

Do China's Investments and Aid in Africa Constitute a Form of Neo-Colonialism?

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Abstract

This essay argues that China's investments and aid in Africa do not constitute neocolonialism. Grounded in the Three Worlds Theory established after 1949, China's foreign policy has, since 2012, emphasized developing nations, particularly in Africa, as a cornerstone of its Global South strategy. Post-2012, Chinese investments have primarily focused on infrastructure and production sectors. Western accusations of neocolonialism, environmental damage, and debt crises lack substantial evidence and often reflect self-projection. These criticisms overlook China's recent efforts in green investments and its policy of non-interference, which contrasts with Western approaches. Methodologically, the essay analyses China's strategy using Chinese government documents, leadership speeches, and data from international organizations. The findings suggest that China's investments aim at win-win outcomes, fostering infrastructure, employment, and education in Africa. While criticism persists, China's engagement reflects a pragmatic approach that contributes to African development and economic growth.

Keywords: China, foreign investment, Africa, neo-colonialism.

1. Introduction

China has recently become a significant trade partner for several African countries. Trade between Africa and China (import and export of goods) has grown significantly, with the total amount increasing from \$11.67 billion in 2000 to a peak of \$257.67 billion in 2022, surpassing both the United Kingdom and the United States (Boston University, 2024). However, there have been concerns regarding whether China's investments and aid in Africa constitute a form of neocolonialism. Neocolonialism refers to the practice of powerful nations using economic imperialism, globalization, cultural imperialism, and conditional aid to influence or even control developing countries (Udegbum, 2020). This essay argues that China's aid and investment in Africa do not constitute neocolonialism. The first part of the essay will review, from a historical perspective, the characteristics of the People's Republic of China's (PRC 中华人民共和国) policies towards developing countries since its establishment in 1949 and in recent years. The essay will also explore the new characteristics of China's recent foreign investments and aid and the allegations of neocolonialism associated with China's activities in Africa. The third part of the essay will discuss the arguments against the notion that China's aid and investment in Africa

amount to neocolonialism. Finally, the essay will conclude based on the discussions presented in the previous sections.

2. The main body

2.1 *China's foreign policy towards Africa: Historical roots and contemporary strategies*

China's foreign policy towards Africa is derived from the Three Worlds Theory (*San'ge shijie lilun* 三个世界理论), which emerged after the establishment of the PRC in 1949. At the end of 1949, when the nascent was founded, China adopted a foreign policy of "lean on one side" (*Yi bian dao* 一边倒) by signing the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance (*Zhongsu youhao huzhu tongmeng tiaoyue* 中苏友好同盟互助条约) with the Soviet Union in early 1950, joining the Soviet-led socialist camp (Zhang, 2021). Concurrently, to develop diplomatic relations with newly independent nations, the Chinese government dispatched Premier Zhou Enlai 周恩来 (1898-1976) to attend the Bandung Conference 1955 (Wright, 2020). The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (*Heping gongchu wuxiang yuanze* 和平共处五项原则), which include mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence, became the guiding principles of China's foreign policy¹ (Chen, 2018).

Based on the Bandung Spirit (*Wanlong jingshen* 萬隆精神) of "solidarity, friendship, and cooperation,"² Mao Zedong proposed the Three Worlds Theory in the 1970s (Deng, 2017). In this theory, the Third World refers to China, other developing countries, and undeveloped nations in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and other regions. According to the Three Worlds Theory, China increased its investment in Africa. In 1975 alone, China's foreign investment and aid accounted for 5% of its GDP (Lowell, 2019). One of the most notable projects was the TAZARA Railway, which runs from Tanzania in the east to Zambia in the west, covering 1,860 kilometers (Li, 2016). China's investments in Africa yielded significant returns. On October 25, 1971, the 26th session of the United Nations (UN 聯合國) General Assembly voted and passed the resolution to restore the lawful rights of the PRC in the UN (UN, 1971). Mao Zedong 毛澤東 (1893-1976) remarked, "It is our African brothers who have carried us into the UN"³ (Xinhua, 1971). This demonstrates the long-standing history of cooperation between China and Africa.

Since 2012, China has further advanced its Global South strategy. Following the reform and opening-up policy (*Gai'ge kaifang* 改革開放) in 1978, China's foreign policy has regarded developing countries, such as those in Africa, as its foundation (Chen, 2019). Around 2000, the Chinese government established a diplomatic framework: "major powers are key, neighboring countries are the priority, developing countries are the foundation, and multilateral

¹ "互相尊重主权和领土完整、互不侵犯、互不干涉内政、平等互利、和平共处"。Chen, Y. (2018). The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence and Their Impact on China's Foreign Policy. *Asian Studies Review*, 42(4), 678–693.

² "團結、友誼、合作"。Cho, H. Y. (2015). Revitalising the Bandung spirit. In *The Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Reader* (pp. 578–591). Routledge.

³ "非洲黑人兄弟把我們擡進聯合國"。Bai, Meng Chen. 白孟宸 (2018). *Bei feizhouxiongdi taijin lianheguo* : zhongfei waijiao dailai de zhongguo xuanfeng 被非洲兄弟擡進聯合國: 中非外交帶來的中國旋風. (Carried into the UN by African brothers: the Chinese whirlwind of China-Africa diplomacy. Times-Picayune, 17.

platforms are an important stage”⁴ (Zhou, 2001). Meanwhile, after the expiry of the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance in 1980, the Chinese government adopted a non-alignment policy, emphasising “dialogue without confrontation and partnerships without alliances”⁵ (Wang, 2005).

In the context of Sino-African relations, the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC 中非合作論壇) has become an essential platform for summit diplomacy between China and Africa (FOCAC, 2009). According to official Chinese views, the forum is based on “political equality and mutual trust, economic cooperation and mutual benefit, and cultural exchange”⁶ (FOCAC, 2009). Besides the China-Africa Economic and Trade Forum, the recent expansion of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS 金磚五國) has also targeted Global South countries. In 2023, BRICS welcomed countries like Egypt and Ethiopia into the alliance (BRICS, 2023). Recently, China has asserted that “China will always stay connected with African countries, share a common destiny, and forever remain good friends, good partners, and good brothers of Africa”⁷ (Xi, 2023). This demonstrates that, with the growth of China’s economic power, developing countries like those in Africa have consistently been the cornerstone of China’s foreign policy (Li, 2023).

2.2 China's modern investment strategies in Africa: Infrastructure development and emerging controversies

Since 2012, China’s investment and aid in Africa have primarily focused on infrastructure and production sectors. In 2015, for the first time, China’s outbound investment surpassed its domestic investment (Johnston, 2019). The Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, known collectively as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI 一帶一路倡議), were proposed and are led by the Chinese government since 2013, involving investments in nearly 70 countries and international organisations (Jackson & Shepotylo, 2021). As one of the most significant continents participating in the BRI, by June 2023, 52 African countries and the African Union Commission had jointly signed cooperation documents with China to build the BRI. China has established capacity cooperation mechanisms with 15 African countries, and Chinese enterprises have been involved in planning, constructing, and operating over 50 industrial parks across African nations (Xinhua Net, 2023).

Simultaneously, China has integrated its infrastructure-focused BRI with Africa’s infrastructure development plans. For instance, the Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa (PIDA 非洲基礎設施發展計劃) primarily targets African nations, aiming to mobilize resources to transform Africa with modern infrastructure. PIDA’s cross-border infrastructure projects and programs cover four major sectors: energy, transport, transboundary water resources, and information and communication technology (African Development Bank, 2019). By the third quarter of 2023, China’s investment and financing in Africa had exceeded \$31 billion,

⁴ “大國是關鍵、周邊是首要、發展中國家是基礎、多邊是重要舞臺”。Zhou, E. (2001). The Evolution of China's Foreign Policy. *Journal of International Relations*, 5(2), 45–67.

⁵ “對話不對抗，結伴不結盟” Ma, Chunhong 馬純紅. (2018). Duihua xieshang : goujian renlei mingyun gongtongti de neihe yu tezhi 對話協商：構建人類命運共同體的內核與特質 (Dialogue and consultation: the kernel and qualities of building a community of human destiny). *Journal of Jishou University* (Social Science Edition), 39(3), 10.

⁶ “政治上平等互信、經濟上合作共贏、文化上交流互鑒”。FOCAC. (2009). Forum on China-Africa Cooperation: Progress Report.

⁷ “中國將始終同非洲國家心連心、共命運，永遠做非洲的好朋友、好夥伴、好兄弟”。Xi Jinping 習近平. (2023). Speech at the BRICS Summit. *Xinhua News Agency*.

with investment projects encompassing various infrastructure endeavors (Office of the Leading Group for Promoting the Construction of the BRI, 2023). This indicates the continuous expansion of China's infrastructure investments, complementing African local infrastructure projects.

Regarding China's expanding infrastructure investments and aid in Africa, there have been various allegations from Western countries and international public opinion about China engaging in "neocolonialism" and "resource and energy plundering." Neocolonialism refers to the practice post-1945, where significant powers use economic imperialism, globalization, cultural imperialism, and conditional aid to influence or control developing countries rather than directly occupying them militarily. Dependency theory has been a primary theoretical basis for these allegations (Gassama, 2008). Dependency theory, a neo-Marxist theory, divides the world into advanced core countries and less developed peripheral countries; due to the structural imbalance of international capitalism, core countries exploit peripheral countries, resulting in a lack of development or issues like corruption (Hays, 1964).

Sino-African relations have accelerated rapidly over the past two decades, with a significant increase in bilateral trade volume, and China has become Africa's largest trading partner. Allegations of neocolonialism by China in Africa are prevalent in Western academia. The first accusation pertains to environmental degradation. Some scholars argue that China's emphasis on extracting natural resources such as oil, minerals, and timber reflects historical colonial practices, leading to economic dependency and environmental degradation in African countries (Jiang, 2009). Additionally, the substantial loans provided by China for infrastructure projects have raised concerns about "debt-trap diplomacy (*Zhaiwu waijiao* 債務外交)" (Wang & Xu, 2023). Critics claim that some African countries incur high levels of debt, and if they fail to repay, they may lose sovereignty, allowing China to control critical assets or strategic sectors (Onjala, 2018).

China's foreign direct investment (FDI 外商直接投資) has also grown significantly over the past decade, making China the world's third-largest source of FDI from 2000 to 2015 (Lee, 2018). Some scholars contend that China weaponises its FDI to impose political conditions on African countries, as evidenced by China's alleged neocolonialism in Africa (Carrai, 2020). Therefore, the main criticisms of China's infrastructure investments and aid in Africa focus on environmental damage, debt crises resulting from Chinese infrastructure investments, and the political conditions attached to Chinese aid, including the resource exploitation resulting from China's FDI.

2.3 Debunking the neocolonialism narrative: China's evolving role and green investments in Africa

The Western countries' accusations of Chinese neocolonialism in Africa can, to some extent, be viewed as a form of self-projection. Historically, Western nations accumulated wealth through forced labor and the slave trade in the 19th century and their colonial rule and racist policies in the 20th century were significant contributors to Africa's poverty and underdevelopment (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2010). The accusations that China is attempting to control African countries through so-called "debt diplomacy" are mainly unfounded. Statistics show that between 2001 and 2017, China restructured or cancelled loans for 51 debtor nations without seizing their state-owned assets. Moreover, compared to the US-led World Bank, China offers better financing rates (The Center for Global Development, 2018).

Regarding the allegations of Chinese neocolonialism, African perceptions of China's diplomatic policies on the continent are generally more favorable than critics acknowledge. However, these perceptions might not be as positive as the Chinese government would hope (Sautman & Yan, 2009). Furthermore, the claim that China's FDI in Africa is aimed at resource

plundering is inaccurate. China's FDI flows into high-income economies rather than developing countries (Sun et al., 2023). Thus, the narrative of Chinese neocolonialism in Africa lacks a factual basis.

Additionally, the accusations that Chinese infrastructure investments in Africa lead to environmental degradation ignore recent initiatives by China concerning overseas green investments. With the global implementation of the BRI, China's demand for oil, natural gas, food, minerals, and sand has risen (Liu, 2019). Chinese companies' overseas expansion has indeed caused environmental damage and community opposition like that caused by Western companies (Chan-Fishel et al., 2007). However, in 2021, Chinese leaders announced that China would not build any new coal-fired power projects abroad and would significantly support green and low-carbon energy development in developing countries (Xi, 2021). Western scholars also recognize that Chinese investments contribute to socioeconomic development (Chan-Fishel et al., 2007). Moreover, China's investments in Africa are becoming increasingly diversified, extending beyond resource extraction to include manufacturing, telecommunications, and financial services, thus contributing to some African countries' economic diversification and industrialization (Xia & Chen, 2023). As global climate action accelerates, China is expected to shift the BRI towards energy transition cooperation, renewable energy investment, and green low-carbon industry investment starting in 2023 (Tang et al., 2024). This indicates a continual shift towards green investments in China's infrastructure projects in Africa.

Finally, the claim that China uses its infrastructure investments to impose political conditions on recipient countries overlooks China's long-standing foreign policy. China's official policy of non-interference in internal affairs is perceived as respecting the sovereignty of African nations, in stark contrast to Western conditional aid, which often requires political and economic reforms in the recipient countries (Trehubova, 2023). The paternalistic model of Western engagement with Africa has yielded limited success, whereas China's mercantilist and business-oriented approach has at least provided infrastructure, employment, and educational opportunities for Africans (Rich & Recker, 2013). China's drive for infrastructure development in Africa is motivated by domestic economic considerations. Chinese enterprises are no longer merely seeking resources abroad. However, they employ a "going out" (*Zouchuqu* 走出去) strategy across entire industrial chains to find new growth points in the global market, leveraging their scale advantages to drive domestic economic development (Nye, 2023). Thus, the "Going Out" strategy, which became a national policy in 2000, seeks to create new markets for China's stagnant domestic economy, ultimately achieving a 'win-win' situation for both China and the recipient countries.

3. Conclusion

This essay argues that China's investments and aid in Africa do not constitute a form of neocolonialism. China's foreign policy towards Africa derives from the Three Worlds Theory, established following the founding of the PRC in 1949. Since 2012, China has further advanced its Global South strategy, consistently positioning developing countries like those in Africa as the cornerstone of its foreign policy. Post-2012, China's investments and aid in Africa have primarily focused on infrastructure and production sectors.

Regarding China's expanding infrastructure projects and aid in Africa, Western nations and international public opinion have made various allegations about China engaging in "neocolonialism" and "resource and energy plundering." These accusations mainly focus on the environmental damage caused by Chinese activities in Africa, debt crises resulting from Chinese infrastructure investments and the political conditions allegedly attached to Chinese aid, including resource exploitation through China's FDI.

The Western countries' accusations of Chinese neocolonialism in Africa can, to some extent, be seen as a form of self-projection and lack sufficient factual basis. Additionally, the accusations of environmental damage caused by China's infrastructure investments in Africa ignore recent initiatives by China regarding overseas green investments. China's approach contrasts with Western models by emphasising non-interference in domestic affairs and fostering genuine partnerships rather than imposing political conditions. This strategy, motivated by domestic economic considerations and the "going out" policy, aims to create a win-win scenario for both China and African nations, promoting infrastructure development, employment, and educational opportunities. In conclusion, while criticisms persist, China's foreign policy and investment strategies in Africa reflect a complex interplay of historical ties, economic pragmatism, and evolving global ambitions, ultimately contributing to the continent's development and China's economic growth.

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