China's Enduring and Expanding Influence: The Quest for Centrality in Sub-Saharan Africa Political Economy

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Abstract

Beijing's influence in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is enduring and expanding, even amid the present decrease in China's loans to the region. Three interconnected elements contribute to Beijing's escalating significance: 1) A strategic emphasis on centrality through connectivity integrates African nations into the Beijing sphere, solidifying its pivotal role in the regional production network, extending economic and geopolitical reach, and securing vital resources while building political support; 2) Establishing institutional arrangements that are largely accepted by many African governments enhances Beijing's appeal as an attractive partner; 3) Power asymmetry positions China as a pervasive actor in the African political economy, wielding tools like debt, financial, and trade dependencies, once exclusive to Western powers (Lendzoumbou 2024). These mechanisms synergistically sustain China's influence in SSA amid the current cascade of crises.

Keywords: China; SSA; connectivity; Western powers; power asymmetry; dependency

1. Introduction

China's economic miracle has endowed the nation with an expanding combination of hard and soft power, enabling it to project influence globally, particularly since President Xi assumed office in 2013 (Ho 2020; Yu 2016). Employing multifaceted strategies such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the establishment of regional

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and international financial organisations, Beijing extends its global reach through trade agreements, infrastructure development, financial aid, and military cooperation (Yalew and Guo 2020). Over 22 years, for instance, China has funded 20,985 projects in 165 low- and middle-income countries through grants and loans, totalling $1.34 trillion (Parks et al., 2023). This allows Beijing and its enterprises to penetrate other societies, much like the ongoing and expanding influence that the US has wielded since the end of World War II. Along this trajectory, China has emerged as the foremost challenger to the US-led Liberal International Order (LIO), actively fostering global connectivity, shaping the global political economy, and disseminating its preferred norms (Owen 2021). This presence is particularly notable in the Global South, including SSA, where China's influence is steadily growing, providing various benefits (Abegunrin and Manyeruke 2020; Large 2021).

As Beijing's influence expands, it has been successful in promoting cooperation with African countries through China-led organisations and initiatives, including the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), BRI, BRICS, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, among others. In just two decades, China has become SSA's largest economic partner, excelling in trade, investment, infrastructure development, and financial assistance (IMF 2023a, 2; Large 2021; Sun et al., 2017, 9). Beijing has emerged as the largest individual country trading partner for SSA for 21 consecutive years, with the trade volume reaching US$242,11 billion in 2023 (per GACC), up from less than $2 billion in 1992. Additionally, Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) stock reached $40.68 billion in 2021 (GDP 2023). China's transformative infrastructure initiatives position it as a strong competitor and attractive partner for African governments. As rightfully said by The Economist (2022): 'When it comes to building big things in Africa, China is unrivalled. Beijing-backed firms have redrawn the continent's transport map'. For instance, when traditional donors declined to build the Tanzania-Zambia railway (TAZARA) in the 1970s, China financed its first, largest, expensive foreign assistance project which represents $3 billion in today's money (The New York Times 1971). Throughout the past two decades, China has not only rivalled but surpassed the influence of former colonial powers in Africa, achieving this without resorting to warfare, military dominance, or employing conventional tools associated with assertive 'great power' diplomacy (Benabdallah 2020: 4).

Today, a cascade of crises indicates that the honeymoon phase of the China-Africa relationship might be ending. During the 2021 FOCAC, President Xi refrained from committing to finance hard infrastructures for the first time—a major issue area of

China's emerging order (Xinhua 2021). This marked a noteworthy departure from previous patterns, signalling Beijing's newfound cautious approach and shifted focus (Carmody and Wainwright 2022). Consequently, Africa has witnessed a significant decline in China's loans, falling from $28.5 billion in 2016 to a mere $994.5 million in 2022 (GDP 2023). Furthermore, FOCAC's financial commitment experienced a rapid increase, starting at $5 billion in 2006, reaching $60 billion in 2015, maintaining the same level in 2018, and then declining to $40 billion in 2021. Some analysts suggest that China's dominant position in Africa may be reaching its peak, potentially signalling a 'new normal' in their engagement (Alden and Jiang 2019: 656-657; Carmody 2023). Some observers interpret this as 'China's retrenchment' from the region (Sun 2021). Does the reduction of China's loans to SSA translate to China's disengagement with the region? How does Beijing perpetuate its influence on the region?

This article investigates the mechanisms underlying China's projection of influence in SSA and argues that China's commitment to the region is enduring, and its influence is poised to intensify in the future (Sun et al. 2017). China's infrastructure-centric economic strategy in Africa is portrayed as resilient, adapting to evolving economic dynamics (du Plessis 2016).

2. Building blocks of influence: China's grand strategy

China's grand strategy is multifaceted, with objectives spanning domestic economic growth and international geopolitical influence. This includes targets set at the second session of the 14th National People's Congress in March 2024, such as achieving GDP growth of around five per cent, creating twelve million new urban jobs, and promoting environmental sustainability domestically. Internationally, China aims to advance the BRI, advocate for multipolarity, and counter Western hegemony in favour of a new type of international relations (People's Daily 2024a). These goals underscore China's need for economic resources to sustain domestic growth, maintain its economic power, and challenge US hegemony by fostering an emergent global order.

China's quest for resources to sustain its rapid economic expansion, combined with the imperative to secure markets for its products, underscores the necessity of developing a comprehensive global geopolitical strategy and forging new alliances (Carmody and Owusu 2007: 505-506). According to the International Energy Agency (IEA), China is the world's second-largest oil consumer after the US, contributing to approximately 80 per cent of the global increase in oil consumption in 2023 (IEA

2023). China's surging petrochemical activity is reshaping global oil markets, driving demand for feedstocks like naphtha, LPG, and ethane. This expansion is set to increase by 850 kb/d in 2023 and 730 kb/d in 2024 (IEA 2023: 11). To meet its large appetite for energy and mineral resources, Beijing has turned to SSA resulting in an exponential rise of export of goods from the region, which more than quadrupled in nominal US dollar terms between 2000 and 2022. Metals, mineral products, and fuel account for approximately 60 per cent of the region's exports to China (IMF 2023a: 2). In 2022, China's oil imports from Angola alone exceeded $20 billion in value (Batsani-Ncube 2023: 7). China's top five import sources in Africa include South Africa, Angola, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Zambia, and the Republic of the Congo. Base metals and their products have experienced rapid growth in import value, reaching nearly US$25 billion in 2022, primarily sourced from DRC, Zambia, and South Africa (CAETE 2023: 81). Chinese firms, including Huayou, Sinomine Resource Group, Chengxin Lithium Group, Yahua Group, and Canmax Technologies, invested over $1 billion in lithium projects in Zimbabwe between 2021 and 2022. In July 2023, Huayou inaugurated a $300 million lithium plant in the country (Chingono 2023). As such, Chinese investment in SSA is a strategic component of the 'go global' policy, aiming to transform Chinese companies into multinational corporations and establish a global order beneficial to China's interests (Carmody and Owusu 2007: 512).

Table 1: Global oil demand distribution by country (%)

Year	US	China	Europe 5[1]	India
2021	20.4	15.5	7.6	5
2022	20	14.7	7.6	5.3
2023	19.8	16.2	7.3	5.4
2024	19.5	16.7	7.2	5.5

Source: *International Energy Agency (2023: 62).*

China's rapid economic growth over the past four decades has resulted in the accumulation of substantial foreign exchange reserves, reaching approximately $3.25 trillion at the end of February 2024 (People's Daily, 2024b). As the world's second-largest economy, Beijing leverages its economic and diplomatic capabilities to extend its influence

1 Europe 5 includes France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the UK.

globally, primarily through infrastructure development and financing. Infrastructure, whether it be in the form of transportation, communication, military installations, and energy serves as a tangible manifestation of power, enabling Beijing to extend its influence, build up its capabilities, and shape the international economic landscape (Blanchard and Flint 2017; Goh et al. 2018; Ho 2020; Yu 2016: 3). This aggressive approach has prompted the US to transition from defensive to offensive strategies in response to China's international expansion. Notably, in 2021, the G7 introduced the Build Back Better World initiative as a counter to China's BRI, subsequently rebranded as the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (Zhao 2021). Moreover, amidst the current cascade of crises and the resurgence of blocs reminiscent of the Cold War era, China engages in a multifaceted pursuit, drawing on the logic of (neo) realism, neoliberalism, and neo-institutionalism simultaneously (Ikenberry 2001, 2011; Mearsheimer 2001). It seeks dominance and centrality by augmenting its material capabilities, fostering interdependence through institutional arrangements, and exerting influence through the power structures inherent in institutions. Pursuing penetration into SSA is part of China's strategy, considering the region's abundant resources and increasing influence on the global stage, as described by Anthony Blinken, the US Secretary of State, as a 'major geopolitical player' (2021).

3. China's political economy in SSA and penetration of the region

The geopolitical landscape in Africa, historically shaped by Western powers has seen pervasive influence across various domains through financial assistance, trade, state-building, and the promotion of liberal democracy and economic reforms. This widespread Western influence is palpable across every facet of the African landscape, leaving virtually no area immune to penetration (See, for instance, Glen 2014). Economic dependence has facilitated the extension of power, reminiscent of the historical scramble for Africa. While Russia and China's attempts during the Cold War fell short, a significant shift has occurred since the twenty-first century, with Beijing rapidly increasing its influence in SSA, altering the geopolitical dynamics in the region.

China's rapid economic growth and increased demand for raw materials have led to a more than fourfold surge in SSA's exports in nominal US dollar terms from 2000 to 2022 (IMF 2023a: 2). China-SSA trade in goods rebounded post-COVID-19, totalling around $221 billion in 2022 (GDP 2023). China's provision of zero-tariff treatment to 98 per cent of tax items for products exported by 21 least-developed African countries likely contributes to the growth of China's imports of African agricultural food products. This is evidenced by an average annual growth rate of 11.4 per cent in recent years, positioning Beijing as the second-largest destination for these exports. Collaborative models in information technology services, including cross-border e-commerce, mobile payment, and cloud outsourcing, bring innovation to Sino-African economic and trade cooperation (CAETE 2023). Chinese investments in Africa, with the potential to reshape the region's global standing (Alden and Jiang 2019), reached $4.99 billion in 2021, marking an 18 per cent YoY increase. The total stock of China's FDI in Africa reached $44.19 billion, almost returning to pre-COVID levels. As of 2017, over 10,000 Chinese-owned firms operate in various sectors in Africa, overseeing almost 12 per cent, amounting to $500 billion annually, and holding nearly 50 per cent of the construction market (Sun et al. 2017). Furthermore, Beijing actively promotes the development of the region through both financial and technical assistance. For instance, between 2013 and 2018, Beijing allocated 120.56 billion Renminbi (RMB) in foreign aid to the region (White Paper 2021).

Emerging as a primary financier of infrastructures in SSA, China has addressed the lag in investments for ports, roads, and railways, remedying operational inefficiencies. In the last five decades until 2006, China provided over $44 billion in aid for 900 infrastructure projects in Africa (Foster et al., 2009). The impact is evident, especially in the realm of ports, where delays, often exacerbated by the inadequacies of the existing poorly equipped ports, far exceed the global average (UNCTAD 2023a: 7-8). Between 2000 and 2020, China constructed over 13,000 km of railways, 80 large-scale power plants, nearly 100,000 km of highways, 1,000 bridges, and 100 ports. Moreover, China's investments extend beyond physical infrastructure to include essential soft components such as 130 medical facilities, 45 physical activity centres, and over 170 educational facilities, significantly impacting the well-being and economic development of Africans (Hua 2022).

Recent years have seen substantial Chinese investments in technological infrastructure, with major companies like Huawei, Hikvision, ZTE, and China Telecom playing pivotal roles. From 2001 to 2007, Beijing's engagement in SSA primarily consisted of selling equipment to national incumbents through commercial contracts and intergovernmental financing. Chinese telecom companies supplied nearly $3 billion worth of ICT equipment, focussing on Ethiopia, Sudan, and Ghana (Foster et al. 2009). Today, Chinese companies dominate in 5G patents and are responsible for over 70 per cent of 4G networks in Africa, challenging historical trends and the dominance of the

US and its allies in undersea cable development (Bartlett 2023a; Munn 2020: 12). They have gained appeal in various African states due to their provision of cost-effective and innovative technology solutions. Notably, South Africa, Uganda, and Kenya have adopted Chinese cameras for border and public space monitoring. Zimbabwe has initiated a Huawei Smart Cities program, and Ethiopia has introduced 5G powered by Huawei (Bartlett 2023a). In Nigeria, Opera, a platform owned by Beijing Kunlun Wanwei Technology Co. Ltd, has expanded its influence by acquiring a local financial services company. This strategic move involves the application of Chinese technology and expertise to develop OPay, becoming a major network in the country. This influence is widespread, with over 1,500 enterprises in more than fifteen African states choosing Chinese partners for digital transformation by the end of 2021. Moreover, 29 countries have adopted smart government service solutions provided by Chinese enterprises (CAETE 2023: 87).

4. Centrality through connectivity: China's BRI

Infrastructure, whether it be in the form of transportation, communication, military installations, or energy can serve as a tangible manifestation of power, enabling Beijing to extend its influence, build up its capabilities, and shape the global political economy (Goh et al. 2018; Blanchard and Flint 2017). The infrastructures associated with the BRI play a crucial role in facilitating the circulation of goods, people, and capital—key components of infrastructural power (Khalili 2017: 2), echoing the historical significance of the Silk Road. The BRI strategically focuses on creating a corridor, extending from the Red Sea to the eastern Mediterranean and reaching into central and southeastern regions, aiming to enhance connectivity and promote economic integration among African nations (Luft 2016:69). This aligns with the historical legacy of fostering exchanges and interactions across diverse societies (Liu and Dunford 2016:4). The Standard Gauge Railway in Kenya, financed and constructed by China, is an example. While its primary goal is to enhance transportation in East, Central and West Africa, it also aims to facilitate trade and establish economic ties with Beijing through significant Chinese investment and products in SSA (Taylor 2020). These activities can be traced to the historical TAZARA railway project, which connected the Indian Ocean port with Zambia's northern copper belt. Of the total project cost of $406 million, 52 per cent was intended to be covered by the proceeds from the annual sale of $16.8 million worth of Chinese consumer goods in Tanzania and Zambia (The

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New York Times 1971).

China's provision of concessional lines of credit operates as a gateway for its companies, tying credit lines for the procurement of products, services, and occasionally labour from Beijing (Zhang 2020). This strategic approach, implemented through infrastructure-for-resources loans, not only expands Beijing's global construction companies but also ensures long-term resource supplies, especially in resource-rich countries (Alves 2013:209-210). According to Brautigam, Huang, and Acker (2020), Angola secures its loans from China with oil exports, representing 75 per cent of commodity-secured loans. This financing model has been extended to nine other countries, constituting 6 to 12 per cent of the overall loan commitment. In specific cases, such as Nigeria or Ghana, only a limited number of projects were financed through this method. Chinese banks have more broadly implemented this model in the Republic of Congo, the DRC, Sudan, and Equatorial Guinea, leading to the construction of at least 57 projects with resource-secured financing. While supporting African infrastructure development, this alignment of infrastructure financing in Africa also allows Beijing to address domestic contradictions related to capital accumulation (Huang and Lesutis 2023). The correlation between bilateral trade, lending disbursements, and the official bilateral debt owed to China by Angola, Kenya, Zambia, Cameroon, and Nigeria underscores the intricate economic relationships between China and these resource-dependent countries (IMF 2023a).

The internationalisation of the RMB has strengthened financial connections between Africa and Beijing, as evidenced by collaborative efforts in banking and securities supervision. By the end of 2022, regulatory cooperation was solidified through memorandums of understanding with financial regulators in eight African states. Progress in RMB global expansion is notable in increased local currency settlement and swap arrangements, with both China and African nations establishing financial institution branches in each other's markets. Key milestones include the China-Africa Cross-border RMB Centre and Settlement Centre, enhancing cross-border RMB trade and financial services for China-Africa industrial cooperation. In 2015, China established offshore RMB clearing banks in South Africa and Zambia, followed by the establishment of a similar bank in Mauritius in 2022. The Bank of China Johannesburg Branch, designated as the first RMB clearing bank in Africa, and fifteen additional branches across the continent, supported by local currency swap agreements totalling 73 billion yuan, significantly contribute to economic and trade cooperation between China and Africa (CAETE 2023). Recently, Bloomberg reported that the Bank of

China plans to leverage its presence in Zambia to enhance trade using the RMB with both the southern African nations and other countries in the region (Hill 2023).

Amid global shifts, notably marked by the Ukraine conflict and the formation of distinct blocs aligning with the US bloc or alternative bloc, China's expanding geopolitical interest in Africa becomes apparent (Carmody 2023: 9). This growing interest is further shaped by the influence of bilateral trade, political alignment, and development finance patterns in Africa, setting it apart from the approach of Western countries and placing a distinct emphasis on wealthier African nations (Landry 2021). A concrete example of this influence is the One China Policy alignment, which has prompted numerous African nations to shift their stance, leaving Taiwan with just one ally, Swaziland (Abegunrin and Manyeruke 2020:13). This strategic alignment is reflected in UN General Assembly votes spanning from 2000 to 2021, where low- and middle-income countries consistently aligned with China 75 per cent of the time. Such alignment consistently results in substantial rewards, with, on average, a 10 per cent increase leading to a remarkable 276 per cent boost in aid and credit from Beijing (Parks et al. 2023). This is consistent with Stone et al. (2022) finding that China strategically deploys state-owned enterprises as instruments of foreign policy, particularly in executing infrastructure projects aligned with its initiatives.

Persistent concerns among African leaders revolve around the ownership of Chinese-built infrastructure, raising doubts about true African ownership (Corkin et al., 2008, 16). There are apprehensions that China's infrastructure projects might enhance its monitoring capabilities and access to information from African states. The African Union's IT unit detected data transfers to Shanghai, sparking espionage concerns (Le Monde 2018). Reuters reported Chinese hackers targeting the Kenyan government, infiltrating networks related to finance, the president's office, and intelligence agencies, with suspicions of seeking information on the country's debt due to increasing pressures since 2019 (Ross et al. 2023). Both claims were dismissed as propaganda and 'sheer nonsense' (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Kenya 2023; Reuters 2023a).

5. Institutional arrangements: A community with a shared future or features?

China's influence in SSA is deeply rooted in a shared historical perspective, where concerns about colonialism and oppression resonate both among the Chinese and many Africans. This shared history fosters a sense of solidarity and mutual values centred around independence and sovereignty. During the FOCAC 2018, the Chinese president underscored these normative principles, outlining a 'five-no' approach that emphasises non-interference in African countries' development paths, internal affairs, and a commitment to providing aid without political strings or seeking selfish gains in investment and financing cooperation (Xinhua 2018). In this context, initiatives and organisations like FOCAC, BRI, and BRICS play crucial roles as platforms for norm-building. Furthermore, the appeal of the Chinese development model is particularly potent for African governments that share affinities with China's governance system and social norms, as noted by Benabdallah (2020: 1). As China's involvement in African development continues to expand, the consensus on the attractiveness of its model forms a robust foundation for influence, remaining resilient even in the face of changes in infrastructure financing or increased Western investments (Tiboris 2019).

China strategically employs infrastructure projects to propagate and institutionalise its norms, projecting soft power and shaping the African landscape. In the realm of media and knowledge sharing, Beijing has employed both overt and covert tools to shape a positive image in Africa since the 1960s, expanding its efforts to establish influence (Alden and Alves 2008; Van Noort 2021). Chinese companies operating in Africa, both in government projects and small-scale ventures, pioneer new markets, providing access to products and services while promoting entrepreneurial values (Corkin et al. 2008: 4). Television and radio serve as crucial mediums for cultural exchanges, as seen in the establishment of CMG Africa and the Forum on China-Africa Media Co-operation. Last year, the National Radio Television Administration of China hosted the 5th Forum on China-Africa Media Co-operation, with participation from over 50 African states in the opening ceremony (CAETE 2023: 87-88).

Last year, Beijing financed the establishment of the $40 million Nyerere Leadership School in Tanzania in collaboration with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and six southern African liberation movements. Serving as China's inaugural political school outside its borders, it aims to enhance cooperation and shared experiences with its counterparts (Bartlett, 2023b). In a similar vein, the International Department of the Central Committee of the CPC acts as the institutional embodiment of relationality, strategically strengthening China's 'relational power' with African political elites through initiatives such as 'host diplomacy' and 'cadre training'. These programmes involve sharing governance methods and rewarding political support, fostering continual growth, and deepening relationships (Eisenman 2023). China has built or renovated more than 15 parliament buildings across Africa, facilitating access to cross-party legislative elites for China through the long-term maintenance of these structures. This allows Beijing to extend its influence within key political institutions and establish direct connections with African political elites (Batsani-Ncube 2023). As of FOCAC 2021 and 2018, China committed to building or upgrading ten schools, inviting 10,000 high-level African professionals to seminars, providing 50,000 government scholarships, 50,000 training opportunities, and hosting exchange visits for 2,000 young Africans (Xinhua 2018, 2021). Social networks and people-centric relationships complement the impact of hard infrastructure projects in China's policy towards Africa (Benabdallah 2020: 3-4).

6. Asymmetric power relations: China's pervasive role in Africa's political economy

The prevailing structure of the African political economy perpetuates power imbalances in dealings with China, given the latter evident material capabilities and Africa's position in the global economy (Taylor 2015). While Beijing may not intentionally pursue debt traps, its financial practices may pose risks of debt, dependence, and reduced policy space for African governments (Carmody and Wainwright 2022: 2833). The greater the dependence, the more likely countries tend to support China's stance on international affairs (Ho 2020:11). African states refraining from public criticism and endorsing China's vision may be indicative of China's exercise of power (see Olewe 2021).

Trade between China and Africa is characterised by a significant imbalance. In 2022, for instance, Beijing exported US$164.49 billion and imported US$117.51 billion, with China primarily exporting manufactured goods to the region, while Africa mainly exported raw materials to China (CAETE 2023). The palpable economic dependence of the region on China is underscored by recent empirical research, suggesting that a potential deceleration in China's growth could have adverse effects on SSA. A mere one-percentage-point decrease in China's growth may result in an average growth reduction of approximately 0.25 percentage points in the region, with oil-exporting countries like Angola and Nigeria potentially facing losses averaging 0.5 percentage points (Abdel-Latif et al. 2023). This economic dependency is further compounded by the infrastructure developed by Chinese companies, adhering to Chinese standards, which fosters reliance on ongoing technical support and maintenance from China (Wieringen and Zajontz 2023: 1598).

China's portion of the external public debt in SSA increased to approximately 17

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per cent in 2021 from two per cent before 2005 (Abdel-Latif et al. 2023). Al-Fadhat and Prasetio (2022: 5) suggest that the potential for a debt trap emerges from China's loan provision beyond countries' repayment capacities, control over strategic sectors fostering long-term dependence, and promotion of the RMB, enhancing control over the financial system.

However, rather than being passive, African countries hold significant bargaining power due to weak legal provisions in BRI agreements, allowing for renegotiations and amendments (Jones and Hameiri 2020; Wang 2023; Zhou 2020). This dynamic is exemplified by the recent shift in the governing regime in the DRC, underscoring the pivotal role of recipient countries in shaping China's grand strategy. The Sino-Congolais des Mines (Sicomines) agreement, initially signed during Joseph Kabila's presidency, underwent a comprehensive reassessment by President Etienne Tshisekedi after his election in May 2021. After eight months of intensive pressure on China to review what he perceived as imbalanced mining contracts, President Tshisekedi achieved success in January 2024 by signing an agreement that amended certain terms of their Sicomines copper and cobalt joint venture. As per the revised deal, both parties agreed that China would increase its investment in infrastructure projects in the DRC to up to \$7 billion, up from the initial \$3 billion outlined in the agreement. Additionally, Chinese investors Sinohydro and China Railway Group will now pay 1.2 per cent of royalties annually to the DRC while maintaining the same shareholding structure (Nyemba and Christensen 2024). Additionally, African states seek to reduce their reliance on China by triangulating between China, the West, and other emerging powers.

7. Chinese vs Western influence

Infrastructure deficits and the failure to benefit from the LIO have marginalised developing states, providing China and other emerging powers with the opportunity to penetrate and establish a non-liberal order (Abegunrin and Manyeruke 2020: 5; Gilpin 2021). Recently, Uganda sought to borrow \$150 million from China's Exim after the World Bank halted funding in protest of a new anti-homosexuality law (Reuters 2023b). During the 1950s and 1960s, over 70 per cent of the World Bank's lending focused on infrastructure projects, declining to 19 per cent in 1999 before rebounding to 30-40 per cent in the 2010s (Dollar 2016: 70). From 2007 to 2020, China's financial institutions alone provided 2.5 times more funding for infrastructure development in the region than all other bilateral financing institutions combined (Brautigam et al. 2022: 30).

Table 2: Measuring China's and the West's power in Africa

		China	
		High	**Low**
West	**High**	soft infrastructure trade high technology investment	security finance cultural exchange governance ODA
	Low	hard infrastructure Diplomacy	economic transformation political governance legal and judicial system

Source: *Author's compilation.*

This table delineates key thematic domains in which both the West and China exert their influence across SSA. The labels 'High' and 'Low' are assigned to facilitate comparative analysis, indicating the relative influence of each entity within specific issue areas. Instances where 'High' and 'High' or 'Low' and 'Low' are noted signify significant influence, while comparisons involving 'High' and 'Low' represent varying degrees of influence between the two entities.

China's influence extends across every facet of the African political economy, significantly surpassing trade volumes with the US, France, and the UK. Even when combining the trade volumes of these incumbent powers, Beijing remains predominant (See Figure 1). For instance, in 2019, the European Union emerged as the second-largest trading partner to SSA, following China (European Commission 2019). China's FDI stocks in Africa doubled from just under 2 per cent in 2004–2008 to over 5 per cent in 2014–2018, surpassing traditional sources like the UK and the US, which saw a decline from 17 and 15 per cent during the same period (Stephen et al. 2022 10). Chinese FDI flows to Africa have outpaced those from the US since 2013 (GDP 2023). ODA to SSA has significantly decreased, dropping from nearly 4 per cent of regional GDP in 2001–2003 to about 2.5 per cent in 2017-19. Despite a surge in 2020, aid

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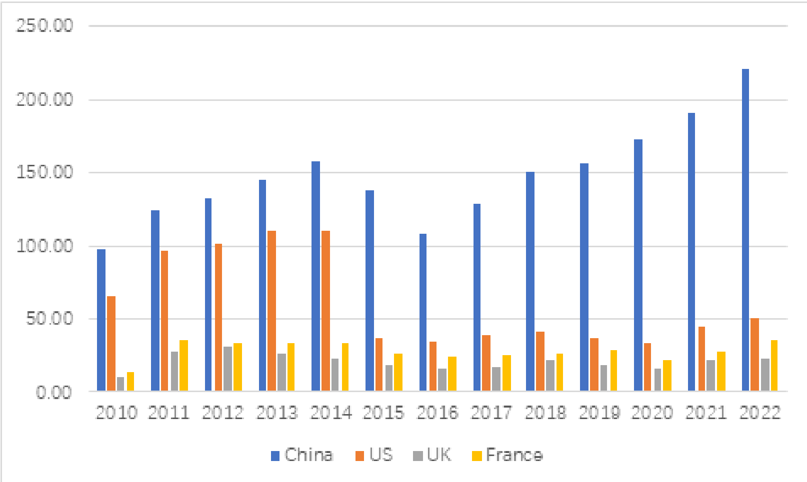
inflows returned to pre-crisis levels in 2021, and the region experienced an 8 per cent decline in real terms in 2022, contrasting with the global increase of 15 per cent in ODA (IMF 2023b:3).

Figure 1: China, UK, US, and France trade volume to SSA



Source: *The author compiled data from the Boston University Global Development Policy (GDP) Centre for the US and China, and from the Direction of Trade Statistics (DOTS) for the UK and France (December 12, 2023).*

However, investors from the West have consistently been the primary contributors to FDI stock in Africa and provide the region's largest share of ODA. In the security, finances, cultural, and political ideology issue areas, the bloc wields stronger infrastructural power than China. Nevertheless, the long-term financial capacity of the US and its allies to rival Beijing remains uncertain. Beijing enjoys a tangible financial advantage, avoiding commitments it might struggle to fulfil, thanks to substantial foreign exchange reserves exceeding its central bank's holdings (Parks et al. 2023).

8. Conclusion

This article contends that China's presence in SSA is not only enduring but also evolving and expansive, as Beijing strategically leverage its material and diplomatic capabilities to strengthen political and economic engagements with SSA nations. The reduced emphasis on loans is situated in a broader context of diversified influence, underscoring China's commitment to reshape the LIO and consolidate its role as a major player in SSA. While the extent of China's meticulously designed plan for penetrating African society and enforcing policies remains debatable, akin to other global powers, Beijing's overarching vision is to establish political and economic connections radiating from central China. As the leading official source of global development finance, China's annual aid and credit commitments to low- and middle-income countries reach approximately $80 billion (Parks et al. 2023). Infrastructure financing in Africa is cautiously resuming. Crucially, geopolitical considerations compel China, with its persistent and robust political affinities in Africa, to remain engaged with the continent in a world increasingly shaped by geopolitics.

The escalating debt relationships between African nations and Beijing carry profound implications for China's lasting presence and influence in the region. While China's financial assistance may dwindle, the accrued debt remains, establishing a lasting predicament. This situation offers Beijing a powerful tool to shape the foreign policy narratives of indebted African nations (Lendzoumbou 2024).

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