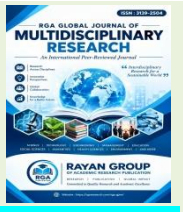
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EVALUATING THE NATURE OF AFRICA–CHINA ECONOMIC RELATIONS: DEPENDENCY OR STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP?

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Abstract
This study examines the evolving economic relationship between Africa and China through a comparative analysis of five selected countries representing different African subregions: Nigeria, Egypt, Kenya, Zambia, and Gabon. In recent years, China has emerged as a key economic partner for Africa, particularly in the areas of trade, infrastructure development, and investment flows. This growing engagement has generated significant scholarly debate. On one hand, some scholars argue that China's involvement reinforces patterns of dependency, as many African countries continue to export primary commodities while importing manufactured goods, alongside rising concerns over debt On the other hand, others view the relationship as a development opportunity, highlighting improvements in infrastructure, increased access to finance, and greater policy flexibility for African states. Using a qualitative comparative approach based on secondary data, this study applies both Dependency Theory and Complex Interdependence as analytical frameworks to better understand the nature of this relationship. The findings indicate that Africa–China relations cannot be adequately explained by a single perspective. Instead, they reflect a combination of dependency and strategic cooperation, with outcomes varying across national contexts. While structural challenges such as trade imbalances and debt risks persist, there are also clear benefits, including infrastructure expansion and new economic opportunities. Ultimately, the extent to which African countries benefit depends largely on domestic institutional capacity, policy choices, and negotiation strategies.

Keywords*: Africa-China Economic Relation, Debt, Dependency, Development, Strategic Partnership*

INTRODUCTION

The global economic landscape in the 21st century has been significantly shaped by the rise of China as a major economic and political power. One region where this transformation is most visible is Africa, where engagement with China has expanded rapidly over the past two decades. This relationship has been driven by a combination of factors, including China's demand for natural resources and Africa's need for investment and infrastructure development (Alden, 2007; Brautigam, 2009).

Over time, China has become Africa's largest trading partner, with trade volumes increasing substantially from the early 2000s to recent years (Dollar, 2016). Beyond trade, China has also played a major role in financing and constructing key infrastructure projects across the continent, including railways, roads, and energy facilities. However, the nature and impact of this engagement vary across countries, depending on differences in economic structure, governance, and resource endowment.

Despite these developments, there is ongoing debate about the implications of Africa–China economic relations. One perspective, rooted in dependency theory, argues that the relationship reinforces structural inequalities by maintaining Africa's role as a supplier of raw materials while importing manufactured goods (Frank, 1967; Amin, 1976). Another perspective suggests that China provides a practical alternative to traditional Western partners by offering investment and financing with fewer political conditions, thereby supporting development efforts (Moyo, 2012).

Given these contrasting viewpoints, an important question emerges: to what extent does Africa's economic relationship with China reflect dependency, strategic partnership, or a combination of both? Addressing this question requires moving beyond generalizations and examining how this relationship operates in different national contexts.

This study adopts a comparative case study approach, focusing on five African countries representing different sub regions: Nigeria (West Africa), Egypt (North Africa), Kenya (East Africa), Zambia (Southern Africa), and Gabon (Central Africa). These cases were selected to reflect variations in economic structure, resource endowment, and levels of engagement with China. By comparing these countries, the study aims to:

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1. Examine the nature of economic interactions between China and each selected country.
2. Assess the extent of dependency and mutual benefit within these relationships.
3. Analyze the role of domestic factors, including governance capacity and African agency.

This research contributes to existing literature by providing a comparative, sub regional perspective that highlights variation across African countries. It also emphasizes the importance of African agency in shaping outcomes, challenging the assumption that African states are merely passive actors within global economic systems.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Dependency Perspective

The dependency perspective is the most fundamental and highly critical approach to study Africa–China economic relations. Dependency school is derived from Dependency Theory that emerged as the alternative version of the modernization theory. Advocates of dependency theory like Andre Gunder Frank (1967) and Samir Amin (1976) posit that underdevelopment is not the prerequisite to development but caused by the global capitalist system, creating an unequal relationship between the dominant "core" and dependent "periphery" (developing states). The primary role of the periphery is to provide cheap raw materials to fuel the industry of the core and absorb its manufactured goods.

Analysing modern Africa–China relations through this lens leads academics such as Ian Taylor (2006) to conclude that China is simply replicating the core-periphery dynamic. Africa ships China overwhelmingly primary commodities such as oil, minerals and agricultural products whilst all of its imports from China are finished goods. The continent is then left in a dependent position where it cannot transition out of this unequal relationship as imports will always be greater than exports. This can lead to "unequal exchange" (Amin, 1976). This argument can extend to other issues raised by dependency theorists such as debt. Chinese loans may help countries finance infrastructure but leave them more vulnerable to external debt and weaken their ability to implement independent policy. While accusations of "debt-trap diplomacy" are debated, scholars have noted that debt sustainability can become a large issue should countries borrow too heavily (Brautigam, 2020). Chinese investment has also been concentrated in extracting Africa's natural resources, further establishing its position as a periphery country.

The Strategic Partnership Perspective

Strategic partnership perspective gives a brighter recognition to Africa–China relations. Supporters of this perspective say that China's involvement in Africa represents a South–South cooperation effort that greatly helps development (Alden, 2007). Differing from traditional Western donors, China supplies funding with very few political strings attached, thus allowing African nations to implement their own development paths (Moyo, 2012).

Among the several positive aspects is the fact that China helps big time in infrastructure development. Projects backed by China have made transport, power and telecom changes possible in Africa,These projects are even considered as helping new ways of working together, lowering costs, and supporting economic growth (Dollar, 2016).

Moreover, the strategic partnership angle draws attention to the diplomatic factor. Having the establishment of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) is a collective bargaining tool and at the same time a sign of a progress towards a more organized, strategic relationship (Alden & Large, 2011). The crucial thing about this viewpoint is that it considers the ties between China and Africa as a two-way beneficial relationship and a one-of-a-kind experience that is totally different from all other powers who have come to Africa before.

A Hybrid Perspective: Complex Interdependence and African Agency

More and more scholarly investigations are going beyond the simplistic choice of dependency versus partnership and are acknowledging that Africa–China relations are, in fact, so complex as to be unlikely to be adequately captured by either framework alone. This hybrid view of the situation is consistent with the idea of Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye (1977/2012) that Complex Interdependence, depicts a world where various states are connected to each other through many different channels of communication, there is no single dominant issue for all, and the use of force is not the main or only tool of diplomacy.

This angle of looking at things emphasizes the idea of African agency, that is, the power and capability of African countries to determine their own future within this relationship. Writers like Giles Mohan (2013) see African authorities not as helpless victims of Chinese money but as capable and skillful negotiators who use the rivalry between foreign players and their desire to get their Chinese partners in investment to fit in with their own development plans to their advantage. Instead of being set in stone by the global environment, they are shaped by the internal factors such as local policies, the level of the government's ability to govern, and the up-front decisions made by the leaders of Africa (Mohan & Lampert, 2013).

EMPIRICAL REVIEW: FIVE COUNTRY CASE STUDIES

Nigeria's trade relationship with China reflects a pattern commonly associated with dependency. The country's exports to China are heavily dominated by crude oil, which accounts for the vast majority of total exports. In contrast, imports from China consist mainly of manufactured goods, machinery, and electronics. This imbalance has contributed to a persistent trade deficit and has placed pressure on local industries. Studies have shown that increased imports of cheaper Chinese goods have negatively affected domestic sectors such as textiles and footwear (Ajakaiye & Kaplinsky, 2010).

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China has played a major role in Nigeria's infrastructure development, particularly in the railway sector. Projects such as the Abuja–Kaduna and Lagos–Ibadan rail lines have significantly improved transportation systems. These projects are typically financed through Chinese loans and executed by Chinese firms, highlighting China's dual role as both financier and contractor.

China's debt holdings in Nigeria constitute a major portion of the country's bilateral debt stock. Even so, Nigeria's debt-to-GDP ratio remains moderate when compared to other African countries. According to Brautigam (2020), Nigeria does not embody the "debt-trap" scenario. However, there are still issues around loan transparency and long-term sustainability that need to be considered.

Nigerian agency has been constrained by weak institutional capacity. The government has had difficulties in implementing local content requirements, securing a high-level technology transfer, or managing trade imbalance effectively. The end result is a dependency-oriented outcome, with infrastructure development giving the partnership a face of significant advantages.

Compared to Nigeria, Egypt's trade with China is more diverse which is a reflection of it more mature industrial sector. Egypt exports mainly range from oils, fruits, and fabrics while their imports mainly refer to machineries, electronics, and domestically produced goods. They still face a huge trade deficit with China.

China has been partnering with Egypt in infrastructure development with one of the most prominent project being the new administrative capital located east of Cairo. China State Construction Engineering Corporation (CSCEC) is the major contractor for this $45 billion project which happens to be one of China's largest foreign investments. China has also invested in the Suez Canal Economic Zone which has become a manufacturing and logistics base for China.

Although Egypt's debt to China is quite considerable, it forms only a part of a wider external debt portfolio where other international creditors are dominant. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF, 2021), higher debt levels in Egypt necessitate careful management but strategic location and diversified economy of the country offer some relief against debt distress.

In the China-Egypt relationship, Egypt exhibits a higher degree of agency than Nigeria. For example, the Egyptian government has successfully negotiated local content agreements such as the provision of Egyptian labor and materials in the new capital project. Establishing the Suez Canal Economic Zone is Egypt's effort to become a manufacturing center that not only benefits from Chinese investment but also captures value instead of serving as a market for Chinese goods alone (Mohan & Lampert, 2013).

Kenya's trade with China mirrors the trade patterns of many other African countries. The main focus of Kenya's export have been agricultural products such as tea, coffee, and horticultural products. On the other hand, imports are mostly made up of manufactured goods, machinery, and electronics. Kenya maintains a large and constant trade deficit with China (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2020).

The most Chinese infrastructure project visible to Kenyans is the Standard Gauge Railway (SGR), which cost $3.8 billion and was initially built to link Mombasa to Nairobi and later Naivasha. It was the China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC) who constructed it while the China Exim Bank provided the funds. The SGR has brought down travel time and costs tremendously. Nevertheless, concerns about the ability to repay the loan and the effects on the environment have also been raised with the project (Kamau, 2019).

The political debate is already vigorous over Kenya's debt to China. Just one project, the SGR, is responsible for a large portion of Kenya's bilateral debt. Brautigam (2020) argues that Kenya's condition of indebtedness is a serious matter but does not constitute a "debt trap" in the sense of predatory lending with hidden seizure clauses. That being said, debt service has limited fiscal space and raised concerns about sustainability in the long run.

One reason why Kenya's agency has been limited is its weak bargaining power combined with its long reliance on external financing. On the other hand, the Kenyan government has sought to negotiate better terms such as local job requirements and technology transfers. However, the question is how effectively these obligations have been implemented is still a matter of speculation (Kamau, 2019).

Apart from copper exports which constitute the dominant part of Zambia's trade with China, the country mostly exports copper to China but in return imports manufactured goods, machinery, and consumer products. This trade pattern has left Zambia quite susceptible to the changes in global copper prices (Carmody, 2011).

China has played a great part in the development of the infrastructure in Zambia through provision of funds and execution of the projects. Among others, the Kenneth Kaunda International Airport expansion and various road projects are some of the Chinese-financed and constructed ones. Building the TAZARA railway in the 1970s by China was symbolic of the historical China-Africa cooperation, however, it is now in need of a major rehabilitation (Brautigam, 2020).

Zambia has been one of the glaring manifestations of debt distress in Africa. At the end of 2020, China's share in Zambia's external debt was about 30%. In that same year, Zambia defaulted on its sovereign debt for the first time among African nations due to the COVID-19 pandemic which led to a lengthy restructuring process (Brautigam, 2020). Since then, Zambia has become the epicenter of the discussions around Chinese lending habits and debt sustainability.

Deep economic dependence on copper and the growing stock of unsustainable debt have largely diminished Zambia's agency. The difficulties of the country in reaching an agreement over the restructuring of debt with Chinese creditors expose how vulnerable small, resource-dependent

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countries are when dealing with a major power like China. Indeed, Zambia's situation serves as a warning about the dangers of heavily borrowing from China without putting sufficient precautions in place.

Gabon trade with China still very much follows the traditional pattern of extractive industries only. The bulk of exports being of oil and manganese, while imports mainly consist of manufactured goods, machinery, and construction materials. The country's small population and economy pretty much pinpoint it as highly dependent on a couple rest key exported commodities (World Bank, 2020).

Chinese companies have been visiting Gabon in their infrastructure development activities through the building of roads, ports, and the national stadium. The biggest project is the opening up of the Nkok Special Economic Zone. This is a Chinese-funded and managed Industrial Park geared towards timber processing. This marks a move away from mere extraction towards value-added processing, although the economic benefits for Gabon are still a topic of debate (Bodomo, 2017).

The amount of debt Gabon owes to China is considerable when compared to its economy, however, it is not as extreme as in Zambia. Gabon's heavy dependence on oil revenues makes it highly vulnerable to price changes, which in turn can lead to problems in maintaining debt sustainability. At the same time, Gabon's relatively smaller population and its resources that are of strategic value have given it some bargaining power during negotiations.

The shaping of Gabon agency has been done mainly by its very small population coupled with an economy largely dependent on resources. The government has attempted to exploit Chinese investment for economic diversification, which is clearly being showcased by Nkok Special Economic Zone. Even so, to what degree this zone has been able to live up to its commitments of job creation, technology transfer, and value addition is not really clear yet (Bodomo, 2017)

There is a lot of research on the economic ties between Africa and China, but there is still a big gap in the existing research. Most studies fit into one of three groups: case studies of a single country, quantitative analyses of all countries on a continent, or thematic studies of certain areas like infrastructure, trade, or debt. Even though each of these methods has given us useful information, they all miss a key part of the relationship between Africa and China: the differences between regions.

First, the prevalence of single-country case studies has yielded profound yet geographically limited insights. Research on Nigeria (Ajakaiye & Kaplinsky, 2010), Angola (Corkin, 2013), Ethiopia (Brautigam & Hwang, 2021), and South Africa (Carmody, 2011) has yielded comprehensive analyses of China's involvement in distinct national settings. However, the results from these studies are frequently regarded as indicative of Africa in its entirety, despite the continent's significant diversity in economic structure, institutional capacity, and historical context. This extrapolation from single cases makes it hard to see how much outcomes are affected by factors that are specific to a sub region.

Second, continent-wide quantitative analyses, although beneficial for discerning overarching trends, often diminish the nuances of variation among countries and sub regions. Research that compiles data from various African nations (Dollar, 2016; Chen et al., 2018) may obscure the pronounced disparities between resource-abundant and resource-scarce countries, coastal and landlocked nations, and those with robust versus fragile institutional frameworks. These aggregated findings, although statistically sound, provide insufficient direction for policymakers aiming to comprehend the influence of context on outcomes.

Third, thematic studies that look at specific areas like infrastructure, debt, or trade have given us important information, but they don't always show how Africa and China are connected. You can't understand the effects of Chinese investment in infrastructure without also looking at trade patterns, debt dynamics, and the ability of the government to run things. In the same way, the effects of accumulating debt depend on how well the borrowed money is used, which in turn depends on the state of the economy and the quality of the infrastructure.

Fourth, and most importantly, there aren't many comparative sub regional studies that look at how Africa–China economic relations are different in different parts of the continent. There are five sub regions in Africa: North, West, Central, East, and Southern Africa. Each of these areas has its own unique economic structures, colonial histories, geopolitical orientations, and institutional trajectories. But most of the time, existing research doesn't use sub region as a unit of comparison. Comparing two or three countries (like Mohan & Lampert, 2013) gives us useful information, but it doesn't show the full range of differences within a sub region.

This study addresses a theoretical gap that has received little attention. Although dependency theory and complex interdependence have each been applied to Africa–China relations, few studies bring them together systematically, and even fewer examine how structural constraints and African agency interact across different contexts. By using both frameworks in a complementary way, this study develops a more nuanced analytical framework. It captures the coexistence of dependency and partnership characteristics, while also helping to explain the conditions under which one tendency tends to prevail over the other.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Dependency theory offers a powerful lens for understanding the structural asymmetries that shape Africa–China relations. Across all five cases, we see persistent trade imbalances, concentrated resource extraction, and recurring debt vulnerabilities all of which align closely with the theory's central predictions. But dependency theory has a blind spot: it tends to treat peripheral countries as passive victims, which makes it difficult to explain the variation in outcomes we actually observe. Take Zambia's debt crisis versus Egypt's more successful management. These differences suggest that outcomes aren't purely determined by structural forces agency and context matter too.

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Again, complex interdependence serves as a useful counterweight to dependency theory not a replacement, but a genuine complement. Where dependency theory emphasizes structural constraints, complex interdependence draws attention to multiple channels of interaction, the absence of a clear hierarchy among issues, and the growing role of non-state actors. In doing so, it helps explain something that dependency theory alone struggles with: how dependency and partnership characteristics can coexist in the same relationship. Just as importantly, this framework brings agency back into the picture. It highlights how African states far from being passive can shape outcomes through strategic choices, even within asymmetric structural conditions.

What do the five case studies tell us? Taken together, the evidence suggests that an integrated framework one that combines dependency theory with complex interdependence offers the most comprehensive analytical lens. Dependency theory does the essential work of illuminating the structural constraints that continue to shape Africa–China relations. Complex interdependence, in turn, captures something dependency theory alone cannot: the dynamic, negotiated character of the relationship, including the real space for African agency. Neither framework is sufficient on its own. But used together, they give us a much fuller picture.

METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

This study uses a qualitative, multi-country comparative case study design. That choice was deliberate: this design is well suited to the research question because it allows for in-depth exploration of complex phenomena within their real-world contexts, while still enabling systematic comparison across different settings (Yin, 2014). Since the goal is to examine how Africa–China economic relations vary across sub regions and to identify what explains those variations a comparative case study approach makes sense. It helps surface both common patterns and context-specific dynamics, moving beyond what single-country studies or continent-wide aggregated analyses tend to miss.

The comparative element is operationalized by selecting one representative country from each of Africa's five sub regions (West, North, East, Southern, and Central Africa). This structure allows the study to capture the full diversity of Africa's political economy while maintaining analytical coherence. The research is qualitative in orientation, prioritizing depth of understanding over statistical generalization. That orientation is not accidental it aligns directly with the study's theoretical framework, which aims to uncover the *mechanism* through which structural constraints and African agency interact to produce particular outcomes.

The study relies exclusively on secondary data sources. This choice is justified by the research objectives, which involve synthesizing and comparing existing evidence across multiple countries, and by the practical constraints of conducting primary research across five African countries.

Data analysis was conducted in three stages, following established practices for qualitative comparative case study research (Yin, 2014; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2020).

Stage 1: Within-Case Analysis: The first stage treated each of the five countries as a standalone case. For every country, the collected data were organized according to the four thematic areas: trade, infrastructure, debt, and agency. The within-case analysis then proceeded by constructing a detailed narrative for each country tracing the evolution of its economic relationship with China and identifying key patterns, outcomes, and causal mechanisms along the way. This stage served an important purpose: it allowed for the development of context-specific understandings that respect the uniqueness of each country's experience, rather than flattening them into a single generic story.

Stage 2: Thematic Analysis: the study proceeded to cross-case thematic analysis. This stage involved identifying recurring themes across the five cases among them, trade imbalances, resource concentration, infrastructure impact, debt sustainability, and agency capacity. The themes were derived from two directions. Deductively, they came from the theoretical frameworks guiding the study (dependency theory and complex interdependence). Inductively, they emerged from patterns in the data itself.

Stage 3: Cross-Case Synthesis: The final stage involved a systematic comparison of the five cases to identify both common patterns and meaningful variation. To facilitate this comparison, the study employed a "case-ordered effects matrix" (Miles et al., 2020) to compare countries along five key dimensions: economic diversification, trade deficit severity, infrastructure impact, debt sustainability, and agency capacity. The matrix served a clear purpose: it helped pinpoint which factors tend to be associated with more favorable outcomes. The synthesis also included a close look at deviant cases Egypt, for instance, emerged as a case of stronger agency. Examining such outliers helped refine the theoretical framework by showing where existing explanations fall short.

DISCUSSION

The evidence across the five case studies shows that dependency characteristics are pervasive but they vary considerably in intensity. Zambia represents the most extreme case. There, copper dependence, unsustainable debt accumulation, and an eventual debt default clearly illustrate the risks embedded in the relationship. Nigeria and Gabon, despite their resource wealth, follow a similar pattern: trade imbalances and limited economic diversification persist. Kenya, though more diversified economically, has nonetheless accumulated significant debt through infrastructure projects. Egypt, which has the most diversified economy of the five, shows the strongest capacity to mitigate dependency characteristics.

What explains these patterns? Part of the answer lies in trade structure. Across all five countries, trade imbalances persist a finding that aligns closely with dependency theory's core argument. The basic structure of Africa–China trade, the evidence suggests, tends to reinforce Africa's

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subordinate position in the global economy. Exports remain concentrated in primary commodities; imports, in manufactured goods. That pattern, as Frank (1967) and Amin (1976) observed decades ago, is not new. The question is whether anything has changed and if so, where and why.

Partnership characteristics are also evident across all five cases and nowhere more clearly than in infrastructure development. This has been the most significant benefit of the relationship. In Nigeria, the new railway system has modernized transportation. In Kenya, the Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) has reduced travel times and costs. In Egypt, the new administrative capital represents a transformative urban development project. In Zambia, infrastructure projects have addressed critical gaps. And in Gabon, the Nkok Special Economic Zone represents an attempt at value-added processing.

Across these cases, China's willingness to finance large-scale infrastructure projects when traditional Western partners were unwilling or unable to do so represents a genuine contribution to Africa's development. The absence of stringent political conditionality a hallmark of many Western loans and aid programs has provided African governments with policy space (Moyo, 2012).

The Role of African Agency

The variation across the five case studies underscores a crucial point: African agency matters. Egypt illustrates this most clearly. Its stronger bargaining position, more diversified economy, and more effective institutional capacity have enabled it to negotiate more favorable terms and capture greater value from the relationship with China. Zambia offers the counterpoint. Weaker institutional capacity and limited economic diversification have left it far more vulnerable to the risks of dependency.

This finding aligns with the complex interdependence framework, which suggests that outcomes are shaped by both structural constraints and strategic choices (Keohane & Nye, 1977/2012). African agency, in other words, is not a given. It must be built through institutional strengthening, economic diversification, and strategic negotiation capacity (Mohan & Lampert, 2013).

The Question of "Debt-Trap Diplomacy"

The variation across cases offers a more nuanced perspective on the concept of "debt-trap diplomacy." Zambia's experience where debt accumulation led to default lends credence to concerns about predatory lending practices. However, as Brautigam (2020) argues, the evidence does not support the claim of a systematic strategy of debt entrapment. Nigeria, Egypt, and Kenya have accumulated significant debt to China but have not faced similar crises. Gabon's debt, meanwhile, remains manageable relative to its economy.

The key factor is not Chinese lending practices alone. Rather, the outcome depends on the combination of borrowing decisions, domestic economic management, and global economic conditions. Countries with more diversified economies and stronger institutions Egypt most clearly among the five have been better able to manage their debt burdens.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to critically evaluate the nature of economic relations between Africa and China through a multi-country comparative analysis one representative country from each of Africa's five sub regions. The evidence demonstrates that the relationship cannot be neatly categorized as either pure dependency or straightforward strategic partnership. Instead, it is a complex, asymmetrical, and evolving relationship that contains elements of both, with significant variation across sub regions.

The dependency characteristics trade imbalances, concentration on primary commodity exports, undermining of local industry, and debt accumulation are real and pose serious risks to African development. Zambia's debt crisis stands as a cautionary tale of these risks. But the partnership characteristics unprecedented infrastructure development, alternative sources of finance, and strategic diplomatic engagement are equally real and offer genuine pathways to address critical development challenges.

The key insight from this analysis is that the relationship's trajectory is not predetermined. It is shaped by the interplay of global structures and local agency. Countries with stronger institutional capacity, more diversified economies, and more effective negotiation strategies Egypt being the clearest example have been better able to mitigate dependency risks and capture partnership benefits. Countries with weaker capacity and less diversified economies Zambia as the cautionary case have been more vulnerable to those same risks.

This study therefore concludes that Africa–China economic relations are best understood as an *asymmetrical but evolving strategic partnership* one shaped fundamentally by African agency and domestic policy choices. "Asymmetrical" acknowledges the structural imbalances that lean toward dependency. "Evolving strategic partnership" acknowledges the potential for mutual benefit and the long-term commitment from both sides. And the final clause "shaped fundamentally by African agency" is the most critical. It highlights that the ultimate impact of this engagement will be determined not in Beijing but in African capitals, by the policies, strategies, and governance capacity of African states themselves.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are advanced for African policymakers seeking to optimize their economic relations with China:

1. Prioritize Economic Diversification: African countries must move beyond dependence on primary commodity exports. That means implementing coherent industrialization strategies investing in agro-processing, light manufacturing, and value addition in extractive sectors. Without diversification, dependency risks will persist regardless of who African countries trade with.

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2. Strengthen Institutional Capacity for Negotiation: Dedicated, skilled negotiation teams should be established to handle all major economic agreements with China. These teams need the capacity to analyze loan terms carefully, negotiate meaningful local content clauses, and secure genuine technology transfer. Leaving these details to political connections or rushed negotiations is a recipe for unfavorable outcomes.

3. Enhance Debt Transparency and Sustainability: African governments should commit to transparency in borrowing. Loan terms should be publicly disclosed as a matter of course. Before taking on new debt, governments should conduct rigorous sustainability assessments and borrowing should be tied directly to projects with clear, measurable economic returns. Zambia's experience shows what happens when these steps are skipped.

4. Enforce Local Content Policies: Political will matters. Governments must enforce existing local content laws and where they do not exist, they should be created. Chinese firms should be required to hire local workers, source materials locally, and invest in skills training. These provisions are only as strong as the commitment to enforce them.

5. Institutionalize Technology Transfer: Future agreements with China should include specific, measurable, and time-bound targets for technology transfer. This means moving beyond vague promises to concrete requirements: joint ventures, local manufacturing, and verifiable training programs. Without such provisions, technology transfer will remain more rhetoric than reality.

6. Leverage Collective Negotiation: African countries have more bargaining power together than they do alone. Platforms such as FOCAC (the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation) and the African Union should be used strategically to negotiate collectively with China. This would strengthen African bargaining power and help ensure that agreements reflect continental priorities, not just bilateral expediencies.

7. Foster Multi-Stakeholder Dialogue: Finally, formal mechanisms for dialogue should be created bringing together government, the private sector, labor unions, and civil society. These mechanisms would serve two purposes: monitoring the actual impact of economic relations with China and providing informed policy input. The health of this relationship should not be assessed by governments alone.

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