



## INFRASTRUCTURE TO INFLUENCE: BEIJING'S BRI IN AFRICA

The Belt and Road Initiative, introduced in 2013, has seen significant total investment in Africa. Interaction with recipient countries differs, as they uphold their autonomy in selecting diplomatic partners. The recent years, there have indicated increased Chinese investment in African recipient countries, leading to closer ties and prolonged collaboration. As China and Africa deepen relations, positive and negative effects will surface. This raises the question: How has China's Belt and Road Initiative shaped geopolitical influence in Africa, and what benefits and risks (effects) did it bring to the region?

### **African Recipient States Benefit Economically**

Africa is paramount to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which embodies and shapes its foreign policy. Africa's importance comprises the belief that it is central to expanding global markets, increasing connectivity through improved trade routes, and propelling economic growth. The increased bilateral trade in 2025 portrays the importance of Africa for China, coupled with Africa topping the rank of BRI engagement in 2025, with USD 61.2 billion, a 283 per cent increase compared to the year prior.

**“The Belt and Road Initiative aims to create economic corridors, with China at its centre. It provides alternatives to historically Western-dominated trade-routes. It serves as outlet-stream for China's industrial excess capacity and creates economic security.”**

- Casper Wits - Lecturer at University of Leiden.

African exports are mainly raw materials, such as crude oil, copper, cobalt and iron ore; a necessity for Beijing. This elaborates the incentive for China to engage with Africa and maintain close ties to African states through the BRI and beyond. Beijing's engagement is important to Africa; it addresses infrastructure deficits and tackles long-standing challenges in connectivity and industrialization. Africa benefits from the multi-sectoral collaboration through the Belt and Road Initiative, which allows Chinese enterprises to enter African markets in agriculture, manufacturing, energy, and technology, while also providing the transfer of skills, knowledge, technology, and investment. The entry of Chinese companies into African markets can stimulate industrial growth.

**“Governments are appreciative because there is no alternative to what China offers. And the technologies China brings are not easily accessible or affordable from other sources. Africa aspires for modernization, industrialization, digitization, so what China offers is unique and valuable.”**

- Dr. Yun Sun - Non-resident researcher at Brookings.

China provides significant opportunities to Africa by instituting zero-tariffs on African trade, allowing for long-term benefits through attracting foreign direct investment (FDI) from external investors seeking to circumvent high tariffs. The zero-tariff policy provides Africa with an entry into the Chinese market at a low cost. This could substantially benefit Africa through the optimisation of resource allocation, leading to the structural transformation of Africa's infrastructure (e.g. hardware and digital infrastructure) for long-term growth.



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### **BRI's Darker Side**

As mentioned in a [previous HIG article](#) on the trends of the Belt and Road Initiative, Africa faces a trade imbalance with China. In parallel with the increased bilateral trade, the trade deficit expands, as more trade translates to more [African imports of Chinese goods and labour](#). The contrast between increased exports to China and increased imports from China is staggering, with 2025 seeing a [5.4 per cent increase in exports](#) in contrast to [a 25.8 per cent increase in imports](#). The imports comprise high-value manufactured goods, allowing China to use Africa as an outlet for its [industrial excess capacity](#) (overcapacity), effectively [flooding the market](#) with, for example, solar panels. In particular, solar panel exports to Africa have increased by almost 50 per cent in 2025, coupled with a surge in [steel, electric passenger vehicles \(EV\) and construction machinery](#) exports, all of which China has an [overcapacity](#) of.

**“But critics will say that China is not boosting African industrial development, only dumping products on African markets. And environmentalists will criticize China for the consequences of its mining activities.”**

- Dr. Yun Sun

The established zero-tariff policy cuts both ways, as expanding the policy could have long-term negative effects; it could further Africa's trade deficit and potentially [entrench its position](#) as a raw material supplier. The lack of African needs (e.g. [economic restructuring, industrial development, and transforming the supply chain](#)) met through zero-tariffs, combined with the appealing alternative effects it provides, could thus shift the focus to intensified trade.

It is important to note that the argument for less effective development-focused engagement through a lack of investment in mining and processing capabilities in Africa, mentioned in the [BRI trends article](#), further highlights that Africa does not benefit as much as it could. China's domestic processing of imported critical minerals and natural resources means the local added value (VA) from processing these materials is lost. For Beijing, this is much cheaper, considering the processing facilities are highly advanced and developed in China, but this takes away benefits reaching Africa and applies them to the Chinese economy.

**“By processing the minerals in China, the bulk of VAD will be generated in China and thus benefit the Chinese economy. Accordingly, if the mineral is processed where it is extracted, the additional VAD would benefit the local economy.”**

- Waltraut Urban - Senior Research Associate at [wiiw](#).

Because of its technological intensity and complexity, the process carries drastic consequences if facilities are insufficiently developed, potentially resulting in substantial environmental damage, significant water supply loss, and depletion of energy resources.

**“But there are not only positive effects: if not done properly, processing may heavily damage the environment and/or overuse the water and energy resources of the country. The process may be highly complicated and technology-intensive, which would imply some technology transfer from the Chinese investor to the foreign country— a step which many companies want to avoid, except other costs advantages, e.g. for water, energy, transport make it worthwhile.”**

- Waltraut Urban



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This increases the economic burden on African recipient states, enlarging the risks of dependency, debt, and future instability. This is apparent in the cases of Zambia and Kenya. Zambia defaulted in 2020 because of heavy borrowing, with China as its leading sovereign creditor. By 2022, Zambia used over 50 per cent of its tax income for debt repayment. External shocks would significantly impact Zambia, whose economic crisis comprises structural weaknesses.

Kenya faces significant debt issues, with commercial borrowing and multilateral loans each accounting for a higher overall share of Kenyan debt. Despite not being Kenya's largest creditor, China is frequently depicted as the primary reason for its debt struggles. While Beijing does not hold the largest share of Kenyan debt, it is responsible for significantly increasing debt burdens and causing economic burdens. The Standard Gauge Railway (SGR), a large and crucial infrastructure project, faced economic challenges. Analysts overestimated the profitability of the completed projects, and the projected costs were overly optimistic. Chinese loans increased as construction costs ballooned, and the assumed revenue generated turned out to be lower. The SGR runs between Mombasa and Nairobi, allowing for greater access to the Mombasa port. Having significant influence in the region allows Beijing to use and reinforce its position in global maritime logistics and trade. The significant Chinese investment in the Mombasa port and associated construction endeavours, such as the SGR, facilitates China's deepening influence and establishes a lasting foothold in the region.

Experts widely regard the lack of transparency as the central issue in assessing Chinese lending and engagement. For instance, Zambian official reports indicate that the external debt amounts to USD 3.3 billion, whereas independent research suggests it is twice that figure. The information regarding BRI projects is scarcely available and more difficult to obtain. Similarly, the sustainability of financing projects and the terms of loan agreements in BRI recipients are opaque, which complicates determining the exact repayment conditions, the collateral and security provided. Such lack of transparency in BRI contracts raises concerns regarding unfair terms or corruption. Many agreements under the Belt and Road Initiative are confidential, diminishing trust and accountability with the lack of public and stakeholder oversight. In cases where projects experience bloated costs, face delays or fail to meet expectations, the party at fault remains unclear.

### Beijing's Foothold in Africa

Beijing's geopolitical influence in the region is rooted in African leaders' views on Western conditionality. China's non-Western economic, pragmatic approach and engagement in Africa is viewed as an opportunity to diversify sources of funding and reduce the region's dependency on traditional Western financial institutions. Historic Western colonialism in Africa resulted in weakened trust and increased anti-European sentiments among African leaders. France's influence in the region is diminished, leading to a lack of presence, which fuels the perception that the Global Gateway acts as a 'Trojan Horse' to recapture Africa.

**“There have always been initiatives from Europe, such as the Global Gateway, but there's a lack of urgency. Places like Africa need to offer an alternative to the BRI; the EU doesn't view the region strategically; it's just erratic companies / organisations present. Europe could do more, though we're hampered by the legacy of our past.”**

- Casper Wits



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Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni criticised the World Bank and the West for mislacing focus. The consensus is that Africa direly needs critical infrastructure construction, such as railways, while the EU and the West place focus on institutions, democracy and human rights. A common perception of the EU is that it is blinded by bureaucracy and civil and political rights; it lacks the understanding that Africa has an urgent need for infrastructure. Alternatively, China's practical method permits the consolidation of its standing as Africa's foremost external financier for infrastructure projects. The African leaders view sovereignty as paramount in foreign policy decisions, frequently reiterating their right to choose partners independently. In that decision, African leaders assert that Chinese engagements, in contrast to traditional Western aid, allows for greater control over terms of investment and development, while respecting the leaders' urgent needs.

Thus the West faces multifaceted challenges, with China also focusing engagements on Djibouti, a small country in the Horn of Africa hosting the only permanent United States (U.S.) Military base in Africa. The increased Chinese engagement, combined with military (peacekeeping) exercises in Djibouti has raised concerns in the U.S., as it has been a strategic location. Djibouti is located alongside one of the busiest shipping corridors on the planet, the Bab el Mandeb strait, a strategic chokepoint between the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea. U.S. officials have expressed worries regarding the large debt Djibouti owes to China, highlighting it could undermine U.S. leverage on the region, as the Djibouti base is referred to as the front line of U.S. strategic competition with China. Beijing exerting influence in the region through financial support and military presence has shaken the U.S., responding to the looming Chinese influence in the region by shifting to a 'trade, not aid' approach in Africa.

African states are not merely passive recipients of external influence; to reshape their economic structures, African leaders intentionally diversify their cooperative engagements. While the leaders are aware of the benefits that Chinese engagement provides, many remain cautious of the economic and political vulnerabilities that could emerge. The dependency theory explains how the global economic and political system creates a cycle of dependency, where weaker states remain subject to influence from more powerful states, even when maintaining formal autonomy. Many African states' narratives are a response to the possibility of falling subject to influence from more powerful actors. Hence, the approaches to the varying influences and the Belt and Road Initiative vastly differ per African country. While Ethiopia has more openly embraced Belt and Road Initiative to pursue industrialisation and rapid infrastructure development, countries such as Ghana and South Africa took a more cautious stance, ensuring benefits and local regulations are defined before committing to large-scale engagements.



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## Conclusion

The amount of Chinese influence exerted on African recipient states is curbed by the strategic diversification of partners. However, due to the lack of conditions, coupled with the attractive infrastructure-rich nature of the investments and engagement Beijing offers, African states opt for China over Western alternatives. The lack of Western understanding of Africa's demands and the colonisation history result in diminished relations, allowing China's influence to create a foothold in the region, including in key locations such as the Mombasa Port and Djibouti. However, the opaqueness present in BRI deals and significant trade deficits are a recipe for economic dependency and increased Chinese influence. African states' caution prevents them from falling under the influence of powerful actors, affecting the growth of Chinese influence. An appealing situation for China arises from the economic advantages offered by its infrastructure projects and other engagements, alongside a deficit in suitable Western alternatives catering to African requirements. The BRI facilitates Beijing's influence and entry into the African market, enhancing its regional power through stronger military and economic connections.