

Rethinking China–Africa Engagements in the Age of Discontent

Introduction: Rethinking China– Africa Engagements in the Age of Discontent

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Over the past five years, China–Africa engagements have undergone significant changes, mainly due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Pdraig Carmody (2021) describes the pandemic's effect on China's global engagements as a critical juncture. This is because due to its extended lockdown, China prioritized domestic consumption and sustainability of its economy, buffering it from external pressures. This led to China restructuring its position in the global supply chains, exposing Africa's dependency on China and other external powers for both financing and manufactured goods. With most African countries' economies dependent on exports of primary commodities, these shifts in the global supply chain and reorientation of the Chinese economy led to financial depression in Africa, leaving countries unable to finance critical development projects and service their foreign debts.

Even as China emerged from its strict lockdown and restrictions, it continued to slow down its investments and sovereign lending to Africa. For instance, according to a policy brief published by the Global China Initiative at Boston University Global Development Policy Center, in 2021–2022, Chinese lending to Africa drastically declined relative to that of other decades, in both total value and number of loans. Only nine loans amounting to US\$994.48 million were signed in 2022 (Moses et al. 2023). However, there was a slight increase of Chinese loan commitments to Africa to US\$4.61 billion in 2023, but half of the loans were to multilateral institutions rather than African countries. Beyond being a result of COVID and the general slowdown of China's economy, this reduction in lending to African countries is a response to the growing inability of some African countries to service their Chinese loans, which sparked the “debt-trap” narrative. Although the debt-trap narrative was debunked as a

myth and meme, it remains persistent in Western media and political circles (Brautigam 2020).

Building on the debunked debt-trap myth, the United States under the Biden administration announced the G7's Build Back Better World, which was rebranded the Partnership for Global Infrastructure Investment in 2022, directed at reducing the infrastructure gap in developing countries. The European Union also announced its Global Gateway–Africa–Europe Investment Package set at an approximately €150 billion investment. These initiatives sought to rival China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which had resulted in China becoming the biggest bilateral financier of infrastructure projects in Africa. Even as China reduced its lending to Africa and has restructured its BRI to focus on “small and beautiful” projects, the EU and United States' initiatives have not taken root in Africa and Africa remains reliant on foreign financing to address its infrastructure gap—the ability of African countries to leverage the geopolitical rivalry between China and Western powers continues to be a challenge.

Beyond infrastructure and trade, the COVID pandemic had huge ramifications on people-to-people engagements between China and Africa. Numbers of African students studying in Chinese universities were affected, and the discrimination against people of African descent by Chinese authorities at the beginning of the pandemic led to more tensions between Africans and Chinese. As a result, people-to-people exchanges have struggled to reach the prepandemic levels. Consequently, African elites and non-State actors are beginning to reevaluate their bilateral relations with Beijing, reassessing their priorities, strategies, and expectations in their bilateral engagements with China. As argued by Folashade Soule in this symposium, these challenges present an opportunity for Africa to enhance its agency and seek to strategically drive its relations with China vis-à-vis other external actors such as the United States and the European Union.

These shifts in China–Africa engagements are not happening in a vacuum. The political reawakening in some parts of Africa, particularly in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, has led to a renewed assessment of Africa's relations with external powers, both Western and non-Western. This introspection of the historical and contemporary ties with former colonial powers like France and Britain has galvanized previously overlooked actors such as Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and the media to also question Africa's engagement with China and other non-Western powers—sparking debates on the need for greater autonomy, agency, and mutual benefit in Africa's engagement with external powers. These non-State actors, CSOs, and media institutions, previously marginalized in

China–Africa engagements, are becoming influential voices in demanding transparency and amplifying the concerns of grassroot people concerning the benefits of Africa’s engagements with external powers.

In addition, as African leaders seek to increase their voice on global issues, Russian aggression in Ukraine and Israel’s war on Gaza have added to the complexities of shifting Africa–China engagements. Furthermore, Trump’s reelection as president of the United States adds to uncertainty in the United States’ foreign policy; respect of international rules, norms, and values; and the position of Africa in US–China geopolitical rivalry. Amid these uncertainties, citizens are increasingly questioning the role of Africa in global affairs and its positioning with respect to the challenges on sovereignty, independence, and autonomy amidst the excesses of great-power competition.

Furthermore, the Trump administration ushers in a period of uncertainty regarding multilateralism. Trump has already suspended US foreign aid, has withdrawn the United States from the World Health Organisation, and threatened to impose tariffs on goods manufactured outside of the United States, especially Chinese products. In his speech to delegates at the World Economic Forum, Trump advised foreign companies to set up manufacturing plants in the United States if they wanted to escape tariffs that his administration will impose on foreign products. This spells doom for African countries that depend on foreign investments to prop up their industrialization drive. Nonetheless, this may provide opportunities for realignment, enabling China to fill in vacuums left because of the United States’ isolationism. At the same time, it may present an opportunity for Africa to reframe its external engagements and redress its dependency on foreign investments to spur its industrialization and economic growth.

Based on the context described above, this symposium gathers the interdisciplinary voices of a diverse range of scholars in economics, international relations, political science, development studies, sociology, and regional studies. Examining the evolving nature of Africa’s engagements with China, the symposium is a result of the Chinese in Africa/Africans in China Research Network’s Early Career Scholars’ workshop held in Accra, Ghana, in December 2023 in collaboration with the Afro-Sino Centre of International Relations. The workshop brought early career scholars together with senior academics with interests in Africa–China relations. The symposium consists of nine articles by senior and early career scholars based in China, Nigeria, Ghana, Tanzania, the United Kingdom, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. It offers a reevaluation and reassessment of China–Africa engagements considering the tumultuous global crises. It further examines how African and Chinese actors beyond the state are exercising agency and influencing a reconsideration of China–Africa engagements in economic and infrastructure development, technology, and entrepreneurship.

OUTLINE OF THE SYMPOSIUM

There is a consensus among China–Africa scholars that Africa should exercise more agency to achieve its own objectives and fully benefit from its engagement with Beijing. Although the

Forum on China–Africa Cooperation promotes multilateralism, China’s engagements with Africa countries are bilateral, making it difficult for Africa countries to negotiate better deals with Beijing. Folashade Soule provides a typological analysis of agency in Africa’s international relations. She argues that there must be a constructive typology method to categorize the different agentic behaviors of African actors in their relations with foreign actors. This is critical for demonstrating the nature of African agency, and in some sense, de-Westernize the concept of agency by showing that agency is “pluri-international, polymorphous and goes beyond resistance and oppositional postures.” Building on Soule’s article, Hodzi examines how Paul Kagame and Cyril Ramaphosa, in their capacities as chairpersons of the African Union conceptualized the Belt and Road Initiative, and the ways in which their conceptualizations of the BRI shape the continent’s engagement with China. In doing that, Hodzi demonstrates how the two chairpersons sought to influence understandings of BRI among AU member states with the objective to maximize Africa gains from BRI and harness it to achieve autonomy and reduce dependency on external actors for financing Africa’s infrastructure and development agendas. By doing that, they sought to harness African countries to engage China from a multilateral rather than solely bilateral level, thereby increasing Africa’s leverage and agency.

Taking the exploration of African agency further, Isaac Nunoo and Justice Kwabena Atenka examine how the media and civil society organizations in Ghana exercise agency in challenging and shaping Ghana–China relations. Usually, in the discourse on China–Africa relations, the role of non-State actors such as local groupings and CSOs is neglected, and by centering the voices of CSOs, the media, and local groupings, Nunoo and Atenka demonstrate how these non-State actors play a critical role in influencing how China is engaged with, tolerated, or resisted by some communities in Ghana. Yet still, this agency is not without controversy because as they discover, some media, CSOs and local communities are co-opted by Chinese actors or instrumentally use the Chinese to achieve their own objectives, mostly political. In the end, the transformative agency of these non-State actors is challenged.

The deficiencies of agency by African actors are reflected in the continent’s dependence on external financing for its development and reliance on foreign models of development. Yabo Wu questions the narrative that Chinese technology firms are agents of the Chinese government promoting the Chinese development model in Africa. Based on interviews with key informants working in Chinese technology firms operating in Kenya, Wu argues that rather than acting as agents of the Chinese government, these firms adapt digital models that worked in China to the suit the local Kenyan market and enhance their market penetration. The objective is therefore profit maximization rather than promoting the Chinese development model on behalf of the Chinese government.

In their evaluation of China–Ethiopia relations and industrial development, John Aberg and Haftom Kahsay question the ability of the Ethiopian government to achieve its objective of becoming the manufacturing hub and a middle-income country by 2025 by following the Chinese development

trajectory. Ethiopia, at least under Meles Zenawi, described itself as a “developmental state.” They argue that a collective of shortcomings such as political allocation of industrial parks, few domestic backward linkages and dependence on foreign suppliers, overreliance on preferential trade regimes, non-existent regional value chains, limited knowledge transfer, high labor turnover, underdeveloped infrastructure, war, civil strife, and instability militate against Ethiopia’s industrial transformation instead benefiting the Chinese companies investing in Ethiopia’s industries.

Advancing the developmental state theme, Xiaochen Hou conducts a comparison of China and South Africa’s development banks and developmental state strategies. She observes that the South African government has incorporated the concept of the “developmental state” into its national growth strategy in the National Development Plan 2030, which formally sets out its intention to develop South Africa into a “capable and developmental state.” By comparing South Africa’s development bank with China Development Bank, Hou explores whether the South African Development Bank can promote South Africa’s structural transformation and economic development to achieve the goal of a developmental state from the perspective of industrial policy and to analyze the main factors affecting the role of the bank. In sum, the article argues that the domestic power structure and the degree of openness have an important influence on the role of the South African development bank.

Before the COVID pandemic, China was second to France as the most popular destination for African students in higher education, with almost 82,000 students. However, as demonstrated by Heidi Østbø Haugen in her article, this number dropped drastically and has not reached its prepandemic levels. Exploring the implications of the drop in international students studying in Chinese universities, Haugen questions China’s narrative of international solidarity directed at gaining political influence through international students’

mobility to China because upon reopening post-COVID, Beijing indicated a restriction for students from low-income countries.

The final article examines the utility of racial delineations in understanding the current global order and how its Eurocentric views can be challenged with the rise of non-Western powers. To do that, the article centers on Charles Henry Pearson’s understandings of global power shifts through the lens of W. E. B. Du Bois’s concept of the Global Color Line. Nyelade’s article therefore provides us with critical insights on how global discontent is reflective of the decline of the West and rise of the non-Western powers, which challenges the foundations of the current global order that was anchored on racial hierarchies and delineations. This conclusion by Nyelade provides a basis for exploring how racial hierarchies may help us to examine the asymmetries among countries in the Global South and how racial hierarchies are replicated in South–South engagements. Nyelade therefore provides the final remarks to this symposium, giving us something to consider on how the position of the African continent in the international system may not change much regardless of the prevailing discontent and attempts to reconstruct the global order to reflect the new balance of power.


CONFLICTS OF INTEREST


The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■


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