic opportunity and a strategic challenge. It offers the continent unprecedented financial and technological resources, but also exposes it to the risks of debt and dependency. The future of this relationship hinges on Africa's ability to leverage international competition to advance an independent and effective development agenda.

7. Conclusion

China's African policy is part of a historical and strategic dynamic that transcends the simple framework of bilateral relations. It reflects both a desire for global recognition and Africa's aspirations to bridge development gaps through alternative partnerships.

By mobilizing economic, diplomatic, security, and cultural tools, Beijing has built a multidimensional presence that makes China an indispensable player in Africa today.

An analysis of the ideological foundations reveals the persistence of the discourse of South-South solidarity and respect for sovereignty, inherited by China from the Cold War and still employed in contemporary discourse.

The economic dimension, which is central to this policy, highlights a strategy of apparent integration, despite its structural imbalances. The security and diplomatic aspects, meanwhile, demonstrate a desire to assert a global role, even if this entails revising the principle of non-intervention.

Finally, cultural and media influence reflects China's ambition to exert long-term influence within African societies.

Case studies—Ethiopia, Angola, and Algeria—show that China adapts its strategy to national contexts, combining realism with flexibility. However, they also reveal constants: financial dependence, trade imbalances, and tensions surrounding local integration. Thus, the opportunities available—infrastructure, diversified partnerships, and technology transfer—cannot be fully realized without strengthened African governance capable of negotiating, regulating, and anticipating.

In conclusion, it can be argued that China's African policy, before being a threat, reflects Africa's own contradictions. While the future of this relationship largely depends on Beijing's strategic choices, it also hinges on the ability of African states to transform this cooperation into a catalyst for liberation rather than a tool for dependency.

Therefore, the fundamental question that will shape the next two decades will revolve around whether Africa succeeds in using its relationship with China as an impetus for its development and the achievement of developmental independence, or, conversely, whether it reinforces the logic of weakness and dependency that has plagued it for decades.

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