



Article

The Political Economy of China's Strategic Partnership with Africa

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Abstract

The paper takes a critical look at the African strategic partnership with China, anchored on dependency theory and adopting qualitative approach to data collection and analysis, the study argues that the partnership is an alliance of unequal partners. Thus, relying on the dependency's theoretical prognosis of who gets what benefits and how, the study argued that, it is China that stands to derive maximum benefits as against Africa's marginal gains. Furthermore, in spite of China's expressed age long solidarity towards Africa since the era of Bandung Conference of 1955, China's emergence as a global power has leveraged it to move from exercise of soft power towards Africa to that of hard power with mind boggling implications: First, their new engagement with the African Union (AU) is a gateway to pursue China's national economic interests. Second, it will not only be used to increase China's exploitative influence on Africa and elicit the latter's undue reliance, but will re-enact sort of unequal exchange the continent experienced with the Western capitalist nations. Third, even though China has presented itself as a non-colonizing and true partner nation, there is no guarantee that the partnership with Africa will be fully harnessed to Africa's economic, political and security interests and advantages. The paper concludes that for Africa not to remain at the lower rung as unequal partner, the African Union should fashion out pragmatic strategies of engagement to mitigate the loses and turn the partnership to that of interdependence partnership.

Keywords

Political Economy, Partnership, Engagement, Strategy and Development.

Introduction

China has recently become Africa's leading partner in the area of trade, investment and development. (Agnes, 2016). Apart from bilateral relations with African states, China partners with regional and sub-regional organizations on a growing number of issues. Of note in this relationship is the partnership between China and the African Union (AU) in the areas of Peace and Security (AU, 2016). China has taken a multi-pronged approach in its relations with Africa; becomes a significant source of foreign direct investment in Africa; offering development loans to resource rich nations, invests in agriculture; and develops special trade and economic cooperation zone and several states, including Ethiopia, Nigeria and Zambia. Chinese banks and companies are offering finance that allow them to secure a greater share of the business deals in Africa as part of their move to "go global". This brings with it risks for African borrowers –also opportunities (Brautigam and Jhhogong, 2016). However, the external or mutual benefits between China and Africa in the partnership are a critical issue of debate. While some scholars were

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optimistic of mutual relationship, others maintained that China stands to maximize the partnership at the expense of Africa.

In order to better grasp the impacts of the Chinese engagements in Africa, it is useful to situate Beijing's contemporary engagement in Africa in a historical perspective. Over the past fifty years, the Sino-African partnership has passed through different phases of ideological, diplomatic, and economic relations. According to an African Union Official, China was one of Africa's allies during the era of liberation movements and decolonization, and the current partnership can be seen as a continuation of the past. The partnership is reciprocal, asserted the official, reiterating the role some African countries played in lobbying for the People's Republic of China to become a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (African Peacebuilding Network, 2017). On another dimension, the pessimists thought otherwise. For example, Adisu, Sharkey and Okoroafo (2010), argued that the trade relationship between Africa and China has an insignificant or negative effect on factor productivity and economic growth for African countries, and is more dominated by China's economic interests to access critical resources.

On this backdrop therefore, the major objective of this study is to evaluate the impacts of the China-Africa relationship on the economic, political, social, cultural and strategic development in Africa. The security partnership with the African Union, deemed to be very beneficial to African countries, is critically analyzed. Another novelty of this study is the historical evaluation of the China-Africa relations adopted in accessing the extent the relationship has triggered development in Africa. This study is crucial in its approach; it tried to unravel the nexus of unequal relationships between China and African countries using the content and context of dependency theory.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows: part one presents China-Africa in strategic diplomatic history in which three major stages were identified to include: the era of ideological partnership; the era of economic and political advancement; and the era of strategic and security partnership. Part two focused on China-Africa relations in which a critical evaluation of who gets what, how and when from the relationship were discussed. Finally, policy recommendations were given as the concluding part of the study.

Theoretical Framework

Dependency theory: Dependency theory is also known as underdevelopment theory/radical school of thought or the neo-Marxist theory. It emerged as a direct response to the short-comings of modernization theory in explaining why the core is developed while the periphery remained underdeveloped. The theory is traced to the influence of the philosophical considerations and the postulations of the radical scholars like, Karl Marx, Fredrick Engels, and V.I Lenin on the Neo Marxist Scholars of Latin America and later third world scholars from Asia and Africa (Obiukwu and Abaneme, 2016). Historically, the theory originated with the two papers published in 1949 by Han's singer and Raul Presbisch, in which they observed that the terms of trade for underdeveloped countries relative to the developed ones had deteriorated over time and that those underdeveloped countries were able to purchase fewer and fewer manufactured goods from developed countries in exchange of a given quantity of their raw material exports (Abaneme, 2021). Prebisch and his colleague were troubled by the fact that economic growth in advanced countries does not necessarily lead to growth in poor countries. So, their postulations brought to the fore an alternative explanation to the cause of poverty of the third world nations. Other scholars such as Paul Barran, Andre, Qunder Frank, Osalvdo Sunked, Dos Santos etc. joined the debate and expanded the theory through their various works.

The central thesis of dependency theory is that, there is a dialectical relationship between development and underdevelopment. Development and underdevelopment are two sides of the same coin in the sense that they are inevitable and physical manifestations of the world capitalist system and its inherent

contradictions and exploitations (Abaneme, 2021). Dependency theory therefore opposed the argument of modernization theories that blamed the underdevelopment of the third world nations on internal factors. They argued that it was pointless to try to locate within a country the reasons for its own underdevelopment since the reasons lay outside the country's boundaries. More precisely, the causes of underdevelopment were related to the relationship between developed and underdeveloped countries as joined by common link "exploitation" (Igwe, 2011). They therefore recommended a delink from the capitalist global economy as the solution to development problems of the third world.

The theory is very apt to this study. This is because it has helped to locate African economies to its status of dependency on more developed economies where China belongs. Again, the theory gave validity to the unequal relationship between China and Africa as such it became a tool that exposes the vulnerability of African countries within the context of the partnership with China. Like these theorists would maintain, Africa being the weaker partner in the relation, stands to achieve minimal benefits from her partnership with China.

Reliance on China's aid, FDI and other assistance is bound to weaken the domestic growth and development in African countries. The utility values of the postulations of the theory had implicit explanation to the study's analytical approach which is based on Afro-centric strategies of development in Africa.

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative approach in carrying out its investigation. The data for the study were gathered from secondary sources collected from both public and private libraries. Besides, the study also made use of internet materials from relevant articles and scholarly works. The study utilized qualitative content analysis. The information used for the analysis were carefully extracted from logical chains of evidence presented in journal papers, conference papers, periodic papers, textbooks, documentary materials, internet materials among others. The information from these materials thereafter were, however, carefully evaluated and analyzed to determine their veracity from which inferences were drawn.

Conceptualization of Political Economy

Political economy is a concept as well as a field of study. As a concept its usage and application cut across virtually all the disciplines in social sciences. It provides for a holistic study of issues, phenomena and policies in any society (Anifowose and Enemu (2008). Ake (1981) gave the clear impression that political economy might be more of a model of inquiry or an approach to the study of society. It is therefore viewed as a totalizing scientific mode of analysis and second, as the context within which socio-economic activities take place (Aina, 1986). This method, based on dialectical materialism, assumed that material conditions, particularly the economic system, are the decisive formative influences on social life, and constitute the essential point of departure for discovering the laws of motion of a society and for explaining it (Ake, 1981).

This study aligns with the Marxian scientific conceptualization of political economy. The focus was a political economy that scientifically studies society in its totality and takes into consideration the interconnection of social relations, class conflict and the organic relationship between the sub-structure (economy) and the superstructure (policy). The theory and method of Marxian political economy is based on historical materialism and dialectical materialism (Beckman 1983). Thus political economy gives primacy to the material existence and production of the society. With the materialist conception and interpretation of society, it is scientifically argued that the dialectical nature of society is the basis of its "Law of motion of development". In other words, the contradictions in society with key concepts such as the transition from quantitative to quality, the law of the unity and conflict of opposites, and the law

of the negation of the negation as inherent in any mode of production are the basis of societal change and development. This explains the history of the movement of human society from communalism to slavery, feudalism, capitalism and communism (Anifowose and Enemu, 2008).

These propositions show the importance of economic conditions in understanding society. In looking at the partnership between Africa and China, due attention is given to the economic conditions. The economic conditions help to understand why China entered into a relationship with Africa and the relationship of unequal and exploitative evidences are exposed. China's engagements in Africa could equally be understood from the globalist political economy prisms. According to Aja-Akpuru,(1998), the main thrust of the globalists is to understand the global contest with which States and other economic actors interact in a world which has been historically dominated by capitalism. He further stressed that, to understand why the developing countries are in persistent crises of poverty and underdevelopment, one needs to understand the nature of exchange relations at the international level which is structurally in favour of capitalist society. A critical evaluation of the China-African relationship of unequal partnership in terms of economic and political development indicates that with the weak economic and political base, Africa stands to achieve minimal benefits.

China-Africa Strategic Partnership in Diplomatic History

China's ties to Africa are traced back to the early post-colonial era of many African states. Beijing forged relationships with African countries as they first gained independence and used diplomatic recognition of the People's Republic of China over Taiwan as a bargaining tool, rewarding countries who sided with Beijing instead of Taipei (Albert, 2017). The establishment of modern Sino-African relations began in the 1950s when China signed bilateral trade agreements with some African countries. The relations got off to a slow start after the first Asia-Africa conference, the Bandung conference, in 1955 as Beijing attempted to assert its leadership over the third world and the nonaligned movement (Wenping, 2008). Egypt became the first African country to establish diplomatic relations with China in May 1956. By the early 1960s over ten African countries including Morocco, Algeria, and Sudan had established diplomatic relations with china. By the end of the 1970s, 44 of the 50 independent African countries had entered into diplomatic relations with china (china daily, (ND))

Historically, China-Africa relations had developed in three major stages between 1949 to present. The stages are categorized as:

- The era of ideological partnership (1949-1979)
- The era of economic and political advancement (1979-1999)
- The era of strategic and security partnership (2000 –Present),

The Stage of Ideological Partnership

This first stage covered between 1949 and 1979. China's early involvement in Africa was primarily centered on building ideological solidarity with other underdeveloped countries, particularly Africa, to advance Chinese-style communism. China within these periods focused on the establishment of bilateral diplomatic ties with African countries anchored on mutual respect on the basis of the five principles of peaceful co-existence (Brautigam, 2008).

The Chinese government and People deeply sympathized with and vigorously supported the African countries and Peoples in their just struggle against imperialism and colonialism. China supported independent movements in Africa, providing not only moral and rhetorical support, but also weapons and military training (<https://www.fmprc.gov.com>).

China also provided African countries with a wealth of selfless aid to help them develop their economies and consolidate their independence, in spite of the fact that China itself was economically in difficulty due to enormous imperialist pressure and embargo. In this way, China made important contributions to the national liberation and economic development of Africa. The aid project Tanzam railway is well known in the world (<https://www.fmprc.gov.cn>)

China's African policy then served two main purposes: First to counter recognition of Taiwan as the representative of China and thus to shore up votes for the eventual rejection of Taiwan's China credentials in the United Nation; second, to counter the West's influence and then the Soviet Union's influence on the continent (Li, 2008).

During this time of political orientations and support, economic aid was also provided to Africa to assist African countries in their nation building. In 1955, the Chinese Government started to provide African countries with concessional loans with subsidized interests. For the two decades from the mid-1950s to mid-1970s, China gave about 2.5 billion to 36 African countries in aid (Garth and Garth, 2007).

This stage also brought about increased cooperation in the cultural, educational, public health and other fields. China sent ten thousand engineers, doctors, and technicians to provide assistances for African development and undertook various infrastructure projects, one of which was the 1860-kilometer long Tanzanians-Zambia railway, financed and built by China, and hailed as a monument of China-African friendship upon its completion (Wenping, 2006). The ultimate achievement of China's Africa policy during this period was that the People's Republic of China (PRC) replaced the Taiwan-based Republic of China (ROC) as a member of the United Nations in 1971 with the help from African countries (<https://sites.google.com>).

The Era of Economic and Political Advancement; 1979-1999.

The second stage of China-Africa relationship covered the period between 1979 and 1999. This period was significant in world order. The era featured the end of the cold war and dramatic changes in the international situation. Peace and development became the two main streams of the world situation. China and Africa entered a new stage of going all out for economic development. China –Africa trade and economic relations developed in forms from single channel of intergovernmental aid to multi-form mutually beneficial cooperation, such as joint ventures, contracted projects, and cooperation in labor and management.

However, China embarked on economic reforms between 1978 to 1990s. As it focused on domestic economic development and opened up to the Western world, China's political interest in Africa waned. As a result, China-Africa relations were largely neglected in the most of the 1980s. The Tiananmen Square protest of 1989 ended China's honeymoon relationship with the western countries. Censured and isolated by the West, China re-evaluated its foreign policies, subsequently reinvigorated its political interest in Africa and found support from its old African friends in multilateral forums once again (<https://sites.google.com>).

The 1990s presented a good opportunity for China to enhance its influence in Africa. The Chinese "Going out" strategy created in 1999 to encourage Chinese companies to invest beyond China created a new wave of Chinese engagement in Africa. As the cold war ended the West's interests and their involvement in Africa declined. This gave China the great opportunity to strengthen their political and economic ties with Africa.

Specifically, in 1996, President Jiang Zemin paid a state visit to six African countries; Egypt, Kenya, Ethiopia, Mali, Namibia, and Zimbabwe, and delivered an address to the organization of African Unity

(OAU). He put forward a “five points proposal” for the development of a long term, more structured cooperative relationship between China and African countries. It eventually led to the creation of the Forum for China- African Cooperation in Beijing in 2000 (<https://sites.google.com>).

The Era of Strategic and Security Partnership (2000 – Present)

The third stage of China-Africa relations which started from the year 2000 marked the period of direct engagement with Africa. Apart from bilateral relations with African States, China partners with regional and sub-regional organizations on a growing number of issues, of note in this burgeoning relationship is the partnership between China and the African Union in the areas of peace and security (Xinhua, 2006).

China’s involvement in Peace and Security initiatives on the continent marks a departure from the country’s non-interventionist foreign policy towards more active engagement (Asebe, 2017). Prior to the security partnership with the African Union, the Forum on China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) was established in 2000. This is one of the most important mechanisms for China – Africa cooperation. Seven successful FOCAC events have been held, of which the third in 2016, sixth in 2015 and seventh in 2018 were upgraded to summits (CGTN, 2022). In 2011, the African Union became a full, permanent member of FOCAC, and as a result reciprocal representative offices were set up in 2015 in Addis Ababa and in 2018 in Beijing (CGTN, 2022).

The Belt and Road initiative (BRI) which was established by China in 2013 to improve connectivity and cooperation on a transcontinental scale has become another important platform for China – Africa cooperation. As of 2022, 52 countries in Africa and the African Union have signed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) cooperation agreement with China, the largest number of countries from any continent in the world (Ibid).

Over the 22 years since its establishment, the forum has grown to become the most important framework for strengthening the China – Africa partnership at all levels, including the political, economic, cultural and security fields. And while bilateral meetings and engagements remain crucial, FOCAC is the key mode that African governments collectively advocate for improved outcomes in their relationship with China and vice versa.

The China- African Peace and Security was specifically clarified, when four areas of engagements in peace and security were identified to include: Military Cooperation; conflict settlement, and peacekeeping operations; Judicial and police cooperation; and non-traditional security cooperation (Jianwai and Jing, 2014). China supported the African Union financially to implement the initiative. In 2015, President Xi announced that China would provide USD 100 Million to the AU to support the building and operation of the African Standby Force and the African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crisis. (ACIRC) ([http://news inhaunet.com](http://news.inhaunet.com)). China also provides technical support, capacity building training and technologies to combat piracy, terrorism and instability, and to better equip the African Organization to respond to security challenges.

China specifically supports the building of Africa's continental and regional peace and security architecture, including key institutions like the AU’s Peace and security (PSC) and Regional Peace Support Operations (POSS) and Finance AU’s Peace Keeping Missions in African Countries such as Somalia, and Sudan. It has also provided equipment to Regional Economic Communities (RECs) particularly ECOWAS for the establishment of a Logistics base. Additionally, China has sent personnel to peacekeeping Operations in over a dozen African countries over the past two decades (Jianwai and Jing, 2014).

China – African Partnership: Who gets what, when and how?

The impacts of China – African strategic relation is debatable. For instance, while some scholars maintain that the relation is of mutual benefits, others argue that China economic and political relations have more insignificant and negative effects on Africa. A cross examination of these views indicate that, though Africa seems to benefit from the relation, however, China stands to gain more being the dictator of the relations.

On the African side, areas of benefits from the relations, includes; Economy; Trade, Infrastructural development, Foreign Development Investments (FDI) and Aid. It also involves political development and security assistance. A critical review of these stages of China – Africa relations becomes pertinent. During the first stage of China – Africa relations, the claimed objective of China policy was to export China's style of communism that would enable African countries to achieve self-reliance. Unfortunately, China has made no significant efforts to export their communist ideology to Africa since the cold war ended, claiming that Chinese communism could not be replicated outside of China. They only gave out peripheral ideological links to rulers of states like Ethiopia, whose Prosperity Party had origins in revolutionary democracy and Marxist – Lenin. Africa was used as a partner to achieve Chinese struggle against hegemonic and power politics, and worked for the establishment of fair and reasonable new international order (<https://www.fmprc.com>) in favor of China.

In 1971, the votes of African countries were instrumental in winning the PRC control of China's seat in the UN General Assembly and Security Council – displacing representatives from Chinese Nationalist Forces, who had been defeated during the Civil war and now governed Taiwan. In the following decades, China's focus in Africa switched to eliminating all remaining recognitions for Taiwan Government. Burkina Faso, Malawi, Liberia, Senegal, and others switched their recognition from Taiwan to the PRC. Eswatini is the only African nation still to recognize Taiwan Government (Obe and Wallace, 2023).

The impact of Africa – China economic relations on the total factor productivity (TTP) is also an object of debate. For instance, some scholars like Adisu, Sharkey, and Okoroafo (2010) argued that the trade relationship between Africa and China has an insignificant effect on factor productivity and economic growth for African countries and is more dominated by China's economic interests to access resources. Elu and Price (2010) found out that increasing trade with China had no direct effect on the country's total productivity. It might even negatively affect total productivity, making it harder for African countries to work toward industrialization. Furthermore, they found out that for Sub – Saharan manufacturing firms, increasing their trade with China does not help them transfer technology and managerial know-how and skills that enhanced firm – level productivity.

Shen (2013) also revealed that private Chinese FDI has a negative impact on technological transfer to Africa. US commentators often describe Chinese policy in Africa as a debt trap, part of a deliberate strategy to loan unmanageable sums to African countries, draw them into China's sphere of influence, and force unfair commitments upon them. Some African Nations do have extensive Chinese loans, and are suffering from out – of – control debt, exacerbated by the COVID – 19 pandemics, the invasion of Ukraine, and the high interests' rates.

BRI projects were largely uncoordinated and unplanned, with credit offered by competing Chinese Leaders. This contradicts the idea of a coherent debt trap policy of China. (Obe and Wallace, 2023).

China's oil consumption is second worldwide. China became a net importer of oil in 1993 and has surpassed the United States as the world's largest importer of oil in recent years. China's second largest source of crude imports after the Middle East is Africa, from which receives 1.4 million barrels per day,

or 22%. Angola was China's third largest supplier in 2016. Other African oil suppliers include the Republic of Congo and South Sudan (Aidlata, 2015).

Militarily, China places significant strategic focus on countries around the Horn of Africa and Gulf of Guinea, including Djibouti, where it opened its first military facility outside China. The choice has received significant comments, as the base will only be six miles from a US military base in the same country. The Chinese wanted a base in Africa to combat piracy. Also following the collapse of Gadhafi regime in 2011, China experienced significant difficulties evacuating its citizens, which was a shock domestically. (Obe and Wallace, 2023). During the Sudanese civil war, China had to deal with representatives of various forces, opposed to the government, to maintain the greater Nile oil pipeline, operated by the China National Petroleum Corporation. (Obe and Wallace, 2023). These demonstrate that China, like the Western countries in Africa, is equally on a mission of self-interests.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The study has examined the China-Africa strategic relations from the political economy parlance. Using historical assessment of the relations, the study was able to establish the areas of who gets what, how, and when from the relations.

Evidently Chinese investment in Africa has helped spur economic growth. However, China's economic slowdown and the drop in commodity prices have squeezed growth rates. Though Africa benefited in the relations, from China's activities which involved building infrastructures, providing loans/aid, providing medical and other socio-economic support.

However, it was equally found out that the support from China to Africa represents only a fraction of China's economic activities around the world and therefore a disproportionate to Chinese gains from the relations. More so, the change from non-interference policy to direct engagement culminated into African Union's Peace and Security Partnership which has led to accusations of exploitative behavior by China in Africa, exposing the self-interests of China in the relationship with Africa.

The study therefore suggests that to advance this partnership in ways that serve the shared interest of China and Africa in the relations to African peace, security and socio-economic development;

- The African Union and China should strengthen their partnership in area of soft skills including supporting knowledge production, developing skills, and technology in the fields of African peace and security as well as economic and political development processes.
- African Governments should actively promote the study of Chinese history, politics, economics and international relations by students, media practitioners and policy makers
- African states and Government should strengthen their institutions and mechanisms of fighting corruptions that have made it difficult to effectively utilize the loans and aid from China.

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