Economic Diplomacy as a Key Element of China's Foreign Policy Strategy in Africa

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ABSTRACT

China's engagement with Africa over the past two decades has been shaped by a deliberate and evolving economic diplomacy that links trade, infrastructure financing, foreign direct investment, and institutional multilateralism to broader foreign policy objectives. Drawing on the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) framework, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and bilateral state-to-state arrangements, Beijing has positioned itself as Africa's largest trading partner and most prolific bilateral infrastructure financier. This article examines the instruments and logic of China's economic diplomacy in Africa, incorporating comparative assessments of Angola, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, and Zambia to illuminate variations in debt sustainability outcomes, employment generation, infrastructure quality, trade performance, and technology transfer. The article argues that outcomes from Chinese economic engagement differ substantially across country contexts and are shaped by factors including the structure of the bilateral financing arrangement, African governmental institutional capacity, the sectoral focus of investment, and the degree of policy conditionality that host governments are willing and able to impose. China's economic diplomacy is neither uniformly predatory nor straightforwardly developmental; it is a state-led strategy that serves China's commercial, resource, and political interests while simultaneously producing real, if unevenly distributed, development benefits for African partners. Variations in these outcomes underscore the analytical inadequacy of continent-wide generalisations about Chinese economic engagement.

Keywords: China-Africa relations, economic diplomacy, Belt and Road Initiative, FOCAC, debt sustainability, comparative political economy

INTRODUCTION

The phrase economic diplomacy captures the systematic use of economic tools trade policy, investment, aid, concessional loans, and institutional frameworks to advance a state's foreign policy goals. For China, this logic has been operating in Africa with increasing sophistication since the early 2000s. What began as a modest push into resource-rich African markets has evolved into one of the most consequential bilateral relationships on the continent, touching infrastructure, agriculture, telecommunications, manufacturing, energy, and security.

By 2018, China had become Africa's largest single trading partner. In 2023, total China-Africa trade reached a record USD 282 billion, with the International Monetary Fund estimating that 16 percent of Africa's imports and roughly 20 percent of the continent's exports now flow to and from China (World Economic Forum, 2024, as cited in Tang et al., 2025). These are not merely commercial figures; they reflect the political architecture that China has built around economic exchange an architecture anchored in the FOCAC summits, the BRI, state-owned enterprise operations, and a non-interference foreign policy doctrine that carries deep appeal for governments chafing under Western conditionality.

Academic literature on China-Africa relations has expanded considerably over the past decade, with scholars debating whether Chinese engagement amounts to South-South solidarity, a sophisticated variant of resource extraction, or something more mixed and contingent on domestic African politics (Alden, 2012; Al-Fadhat & Prasetio, 2024; Brautigam & Rithmire, 2021; Obeng-Odoom, 2022; Calabrese, 2023). A persistent weakness in this scholarship, however, has been the tendency toward continent-wide generalisations framing China-Africa relations as a singular dynamic when the relationship's outcomes vary considerably between Angola's resource-collateralised debt model, Ethiopia's manufacturing and ICT-driven partnership, Kenya's infrastructure-led debt trajectory, Rwanda's technology and e-commerce engagement, and Zambia's experience of debt distress and restructuring.

This article addresses this gap directly. It examines the key instruments of China's economic diplomacy, traces how they serve Beijing's foreign policy objectives, and provides comparative quantitative assessments of five country cases Angola, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, and Zambia across five dimensions: debt sustainability, employment generation, infrastructure quality and outcomes, trade performance, and technology transfer. These cases are not representative of the entire continent but are selected because they represent distinct variants of Chinese economic engagement, allowing analytical differentiation rather than artificial uniformity.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 provides a brief conceptual grounding of economic diplomacy as a foreign policy tool. Section 3 examines the FOCAC institutional framework. Section 4 addresses the BRI and infrastructure investment. Section 5 analyses trade dynamics. Section 6 turns to the five-country comparative assessment covering debt sustainability, employment, infrastructure quality, trade outcomes, and technology transfer. Section 7 examines African agency. Section 8 considers the geopolitical dimensions of China's economic presence. Section 9 reflects on the post-2024 FOCAC trajectory. Section 10 concludes.

Economic Diplomacy as a Foreign Policy Tool

Economic diplomacy, broadly understood, refers to the use of economic means to achieve foreign policy ends, and the use of diplomatic means to advance economic interests abroad (Okano-Heijmans, 2011). For major powers, these two logics are rarely separable. Trade agreements establish political dependencies; investment relationships create structural alignments; aid and concessional finance generate political goodwill and voting blocs in multilateral institutions.

China's approach to economic diplomacy is distinctive in several respects. First, it operates through a "competitive state system" in which state-owned enterprises (SOEs), policy banks such as the Export-Import Bank of China and the China Development Bank, and government-to-government agreements work in concert to pursue both commercial and geostrategic objectives (Bruton et al., 2021, as cited in Springer, 2026). Second, China has historically attached fewer political conditions to its economic engagement than Western donors, making it attractive to African governments that find IMF structural adjustment or EU governance benchmarks intrusive. Third, China frames its economic diplomacy within the discourse of South-South cooperation, explicitly positioning its engagement as different in kind from Northern-dominated development assistance — a framing that carries considerable ideological weight on a continent marked by the history of colonial extraction.

These features do not make Chinese economic diplomacy benign or interest-free. They do, however, make it qualitatively different from the models offered by Western multilateral institutions and bilateral donors, and this difference is itself a core element of Beijing's foreign policy appeal in Africa. The country cases examined in Section 6 demonstrate that the particular form this difference takes, and its developmental consequences, depend heavily on context.

FOCAC: The Institutional Architecture of China-Africa Economic Diplomacy

The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, established in Beijing in 2000, is the primary institutional platform through which China manages its economic diplomacy on the continent. Held every three years, the forum brings together heads of state and government from across Africa for structured negotiations on finance, trade, and development cooperation. The 2024 summit the ninth in the series was the largest FOCAC event ever held, drawing leaders from all 53 African countries that maintain diplomatic relations with Beijing, with 36 delegations led personally by heads of state or prime ministers (Carnegie Endowment, 2024).

The forum has served as a vehicle for progressively expanding Chinese financial commitments to Africa. From modest initial financing pledges in 2000, FOCAC commitments rose to USD 60 billion at the 2018 summit before contracting to USD 40 billion in 2021, reflecting China's post-COVID fiscal constraints and growing wariness about sovereign debt exposure. At the 2024 Beijing summit, China pledged approximately USD 51.32

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billion in financing over the following three years, structured as USD 29.6 billion in credit lines, USD 11.8 billion in development assistance, and USD 9.87 billion in investment from Chinese firms (Boston University Global Development Policy Center, 2024).

The modalities of this financing have shifted. The blunt instrument of sovereign concessional loans, which characterised Chinese financing in the 2000s and 2010s, has been substantially replaced by a more blended finance approach combining public-private partnerships, commercial creditors, equity investments, and smaller "livelihood" aid projects. Xi Jinping's articulation of the "small and beautiful" (小而美) development assistance principle at the 2024 summit pledging 1,000 small-scale livelihood projects signals a deliberate repositioning away from the mega-project model that generated much of the debt sustainability concern (Boston University Global Development Policy Center, 2024).

Beyond financing, FOCAC has become an instrument of normative and political influence. The 2024 Action Plan and Beijing Declaration link China-Africa economic cooperation to China's Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global Security Initiative (GSI), and Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI), framing the relationship within a South-South coalition politics that challenges Western-defined global governance norms (Carnegie Endowment, 2024).

The Belt and Road Initiative and Infrastructure Investment

Announced by Xi Jinping in 2013, the BRI is the most visible expression of China's economic diplomacy globally. In Africa, the initiative has financed major infrastructure across energy, transport, telecommunications, and logistics. Between 2000 and 2022, Africa secured roughly USD 116 billion in Chinese loans for infrastructure development (China's Diplomacy in the New Era, 2024). Chinese infrastructure diplomacy fills a genuine gap: the World Bank has not independently financed a new railway project in Africa since 2002, and U.S. governmental organisations financed only three African infrastructure projects in 2023, compared to nine by Chinese organisations (China's Diplomacy in the New Era, 2024). The continent's infrastructure deficit estimated at USD 100 billion annually remains a binding constraint on economic transformation, and China's willingness to finance this gap has been a major source of its diplomatic leverage and political goodwill.

At the same time, infrastructure diplomacy has not been without friction. The BRI in Africa is increasingly understood as creating a web of economic and security interdependencies that integrate African states into China-centred supply chains and logistics networks in ways that complicate African industrial policy and regional integration (E-International Relations, 2025). Critics have noted that the terms of infrastructure contracts often favour Chinese state-owned construction firms, source materials and labour from China rather than locally, and contain collateral clauses that were poorly understood by recipient governments at the time of signing (Al-Fadhat & Prasetio, 2024).

The 2024 FOCAC signalled a partial shift: the 2025-2027 Action Plan integrates BRI infrastructure investment explicitly with Africa's Programme for Infrastructure Development (PIDA) and the AfCFTA, emphasising regional connectivity over bilateral project logic and framing infrastructure finance increasingly through commercial and PPP models (Boston University Global Development Policy Center, 2024).

Trade, Commodity Dependence, and the Push for Industrialisation

Trade is the most fundamental pillar of China-Africa economic relations, and it is also where structural asymmetries are most visible. In 2023, China exported USD 170 billion worth of goods to Africa and imported USD 100 billion a USD 70 billion imbalance that African leaders have openly criticised at successive FOCAC meetings (ODI, 2024). Approximately three-fifths of Africa's exports to China consist of primary commodities metals, mineral products, and petroleum while China exports manufactured goods and, increasingly, electric vehicles and digital technology (Tang et al., 2025).

China has responded to African criticism on trade imbalances with successive tariff reduction commitments. As of September 2024, all imports from 33 of Africa's least developed countries became exempt from Chinese tariffs (LSE Africa at LSE, 2024). At the June 2025 Ministerial Meeting in Changsha, China announced plans to remove tariffs on all 53 African diplomatic partners, including major economies like Nigeria and South Africa (Council on Foreign Relations, 2025). The 2024 FOCAC gave prominence to industrialisation, with Xi pledging five regional industrial clusters, ten industrial parks, and training for an additional 60,000 polytechnical workers in digital economy and clean energy (LSE Africa at LSE, 2024).

Chen (2024), calculating China's export trade efficiency with Africa using stochastic frontier analysis, finds significant variation across African economies in how productively they convert Chinese trade and investment flows into economic growth a result that underscores the importance of domestic institutional factors in shaping trade outcomes beyond the bilateral relationship itself.

Comparative Country Assessment: Variations in Outcomes

The most analytically productive entry point into China-Africa economic diplomacy is not the continental aggregate but the country-level variation. The five cases below Angola, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, and Zambia are examined across five dimensions: debt sustainability, employment generation, infrastructure quality and development outcomes, trade performance, and technology transfer. Together, they illustrate the range of outcomes that Chinese economic diplomacy produces and the factors that determine which end of that range a country tends toward.

Angola: Resource-Collateralised Debt and Structural Vulnerability

Angola is the archetype of the "Angola model" infrastructure loans collateralised by oil exports and the country most frequently cited in discussions of Chinese debt dependence. From 2000 to 2020, Angola received approximately 27 percent of all Chinese loan commitments to Africa, amounting to roughly USD 43 billion (Mutai et al., 2024). As of 2023, Angola owed China an estimated USD 17–21 billion, making it Africa's most indebted country to China in absolute terms (Momoh, 2025; Allianz Trade, 2025).

Debt sustainability. Angola's debt-to-GDP ratio peaked at 118.3 percent in 2020, driven partly by COVID-19 fiscal pressures, kwanza depreciation, and falling oil prices. Debt service to China consumed 16.2 percent of GDP in 2023 and 12.8 percent in 2024, before projections suggested a reduction to 11.9 percent in 2025 as oil revenues recovered and China agreed to more flexible access to an escrow account held as collateral (Allianz Trade, 2025). By 2024, Angola's debt-to-GDP ratio had declined to 58.2 percent (Trading Economics, 2025). In the first half of 2025, Angola reduced its oil-backed debt exposure to China from USD 10.2 billion to USD 8.9 billion a deliberate strategy to reduce collateral-linked obligations (Finance in Africa, 2025). The Angolan case demonstrates that high debt burdens from Chinese loans are not immutable but are highly sensitive to commodity price volatility and the structure of the original collateral agreement.

Employment and infrastructure quality. Chinese construction of Angola's road network particularly extensive in the post-war reconstruction period after 2002 delivered physical infrastructure at scale but was criticised for prioritising Chinese contractors and workers over local employment (Schmitz, 2014). Infrastructure quality has been mixed: road construction contributed meaningfully to reconnecting provinces devastated by civil war, but post-construction assessments of projects like the Benguela Railway rehabilitation identified planning deficiencies and design limitations that constrained the project's development impact (ODI, 2024a).

Trade performance. Angola's trade relationship with China is almost entirely oil-dependent. Angola was China's second-largest oil exporter behind Saudi Arabia in 2010; by 2023, it had fallen to eighth place, and between 2019 and 2023, Angolan exports to China fell 20 percent as oil production declined by 22 percent from 1.42 to 1.1 million barrels per day (Africa Defense Forum, 2024). This trajectory exposes the fundamental vulnerability of the Angola model: when the commodity underpinning the debt-for-infrastructure exchange weakens, both the financing relationship and the fiscal position deteriorate simultaneously.

Ethiopia: Manufacturing Integration and ICT Investment

Ethiopia presents a markedly different outcome profile. Rather than resource-backed lending, Chinese engagement in Ethiopia has concentrated heavily on manufacturing investment, ICT infrastructure, and industrial zones modes of engagement that create more diversified economic linkages than the Angola model.

Debt sustainability. Ethiopia received approximately USD 14 billion in Chinese loans between 2000 and 2020, ranking second after Angola (BNP Paribas, 2024). However, the sectoral composition of this debt differs: a larger share was directed at productive sector investment the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway, ICT infrastructure, and manufacturing zones rather than pure commodity extraction infrastructure. Ethiopia received over USD 3 billion in Chinese ICT financing from 2000 to 2023, the largest allocation on the continent, representing 20 percent of China's total ICT lending to Africa in that period (ODI, 2024a). The debt burden has nonetheless contributed to Ethiopia's fiscal pressures, particularly following the Tigray conflict, and the country has sought debt restructuring through the G20 Common Framework.

Employment and infrastructure quality. The Hawassa Industrial Park a Chinese-built special economic zone operational since 2016 has attracted investments from global apparel companies and at peak employed over 25,000 workers, the great majority of them Ethiopian women (Calabrese, 2023). This is among the more favourable employment outcomes from a Chinese-financed zone in Africa, driven partly by Ethiopia's explicit local employment requirements as a condition of investment approval. The Addis Ababa Light Rail Transit, opened in 2015 at a cost of USD 475 million with Chinese financing and construction, has faced criticism for quality issues in materials and maintenance, illustrating that Ethiopian outcomes are not uniformly positive across sectors (Michigan Journal of Economics, 2024). Internet access expanded from 1 percent of Ethiopians in 2000 to significantly higher rates by the mid-2020s, partly enabled by Chinese ICT infrastructure investment though comparable statistics for broadband specifically remain contested.

Technology transfer. Ethiopia's satellite programme offers a concrete illustration of substantive technology transfer. Ethiopia's first remote sensing satellite, ETRSS-1, was developed collaboratively between the China Academy of Space Technology (CAST) and the Ethiopian Space Science Technology Institute (ESSTI), with Ethiopian scientists trained as an explicit condition of the agreement (Patra & Muchie, 2024). A second satellite, ET-SMART-RSS, followed in 2020. This represents a qualitatively higher level of technology transfer than most African countries have achieved through Chinese engagement, reflecting Ethiopia's deliberate negotiating posture and sectoral prioritisation.

Kenya: Infrastructure Delivery Amid Mounting Debt Concerns

Kenya's experience centres on the Mombasa-Nairobi Standard Gauge Railway (SGR), which at USD 3.6 billion nearly 90 percent financed by China's Export-Import Bank is the largest infrastructure project in Kenya's post-independence history (Chatham House, 2022). The 472-kilometre line was completed in 32 months in 2017, well under the 60-month contract period, representing a credible infrastructure delivery outcome (ODI, 2024a). A subsequent 120-kilometre Nairobi-Naivasha extension cost an estimated USD 1.5 billion.

Debt sustainability. Kenya's total debt to China stood at approximately USD 6.7 billion as of 2023 (Momoh, 2025). Chinese debt accounts for 21 percent of Kenya's foreign debt and 72 percent of its bilateral debt (Wikipedia, 2025). The SGR's financial sustainability has been a persistent concern: the World Bank raised early questions about whether operating revenues would cover costs in the first five years, and the feasibility studies conducted prior to approval flagged sub-optimal traffic projections (Chatham House, 2022). Brautigam et al. (2022) clarified an important legal point frequently misunderstood in public debate: the borrower was the Kenyan National Treasury, not the Kenya Railways Corporation, meaning the collateral risk to port assets was more limited than media reporting suggested. Nevertheless, Kenya's broader debt-to-GDP position remains elevated, and the country has been actively seeking renegotiation of infrastructure loan terms during President Ruto's visits to Beijing in 2023 and 2025 (Council on Foreign Relations, 2025).

Employment. The SGR created approximately 46,000 jobs during the construction phase, the majority Kenyan, though the proportion of Chinese versus local workers during construction generated public controversy (Chatham House, 2022). Operational employment has been more limited, and skills transfer from Chinese operators to Kenyan railway staff has occurred but at a slower pace than initially anticipated. Kenya's internet penetration expanded from 1 percent to 40 percent of the population between 2000 and 2022, a trajectory in which Chinese ICT financing of 2,100 kilometres of national fibre-optic infrastructure played a documented supporting role (ODI, 2024a).

Trade performance. Kenya's exports to China remain heavily concentrated in primary products tea, cut flowers, sesame and the trade deficit with China is significant. However, Kenya has secured zero-tariff access to China for an expanding list of agricultural products under successive FOCAC trade facilitation measures, and the SGR has meaningfully reduced transport costs from the port of Mombasa to the Nairobi inland container depot, improving Kenya's logistics competitiveness.

Rwanda: Technology-First Engagement and Positive Differentiation

Rwanda represents a qualitatively different model of Chinese economic engagement, one driven less by infrastructure finance and more by digital economy investment, e-commerce integration, and targeted technology transfer. It is a relatively small economy but an analytically important case because it demonstrates what outcomes are possible when African governments impose clear conditions and sectoral priorities on Chinese partners.

Technology transfer. C&H Garments, a Chinese manufacturing firm operating in Rwanda, has been documented as an active contributor to technology transfer between Chinese and Rwandan entrepreneurs, serving as a catalyst for structural transformation in Rwanda's garment sector (Eom, 2018, as cited in Calabrese, 2023). Rwanda launched its first satellite, RwaSat-1, in September 2019, joining Kenya (1KUNS-PF, 2018) and Ethiopia in achieving space capability through Chinese collaborative arrangements (Patra & Muchie, 2024). Under the China-led Electronic World Trade Platform (eWTP), Rwanda signed a memorandum of understanding with Alibaba in 2018, enabling Rwandan coffee producers to access Chinese consumers through e-commerce. In a single day following the launch of Rwandan coffee on Alibaba's gather cost-effective platform, sales volumes matched an entire prior year's total (Springer, 2024). This outcome illustrates the potential of digital economic diplomacy when implemented through genuinely reciprocal platforms.

Debt sustainability. Rwanda's exposure to Chinese debt is substantially lower than Angola, Kenya, or Ethiopia, and Rwanda's public debt management framework supported by a more transparent institutional environment and the oversight of a well-regarded Ministry of Finance has maintained debt within manageable parameters. This enables Rwanda to engage Chinese investment on terms that prioritise technology and skills transfer over pure infrastructure finance.

Zambia: Debt Distress, Restructuring, and Cautionary Lessons

Zambia offers the starkest cautionary illustration in the comparative set. The country became the first African nation to default on its Eurobond obligations during the COVID-19 pandemic in November 2020, failing to make a USD 42.5 million coupon payment. At that point, Zambia's debt-to-GDP ratio stood at 140.2 percent (2020) and 110.8 percent (2021) far above the World Bank's threshold of 77 percent, beyond which debt servicing begins to meaningfully constrain economic growth (Mutai et al., 2024). Zambia owed China approximately USD 5.7 billion as of 2023, representing a significant share of its bilateral obligations (Assen Lloyde Quatrid & Tulela, 2025).

Debt sustainability. The Zambian case is analytically significant for several reasons. First, Chinese loans were not the sole driver of Zambia's distress: Eurobond debt from commercial creditors and multilateral obligations also contributed substantially. Second, the opacity of Chinese loan contracts complicated creditor coordination under the G20 Common Framework, delaying restructuring negotiations and exposing the governance gap in Chinese sovereign lending practices (Lippolis & Verhoeven, 2022). Third, Zambia's eventual restructuring agreement with China reached in 2023 after protracted negotiations reduced Zambia's debt service payments and extended maturities, demonstrating that China does restructure rather than seize assets, but does so slowly and without transparency (Chatham House, 2022).

Employment and infrastructure. Chinese investment in Zambia's copper sector and associated infrastructure has generated employment, but local content and skills transfer outcomes have been inconsistent. The Zambia-China Economic and Trade Cooperation Zone (ETCZ), upgraded to a comprehensive free trade zone in 2021, has attracted investment but performance has been constrained by infrastructure bottlenecks and regulatory uncertainty (Centre for Global Studies, 2022). Road construction by Chinese firms contributed to connectivity in key mineral corridors, but quality assessments have been mixed.

Summary: Factors Shaping Outcome Variation

The five cases together permit several analytical observations. First, the structure of the financing agreement whether resource-collateralised, sovereign loan, equity investment, or technical cooperation substantially determines the debt sustainability profile and the degree to which economic dependence is entrenched. Angola's oil-collateral model produced the deepest vulnerability; Rwanda's technology-forward engagement the lowest. Second, African governmental institutional capacity manifested in negotiating capability, contract management, local content enforcement, and debt management is a primary determinant of whether Chinese engagement generates technology transfer and employment or delivers infrastructure while exporting profits and skilled jobs. Third, sectoral focus matters: ICT and manufacturing investment (Ethiopia, Rwanda) generates more diversified economic linkages and technology spillovers than resource extraction infrastructure (Angola, Zambia). Fourth, the quality of infrastructure delivery is variable: the Kenyan SGR was completed ahead of schedule; the Angolan Benguela Railway rehabilitation exhibited post-construction limitations; the Addis Ababa Light Rail suffered quality and maintenance shortfalls. These variations

are not random; they reflect the particular contractual arrangements, oversight mechanisms, and local government capacity brought to each project.

Table 1 summarises key quantitative indicators across the five cases for comparative reference.

Table 1: Comparative Indicators of Chinese Economic Engagement Outcomes (Selected African Countries)

Indicator	Angola	Ethiopia	Kenya	Rwanda	Zambia
Chinese debt exposure (USD bn, 2023)	~21.0	~14.0	~6.7	<1.0	~5.7
Debt-to-GDP ratio (peak, %)	118.3 (2020)	~57.0 (2022)	~68.0 (2023)	~71.0 (2022)	140.2 (2020)
Chinese share of bilateral debt (%)	~70+	~60+	~72	<20	~60+
Key Chinese ICT loan (USD bn, 2000-2023)	1.3	3.0+	~1.0+	N/A	N/A
Employment (flagship project, direct jobs)	Limited local	25,000+ (Hawassa)	~46,000 (SGR construction)	Growing (garments)	Variable

Satellite programme (technology transfer)	No	Yes (ETRSS-1, 2019; ET-SMART-RSS, 2020)	Yes (1KUNS-PF, 2018)	Yes (RwaSat-1, 2019)	No
Debt restructuring under G20 Framework	Yes (moratorium 2020-2023)	Ongoing	Renegotiation sought	N/A	Yes (2023 agreement)

Sources: Mutai et al. (2024) Momoh (2025); Allianz Trade (2025); Chatham House (2022); ODI (2024a); Patra & Muchie (2024); Trading Economics (2025); Boston University GDP Center (2024).

African Agency and the Limits of the Passive Recipient Frame

A persistent weakness in the literature on China-Africa relations is the tendency to frame African states as passive objects of Chinese strategy, lacking the agency to shape, resist, or redirect external engagement. This framing is empirically inaccurate and analytically disabling. The comparative evidence in Section 6 illustrates this directly: Rwanda's technology forward outcomes and Ethiopia's satellite programme were not coincidental; they reflected deliberate negotiating postures and institutional prioritisation by African governments.

African governments have used successive FOCAC summits to push back on trade imbalances, demand greater local employment, call for technology transfer requirements, and insist on debt restructuring. Kenyan President William Ruto's 2025 Beijing visit centred on renegotiating infrastructure agreements and pushing for new commitments on the SGR extension and highway upgrades (Council on Foreign Relations, 2025). Ghana has formed a Chinese-Ghanaian mining coalition with explicit provisions on local revenue sharing. Namibia, Ethiopia, and Kenya have enacted policies requiring technology transfer from foreign partners, including Chinese ones, as a condition of new investment (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2026).

The structural power asymmetry identified by Al-Fadhat and Prasetio (2024) remains real for smaller, more indebted, or institutionally weaker states. Zambia's debt distress and Angola's fiscal vulnerability both illustrate how debt relationships can accumulate into significant constraints on governmental autonomy. But the point is not that African agency is uniform or sufficient; it is that it is consequential and growing, and that analyses which ignore it produce a distorted picture of how Chinese economic diplomacy functions on the ground.

Geopolitics, Non-Interference, and the Competition for Africa

China's economic diplomacy in Africa cannot be fully understood outside of its geopolitical context. The relationship has always served political purposes alongside commercial ones: securing African diplomatic support in multilateral institutions, advancing the "One China" principle, building coalitions around Chinese positions on global governance reform, and offering an alternative model of development cooperation that implicitly challenges Western conditionality-based frameworks.

These political functions have become more explicit in the past five years as geopolitical competition over Africa has intensified. The United States, European Union, Japan, South Korea, Italy, and Indonesia have all launched or revitalised Africa engagement platforms, frequently framing their initiatives such as the EU's Global Gateway as alternatives to Chinese financing (Megatrends Afrika, 2024). Washington's increasingly erratic engagement with the continent, including the dramatic slashing of USAID funding in early 2025 and U.S. absenteeism from key multilateral forums, has paradoxically strengthened China's positioning as a stable partner (Council on Foreign Relations, 2025).

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China has also been notably active in the security domain. The BRI's strategic infrastructure ports, railways, logistics hubs carries security implications that complicate simple economic characterisations (E-International Relations, 2025). China's first overseas military installation, at Djibouti, was established in 2017 in proximity to Chinese commercial port infrastructure. More than 40 African defence chiefs have visited China, and the China-Africa Peace and Security Forum (CAPSF) embeds China within Africa's security architecture in ways that reinforce economic and political ties (E-International Relations, 2025).

The June 2025 Changsha Declaration's explicit anti-unilateralism tone calling on "the United States in particular" to stop economic coercion and return to multilateral trade norms signals that China is willing to position itself overtly as the champion of the Global South against unilateralism (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2025). This represents a qualitative escalation in the political use of China-Africa economic diplomacy.

Post-2024 Recalibration: What the New Era Looks Like

The 2024 FOCAC and the 2025 Changsha Declaration suggest that China-Africa economic diplomacy is entering a qualitatively new phase. Several dimensions of this recalibration deserve close attention.

First, the financing model has changed. The era of large sovereign concessional loans channelled through Chinese policy banks has given way to a more diverse set of instruments, including equity investment, blended finance, PPPs, and smaller aid projects. Lending from Chinese policy banks to Africa recovered to approximately USD 4.6 billion in 2023 a seven-year high but remains far below the peak years (Carnegie Endowment, 2024).

Second, the sectoral focus has shifted toward technology, green energy, and industrialisation. China's exports of electric vehicles to Africa rose by 291 percent in 2023, and lithium battery exports grew by 109 percent (Vivekananda International Foundation, 2024). Boston University's Global Development Policy Center (2026) finds that cumulative Chinese lending to non-hydro renewables in Africa totalled only USD 1.7 billion between 2000 and 2024 a relatively modest figure despite the rhetoric while the bulk of Chinese energy exports in 2024 flowed to Africa's largest power markets including South Africa, Nigeria, Egypt, Morocco, and Algeria. Zimbabwe's 2022 ban on raw lithium ore exports, and its subsequent tightening in 2026 to include lithium concentrates, catalysed rounds of Chinese investment in lithium processing facilities an illustration of how African resource sovereignty policies can redirect the character of Chinese engagement toward value addition (Boston University GDP Center, 2026).

Third, African governments are becoming more assertive. Quantitative evidence from Calabrese (2023), drawing on firm-level data across multiple African economies, finds that whether Chinese firms contribute to or hinder economic transformation depends significantly on host country industrial policy and the degree to which governments enforce local linkage requirements. Countries with clearer, better-enforced industrial policies Rwanda being a prominent example extract measurably more technology transfer and employment from the same investment stock.

Fourth, the June 2025 announcement of China's plan to eliminate tariffs on goods from all 53 African diplomatic partners represents the most significant trade liberalisation commitment in the relationship's history (Council on Foreign Relations, 2025). Whether this translates into genuine diversification of African export capacity, or simply expands commodity flows in existing extractive patterns, will depend on complementary investments in African productive capacity and on whether the AfCFTA framework can create the regional supply chains that give value addition an economic logic.

CONCLUSION

China's economic diplomacy in Africa is not reducible to a single motive or a single effect, and the comparative evidence examined in this article makes this point empirically rather than rhetorically. Angola's resource-collateralised debt model produced deep fiscal vulnerability and limited economic diversification. Ethiopia's manufacturing and ICT-led engagement generated more employment, stronger technology transfer including satellite programmes and a more diversified economic relationship, though not without its own debt pressures.

Kenya's SGR delivered credible infrastructure on time but created a large debt burden whose long-term sustainability remains contested. Rwanda's technology-forward, relatively debt light engagement demonstrates what is achievable when governments impose clear conditions. Zambia's debt distress illustrates the systemic risks when loans are absorbed without sufficient institutional capacity to manage them or enforce local economic linkages.

Across these cases, debt sustainability outcomes are primarily shaped by three factors: the structure and collateral terms of the original financing arrangement, the volatility of the commodity underpinning any resource-backed loan, and the speed and transparency of restructuring when distress occurs. Employment generation and technology transfer are primarily shaped by two factors: whether host governments enforce local content requirements and technology transfer obligations, and whether the sectoral focus of investment creates the conditions skills, infrastructure, market access for genuine industrial learning. Infrastructure quality varies significantly by sector and project, and does not follow a simple pattern attributable to Chinese contractors as a class.

These findings carry implications for how both African governments and the scholarly literature on China-Africa relations should proceed. For African governments, the comparative evidence suggests that institutional capacity to negotiate, monitor, and enforce contractual obligations is the single most important variable determining what kind of development outcome Chinese economic engagement produces. The relationship's terms are not fixed by Beijing, they are negotiated, and the results reflect the quality of that negotiation. For scholars, the evidence underscores the analytical inadequacy of continent-wide generalisations whether condemning or celebratory about Chinese economic diplomacy. The agenda going forward must be comparative, quantitative, and attentive to the ways in which African agency shapes outcomes from the inside, rather than treating African states as passive recipients of an externally determined strategy.

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