

## Revisiting Africa-China Relations: A Socialist Perspective on Historical Solidarity and Modern Engagement

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### ABSTRACT

*Africa-China relations have evolved as a compelling narrative of solidarity and cooperation, rooted in a shared history of anti-colonial struggles and socialist ideals. This paper revisits the dynamics of this relationship through a socialist lens, highlighting themes such as historical solidarity, South-South cooperation, and developmental partnerships. It critically examines the ideological underpinnings of these interactions, juxtaposing the principles of mutual respect and equality with critiques of neocolonialism and dependency that have emerged in contemporary engagements. While Africa-China relations have fostered significant infrastructure development, trade expansion, and diplomatic ties, the study underscores the challenges of aligning ideological aspirations with pragmatic realities. By interrogating the balance between ideology and practice, the analysis sheds light on the complexities of maintaining socialist ideals within the frameworks of modern geopolitical and economic engagements. Ultimately, the study calls for a recalibration of the Africa-China partnership to better reflect the principles of equality and shared prosperity, as envisioned in its historical solidarity.*

**Keywords:** *Africa-China relations; socialism; south-south cooperation; development; anti-imperialism.*

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Africa-China relations have emerged as one of the most consequential dynamics in global politics and economics, redefining South-South cooperation and influencing the trajectory of development across the Global South. This evolution is marked by a transition from the early days of post-colonial diplomacy to the present-day strategic partnerships that dominate global discussions on South-South cooperation. Since the Bandung Conference of 1955, where African and Asian nations first formalized their collective push for decolonization and non-alignment, China has positioned itself as a steadfast ally of Africa, grounded in a shared history of anti-imperial struggle and mutual aspirations for development (Akude, 2020). In the following decades, this partnership transitioned from ideological solidarity to pragmatic economic engagement, as evidenced by China's growing investments in African infrastructure, trade, and resource extraction. Today, Africa-China relations are heralded as a cornerstone of South-South collaboration, with China serving as Africa's largest trading partner and a leading source of foreign direct investment (Zhou & Xiong, 2021).

Despite this burgeoning partnership, mainstream analyses often focus on the economic and geopolitical implications of Africa-China relations, neglecting the ideological underpinnings that have historically shaped this relationship. Early ties between Africa and China were anchored in socialist ideals, emphasizing anti-colonial solidarity, mutual respect, and collective progress. However, the contemporary narrative is frequently critiqued for veering towards a neo-colonial

framework, characterized by dependency and asymmetry in power dynamics (Carmody & Kragelund, 2016). This tension between ideology and practice raises fundamental questions, such as: Has Africa-China engagement remained faithful to its original socialist ethos? Or has it evolved into a pragmatic relationship that prioritizes economic expedience over ideological alignment?

This article seeks to address these questions by revisiting Africa-China relations through a socialist lens. It examines the ideological roots of this partnership, the challenges posed by modern engagements, and the implications of these interactions for African development and agency. By interrogating the balance between historical solidarity and contemporary practice, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the ideological complexities underpinning Africa-China relations and their broader implications for global politics. The primary objective of this research is to assess how the historical solidarity between Africa and China has been maintained or transformed in contemporary diplomacy.

The research questions focus on:

1. How have socialist values of mutual benefit and anti-imperialism shaped Africa-China relations historically and in the present?
2. What are the implications of this solidarity for the global geopolitical order and African development?

By linking these objectives and questions to the ideological roots and modern realities of Africa-China engagements, the article aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the interplay between ideology and practice. This analysis seeks to contribute to ongoing debates on the future of South-South cooperation and the ideological coherence of Africa-China relations within the broader context of global politics.

### **1.1 Statement of Research Problem: The Tension Between Socialist Ideals and Pragmatic Engagements in the Africa–China Relationship**

Socialism, in its ideological purity, envisions a socio-economic order grounded in equality, collective ownership, and the prioritization of communal welfare over individual gain. However, the historical and contemporary application of socialist principles has often confronted significant challenges when interfacing with political, economic, and global realities. Across diverse national contexts from the former Soviet bloc and post-revolutionary Cuba to contemporary China, Venezuela, and various African experiments there exists a persistent tension between the lofty ideals of socialism and the imperatives of pragmatic governance and economic survival.

This tension is manifested in multiple ways. The accommodation of market mechanisms within ostensibly socialist economies, the adoption of authoritarian controls to enforce ideological discipline, the reliance on capitalist trade partners, and the prioritization of national interests over proletarian internationalism. These contradictions raise fundamental questions about the coherence, adaptability, and viability of socialism as a framework for governance in a world dominated by capitalist globalization. It is in this context that Africa-China relationship is analyzed using historical-structural approach within the qualitative methodological school. This relationship, particularly in the post-Cold War era, has evolved into one of the most dynamic and complex partnerships in global geopolitics. Rooted in the ideological solidarity of the mid-20th century when both regions shared

anti-imperialist aspirations and socialist inclinations. The partnership was once framed by principles of mutual respect, South-South cooperation, and equitable development. However, the resurgence of China as a global economic powerhouse, governed by a hybrid model of state-led capitalism under a nominally socialist regime, has redefined the contours of this relationship.

Today, the engagements between China and African states are largely driven by economic pragmatism, infrastructure diplomacy, and strategic interests rather than shared socialist ideals. Chinese investments in Africa, while often framed rhetorically within the language of solidarity and non-interference, increasingly mirror patterns reminiscent of neo-colonial economic dependencies. Infrastructure loans, resource extraction contracts, and industrial partnerships often prioritize returns for Chinese corporations, raising concerns about sustainability, sovereignty, and asymmetry.

This evolution presents a fundamental tension: how do the proclaimed socialist ideals that once underpinned Africa–China relations reconcile with the realities of a market-driven, interest-based partnership? African countries, many of which maintain rhetorical commitments to pan-Africanism, collective development, and public-sector-led growth, find themselves navigating the fine line between embracing Chinese economic pragmatism and preserving their developmental autonomy.

This study therefore revisits the Africa–China relationship through a socialist lens to interrogate the dissonance between ideological roots and contemporary realities. It also interrogates the dialectical relationship between socialist ideals and the pragmatic engagements required to sustain governance and development. It seeks to explore whether socialist principles have been sidelined in favor of expedient economic cooperation, and whether a return to a value-based partnership is feasible or desirable in the current global order. The research addresses how both African and Chinese actors navigate this tension in different contexts, what compromises have emerged, and what this reveals about the future of post-socialist international solidarity

## **2.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SOCIALIST INTERNATIONALISM AND SOUTH-SOUTH SOLIDARITY**

This study is rooted in socialist internationalism, a framework that advocates for global solidarity based on anti-imperialism, the liberation of oppressed peoples, and the pursuit of collective development. Socialist internationalism emerged as a key ideological stance in the mid-20th century, particularly among newly independent African states and socialist China. The theory emphasizes that the global working class, and particularly the Global South, should unite to resist capitalist exploitation and build a more just world order. In essence it refers to the practice of solidarity among socialist or Marxist states and movements, rooted in shared opposition to imperialism and capitalism (Munck, 1986). China's engagement with Africa, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, was deeply influenced by Maoist internationalism, which viewed African liberation as part of the global anti-imperialist front (Chen, 2015).

Contemporary South-South cooperation draws from this tradition but incorporates elements of mutual development, technical exchange, and state-led capitalism, leading to what some call “pragmatic socialist diplomacy” (Abdel-Malek, 2017). This framework allows for an analysis of both rhetorical continuity and structural change.

### **2.1 Overview of Socialism as an Analytical Lens**

Socialism, rooted in the works of Marx, Engels, and subsequent theorists, emphasizes the collective ownership of resources, the prioritization of communal welfare, and the eradication of exploitation and inequality. In the context of international relations, socialism critiques the global capitalist order,

highlighting how imperialism and economic dependency perpetuate inequality between nations. It advocates for an alternative system that fosters solidarity among oppressed and developing nations, mutual benefit, and self-reliance (Wallerstein, 1979; Cox, 1981).

As an analytical framework, socialism is particularly suited to studying Africa-China relations, as these interactions have historically been framed as a partnership of equals, grounded in anti-imperialist ideals and the pursuit of shared development goals. This perspective enables a critical evaluation of whether the practices of this relationship align with its stated principles or if they reflect contradictions and deviations from socialist ideals.

## **2.2 Key Tenets of Socialism Relevant to International Relations**

### **2.2.1 *Anti-imperialism***

Anti-imperialism is central to socialism, opposing the domination of one nation over another through political, economic, or military means. It calls for the dismantling of imperial structures that exploit weaker nations. In the context of Africa-China relations, this principle has historical significance, as China positioned itself as a leader of the global anti-imperialist movement during the Cold War. Through support for African liberation movements and opposition to Western neocolonialism, China presented itself as a partner committed to Africa's sovereignty and independence (Ogunsanwo, 1974). This tenet remains critical in assessing whether contemporary Africa-China engagements challenge or reproduce imperialistic dynamics.

### **2.2.2 *Economic equality and Collective development***

Socialism advocates for the equitable distribution of resources and collective development, rejecting exploitative economic practices that prioritize profit over people. Africa-China relations have been framed as a form of South-South cooperation, emphasizing mutual benefit and shared progress. Initiatives such as the construction of the TAZARA Railway symbolized this commitment to collective development. However, contemporary criticisms of Africa-China relations—such as concerns over debt dependency and resource exploitation—raise questions about the extent to which this principle is upheld in practice (Brautigam, 2009; Carmody & Kragelund, 2016).

### **2.2.3 *Respect for sovereignty and non-interference***

Respect for sovereignty and non-interference are foundational principles of socialism in international relations. These tenets reject interventionist policies and affirm the right of nations to determine their own political and economic systems. China has historically emphasized non-interference in its dealings with African nations, distinguishing its approach from that of Western powers. This principle is evident in China's policy of respecting African governments' decisions without imposing political conditions, a stance rooted in its own experience of resisting foreign domination (Alden, 2007). The examination of this tenet involves evaluating whether contemporary practices align with or contradict this stated commitment.

## **2.3 *Applicability of these tenets to Africa-China relations***

The socialist framework provides a lens to critically evaluate the extent to which Africa-China relations embody the principles of anti-imperialism, economic equality, and respect for sovereignty. Historically, these tenets were evident in China's support for African liberation movements and its symbolic and material contributions to collective development. However, the growing economic ties

between Africa and China in recent decades have prompted debates about whether this relationship remains consistent with its ideological foundations.

For instance, while China's investments in African infrastructure align with the principle of collective development, concerns about unequal power dynamics, resource dependency, and debt sustainability challenge the narrative of mutual benefit (Taylor, 2011). Similarly, while China upholds a policy of non-interference, its deepening economic involvement in Africa raises questions about the implicit influence it may exert on African policies and priorities.

By applying this theoretical framework, the paper seeks to explore these contradictions and tensions, offering a nuanced analysis of how socialist principles have shaped, and continue to shape, Africa-China relations. This approach not only illuminates the ideological underpinnings of this partnership but also contributes to broader debates on the relevance and application of socialism in contemporary international relations.

This theoretical framework stands in contrast to neoliberal paradigms that focus on economic liberalization and market-driven solutions. By drawing on historical-materialist analysis, this article critiques these dominant perspectives and reaffirms the continued relevance of socialist values in South-South cooperation.

Summarily, the historical foundations of Africa-China relations highlight a period of deep ideological and material commitment that transcended mere economic or geopolitical interests. Rooted in shared anti-colonial struggles, China's active support for African liberation movements and its symbolic and practical contributions, such as the TAZARA railway, underscored its solidarity with Africa. These foundations established a framework of mutual respect and cooperation, reflecting the socialist principles of anti-imperialism and collective progress. Understanding this historical context is essential for evaluating the ideological continuity or deviation in contemporary Africa-China relations.

### **3.0 METHODOLOGY**

This article uses a qualitative, historical-structural approach, drawing from archival materials, official communiqués, and secondary literature. Primary sources include:

1. Communiqués from the Bandung Conference (1955) and FOCAC declarations (2000–2021),
2. Speeches by Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Kwame Nkrumah, and Julius Nyerere,
3. Reports from the China-Africa Research Initiative (CARI), World Bank, and African Development Bank.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is used to examine China's evolving rhetorical positioning, while periodization methods allow segmentation into historical epochs (1950s–70s, 1980s–1990s, post-2000).

The qualitative methodology allows the paper to integrate a review of historical documents, contemporary agreements, and case studies to provide a comprehensive analysis of Africa-China relations from a socialist perspective. This methodological framework is designed to trace the ideological evolution of the partnership, critically assess its foundations, and evaluate its current trajectory.

The review of historical documents focuses on the early stages of Africa-China relations, particularly during the era of decolonization and the Cold War. These include speeches, agreements, and declarations from pivotal events such as the Bandung Conference (1955), the Afro-Asian Peoples' Solidarity Organization (AAPSO), and China's support for African liberation movements. By analyzing these sources, the paper uncovers the socialist principles and values that shaped the early phases of this partnership (Aidoo, 2013; Ogunsanwo, 1974).

The analysis of contemporary agreements provides insight into the current practices and engagements between Africa and China. Documents such as the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) declarations, bilateral trade and investment agreements, and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) partnerships with African nations are examined. These agreements are evaluated to determine the extent to which they reflect or deviate from the socialist ideals of equality, mutual benefit, and solidarity that originally underpinned the relationship (Taylor, 2011; Alden & Alves, 2017).

The inclusion of case studies enhances the depth and specificity of the analysis by focusing on particular instances of Africa-China engagement. Case studies of infrastructure projects, resource extraction agreements, and educational or cultural exchanges provide concrete examples of how socialist principles are applied or compromised in practice. For instance, examining China's role in constructing railways in East Africa or funding renewable energy projects allows for an assessment of the tangible outcomes and ideological coherence of these engagements (Carmody & Kragelund, 2016; Brautigam, 2009).

The scope of the study encompasses both historical and contemporary dimensions of Africa-China relations, offering a holistic perspective that captures the continuity and changes over time. Geographically, the study spans multiple regions of Africa, reflecting the diversity of experiences and engagements within the continent.

This methodology is particularly suited to the paper's objectives and research questions. By combining historical and contemporary analyses, it addresses the ideological roots of Africa-China relations while critically evaluating their modern manifestations. The use of case studies further grounds the analysis in real-world examples, enhancing the relevance and applicability of the findings. Moreover, this approach allows for a nuanced exploration of the balance between ideology and practice, providing insights that contribute to both academic debates and policy discussions on South-South cooperation and Africa-China relations.

#### **4.0 HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS OF AFRICA-CHINA RELATIONS**

Africa-China relations began with shared struggles against imperialism and colonialism in the mid-20th century. The Bandung Conference of 1955 marked a pivotal moment in the development of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), where both China and African nations aligned ideologically, advocating for political independence and economic self-determination. China, under Mao Zedong, provided critical support to African liberation movements, from military assistance to technical aid, reinforcing a solidarity rooted in socialist ideals. China's support for African liberation was not merely diplomatic but operational. In Algeria, for example, China was the first non-Arab country to recognize the Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic in 1958 (Yu, 2014). China provided weapons and training to liberation movements such as the African National Congress (ANC), Mozambique's FRELIMO, and Zimbabwe's ZANU-PF (Shinn and Eisenman, 2012). The most iconic symbol of this solidarity was the Tanzania-Zambia Railway (TAZARA), constructed from

1970 to 1975. China provided an interest-free loan of US\$406 million and deployed over 50,000 workers to build the 1,860 km rail line (Monson, 2009).

The early diplomatic efforts were not merely about trade or strategic interests but were framed as a moral and ideological commitment to global justice. Chinese leaders, particularly Zhou Enlai, played a pivotal role in organizing solidarity missions, sending medical teams, engineers, and educators to Africa. These engagements were rooted in the belief that both China and Africa were victims of Western imperialism and that their future success lay in solidarity rather than exploitation.

#### **4.1 Shared experiences of anti-colonial struggles**

Africa and China's partnership originated in their shared experiences of colonial domination and their collective struggle against imperial powers. Both Africa and China endured foreign exploitation, with Africa subjected to centuries of European colonization and China experiencing Western imperialism and the Japanese invasion during the first half of the 20th century. These shared histories fostered a sense of solidarity and mutual understanding that shaped their early relationship. The Bandung Conference of 1955 marked a critical moment, bringing together African and Asian leaders to advocate for decolonization, non-alignment, and mutual cooperation. This conference laid the groundwork for Africa-China relations, emphasizing solidarity among oppressed peoples (Ayoo, 1995).

#### **4.2 Role of China in supporting African liberation movements**

During the Cold War, China positioned itself as a strong ally of African nations in its quest for independence. Unlike the United States and the Soviet Union, whose engagements were often seen as proxies for their ideological competition, China's approach was framed as a partnership of equals, rooted in mutual respect and the shared goal of dismantling imperialism. China provided extensive support to liberation movements across the continent, including the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa, the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO), and the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU). This support took various forms, including military training, financial aid, and the provision of weapons (Ogunsanwo, 1974). For example, China played a critical role in aiding Algeria's National Liberation Front (FLN) during its war of independence against France (Shinn & Eisenman, 2012).

#### **4.3 Symbolic and material contributions**

One of the most iconic material contributions to Africa-China relations is the construction of the Tanzania-Zambia Railway (TAZARA). Completed in 1976, this 1,860-kilometer railway connected landlocked Zambia to the Tanzanian port of Dar es Salaam, enabling Zambia to reduce its dependence on the apartheid regimes of South Africa and Rhodesia for trade routes. The railway, financed and constructed by China, symbolized China's commitment to African development and its solidarity with anti-colonial struggles. Beyond its economic significance, TAZARA represented a model of South-South cooperation and the application of socialist principles in practice (Monson, 2009).

#### **4.4 Ideological alignment with socialist principles**

The relationship between Africa and China during this period was underpinned by shared ideological commitments to socialism, anti-imperialism, and solidarity among oppressed nations. China's Marxist-Leninist framework emphasized the importance of supporting revolutionary movements worldwide, particularly in regions suffering under colonial rule. African leaders such as Julius

Nyerere of Tanzania and Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana found ideological resonance with China's emphasis on self-reliance, collective development, and the rejection of Western imperialism. This ideological alignment not only strengthened diplomatic ties but also shaped the nature of China's engagements, which were characterized by non-interference in domestic affairs and a focus on mutual benefit (Alden, 2007).

## **5.0 TRANSITION AND PRAGMATISM: FROM IDEOLOGICAL SOLIDARITY TO STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP**

Following Deng Xiaoping's reforms, Chinese foreign policy became less ideological and more pragmatic. Nonetheless, the establishment of Focus on China-Africa Cooperation in 2000 (FOCAC 200) institutionalized Africa-China relations, reinforcing long-standing political goodwill while expanding economic cooperation.

Trade between China and Africa grew from US\$10 billion in 2000 to US\$282 billion by 2023, making China Africa's largest trading partner (CARI, 2024). However, trade imbalances persist: African exports remain largely primary commodities, while Chinese imports are predominantly manufactured goods (UNCTAD, 2021).

As China embarked on economic reforms in the late 1970s and early 1980s, its foreign policy gradually shifted toward pragmatism. The early socialist rhetoric gave way to more strategically focused engagements with Africa, marked by increasing trade, investment, and technical cooperation. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, represents the culmination of this transformation, where China seeks to deepen its economic footprint across Africa.

Between 2000 and 2020, China provided over US\$143 billion in loans to African countries, funding infrastructure projects in energy, transport, and telecommunications (Brautigam, 2020). While these loans support development, they also raise concerns about sustainability and dependency.

Despite this shift, the rhetoric of solidarity continues to influence public discourse in both China and Africa. For example, FOCAC 2000 emphasized mutual respect and non-interference, while promoting economic partnerships grounded in the rhetoric of win-win cooperation. The language of solidarity remains a core feature of China's diplomatic messaging, even as economic and political interests become more pronounced. Recent initiatives include:

1. The Julius Nyerere Leadership School, opened in Tanzania in 2022, where China's Communist Party trains ruling party officials from six African countries (Le Monde, 2022).
2. Tariff exemptions on 98% of taxable products from 12 African countries (MOFCOM, 2023).
3. Agricultural demonstration centers in Uganda, Zambia, and Ethiopia reflecting socialist-era commitments to rural transformation (Zhou, 2020).

This ideological framing serves both domestic and foreign policy purposes. It signals moral legitimacy to African partners and reaffirms China's self-image as a responsible global actor resisting Western hegemony.

## **6.0 CONTEMPORARY ENGAGEMENTS AND THE RESIDUAL FORCE OF SOCIALIST RHETORIC**

The contemporary China-Africa relationship is often viewed through the lens of economic cooperation and infrastructure development. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a significant driver of China's growing influence in Africa, yet socialist discourse persists in shaping both policy and



public perceptions. The rhetoric of sovereignty, non-interference, and mutual benefit continues to be articulated in Chinese diplomatic and media channels, suggesting a residual force of socialist ideals within the broader capitalist framework.

However, there are growing concerns in Africa regarding the debt burden associated with Chinese investments, with some critics arguing that the modern engagement echoes patterns of neocolonialism. The challenge remains to balance historical solidarity with the reality of economic interdependence in a capitalist world order.

In recent decades, Africa-China relations have evolved into a multi-dimensional partnership encompassing economic cooperation, developmental partnerships, and cultural exchanges. These interactions have been framed as a continuation of the historical solidarity and mutual respect that characterized earlier relations, yet they also reflect new dynamics shaped by globalization, China's rise as a global power, and Africa's developmental aspirations. This section critically examines the contemporary dimensions of the relationship, focusing on economic cooperation, South-South developmental partnerships, and cultural exchanges.

## **6.1 Economic cooperation**

### **6.1.1 *Investments in infrastructure and development projects***

One of the most visible aspects of Africa-China relations today is China's significant investment in infrastructure across the continent. Through concessional loans, grants, and investments, Chinese firms have financed and constructed highways, railways, ports, power plants, and telecommunications infrastructure in countries such as Kenya, Nigeria, and Ethiopia. The Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) in Kenya, financed by China and built by Chinese firms, exemplifies this trend, improving connectivity and trade within East Africa (Deloitte, 2018).

China's emphasis on infrastructure aligns with its strategy of fostering economic growth and trade while solidifying its presence in African markets. However, critics argue that some of these projects have created unsustainable debt burdens for African nations, raising questions about the long-term benefits of this cooperation (Brautigam, 2020).

### **6.1.2 *Trade dynamics: Raw materials vs. Manufactured goods***

Trade between Africa and China has grown significantly, with China becoming Africa's largest trading partner. In 2022, trade between the two regions reached \$282 billion, with Africa exporting primarily raw materials such as oil, minerals, and agricultural products, while importing manufactured goods, machinery, and electronics from China (UNCTAD, 2023).

This trade imbalance has raised concerns about Africa's reliance on resource exports and the potential for reinforcing patterns of dependency. Critics argue that the focus on raw material exports may undermine Africa's industrialization efforts, while proponents highlight the economic growth and revenue generated by these exchanges (Kaplinsky, 2008).

## **6.2 South-South cooperation and Developmental partnerships**

### **6.2.1 *Role of FOCAC and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)***

The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) has become a cornerstone of Africa-China relations, institutionalizing dialogue and cooperation between the two regions. FOCAC, established in 2000, provides a platform for policy coordination, economic agreements, and cultural exchange.

The outcomes of FOCAC summits often include substantial commitments by China to support African development, such as loans, grants, and investments in health, education, and infrastructure (Alden, 2007).

Similarly, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, has extended China's developmental partnership with Africa, integrating the continent into global trade routes. Through the BRI, China has financed large-scale infrastructure projects like the Djibouti-Addis Ababa Railway, facilitating trade and connectivity (Carmody et al., 2021). However, these initiatives have drawn criticism for potential debt traps and questions about transparency in project implementation.

### **6.2.2 *Technology transfer and Education programs***

China's involvement in Africa includes technology transfer and capacity-building initiatives. Chinese companies have contributed to technological advancements in sectors such as telecommunications, with firms like Huawei and ZTE playing key roles in building Africa's ICT infrastructure. Additionally, China has supported education and skills development through scholarships, training programs, and the establishment of Confucius Institutes across Africa (Shinn & Eisenman, 2012).

While these efforts align with South-South cooperation principles, questions remain about the depth and sustainability of the technology transfers, as many African countries remain consumers of Chinese technology rather than co-producers.

## **6.3 Cultural exchanges**

### **6.3.1 *Training programs for African professionals in China***

As part of its developmental agenda, China has offered thousands of scholarships and training opportunities to African students and professionals. These programs, which range from technical training to leadership development, aim to equip Africans with skills needed for their nations' development while fostering goodwill toward China. By 2021, China had hosted more African students than the United States and the United Kingdom combined, reflecting its emphasis on educational exchange (King, 2019).

### **6.3.2 *Cultural diplomacy and its ideological undertones***

Cultural diplomacy is another significant dimension of contemporary Africa-China relations. Through initiatives such as the Confucius Institutes and cultural festivals, China has sought to enhance its soft power and project a positive image of its developmental model. These programs often emphasize shared values of mutual respect and cooperation, but they also carry subtle ideological undertones that promote China's governance model as an alternative to Western liberalism (Gill & Huang, 2006).

Critics argue that while these cultural exchanges promote understanding and cooperation, they may also serve as a tool for advancing China's geopolitical interests in Africa. For example, the portrayal of China as a benevolent partner in official narratives often downplays controversies surrounding labor practices, environmental concerns, and governance issues in Africa-China projects.

In a nutshell, the contemporary dimensions of Africa-China relations demonstrate a complex interplay of economic, developmental, and cultural engagements. While these interactions are framed as a continuation of historical solidarity and South-South cooperation, they also reveal tensions and contradictions that challenge the narrative of mutual benefit. Economic partnerships, while driving development, have raised concerns about debt dependency and trade imbalances. Developmental

initiatives like FOCAC and the BRI offer significant opportunities for growth but face criticism for their potential geopolitical implications. Cultural exchanges, meanwhile, foster mutual understanding but also reflect China's soft power ambitions.

Understanding these dimensions through a critical lens provides insight into the evolving nature of Africa-China relations and their implications for both regions in an increasingly multipolar world

## **7.0 CRITIQUE AND SYNTHESIS: SOCIALIST VALUES IN A CAPITALIST WORLD ORDER**

This article critiques the shift in Africa-China relations from a socialist-inspired alliance to a more pragmatic, market-driven approach. While capitalist globalization has redefined the nature of these relations, the residual influence of socialist values offers a unique perspective on the current global order. The rhetoric of solidarity continues to provide a counter-hegemonic narrative, suggesting that socialist values can still offer alternative pathways to development that prioritize collective welfare over individual profit.

The article also examines the paradoxes inherent in this transition. How China, as a socialist state, navigates a capitalist global economy while maintaining ties to historical socialist principles. This tension is critical in understanding the contradictions within the modern Africa-China partnership.

Africa-China relations now operate in a global capitalist economy, where commercial interests often outweigh ideological commitments.

Still, China's emphasis on infrastructure and state-led development offers an alternative to neoliberal prescriptions promoted by the West and institutions like the IMF and World Bank (Mkandawire, 2011). China's developmentalism, while capitalistic is anchored in a statist logic that echoes socialist principles.

Despite the substantial benefits associated with the relationship, the partnership has attracted significant criticism. Key concerns revolve around neocolonial tendencies, labor, and environmental issues, and deviations from the socialist ideals that initially underpinned the relationship. This section critically examines these challenges, offering an analytical discussion of the criticisms concerning relevant scholarly debates and empirical evidence.

### **7.1 Neocolonial tendencies**

#### ***7.1.1 Unequal trade patterns and dependency concerns***

While Africa-China trade has grown exponentially in recent decades, the pattern of trade remains largely unequal. African countries predominantly export raw materials such as oil, copper, and rare earth minerals to China, while importing finished goods, machinery, and electronics. This perpetuates a structural dependency that resembles colonial trade patterns, where African economies are locked into the role of primary commodity suppliers (Kaplinsky, 2008).

This trade dynamic undermines industrialization and economic diversification in Africa, as resource-dependent economies are vulnerable to price fluctuations in global markets. Critics argue that such dependency limits the potential for long-term, sustainable development. Furthermore, while Chinese investments have enhanced Africa's infrastructure, some scholars question whether these projects truly address Africa's developmental needs or serve China's strategic interests (Carmody et al., 2021).

### **7.1.2 *Rising debt burdens in African nations***

Chinese loans have financed large-scale infrastructure projects across Africa, but they have also contributed to mounting debt levels in several countries. Nations like Zambia and Angola have found themselves heavily indebted to China, raising concerns about the sustainability of these financial arrangements (Brautigam, 2020).

Critics refer to this phenomenon as "debt-trap diplomacy," whereby excessive debt gives China leverage over debtor nations. While China disputes this characterization, pointing to the concessional nature of many of its loans, the lack of transparency in loan agreements has fueled skepticism. The concern is not just the financial burden but also the potential erosion of sovereignty, as debtor nations may feel compelled to align with China's strategic and geopolitical interests (Mawdsley, 2021).

## **7.2 Labor and Environmental issues**

### **7.2.1 *Exploitative labor practices in Chinese-funded projects***

Chinese-funded projects in Africa have faced criticism for exploitative labor practices, including the underemployment of local workers and poor working conditions. In some cases, Chinese firms have been accused of favoring Chinese laborers over local hires, which undermines the promise of job creation for African communities (Shinn & Eisenman, 2012).

Moreover, concerns have emerged over labor conditions at Chinese-operated mines (Cooke, 2016). There have been reports of substandard labor conditions in construction projects, such as insufficient wages, long working hours, and lack of safety measures. These practices not only contradict the principles of mutual benefit but also raise ethical concerns about the nature of Chinese engagement in Africa.

### **7.2.2 *Environmental degradation linked to resource extraction***

Chinese investments in Africa's natural resources have been linked to environmental degradation (Bosshard, 2008), including deforestation, water pollution, and habitat destruction. Resource extraction projects, particularly in mining and logging, have caused significant ecological damage in countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo and Zambia (Carmody et al., 2021).

These environmental concerns highlight the tension between economic development and sustainability. Critics argue that Chinese firms often prioritize profit over environmental stewardship, which undermines the long-term viability of African ecosystems. This approach conflicts with global commitments to sustainable development and raises questions about the accountability of Chinese corporations operating abroad.

## **7.3 Deviations from socialist ideals**

### **7.3.1 *Profit-driven motives in China's State-capitalist model***

Although China portrays its engagement with Africa as a partnership rooted in socialist ideals of anti-imperialism and mutual benefit, critics point out that its state-capitalist model prioritizes economic gain and geopolitical influence. This profit-driven approach often results in practices that mirror those of Western capitalist nations, such as resource exploitation and uneven power dynamics (Alden, 2007).

For instance, while Chinese loans and investments are framed as fostering development, they often come with conditions that benefit Chinese companies, such as the requirement to use Chinese

contractors and materials. This approach raises questions about the extent to which the partnership is genuinely reciprocal or primarily serves China's economic interests.

### **7.3.2 *The gap between rhetoric and practice in mutual benefit***

China's rhetoric of mutual benefit and "win-win" cooperation is often undermined by practices that disproportionately favor Chinese interests. While African leaders may emphasize the opportunities provided by Chinese engagement, local communities frequently bear the brunt of the negative impacts, such as displacement from mining activities or inadequate compensation for land acquisitions (Gill & Huang, 2006).

Furthermore, China's non-interference policy, while ostensibly respecting African sovereignty, has sometimes been criticized for enabling authoritarian regimes. By providing unconditional financial and diplomatic support to governments with poor human rights records, China risks perpetuating governance challenges in parts of Africa (Taylor, 2014).

## **8.0 CRITICAL ANALYSIS**

The critiques and challenges of Africa-China relations highlight the complex and often contradictory nature of the partnership. While China's engagement has brought significant economic opportunities to Africa, the patterns of trade, debt, labor practices, and environmental impact suggest a dynamic that is not entirely dissimilar to the exploitative relationships of the colonial era.

At the heart of these challenges is the tension between China's socialist rhetoric and the realities of its state-capitalist practices. The emphasis on profit and strategic gain often overshadows the principles of mutual benefit and solidarity. For African nations, the challenge lies in leveraging the benefits of Chinese engagement while mitigating its negative consequences. This requires stronger governance, increased transparency in negotiations, and a focus on sustainability and inclusivity.

Critiques of Africa-China relations underscore the need for a more balanced and equitable partnership that truly reflects the ideals of South-South cooperation. Addressing issues such as trade imbalances, debt dependency, labor rights, and environmental sustainability will be crucial for realizing the full potential of this partnership. At the same time, African leaders and policymakers must play a proactive role in shaping the terms of engagement to ensure that the relationship advances the continent's developmental goals.

### **8.1 Implications of Africa-China relations for Africa's development**

The Africa-China relationship has transformative potential, but it also poses critical challenges. Its implications for Africa's development can be assessed through its capacity to redefine global partnerships, the risks of dependency and sovereignty erosion, and the steps needed to align the partnership with equitable and sustainable development goals.

#### **8.1.1 *Potential as a model for equitable global partnerships***

Africa-China relations have the potential to serve as a global model for equitable partnerships, especially within the framework of South-South cooperation. Unlike traditional North-South engagements, this partnership emphasizes mutual respect, shared benefits, and a rejection of historical colonial hierarchies.

Through mechanisms such as the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has facilitated infrastructure development, trade expansion, and

knowledge transfer in Africa. For instance, projects like the TAZARA Railway and numerous road and port constructions exemplify how such partnerships can address critical development gaps (Brautigam, 2020).

Furthermore, China's investments in capacity-building initiatives, including scholarships for African students and training programs for professionals, reflect an attempt to enhance Africa's human capital (Shinn & Eisenman, 2012). These programs could empower African nations to build self-sufficient economies and reduce reliance on foreign aid if coupled with broader industrial and technological development strategies.

This approach aligns with socialist ideals of collective development and respect for sovereignty, presenting an alternative to exploitative neoliberal models. If properly managed, Africa-China relations could challenge global power imbalances and offer a pathway toward more inclusive globalization.

## **8.2 Risks of dependency and Sovereignty erosion**

Despite the partnership's potential, critics warn of the risks associated with over-dependence on China, especially economic dependence and sovereignty concern

### **8.2.1 Economic dependency**

The trade imbalance, where African nations primarily export raw materials and import manufactured goods from China, perpetuates structural economic dependency. This dependency undermines Africa's industrialization ambitions, leaving economies vulnerable to commodity price fluctuations (Kaplinsky, 2008).

Additionally, the increasing reliance on Chinese loans for infrastructure projects raises concerns about debt sustainability. For instance, countries like Zambia and Djibouti have seen their external debt levels soar, with a significant portion owed to China (Brautigam, 2020). Such financial dependency may limit the fiscal autonomy of African states and constrain their development options.

### **8.2.2 Sovereignty erosion**

The lack of transparency in many China-Africa agreements has fueled fears of sovereignty erosion. Critics argue that Chinese loans and investments, while often framed as concessional, come with implicit political and economic conditions. For example, the use of Chinese contractors and materials for infrastructure projects often restricts local participation and limits technology transfer (Carmody et al., 2021).

Furthermore, China's non-interference policy, though ostensibly respecting African sovereignty, has occasionally shielded authoritarian regimes from accountability. This dynamic raises ethical questions about the long-term political and governance implications of the partnership (Taylor, 2014).

## **9.0 POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ALIGNMENT WITH SOCIALIST IDEALS**

To ensure that Africa-China relations align with the socialist principles of mutual empowerment and sustainability, both African nations and China must address the existing challenges in the partnership.

### **9.1 Strengthening governance and transparency**

African leaders must prioritize transparency and accountability in their negotiations with China. This includes ensuring that loan agreements and investment contracts are publicly disclosed and include

provisions that protect national interests. Stronger governance frameworks can help mitigate the risks of corruption and ensure that Chinese investments benefit local populations.

## **9.2 Promoting industrialization and Economic diversification**

To reduce dependency on raw material exports, African nations must leverage Chinese investments to develop local industries and value chains. Collaborative projects should prioritize skills transfer, local capacity building, and joint ventures that empower African businesses.

## **9.3 Enhancing debt management strategies**

African governments should adopt sustainable debt management strategies, including diversifying their sources of financing and negotiating for debt restructuring or relief when necessary. Partnerships with multilateral financial institutions and other global actors can complement Chinese investments, reducing the risks of over-dependence.

## **9.4 Fostering inclusive and Sustainable development**

Both parties must prioritize projects that align with sustainable development goals (SDGs). This includes addressing labor rights violations, minimizing environmental degradation, and ensuring that infrastructure investments contribute to long-term economic and social development. Collaborative efforts to promote green technologies and renewable energy could be a key area of focus.

## **9.5 Centering the partnership on people-to-people relations**

Beyond state-level cooperation, Africa-China relations should emphasize people-to-people diplomacy. Cultural exchanges, academic collaborations, and grassroots partnerships can foster mutual understanding and build solidarity between the two regions. Such initiatives can also help counter narratives that portray the partnership as purely transactional or exploitative.

## **10.0 RECAP OF KEY FINDINGS**

The historical analysis underscores the ideological foundations of the relationship, rooted in shared anti-colonial struggles, China's support for African liberation movements during the Cold War, and iconic projects like the TAZARA Railway. These foundations reflect a strong alignment with socialist principles of anti-imperialism, solidarity, and collective development.

In contemporary times, Africa-China relations have evolved into a pragmatic partnership driven by economic cooperation, developmental partnerships, and cultural exchanges. Investments in infrastructure, trade, and educational programs signal China's deepening engagement with Africa. However, the dynamics of this relationship reveal tensions between socialist ideals and the realities of global capitalism. Unequal trade patterns, debt burdens, and environmental and labor challenges expose the limitations of a partnership ostensibly built on mutual benefit.

The theoretical framework based on socialist principles emphasizing anti-imperialism, economic equality, and sovereignty provides a critical lens to assess these tensions. While the relationship embodies elements of South-South cooperation and offers opportunities for Africa's development, it also highlights deviations from socialist ideals, particularly in China's state-capitalist approach and Africa's dependency risks.

### **10.1 Final assessment**

The extent to which Africa-China relations reflect socialist principles is nuanced. On the one hand, the partnership has expanded avenues for development, infrastructure growth, and technological transfer, embodying aspects of solidarity and collective progress. On the other hand, it has been marked by significant deviations from these principles, including unequal economic exchanges and profit-driven motives that challenge the ideological rhetoric of mutual empowerment.

Africa-China relations exemplify the broader challenges of reconciling ideological commitments with the demands of a globalized, market-driven economy. While the partnership provides valuable lessons on fostering non-Western alliances, it also reveals the complexities of operationalizing socialist ideals in an era dominated by pragmatism and power asymmetries.

### **11.0 CONCLUSION**

Africa-China relations stand as a significant and dynamic partnership in the discourse on global development and international cooperation. Rooted in historical solidarity, ideological aspirations, and pragmatic interests, this relationship offers both immense opportunities and critical challenges for Africa's developmental trajectory. It provides a platform for economic growth, industrialization, and capacity building, yet also risks fostering dependency, inequality, and a lack of transparency.

To harness the transformative potential of this partnership, African states must prioritize equitable and sustainable development, enhance governance, and address dependency concerns. Simultaneously, China has an opportunity to align its approach more closely with the socialist ideals of collective progress and solidarity that have historically underpinned its foreign policy. By recalibrating the relationship to reflect mutual benefit and shared responsibility, Africa-China relations can evolve into a model of South-South cooperation that not only strengthens ties between the two regions but also reshapes global development paradigms.

This paper has critically examined the historical foundations, contemporary dynamics, and theoretical underpinnings of Africa-China relations through a socialist lens, emphasizing the duality of socialist ideals and pragmatic interests. At this crossroads, the partnership holds the potential to empower African nations and inspire a transformative framework for global development in the 21st century.

### **12.0 SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

This study highlights the need for more nuanced explorations of the ideological frameworks underpinning Africa-China relations. Future research should:

1. Investigate the role of African agency in shaping the partnership, focusing on how African states negotiate their interests within this dynamic.
2. Examine how grassroots-level interactions through cultural exchanges, training programs, and local partnerships affect perceptions of the relationship.
3. Explore alternative ideological frameworks, such as neo-communitarianism or regionalism, to assess their potential in guiding equitable South-South partnerships.
4. Analyze case studies of specific African nations to evaluate how China's engagement varies across political, economic, and cultural contexts.



5. Assess the long-term sustainability of the partnership in the face of shifting global power dynamics and domestic pressures within Africa and China

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