

China-Africa Relations: A Critical Analysis of Neo-colonialism and Development

Olatunji Olateju | Dotun Adebisi

¹Achievers University

²Post-graduate student of International Relations at the Department of International Relations of Achievers University, Owo in Nigeria

Received 01-06-2025

Revised 27-06-2025

Accepted 29-06-2025

Published 05-07-2025



Copyright: ©2025 The Authors. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Abstract:

This article examines the evolving China-Africa relationship, particularly since the 1990s, focusing on economic, political, and social dynamics. While Chinese investments have spurred significant infrastructure growth, the rise of neo-colonial concerns highlights the risks of dependency and exploitation. This study explores whether China's foreign policy in Africa contains elements of neo-colonialism, focusing on the impacts of investment, trade, and political influence on African economies and sovereignty. It aims to provide a balanced and critical analysis of the China-Africa relationship by evaluating both the positive outcomes and the potential risks for the continent's long-term development.

Introduction:

The evolution of China's role in Africa can be traced back to the 1950s, when China's engagement was driven by ideological solidarity with anti-colonial movements across the continent. However, since the 1990s, China's focus has shifted from political and military support to an economic strategy aimed at securing raw materials to fuel its growing industrial base. This shift coincided with China's own economic reforms under Deng Xiaoping, which prioritized securing international markets and resources. By 2014, over 10,000 Chinese companies were operating across Africa, and Chinese investments had risen from 2% to 55% of U.S. levels between 2000 and 2014, making China a dominant economic actor (Pilling & Feng, 2019).

While these investments have undoubtedly contributed to infrastructure development and economic growth in many African countries, they

have also sparked concerns about economic dependency. China's trade with Africa, primarily focused on the export of raw materials such as oil and minerals in exchange for manufactured goods, has raised questions about the sustainability of this relationship and whether it perpetuates Africa's historical role as a supplier of raw materials to more industrialized economies (Chen & Nord, 2017).

The burgeoning relationship has become a focal point of global debate, primarily due to its rapid expansion and the implications of China's economic presence on Africa's development trajectory. Since the 1990s, China has shifted from being a peripheral player in Africa, primarily involved in diplomatic and military cooperation, to establishing itself as a dominant economic force on the continent. This transformation has seen China emerge as Africa's largest trading partner, a

significant investor in infrastructure projects, and a crucial source of development finance. However, with this growing influence has come increasing scrutiny and debate over whether China's engagement represents a modern iteration of imperialism.

Moreover, China's provision of loans to African nations, often without the political or economic conditions that accompany Western aid, has fueled concerns about debt dependency. From 2000 to 2014, external debt to China grew from 2% to 15%, raising fears that African countries may be locked into cycles of debt that could undermine their economic sovereignty (Chen & Nord, 2017). This dynamic, coupled with China's increasing political influence through its "no strings attached" diplomacy, suggests the possibility of a new form of neo-colonialism, where economic power serves as a tool for indirect control.

Scholars and policymakers have expressed concerns that China's involvement in Africa bears the hallmarks of neo-colonialism—a term often invoked to describe power imbalances and exploitative relationships reminiscent of the colonial era. Neo-colonialism, as articulated by Kwame Nkrumah, refers to a form of indirect control where a powerful state exerts influence through economic, political, or cultural dominance, often at the expense of the sovereignty and long-term development of weaker nations. Critics argue that China's expansive investments, resource extraction, and debt-financed projects in Africa echo this model, creating a new form of dependency and potentially undermining African sovereignty and sustainable growth (Lumumba, 2011).

The central problem this article seeks to address is whether China's foreign policy in Africa embodies elements of neo-colonialism. While Chinese investments have driven significant infrastructure development and economic growth across the continent, concerns remain about the equitable distribution of these benefits and the potential risks of long-term economic dependency.

At the heart of this debate is the question of whether China's engagement with Africa is primarily driven by mutual development interests or if it serves China's strategic goals, potentially at the expense of African sovereignty and long-term growth. The rapid accumulation of debt, unequal trade relations, and China's growing political influence raise important questions about the sustainability of this relationship and its impact on Africa's ability to chart an independent development path.

Therefore, this article seeks to critically analyze the nature of China-Africa relations, asking whether China's foreign policy in Africa aligns with neo-colonial practices or represents a new development model. By examining the historical evolution of China's engagement, from the 1950s to the present, the article will explore the underlying motivations, strategies, and outcomes of this relationship. Through this analysis, the article aims to offer a nuanced understanding of the extent to which China's actions mirror the exploitative practices of former colonial powers and assess the broader implications for Africa's development. In doing this, the article aims at interrogating pertinent questions such as to what extent, if any, does China's relationship with Africa exhibit neo-colonial characteristics?, what is the nature of China's foreign policy towards Africa, particularly regarding economic, political, and social dimensions?, how has China shifted from an aid-based approach to pragmatic, "win-win" relations, and how has this affected African economies and political sovereignty?, and what are the potential risks of China's growing influence in Africa, particularly concerning debt dependency, political sovereignty, and the environment? These interrogations are done with objective of analyzing the potential risks associated with China's growing influence, particularly regarding economic dependency, political sovereignty, and environmental sustainability

Significantly, understanding China's evolving role in Africa is crucial for policymakers, scholars, and African leaders as they navigate this complex and

rapidly changing relationship. By examining China-Africa relations through the lens of neo-colonialism, this article will contribute to ongoing debates about the future of Africa's development, its economic independence, and the nature of its global partnerships. Additionally, this research will provide insights into the potential risks of creating new forms of dependency that could hinder Africa's long-term economic and political autonomy.

Conclusively, while China's engagement with Africa has brought significant economic benefits, particularly in terms of infrastructure development and investment, it also presents challenges related to debt dependency, political influence, and potential environmental degradation. This article aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the extent to which China's foreign policy in Africa aligns with neo-colonial practices and to assess the broader implications of this relationship for Africa's sovereignty and development. By examining these complex dynamics, this article will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of China-Africa relations in the 21st century.

China-Africa Relations: Evolution and Key Features:

The relationship between China and Africa has evolved over several decades, from early diplomatic support for African independence movements to the contemporary economic and trade-focused engagement. The relationship has undergone significant transformations over several decades. It evolved from ideological solidarity during the Cold War to a strategic partnership centered on trade, investment, and infrastructure development in recent years. Understanding these shifts requires an examination of key historical phases, starting from China's early engagement with Africa.

1.0 Early Engagement (1950s–1970s): China's Support for African Anti-Colonial Movements:

China's involvement in Africa began in the 1950s when it provided support to anti-colonial movements during the Cold War. China's initial

engagement was ideological, rooted in a shared experience of colonialism and imperialism (Jian & Frasher, 2014). Following the Bandung Conference of 1955, where leaders from Africa and Asia discussed anti-colonial cooperation, China began offering military and economic aid to African nations like Algeria, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe. This early relationship was framed by China as a solidarity-based alliance against Western imperialism, which helped to build diplomatic ties between the two regions (Jian & Frasher, 2014).

Glaringly, China's involvement in Africa began in the context of the Cold War, a time when newly independent nations in Africa were navigating the complex geopolitics of the post-colonial world. From the 1950s to the 1970s, China established itself as a key ally of African countries through its support of anti-colonial movements, offering military, political, and economic assistance. This early engagement was grounded in ideological solidarity, where China saw itself as part of the "Third World" and aligned with Africa in resisting Western imperialism and colonialism.

1.1 Ideological Roots of Engagement: Bandung Conference and Anti-Colonial Solidarity:

China's early involvement in Africa was deeply ideological, rooted in a shared history of colonialism and a desire to challenge Western dominance. The Bandung Conference of 1955 marked a significant milestone in this relationship. Held in Indonesia, the conference brought together leaders from Asia and Africa to discuss issues of colonialism, economic development, and cooperation among newly independent states. Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai played a prominent role at this conference, presenting China as a leader of the global anti-imperialist movement (Jian & Frasher, 2014). The Bandung Conference provided China with a platform to strengthen its ties with African nations, particularly those still struggling for independence from European colonial powers. Following the conference, China adopted a more active role in supporting African liberation movements. It provided military and financial support to independence fighters in

Algeria, Mozambique, Zimbabwe (then Southern Rhodesia), and Tanzania, among others. For instance, China supplied arms and training to the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) during its war of independence from France (Monson, 2009). This support was part of a broader strategy to forge alliances with African nations as they sought to break free from colonial rule.

China's backing of these movements was framed as an expression of international solidarity. Chinese leaders emphasized the importance of building a united front against imperialism, with Mao Zedong famously referring to Africa as part of the global "anti-imperialist front." This ideological stance resonated with many African leaders, who viewed China as a fellow developing nation that had successfully liberated itself from foreign domination and was offering support without the political strings often attached to Western aid (Alden & Large, 2011).

1.2 Strategic and Economic Considerations:

While China's early engagement with Africa was largely driven by ideological factors, there were also strategic and economic considerations. As China sought to expand its influence globally, Africa became an important arena for contesting Western and Soviet dominance. Chinese leaders viewed Africa as a potential ally in their efforts to counterbalance superpower influence and to promote South-South cooperation.

Economically, China's assistance to Africa during this period was modest compared to its later investments. Nonetheless, China's aid programs, which included infrastructure development and technical assistance, were aimed at demonstrating China's commitment to helping African nations achieve self-reliance. These early projects laid the groundwork for the more substantial economic engagement that would come in later decades (Alden & Large, 2011).

There is no doubt that period from the 1950s to the 1970s laid the foundation for China's future relationship with Africa. China's ideological alignment with African nations during their struggles for independence helped to establish

strong diplomatic ties, while its willingness to provide military and economic assistance without the conditionalities attached to Western aid made it an attractive partner for many African governments. By the late 1970s, China had cultivated a reputation as a reliable ally in Africa, one that was committed to supporting African sovereignty and development.

This early phase of engagement created a platform for the subsequent phases of China's Africa policy, where ideological solidarity would gradually give way to more pragmatic economic and strategic considerations, especially as China itself began to open up to the global economy in the late 20th century.

1.3 China's Support for Liberation Movements: Case Studies:

China's ideological commitment to anti-colonialism translated into tangible support for African liberation movements. One of the most significant examples of this support was China's involvement in the construction of the Tanzania-Zambia (TANZAM) Railway, also known as the TAZARA Railway. Completed in 1976, the railway was built with Chinese financing and technical expertise and connected landlocked Zambia with Tanzania's port of Dar es Salaam. This project was a strategic move, helping Zambia reduce its dependence on Rhodesia and South Africa, both of which were controlled by white-minority regimes at the time (Monson, 2009).

The TAZARA Railway symbolized China's commitment to African development and independence. It demonstrated China's willingness to provide aid to Africa without the conditionalities that were typically imposed by Western donors, such as structural adjustment programs or political reforms. For African countries, this "no strings attached" approach made China an attractive partner.

In addition to large-scale infrastructure projects like the TAZARA Railway, China provided direct military aid to liberation movements. In Zimbabwe, China supported the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU), supplying

weapons and training to guerrilla fighters in their struggle against British colonial rule. Similarly, in Mozambique, China aided the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO) in its fight against Portuguese colonial forces (Jian & Frasher, 2014). These interventions were crucial in helping African nationalist movements gain the resources they needed to challenge colonial powers.

1.4 Diplomatic Relations and UN Membership:

China's early engagement in Africa was also motivated by a desire to secure diplomatic recognition from newly independent African states. At the time, China faced a significant challenge in the international arena: it was not recognized by the United Nations, where the seat for "China" was held by the Republic of China (Taiwan). African support was critical in China's campaign to gain international recognition and reclaim its UN seat.

By the 1960s, many African nations had gained independence and were joining international organizations such as the UN. China actively cultivated diplomatic ties with these nations, offering economic aid and political support in exchange for their backing in international forums. This strategy paid off in 1971, when the People's Republic of China was finally admitted to the United Nations, replacing Taiwan. African nations played a pivotal role in this diplomatic victory: of the 76 votes cast in favor of China's UN membership, 26 came from African countries (Larkin, 1971). This marked a turning point in China's global diplomatic standing and strengthened its ties with Africa.

1.5 Strategic Considerations and the Cold War Context:

While China's early engagement with Africa was primarily driven by ideological motivations, there were also strategic considerations at play. The Cold War provided the backdrop for much of China's foreign policy during this period. As the global struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union intensified, China sought to expand its influence in the developing world, positioning

itself as an alternative to both Western capitalism and Soviet-style socialism (Brautigam, 2009).

For China, Africa represented a key battleground in the Cold War struggle for influence in the "Third World." By supporting African liberation movements and forging diplomatic alliances with newly independent nations, China aimed to counterbalance both Western and Soviet dominance in the region. This strategy was part of China's broader effort to build a coalition of developing nations that could challenge the existing world order and promote South-South cooperation (Jian & Frasher, 2014).

2.0 Economic Cooperation (1980s–2000): China's Shift to Economic Interests in Africa:

With the launch of China's economic reforms in the late 1970s under Deng Xiaoping, the country's focus shifted from ideological to pragmatic economic concerns. During this period, China's engagement with Africa was driven by a desire to secure access to natural resources to fuel its growing economy. The 1980s and 1990s saw China increasingly involved in trade and investment in Africa, particularly in sectors like infrastructure, mining, and oil extraction. This shift in China's Africa policy laid the foundation for its emergence as a major economic player on the continent.

2.1 Deng Xiaoping's Economic Reforms and the Shift in Africa Policy:

Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms, beginning in 1978, marked a significant turning point in China's foreign policy, including its relations with Africa. The reforms aimed to modernize China's economy through market-oriented policies and opening up to international trade and investment. As a result, China became increasingly interested in securing the raw materials and resources necessary to support its rapid industrialization and economic growth (Chen & Nord, 2017).

Africa, with its abundance of natural resources, became a key focus of China's foreign economic policy. In the 1980s, China began forging trade and investment partnerships with resource-rich African countries, particularly in oil, minerals, and

other commodities. Chinese companies, often backed by state funding, began exploring investment opportunities in Africa's energy and infrastructure sectors, laying the groundwork for what would later become a major component of China-Africa relations (Alden, 2007).

2.2 Trade and Investment: China's Growing Presence in Africa:

By the 1990s, China had solidified its presence in Africa's energy and infrastructure sectors. The Chinese government began investing heavily in countries like Angola, Sudan, and Nigeria, where oil and other mineral resources were abundant. China's growing demand for raw materials led to increased trade between China and Africa, with Chinese companies becoming major players in resource extraction industries (Chen & Nord, 2017). In Angola, for instance, China invested heavily in oil production, providing loans and technical assistance in exchange for long-term access to oil supplies.

China's investments in Africa during this period were often accompanied by development aid, usually in the form of low-interest loans. These loans were used to finance infrastructure projects such as roads, railways, and telecommunications, which were crucial for the extraction and transportation of Africa's natural resources (Taylor, 2009). Chinese companies, in return, gained access to valuable resources, creating a mutually beneficial, though sometimes imbalanced, economic relationship between China and African nations.

2.3 Infrastructure Development and Economic Cooperation:

One of the key features of China's economic engagement with Africa during this period was its focus on infrastructure development. Chinese companies became involved in building roads, railways, airports, and energy facilities, often as part of large-scale bilateral trade agreements. This focus on infrastructure not only facilitated the extraction of resources but also contributed to Africa's broader economic development, as improved infrastructure was critical for integrating

African economies into global trade networks (Alden, 2007).

One notable example of this cooperation is China's involvement in Sudan's oil industry. In the 1990s, China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) became a significant player in Sudan's oil sector, investing in oil extraction and infrastructure projects such as pipelines and refineries. In return, China secured a stable supply of oil, which was crucial for its energy security. Similar patterns of investment and resource extraction were replicated in other African countries, including Nigeria and Angola (Brautigam, 2009).

3.0 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC): Institutionalizing Economic Relations:

The establishment of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000 institutionalized the economic ties between China and Africa, formalizing a platform for regular dialogue and negotiations. FOCAC marked the beginning of a new phase in China-Africa relations, emphasizing economic cooperation, trade, and investment. The forum became an essential mechanism for coordinating China's involvement in Africa and set the stage for the rapid expansion of Chinese economic activities across the continent in the 21st century (Jauch, 2011).

Through FOCAC, China emphasized its commitment to Africa's development through mutually beneficial cooperation. By the end of the 2000s, China had become Africa's largest trading partner, surpassing the United States and the European Union. This rise in trade was driven by China's increasing demand for African raw materials, while Africa imported manufactured goods and machinery from China (Jauch, 2011).

FOCAC also facilitated China's expansion of development assistance and loans to African countries, often through concessional loans that supported infrastructure projects. These projects were critical for the development of transport networks and energy infrastructure, enabling African countries to improve their economic

capacity and integrate more fully into the global economy (Obi, 2019).

4.0 China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Its Impact on Africa:

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, further intensified its engagement with Africa, particularly in infrastructure development. The BRI, which aims to create a network of trade routes connecting Asia, Europe, and Africa, includes a significant focus on African infrastructure. Through BRI, China has invested in large-scale projects such as roads, railways, and ports, which are seen as critical for enhancing trade connectivity and economic development across the continent (Pilling & Feng, 2019).

However, as China's presence in Africa has grown, concerns about the long-term impact of these investments have emerged. Critics argue that Chinese loans and investments may lead to unsustainable levels of debt for African nations, potentially creating economic dependency on China. By 2014, over 10,000 Chinese companies were operating in Africa, contributing significantly to the continent's economic growth but also raising fears about debt accumulation and resource extraction (Chen & Nord, 2017).

5.0 Neo-Colonialism in China-Africa Relations:

China's increasing influence in Africa has sparked debates about whether its economic engagement constitutes a form of neo-colonialism. Neo-colonialism, as defined by Kwame Nkrumah, refers to the indirect control or influence that powerful nations exert over weaker countries, often through economic or political means rather than direct military control (Nkrumah, 1965). Scholars have argued that China's growing economic dominance in Africa mirrors the colonial-era relationship between European powers and their African colonies, particularly in terms of resource extraction and economic dependency.

5.1 Economic Dependency and Debt:

One of the most significant concerns about China's involvement in Africa is the risk of debt

dependency. China has provided low-interest loans to African nations for infrastructure development, but many of these countries have become increasingly indebted to China. According to a report by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), external debt to China in Africa grew from 2% in 2000 to 15% in 2014 (Chen & Nord, 2017). This rise in debt has led to concerns that African countries may become trapped in cycles of debt, increasing China's leverage over their economies.

The concept of a "debt trap" is often cited in discussions of China-Africa relations. Some scholars, such as Timothy and Recker (2013), argue that China's frequent lending practices may be designed to trap African nations in debt, thus allowing China to exert greater control over their political and economic systems. This situation resembles colonial-era economic structures, where European powers lent money to African colonies in exchange for resources, ensuring long-term dependence.

5.2 Resource Extraction and Trade Imbalance:

Another critical aspect of neo-colonialism in China-Africa relations is the trade imbalance between raw materials and finished goods. Africa exports large quantities of raw materials, such as oil, minerals, and metals, to China, while importing manufactured goods from China. This dynamic echoes the colonial model of economic exploitation, where European powers extracted raw materials from their colonies and exported finished products back to them, stunting industrial development in Africa (Chen & Nord, 2017).

6.0 Political Influence and "No Strings Attached" Diplomacy:

China's approach to diplomacy in Africa, characterized by its "no strings attached" policy, has raised concerns about its political influence. While Western countries often attach conditions related to governance and human rights to their aid, China has offered economic support without such preconditions. This approach has been particularly appealing to African governments, especially those facing criticism from the West for

authoritarian practices (Jauch, 2011). However, it has also led to concerns that African leaders may become beholden to Chinese interests, undermining local governance and accountability.

7.0 Conclusion:

China's economic engagement with Africa from the 1980s to 2000 set the foundation for its current status as a key player in the continent's economic sphere. While China's investments have significantly contributed to Africa's infrastructure development and economic growth, they have also sparked concerns over debt dependency, trade imbalances, and rising political influence. The ongoing debate about whether China's involvement constitutes a new form of neo-colonialism highlights the complexities that characterize modern China-Africa relations.

On one side, clear parallels exist between China's activities in Africa and historical colonial practices. These include the creation of economic dependency through large-scale loans, resource extraction that echoes colonial-era economic structures, and increasing political influence exerted by China on African governments through its "no strings attached" diplomacy. This model, which prioritizes economic relationships over political conditions, raises concerns about the indirect control China may be gaining. Such patterns resemble the neo-colonial model described by Kwame Nkrumah, where powerful nations exert dominance through economic influence rather than direct military or political control.

However, reducing China's engagement with Africa solely to a form of neo-colonialism overlooks the tangible benefits and developmental opportunities China has brought to the continent. Chinese investments have undoubtedly contributed to Africa's economic development, particularly through the construction of critical infrastructure such as roads, railways, ports, and power plants. These projects have improved Africa's capacity to integrate into the global economy, fostered industrialization, and created employment opportunities for local populations.

Additionally, China's approach, which avoids the imposition of political conditions, is viewed by many African leaders as a favorable alternative to Western donors, allowing them to pursue development goals without the constraints of governance reforms and conditionalities.

In conclusion, while China's presence in Africa does exhibit certain neo-colonial characteristics—particularly concerning debt accumulation and trade imbalances—it also presents opportunities for development that many African nations would not have been able to achieve through traditional Western partnerships. The relationship between Africa and China is not a one-dimensional narrative of exploitation; it is complex and offers mutual benefits. Nonetheless, African governments must tread carefully to ensure that the benefits of Chinese investments are equitably shared, and that their countries do not become overly dependent on China. This requires robust governance, transparent trade and investment practices, and long-term strategies to safeguard Africa's sovereignty and economic independence.

References:

1. Alden, C. (2007). *China in Africa*. Zed Books.
2. Alden, C., & Large, D. (2011). *China Returns to Africa: A Rising Power and a Continent Embrace*. Columbia University Press.
3. Brautigam, D. (2009). *The Dragon's Gift: The Real Story of China in Africa*. Oxford University Press.
4. Chen, Y., & Nord, R. (2017). China's Foreign Direct Investment in Africa: Impacts and Challenges. *Journal of African Development*, 1(9), 1-18.
5. Jauch, H. (2011). The Chinese Investment in Africa: Neo-colonialism or Development Opportunity? *African Journal of Political Economy*, 50, 50-63.
6. Jian, L., & Frasher, S. (2014). Africa and China: A New Paradigm in South-South Cooperation. *Global Development Review*, 193, 193-210.

7. Larkin, B. (1971). *China and Africa 1949-1970: The Foreign Policy of the People's Republic of China*. University of California Press.
8. Lumumba, P. L. O. (2011). Neo-colonialism in Africa: A Critical Appraisal. *Journal of African Politics and Development*, 234-235.
9. Monson, J. (2009). *Africa's Freedom Railway: How a Chinese Development Project Changed Lives and Livelihoods in Tanzania*. Indiana University Press
10. Nkrumah, K. (1965). *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*. Thomas Nelson & Sons.
11. Obi, C. (2019). "China and Africa: Opportunities and Challenges for the Next Decade." *African Affairs*, 118(473), 495–502.
12. Obi, C. (2019). China's Expanding Influence in Africa: Risks and Opportunities. *African Studies Review*, 12, 12-22.
13. Pilling, D., & Feng, E. (2019). "China and Africa: The Ties that Bind." *Financial Times*.
14. Pilling, D., & Feng, E. (2019). China-Africa Trade: Growth and Dependency. *The Financial Times*, 2(19).
15. Taylor, I. (2009). *China's New Role in Africa*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.
16. Timothy, D., & Recker, C. (2013). *Debt Traps: The New Frontier of China's Global Influence*. University of Chicago Press
17. Timothy, M., & Recker, S. (2013). Chinese Investments in Africa: A Critical Analysis. *African Development Review*, 61, 61-75.