

Developing a common African approach to China in a divided world

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African states must carefully maintain ties with countries across prevailing geopolitical divides. With China facing increased scrutiny and criticism from the United States and its allies, Africa's relations with Beijing are being closely observed. This report discusses the need for a comprehensive common African approach towards China, focusing on critical discussion points that policymakers should consider.

Recommendations

- ▶ Continental or regional approaches could be taken to produce a common African framework for engaging with China. The AU's Agenda 2063 and the AfCFTA can serve as the foundation at the continental level. Regional economic communities could use their respective development plans to develop a common position among members.
- ▶ The principles embodied in the AU's Constitutive Act should serve as the guiding principles for anchoring an African framework towards China.¹
- ▶ Deliberations on a continental framework would best be led by the African Union (AU) Commission and African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) Secretariat. The AU can lead on political, social, environmental and security issues and the AfCFTA on trade and economic development. A coordination and research unit consisting of AU Commission and AfCFTA Secretariat representatives could lead deliberations.
- ▶ African agency at the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) should be enhanced. Led by the AU Reforms Advisory Committee, the aim should be to have a more unified African voice in FOCAC and other multilateral Africa-China forums to streamline and articulate African priorities. Importantly, civil society needs to have a larger presence at FOCAC to represent public interests and ensure that African governments adequately prioritise and advocate for citizens' interests.
- ▶ African states, regional economic communities, and the AU must harmonise their engagements with China through the China-Africa Peace and Security Forum and China's Global Security Initiative. The aim should be to continue leveraging finance, technology, and capacity-building resources to address security matters.
- ▶ To help develop African policy on China and inform discussions with Chinese stakeholders, databases at national, regional and continental level are needed on official declarations, agreements and research. With the help of researchers, academics and think tanks, research units can be set up to inform decision making.
- ▶ Regional and continental frameworks should be reviewed every three years and updated before the tri-annual FOCAC conference. This would ensure they are continuously adapting to changes in relations, international dynamics and evolving African and Chinese interests.
- ▶ An African network of advisory groups at continental, regional and national levels should be established to assist in formulating, drafting and updating policies towards China. To avoid bureaucratic headaches and coordination complications, advisory groups should consist of a few select individuals who provide strategic foresight and analysis to guide a common African approach towards China.

Introduction

Words such as ‘transition’, ‘strategic unease’, ‘geopolitical tension’, ‘geo-strategy’, ‘uncertainty’, ‘de-risking’, and ‘unpredictability’ have come to characterise an international system leaning towards multipolarity. Here the diffusion of power, a mounting challenge to the rules-based order, and retreat from multilateralism in favour of isolationism has given rise to a *realpolitik* international climate.

In a little over a decade, the international liberal order – that the United States (US) (and its Western allies) built and moulded to work in their favour after the Cold War – is being significantly challenged by the re-emergence of China and Russia. They seem to be bent on ensuring that the international community (no matter how much it may disapprove) respects their political ideologies, trade and economic approaches, and military might.²

Reminiscent of the Cold War climate that once engulfed the world, some argue that the ‘great game’ is back

As states attempt to navigate an international system in flux, not only must they grapple with multiple environmental, economic, health, and social challenges. They also have to respond to increasing tensions between the West (the US and its North Atlantic Treaty Organization allies) and revisionist powers like China and Russia. Reminiscent of the Cold War climate that once engulfed the world, some argue that the ‘great game’ is back, and all great and emerging powers³ are competing to shape and influence a new world order that works to their advantage.

In this regard, Africa has once again emerged as a geopolitical battleground where major and revisionist global powers are vying to secure African states’ political support in shaping the future of the international order.

Concurrently, a renewed scramble for access to Africa’s natural resources (especially critical minerals for low-carbon energy transitions) and emerging markets with an expanding consumerist base is under way. In this context, amid geopolitical tensions heightened

by the Russia-Ukraine war, African officials must consider how they carefully balance, and at the same time advance, relations with countries of varying geopolitical dispositions for their respective countries’ developmental benefit.

Africa-China ties: a perceived challenge for the West

Mindful of the West’s colonial and imperial legacy in Africa as well as its own experience of Western subjugation, China has used anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism to serve as common denominators in building Sino-Africa relations. Over time this has significantly garnered favour across the region. Unlike the West’s often paternalistic and condescending disposition towards Africa, China’s approach has been based on equality and mutual respect.

Based on south-south solidarity, China has championed (when it is in their interests) several African interests in international fora. For example, Chinese representatives have regularly voiced their support for greater African representation at the United Nations (UN) Security Council and G20. They’ve also urged more African countries to join the World Trade Organization to influence and shape global trade rules.

As the West – led by the US – looks to re-engage and strengthen its influence in Africa, it faces a significant challenge from China.⁴ Historically, Africa has not been significantly prioritised in the US’s foreign policy because it was never really considered a region of importance to Washington.

Aside from a region for great power competition during the Cold War and another front where America’s Global War on Terror had to contain and confront terrorist activities, Washington never really prioritised developing a comprehensive policy on Africa. This is because those informing policy were mired in outdated thinking that viewed Africa as a “region apart,” divorced from the developments in other areas of the world.⁵ As such, the US’s policy priorities towards the region ‘were almost exclusively about addressing local issues on the continent and often were oblivious to Africa’s sway in the international system.’⁶

The US’s relations with African countries were strained considerably under President Donald Trump’s leadership.

This was arguably the US's most Africa-adverse administration; during this period, Africa was barely prioritised in the US's foreign policy.⁷ Now, aware of Africa's geopolitical influence (in light of the Russia-Ukraine war) and its growing geo-economic importance, under President Joe Biden's leadership, the US is seeking to re-engage with Africa and compete for the continent's favour.⁸

Alongside other global development initiatives – like the European Union's (EU) Global Gateway (established in 2021), which rivals China's Belt and Road Initiative – the US launched the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment with the G7 in 2022. How these initiatives will manifest in Africa – especially if they can really challenge the Chinese in the region's infrastructure sector – remains to be seen. These Western-led global development initiatives are relatively new and will require significant support and investment in Africa to seriously demonstrate erstwhile engagement with the continent.

Unlike the US, China has spent the past two decades nurturing its relationship with Africa to the point where it is considered among many African countries to be

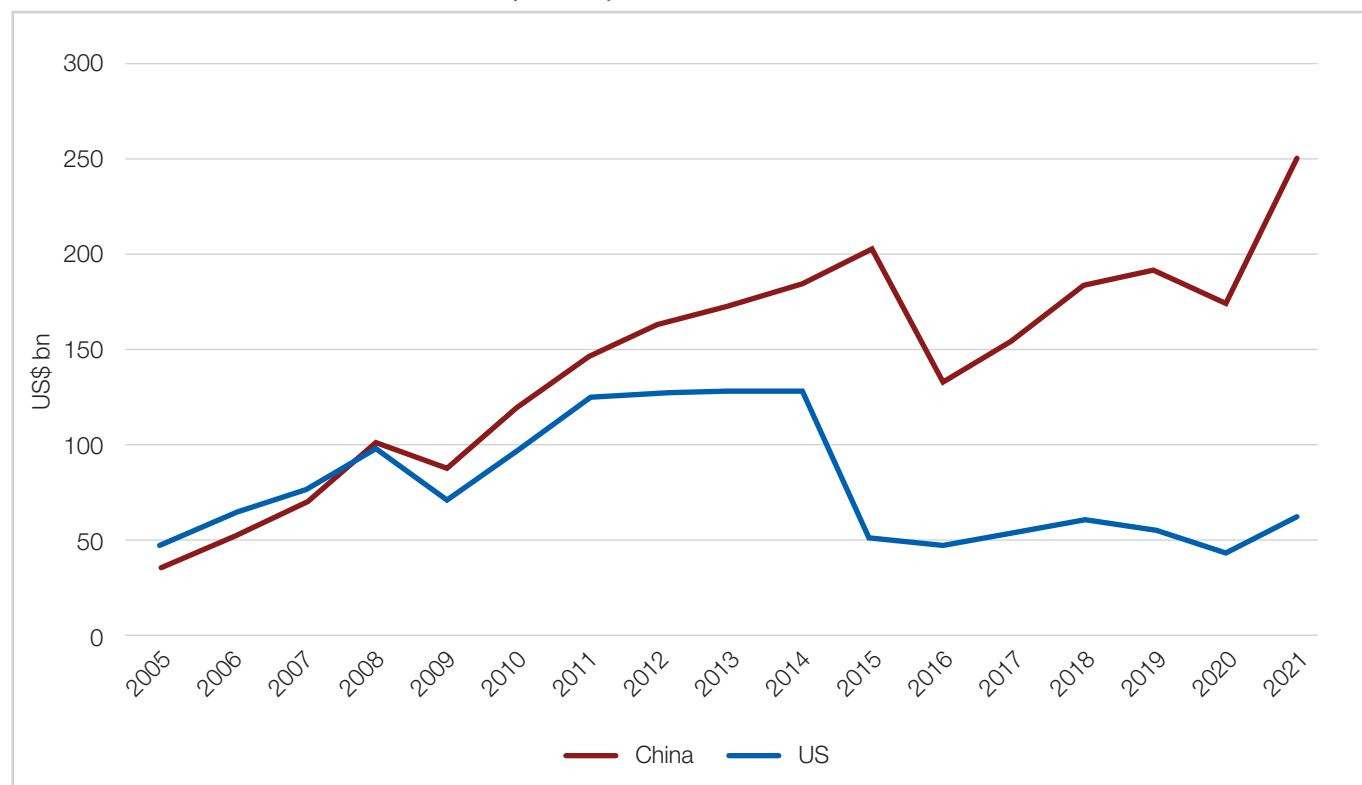
the development partner of choice. It has consistently engaged with the region on several economic fronts. No other country can match China's economic engagement on the continent in trade, investment, and development finance; it significantly outperforms the US in trade and foreign direct investment (FDI) flows to Africa (see Chart 1 and Chart 2).

No other country matches China's economic engagement in Africa on trade, investment and development finance

Before China's economic reform and opening up in the late 1970s, China's trade deals with Africa were politically advantageous but amounted to marginal trade volumes. Its trade relations with Africa gained more prominence only after the establishment of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000.

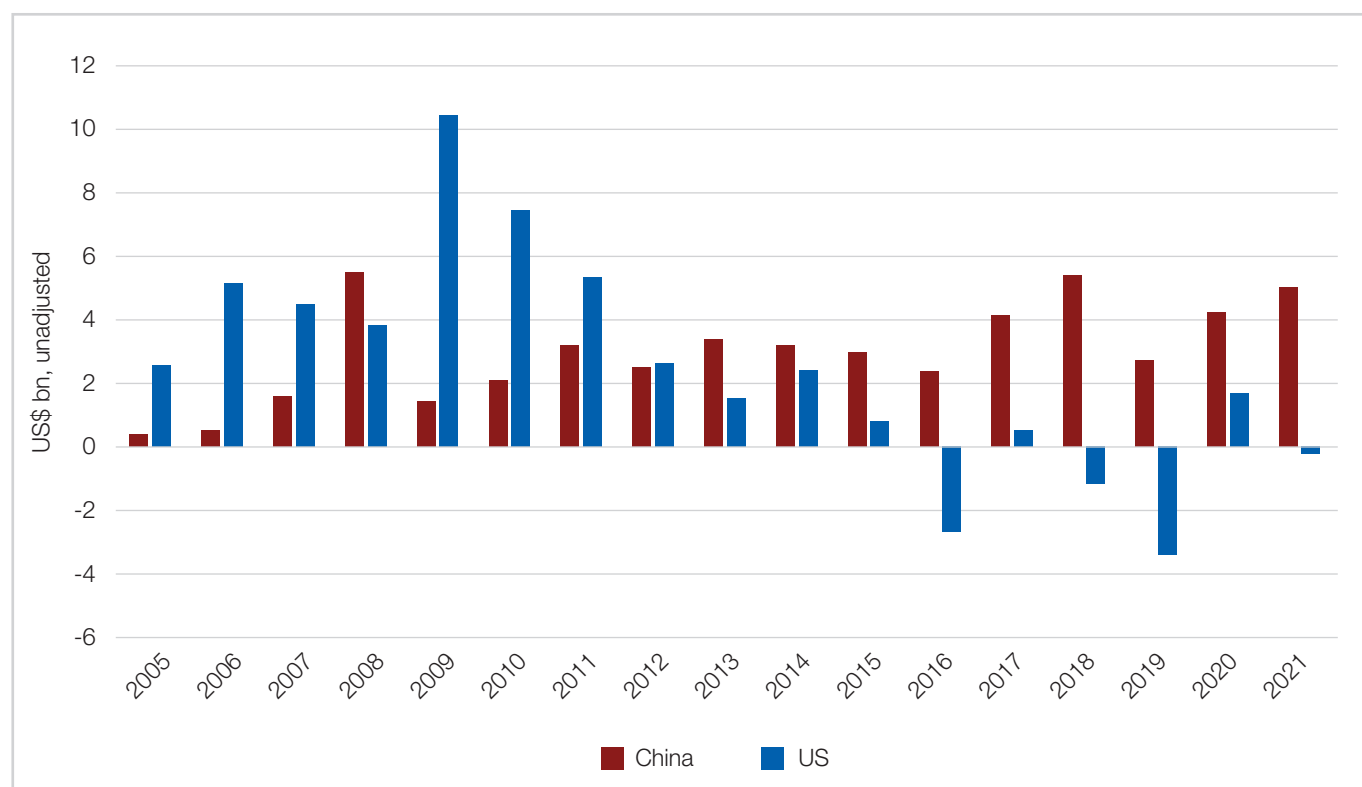
In the late 1990s and early 2000s, in desperate need of resources to fuel and sustain its economic development and growth, China deployed its state-owned companies

Chart 1: US-Africa vs China-Africa trade (US\$ bn)



Source: China Africa Research Initiative

Chart 2: Chinese FDI vs US FDI flow to Africa



Source: China Africa Research Initiative

under its Go Out Policy (or Going Out Policy) to Africa (and other regions). This was to secure the necessary hydrocarbon and natural resources it needed for its burgeoning economy.

Through significant resources-for-investment deals in Africa's oil and mining sectors, China secured advantageous trade deals, and in 2009 it surpassed the US as Africa's largest sovereign trading partner. In 2021, the total trade volume between China and Africa was estimated at US\$254.5 billion.⁹

China's trade with its top 10 African trading partners (South Africa, Nigeria, Angola, Egypt, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Ghana, Algeria, Kenya, Tanzania, and Morocco) amounted to approximately US\$175.3 billion. This made up an estimated 68.9% of the total trade volume between China and Africa collectively.¹⁰ South Africa is China's largest trading partner in Africa followed by Nigeria, Angola and Egypt.¹¹

Although energy, mineral, and metal resources make up most of China's investment on the continent, other 'forms of resource-based ... engagement with Africa

play an important part in shaping trade and investment ties' – such as logging and timber, agriculture, fisheries, and textile industries.¹² Since the late 2000s and early 2010s, Chinese companies began investing in Africa's infrastructure, manufacturing, telecommunications, and agricultural sectors.

From 2003–2020, China's FDI stocks in Africa grew nearly a hundredfold, reaching US\$43.4 billion in 2020

By 2013, Chinese FDI flows to Africa surpassed those of the US,¹³ and in 2016 China was the single largest contributor of FDI capital and jobs in Africa.¹⁴ Between 2003 and 2020, Chinese FDI stocks in Africa grew nearly a hundredfold, from US\$490 million (in 2003) to US\$43.4 billion (in 2020), peaking at US\$46.1 billion in 2018 and placing China as Africa's fourth largest investor.¹⁵

In 2020, Chinese FDI stock in Africa's construction sector reached US\$15.2 billion, accounting for 34.9% of total

FDI stock, and mining apportioned 20.6%, followed by the manufacturing sector, which accounted for 14.1%.¹⁶ African countries with special economic zones (especially developed by China), high economic growth rates, or large domestic markets have mostly attracted Chinese FDI for their manufacturing sectors.¹⁷

In the context of Beijing's international trade relations, Africa remains a small trade partner for China compared to Asia and Europe.¹⁸ Its trade relations with Africa are 'highly selective and specialised and ... determined by the imperatives of the Chinese political economy.'¹⁹

Relative factor endowments of labour, capital, and resources shape China-Africa trade patterns and, individually, each African country's trade arrangements with China. In 2021, Africa's exports to China reached US\$105.9 billion, a 43.7% increase from 2020.²⁰ South Africa and Angola made up 51% of the total exports from the continent at US\$33 billion and US\$21 billion, respectively.²¹ In the same year, Chinese exports to Africa totalled US\$148.3 billion, an increase of 29.9% from 2020.²²

Nigeria, South Africa, and Egypt are the top three importers of Chinese products in Africa. For 2021, they each respectively imported US\$22.7 billion, US\$21.2 billion, and US\$18.3 billion of Chinese goods.²³ From a continental perspective – looking at the China-Africa trade relationship with all 54 African states grouped together – trade is generally balanced. Yet stark differences become apparent when Chinese trade data is analysed on country-by-country basis; many African countries have substantial trade deficits with China.

Based on comparative advantage, the trade balances between China and many African states convey a lopsided relationship favouring China.²⁴ Trade between the two regions seems to be dichotomous in nature.²⁵ China's exports to Africa are diversified, while African exports to China are generally limited to primary commodities. Mineral products, oil, base metals, precious stones and metals, and wood products make up most of China's imports from Africa. On the other hand, China's exports to Africa consist of electrical equipment and machinery, textiles, garments, and new technology developments.²⁶

Essentially, China-Africa trade maintains the 'classical skewed' trade pattern in which Africa remains the

supplier of raw materials in exchange for (value-added) manufactured products from China.²⁷ To address this and ensure that trade with China benefits and contributes to Africa's economic development, African trade policies should not avoid setting conditions for trade with China (and other countries). In this regard, in assessing different industries and sectors, policymakers need to develop specific value-added regulations and minimum value-added thresholds that should be met before exportation.

Trade patterns are skewed, with Africa supplying raw materials in exchange for China's manufactured goods

Leveraging China's expertise in manufacturing and developing an export-led economy, Africans can partner with the Chinese to build processing and refining plants for raw commodities to undergo some value addition before being exported to China (and other regions). The Chinese have already demonstrated an interest in building manufacturing-related infrastructure, such as special economic zones, and partaking in technology and skills transfers. Building on this, African policymakers should steer engagements with the Chinese to prioritise building regional value chains.

China is also Africa's largest sovereign lender of development finance, providing massive loans to many African countries. Between 2008 and 2018, it extended US\$148 billion in loans to African nations.²⁸ Angola, Ethiopia, Zambia, Kenya, Nigeria, Cameroon, Sudan, the DRC, Ghana, and Côte d'Ivoire are the top 10 recipients of Chinese loans.²⁹ However, loans from Beijing have been criticised for lacking transparency, making it difficult to assess how funds are used and spent.³⁰ Accessing Chinese finance is especially appealing to governments that want to avoid adhering to Western pressure to be more transparent in order to access their capital.³¹

China has also been accused of being a 'shrewd negotiator' – willing to impose stringent conditions on sovereign borrowers to secure repayment priority over other creditors.³² However, the Chinese have vehemently discredited this accusation.³³

China is willing to pursue economic dealings with African countries provided they recognise and do not challenge or dispute its One China policy.³⁴ The One China principle is a fundamental part of China's foreign policy; it is the only political condition for Beijing's cooperation with most developing countries. Through chequebook diplomacy, China has gained almost all African countries' support for its One China policy, leaving Taiwan (as of 2023) with one African ally – Eswatini (formerly Swaziland).

If African countries choose not to adhere to this principle, China could threaten to cut off all trade ties and halt lending and developmental support. This would undoubtedly have significant ramifications for a country's economy and development.

Alongside the Belt and Road Initiative, Beijing's Global Development Initiative (GDI) provides another vector of cooperation between China and Africa. Announced in September 2021 at the 76th session of the UN General Assembly, the GDI's primary goals are to help the UN achieve its 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, assist countries (especially developing countries) in responding to the economic shock caused by COVID-19, and focus on 'stronger, greener and healthier development'.³⁵

Under the impetus of the GDI, the Chinese are likely to get more involved in Africa's renewable energy sector. They could invest in more renewable energy and greener infrastructure, prioritise technology and skills transfer in this sector, and potentially partner with countries to achieve their low-carbon energy transitions. Chinese development banks could focus more on increasing climate finance to the region – especially prioritising climate mitigation, adaption, and resilience projects that improve Africa's capacity to respond to the harsh impacts of climate change.

In addition to steadily building economic relations with Africa, China has gradually increased its security footprint in the region, becoming more embedded in peace and security matters across the continent. It has adopted a dual strategy towards African security matters, to address its economic and security concerns while simultaneously seeking to expand its influence across the region.

On the one hand, it has contributed to current multilateral structures and mechanisms aimed at promoting

peace and security, and it has actively engaged in peacekeeping operations organised by the UN in various African regions.³⁶ Additionally, it has participated in UN efforts to combat piracy off the Horn of Africa.

On the other hand, China has augmented its military footprint by actively participating in bilateral interactions with African nations, involving joint drills, military training, the development of military infrastructure, and multilaterally through newly created China-Africa forums focused on security matters.³⁷ By opening its first military base in Djibouti in 2017, alongside military bases of the US, Germany, France, Spain, Italy, the United Kingdom (UK), Japan, and Saudi Arabia, China signalled to the international community its emboldened security presence not just in Africa, but also internationally.

More than 80% of Chinese peacekeepers have been deployed in Africa since China first took part in UN peacekeeping operations in 1990.³⁸ As of 2021, more than 1 800 Chinese peacekeepers were part of peacekeeping missions in Mali, the DRC, South Sudan, and Western Sahara.³⁹ Among the permanent members of the UN Security Council, China has the largest number of peacekeepers on the continent.⁴⁰

Of the five permanent UN Security Council members, China has the most peacekeepers deployed in Africa

China's position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council and its growing economic presence in Africa has made it difficult for Beijing to stick to its non-interference principle,⁴¹ which is a key component of its foreign policy. Its approach to peace and security issues in Africa has evolved from disengagement to sponsoring UN Security Council resolutions that set up peacekeeping missions and establish Chinese peacekeeping training centres, and direct participation in peacekeeping missions in several African countries.⁴²

China's transition from maintaining a detached attitude on African security matters to actively engaging and addressing peace and security-related concerns is particularly notable in the evolution of its approach towards Sudan's civil war, which broke out in December 2013. Initially, China maintained

a non-interventionist approach and vetoed efforts to impose sanctions and pressure the regime in Khartoum. However, as it assumed a more significant role in the conflict, it began facilitating the deployment of peacekeeping missions in Sudan.⁴³

China has also been actively involved in anti-piracy operations. Since 2009, it has participated in the UN-led operation to combat piracy off the coast of Somalia in the Gulf of Aden. Since then, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy port visits in Africa have occurred often. In 2014, PLA contingents carried out their first ever joint drills with Tanzania. And in 2018, the PLA Navy's anti-piracy units visited ports in Cameroon, Gabon, Ghana and Nigeria, and performed joint military exercises with these countries.⁴⁴

China's revisionist vision of an international system resonates with many African states

At FOCAC's fifth ministerial meeting in 2012, China also unveiled the new Initiative for a China-Africa Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Security.⁴⁵ This initiative aims to deepen cooperation with the AU and its member states on peace and security issues, provide financial support for AU peacekeeping missions and the development of the African Standby Force, and train more AU peacekeepers and officials in peace and security affairs.⁴⁶

China has contributed significant funding to support the AU's African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA). In 2015, during a speech to the UN General Assembly, President Xi Jinping pledged US\$100 million in military assistance over five years to support APSA through initiatives such as the African Standby Force and African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crises. And at the 2015 FOCAC Summit, held in South Africa, China pointed out that some of the funds would be used to create a China-Africa Peace and Security Fund. This would be channelled towards military assistance and the creation of 50 programmes in law and order, peacekeeping, anti-piracy and counter-terrorism.⁴⁷

Although Chinese funding to support peace and security initiatives on the continent is impressive, there is cause

for some scepticism. With China being Africa's second largest arms supplier, it could potentially leverage its financial support for African peacekeeping initiatives for arms transfers to various countries, especially to fragile and authoritarian states. The Chinese do not insist on their customers having a good track record on human rights or democratic conditions.⁴⁸ Chinese arms have been reportedly used in some of the continent's most protracted conflicts in Cote d'Ivoire, Sierra Leone, the DRC, and Sudan.⁴⁹

In February 2023, China officially established the Global Security Initiative (GSI). The GSI concept paper published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs outlines China's vision for 'common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security.' The GSI 'represents a more coordinated effort by Beijing to promote its brand of security assistance globally.'⁵⁰ Gambian Defence Minister Sering Modou Njie proposed at the 3rd China-Africa Peace and Security Forum⁵¹ that the GSI creates another domain for China-Africa cooperation on peace and security matters.

However, given that this initiative is relatively new, it remains unclear how it will manifest in Africa – its impact can be fruitful if it delivers 'security projects that empower "African solutions" while being cognisant of the continent's governance challenges'⁵² and complements existing China-Africa peace and security initiatives.

China: a revisionist power

As China has risen to become a formidable power, it has promoted and pushed for a multipolar system in which the sovereignty of each nation is respected. Moreover, it has consistently voiced its disapproval of hegemony and neo-imperialist-like structures that seek to maintain the US-led hegemonic world order. China's revisionist vision of an international system resonates with, and is supported by, many African states on the sidelines of the international system, and for whom the current makeup of the international order has not significantly worked in favour of their economic development.

China has proven that developing countries do not need to adhere to Western rules, norms, and standard setting to achieve desired developmental outcomes. Instead, the Beijing Consensus, underpinned by economic

pragmatism, has shown that a socialist-communist planned economy can achieve significant economic development. This appeals to several African parties that admire the rapid development that China – led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) – accomplished by not experimenting with the Washington Consensus’ neoliberal market-based reforms prescribed by Bretton Woods Institutions. That is, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

For example, South Africa’s African National Congress expressed in a party policy document in 2015 that ‘China[’s] economic development trajectory [sic] remains a leading example of the triumph of humanity over adversity’ and that the CCP’s leadership in guiding its country’s astounding economic growth ‘should be a guiding lodestar for our own struggle.’⁵³

Taking a page out of China’s Africa playbook, over the past decade, Western countries have been courting African nations in efforts to compete with the Chinese to become Africa’s ‘partner of choice.’⁵⁴ This on almost everything from development projects to humanitarian assistance, political partnerships, and peace and security issues. However, most African countries in desperate need of developmental finance and assistance do not have the luxury of selectively prioritising relations with the West over the East, as partnerships with multiple

stakeholders that can significantly contribute to achieving developmental outcomes cannot afford to be overlooked.⁵⁵

To balance China-West relations (and potentially pursue diplomatic brinkmanship), African states should develop an approach towards China that allows them to progressively advance their Beijing relations while maintaining ties with the West. This should be done either individually or collectively, to navigate prevailing (and expanding) geopolitical rifts.

Need for an African framework towards China

Contemporary Africa-China relations have generated significant debate and discussion among academic and policymaking circles. As Sino-Africa relations have evolved, the continent has become more than simply a resource supplier for China. Over the past decade, numerous domestic political and economic factors in China have prompted Beijing to elevate relations with Africa to a ‘comprehensive strategic partnership.’ These include slowing economic growth, the need to expand into new commercial markets, and the country’s Belt and Road Initiative. This partnership was announced at the 2015 FOCAC hosted by South Africa.

The upgraded status conveys that Africa-China relations are on an equal footing and designed to be a mutually

Beijing Consensus vs Washington Consensus

The Beijing Consensus is an economic development model that was fashioned by the Chinese in the early 2000s. Unlike the Washington Consensus that was promoted by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank during the 1980s and 1990s and pushed for market-oriented reforms and liberalisation measures in developing countries, the Beijing Consensus takes a more state-led and interventionist approach to economic development and growth.

The Washington Consensus prioritises fiscal discipline, reducing government spending, deregulation, trade liberalisation, and the privatisation of state-owned enterprises. It focuses on macroeconomic stability, reducing inflation, and

attracting foreign investment. This model has been criticised for its one-size-fits-all approach, which has in many cases produced adverse social impacts and limited success in fostering economic development.

On the other hand, the Beijing Consensus prioritises long-term economic development and primarily uses strategic industrial policies and state-owned enterprises to achieve economic goals. An export-focused approach in which industrial and manufacturing development is prioritised is preferred. China’s success in rapidly developing and expanding its economy using a state-led and export-driven approach has garnered much admiration from other developing countries.

beneficial win-win relationship. However, there are multiple discrepancies in the relationship noted by commentators that indicate otherwise.⁵⁶

Relations between China and Africa are often described as asymmetrical, largely due to trade and economic imbalances and the political and cultural asymmetry between China and many African states.⁵⁷ Due to the lack (or limited forms) of African agency,⁵⁸ the relationship is mostly driven or steered by Beijing, guided by its Africa policy,⁵⁹ which ensures that Chinese interests are prioritised and addressed in engagements with African states.

The chances of having a comprehensive African framework on China by the 2024 FOCAC are slim

Although aspects of an African framework or policy towards China can be read in broader vision documents such as the African Union's (AU) Agenda 2063, Africa's implementation capacity is mostly weak.⁶⁰ The skewed relationship stems from the fact that China has a coherent African policy – the Chinese have thought carefully about what they want from relations with African states' – while most African states, on the other hand, are guided by 'ambiguity and ambivalence.'⁶¹

Africa as a whole has not given enough thought to strategically determining what 'it needs from China in the view of the many dynamics inside and outside the continent.'⁶² By now a common regional or continental position towards China that enables African countries of varying sizes, with various degrees of leverage and power, should be produced to articulate individual and collective interests. This has a bearing on how Africa is observed, studied, and sized up by global actors.

An updated China policy on Africa will likely be announced at the 2024 or 2027 FOCAC, especially if the event is elevated from a ministerial to a heads of state summit. The past two Chinese policies on Africa (2006, 2015) were both presented at heads of state summits. If African leaders want an amplified voice at FOCAC and want to ensure that many of its decisions work for the continent, a solid African framework on China (which

could be developed into a continental policy) must be in place by this time.

Given the resources that need to be mobilised and the extensive coordination and consultations between various stakeholders that will be required, the chances of having a comprehensive continental framework on China by 2024 are slim. A more manageable and realistic timeline would be to aim for the 10th FOCAC in 2027.

Developing a common African approach towards China

The end goal of developing a common African approach towards China (and towards other countries) should be to 'advance African integration as the apex of the continent's developmental agenda.'⁶³

Ultimately, the 'political will and geopolitical imagination ... of African leaders and the political class'⁶⁴ will determine if African policies on China will be produced, how comprehensive and robust they are, and whether they genuinely prioritise African interests. Below are a few critical points of thought and discussion that can inform policymaking on an African approach towards China.

Continental or regional approach?

China already has agreements with the AU and the AU Development Agency-New Partnership for Africa's Development that could be reviewed and analysed to inform a continental African framework towards China. Deliberations on producing such a framework on China should be led jointly by the AU Commission and African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Secretariat. The AUC can lead on political, social, environmental, and security issues and the AfCFTA Secretariat on trade and economic development issues.

To ensure that a framework on China aligns with efforts to achieve continental aspirations, a coordination and research unit comprising AU Commission and AfCFTA Secretariate representatives should be set up to lead consultations and deliberations. However, with many China-related agreements not publicly available, respective continental, regional, and national organisations should provide a select team of individuals from the suggested AU-AfCFTA team with clearance to access specific China-related documents needed to inform their work.

Continental plans, especially the AU's Agenda 2063 and AfCFTA Agreement, can serve as the foundation for developing a continental approach towards China. As the overarching blueprints for Africa's development, these two continental visions should shape the development of a continent-wide China framework.

A continental policy on China must be a product of careful deliberation that acknowledges what has been achieved between the two sides over the past two decades in economic, political, cultural, and peace and security cooperation. But it must also acknowledge the China-Africa relationship's shortcomings, and seek to help Africa achieve its long-term goal (envisioned in Agenda 2063) of becoming 'a strong, united, resilient, peaceful and influential global player and partner with a significant role in world affairs.'

Side events in the form of open and closed workshops and conferences can be held alongside major AU and AfCFTA events (e.g. the AU Summit, AfCFTA Council of Ministers Meetings, or AfCFTA Business Forum) to inform deliberations and contribute to crafting guidelines on how to engage with China. It is essential that the suggested events are not just talking clubs, but are structured and coordinated to ensure that meaningful suggestions and proposals are presented that could really contribute to producing a practical and pragmatic policy document on China.

However, since Africa is not homogenous, and each country has its own unique makeup, an overarching continental policy risks overlooking nuanced interests and differences. Moreover, the time, effort, and resources required to coordinate all 54 African countries to develop a genuinely Pan-African framework would be complex and challenging, making it a Herculean task. It may be more strategically prudent to develop regional-level frameworks of engagement or policies towards China. In this context, hosting China in regional economic community (REC) summits may be more beneficial than the tri-annual FOCAC Summit.

Agenda setting: FOCAC or African REC+China summits?

Despite other international cooperation platforms with China (such as the BRICS Plus) and other Chinese-led vectors of cooperation, notably the Belt and

Road Initiative, Global Security Initiative, and Global Development Initiative, FOCAC will likely remain the pre-eminent structure to steer and shape Africa-China relations. FOCAC has no permanent secretariat. Instead, it is organised and coordinated by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which assumes most of the responsibility for agenda setting and drafting joint declarations and action plans.

FOCAC – despite China's rhetoric on equality and south-south cooperation – perpetuates an imbalanced power dynamic that resembles a conventional donor-recipient relationship.⁶⁵ This arrangement allows China to capitalise on and maximise its influence.

FOCAC will likely remain the pre-eminent structure to steer and shape Africa-China relations

Because FOCAC essentially encourages competition among African countries for development finance, it has made African policy coordination challenging. This has affected the capacity of African countries to leverage their agency to exert their diplomatic muscles and advance their own agenda. Given this, a continental approach towards China should push for reforms allowing for more African agency at FOCAC. Efforts to reform FOCAC to be more inclusive of African views and interests could be led by the AU Reforms Advisory Committee.

The aim should be to have a more unified African voice in FOCAC and FOCAC-linked events and activities and other multilateral Africa-China forums (e.g. the China-Africa Business Council) to streamline and clearly articulate African priorities and interests. However, this requires that Africa's ruling elites prioritise a 'strategically focused approach and better coordination.'⁶⁶ The onus is on African officials to work harder to ensure that FOCAC truly advances African development and prosperity through joint agenda setting with the Chinese.⁶⁷

In this context, civil society should have a more substantial presence at FOCAC to represent public interests and keep African elites in check. This to prevent or deter them from harnessing 'Chinese largesse to build

patronage networks, strengthen their political positions, and maximize self-enrichment.⁶⁸

To enhance African agency, clearly express African interests, and project a more unified continental approach at FOCAC (and other Africa+1 summits), a delegation from the AU (including current, former, and incoming AU chairs, the AU Commission and chairpersons of the eight official regional economic communities (RECs)) should act on behalf of all African countries, as suggested in the Kagame Report.⁶⁹ This strategy will allow for a more unified African voice and serve African interests and needs better.

Individually, African governments are responsible for maximising benefits from FOCAC through better governance, regulatory frameworks, and the development of efficient and effective business environments.⁷⁰

Broad FOCAC declarations on development cooperation in every sector and industry are ineffectual

Broad and sweeping FOCAC declarations and statements that try to be all-encompassing to address development cooperation between Africa and China in every sector and industry is admirable, but ineffectual. Details on how to go about achieving and implementing development projects are often overlooked. It seems to be more of a behind-the-scenes (of FOCAC) concern involving deliberations and consultation between various African and Chinese government departments.

While this is the case with most Africa+1 summits, more attention needs to be given to ironing out the finer details of agreed deals and projects at these meetings to improve organisational and implementation capacity on both sides. Not only is more clarity around project development and financing needed, but which projects are part of FOCAC, and what monitoring and evaluation measures (if any) are in place to track the development of FOCAC projects, must be stipulated.

FOCAC could be more impactful if it directed Chinese and African efforts and resources to focus on a few pressing issues for the continent. It would be prudent

for African countries at a continental and regional level to identify specific issues and projects tailored for each Africa+1 Summit. Three to four should be identified by the African side and presented at Africa+1 summits, outlining where and how cooperation with China (and others) would be most beneficial. This should be under the themes of climate change and sustainable development, peace and security, trade and infrastructure development, medical and public health, and economic development.

The aim for Africans should be to ensure that these Africa+1 summits are not siloed, but complement each other to benefit the continent. This will show the international community that Africans can play a major role in strategic agenda setting at Africa+1 summits and use each one significantly for specific developmental purposes.

For a more nuanced approach to cooperation between China and Africa, REC+1 summits or conferences should be developed for African countries from various regions to engage robustly with the Chinese. By taking an Africa+1 summit approach, all African countries are 'painted with the same brush.'

As noted earlier, Africa is not a homogenous region. By adopting an REC+1 approach, the Chinese (and other countries) could gain a more granular understanding of each region's specific economic, social, and security needs and development aspirations. This would allow agreements and deals to be developed and structured more to the needs of each country within a specific REC.

The eight RECs, as recognised by the AU, should be prioritised for REC+1 summits; and deliberations from these summits could feed into a continental-level framework on China and bigger Africa+1 summits such as FOCAC. However, the main issues that need to be addressed are how to deal with countries (such as the DRC and Kenya) that have overlapping REC memberships, and how to engage with RECs with weak organisational and institutional capacity.

Aligning Chinese and African development and security interests

To achieve win-win outcomes, an approach towards China (whether regional or continental) should seek to achieve synergy between Chinese and African

development and security interests. African policymakers should keep in mind that China's overarching long-term development ambition is to achieve its two centenary goals. Using Agenda 2063 (at the continental level) and various REC development plans or long-term visions (at the regional level), African officials should focus on achieving synergy in areas of shared strategic convergency with China's two goals.⁷¹

For example, industrialisation relates to Chinese considerations to relocate some of their industrial overcapacity to Africa and help African countries produce value-added products for exportation. Infrastructure development speaks to opportunities for Chinese construction companies operating in a saturated domestic market, while improving intra-African trade and bolstering African exports to China. And partnering on reforms at international organisations speaks to China and Africa's preference for an international order that is fairer and more inclusive of global south countries.⁷²

A common African approach is vital as other global powers court African states to advance their own interests

Regarding Africa-China cooperation on peace and security, African states, RECs, and the AU must harmonise their approach and engagements with China to leverage finance, technology, and capacity-building resources to address traditional and non-traditional security threats and issues.⁷³ To achieve this, 'more focused and regular joint dialogues on African [peace] and security matters involving the AU, RECs, and China' could be held, especially on the sidelines of the China-Africa Peace and Security Forum.⁷⁴

The AU and RECs can further strengthen their security partnership with China in soft skills. This could cover improving security and military knowledge (on training, tactics, and strategy) and technology transfers.⁷⁵ African policies on China should carefully consider how best to engage with Beijing on peace and security issues while simultaneously avoiding being perceived by the West as allying strongly with China. This is in the interest of maintaining and preserving good relations with Western counterparts, especially the US, UK, and EU, which are

three significant trade partners. Proposals of trilateral peace and security cooperation (for example, AU-EU-China) could help with international optics and be more beneficial for Africa at large.

Conclusion

In a vacillating geopolitical climate reminiscent of the Cold War, it's become increasingly imperative for African states to be adept in diplomatic gymnastics. This while they attempt to maintain and leverage partnerships across prevailing geopolitical divides with the Chinese (and Russians) on the one hand, and the US and its allies on the other.

As the world's major powers reconfigure their foreign policies towards addressing more immediate and self-serving priorities, African countries need to do the same. They must ensure their agency in shaping important continental and international development and peace and security concerns isn't overlooked or diluted by the miasma of great power competition. In this regard, drawing on the adage that a united Africa is a strong Africa, African countries must speak with one voice. This will make it difficult for countries (such as China) that often have the upper hand in bilateral dealings with (comparatively weaker) African states to push their interests and agendas.

To this end, a common African approach (either at a continental or regional level) towards China is necessary now more than ever, as great and emerging powers seek to gain favour with African states to advance their economic and geopolitical interests. For the AU's development aspirations for Africa (as encapsulated in Agenda 2063) and AfCFTA trade ambitions to be achieved, Africa must prioritise strategic diplomatic engagements with China (and other international actors) that are informed by well-calibrated and comprehensive recommendations and prescriptions.

African officials must take more responsibility for agenda setting in engagements with the Chinese (and others), especially in uni-multilateral settings. This will support African stakeholders in engaging strategically with the Chinese (and other foreign counterparts), ensuring that African development and security interests are prioritised and duly considered in deliberations and negotiations.

Notes

- 1 These principles include: sovereign equality of states; respect for national sovereignty; enhancing democratic governance and popular participation; accelerating regional and continental integration; promoting peace, stability, and security; encouraging international cooperation; and sustainable development. See: S Zondi, *The Need for Africa's Common Policy Towards China: A Decolonial Afrocentric Perspective*, in: *Africa-China Cooperation: Towards an African Policy on China*, edited by P Mthembu and F Mabera, p43, Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021.
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