

# Chinese Investment in Africa: The Realities of Development and the Global Context

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**Abstract:** *This manuscript explores the narratives surrounding Chinese investment in Africa and the common narratives surrounding this topic. It looks at forms of investment, specific development projects, the concerns surrounding these projects, and the opinions of Africans who see the effects of this investment. This analysis shows that Chinese investment in Africa is one large part of China's goals for the 21<sup>st</sup> century by becoming a world power that leads by mutual prosperity.*

**Keywords:** *China, Africa, Development, Foreign Direct Investment, Belt and Road Initiative, Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, Clean Energy, Infrastructure*

## Introduction

In recent years, Chinese foreign direct investment gained immense attention from outside observers. As China has gained geopolitical influence, its government has put more focus on strengthening its diplomatic relations. One of the ways in which China attained its ever-growing influence has been through investment in other countries, most notably in the developing world. The impact of this can be seen best in Africa, where the Chinese government and Chinese companies have put a great amount of effort and resources into projects across the continent, with nearly two trillion dollars being invested since 2005.<sup>1</sup> Many observers such as Jean-Marc F. Blanchard, an International and Area Studies professor at East China Normal University, pointed to these projects as examples of some sort of neo-imperialism, whereby China is expanding into

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<sup>1</sup> Elliot Smith, "The US-China trade rivalry is underway in Africa, and Washington is playing catch-up," *CNBC*, October 9, 2019, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/10/09/the-us-china-trade-rivalry-is-underway-in-africa.html>.

these countries for their labor and resources.<sup>2</sup> Others like Theo Neethling, a professor at University of the Free State, claim that these investments are proof that China is attempting to bring African countries into their sphere of influence, making them reliant on China, and turning them against the West.<sup>3</sup>

Both of these claims are part of a growing fear of China's rise to prominence and the possibility that they will overtake the US as the world's foremost superpower. Instead of using these biased perspectives to view this topic, an objective analysis is necessary. To accomplish this, one must look at the types of development being done in African countries, how people in these countries feel about Chinese investment, and how this trend fits into China's overall goals for this century. By analyzing each of these factors, it becomes evident that Western narratives are incorrect, and the means by which China is expanding its influence is a successful and mutually beneficial model that China plans to continue as they come to parity with the United States.

This piece seeks to show that the common discourse that paints China as domineering, exploitative, and untrustworthy is incorrect, as is made evident by several cases of Chinese investment across the African continent. These cases show a different relationship, by which China is aiding African countries in strengthening and advancing their economies and providing a better quality of life for their citizens by tackling key problems they have historically faced—such as a lack of or low-quality infrastructure and not having electricity. In fact, the Chinese investment model shows how they can work to fix these problems in shorter time spans, with

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<sup>2</sup> Jean-Marc F. Blanchard, "Revisiting the Resurrected Debate About Chinese Neocolonialism," *The Diplomat*, February 8, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/02/revisiting-the-resurrected-debate-about-chinese-neocolonialism/>.

<sup>3</sup> Theo Neethling, "What the Djibouti military base tells us about China's growing role in Africa," *The Conversation*, August 1, 2017, <https://theconversation.com/what-the-djibouti-military-base-tells-us-about-chinas-growing-role-in-africa-81783>.

less expenses, and a quality on par with more developed countries. The dominant narratives surrounding China's role in the world—especially its relationship with Africa—do not portray any of these things, simply seeking to condemn China on false premises born from fear. In order to critique these narratives and show the truth behind Chinese investment in Africa, the critiques themselves must be further explained.

### ***Claims Made about Chinese Investment in Africa***

In order to understand the importance of the narratives surrounding this trend, a closer look at how this topic is discussed in the West must be explored. The dominant Western narrative surrounding Chinese investment in Africa is that these investments, projects, and loans are a form of “soft power” which China is using to manipulate African nations. The idea is that as China has become powerful, it has reached outwards, seeking to build a sphere of influence. In this lens, this gives China an avenue through which it can acquire cheap resources and labor, allowing it further growth domestically and exerting its power abroad.<sup>4</sup> This view is heavily influenced by the way the United States grew its power off of China's back. After the PRC and the US reopened relations in the 1970s, much of US production was shifted to China because of its relatively cheap resources and labor force.<sup>5</sup> While American companies chose to deindustrialize their country in order to save money, it is not true that every aspiring world power needs to exploit the resources of other countries. In the case of China, its investment and dealings with less-developed countries shows a more benevolent and fair relationship than China's critics claim.

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<sup>4</sup> Mark Akpaninyie, “China's ‘Debt Diplomacy’ Is a Misnomer. Call It ‘Crony Diplomacy’,” *The Diplomat*, March 12, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/03/chinas-debt-diplomacy-is-a-misnomer-call-it-crony-diplomacy/>.

<sup>5</sup> Kenneth Rapoza, “Why American Companies Choose China Over Everyone Else,” *Forbes*, September 3, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kenrapoza/2019/09/03/why-american-companies-choose-china-over-everyone-else/?sh=789cdb4871de>.

The other main argument is that China is seeking a network of nations so reliant on it that they would come to China's defense in the event of a war with the United States, a war which much of the American media, and many in the US government, pose as an inevitability.<sup>6</sup> This view is especially vulturous because of its inherently conflict-centric worldview. It eschews the idea that nations can engage in friendly relations and actions without selfish and greedy motives. It benefits Western media to create headlines about the looming threat of war between America and the bogeyman image of China that they have manufactured. The American government can coalesce its allies, provide more funding to its military-industrial complex, and justify its military presence abroad by propping up this image that the media forwards. By describing Chinese development of developing countries as colonialism, the US is simultaneously able to condemn China further, while justifying America's own reluctance and inability to help develop poorer countries to its citizens and the world. The war-based narrative and the view that helping other countries is a malevolent act should thus be laid to rest, as these perspectives only harm the chances of peace between America and China and do nothing to help countries that have a dire need for funding and development.

The motivation behind these anti-China narratives is clear: the West, especially the United States, fears losing its centuries long dominance over the world. This is worsened by the fact that such loss of dominance is being caused by a nation they imperialized and exploited: cutting the nation apart, holding cities and territory as part of their empires, and exploiting the people and land for all they could bear. This period—the “Century of Humiliation”—is the foundation upon which China's pursuits should be understood. Despite China's stated goals, the West persists in pushing the narrative that China cannot be trusted, and that it must logically be

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<sup>6</sup> Michael T. Klare, “Is a War With China Inevitable?,” *The Nation*, July 15, 2021, <https://www.thenation.com/article/politics/is-a-war-with-china-inevitable/>.

on the warpath, seeking to establish its dominance and usher in a world order with China and its ideology at the center.

This view of the world shows the egotism that lies at the heart of how the West views countries outside of its sphere. From this perspective, if a non-Western nation has the capability to expand its influence, it typically reached that position through morally reprehensible means. If it provides aid or tries to improve relations with other countries, it must be doing it for nefarious reasons. This can be contrasted with how Western countries view themselves in relation to lesser-developed countries, where investments, loans, and projects are seen simply as business, a mutual exchange by which both sides give and receive benefits. Many times, Western countries view such transactions as altruism—sharing their wealth with countries that are less fortunate out of moral obligation—while ignoring that they often were the direct cause of that nation’s destitution. This dominant view is not just a falsehood, but a danger, as it perpetuates the idea that so long as any Western nation remains true to the values of “democracy” and “freedom” with which they characterize themselves, then any exchange will always be done for the right reasons. If the reasons are just, then these nations can overlook the often predatory and exploitative methods they use against lesser-developed states.

These narratives run rampant in the field of international relations, especially the view that China’s actions abroad are gearing itself up to be in a position for war with the United States. The lead proponent of offensive realism, John Mearsheimer, has been outspoken in his belief that China’s rise is itself a sign that war is on the way unless the US maintains its military presence in regions surrounding China and becomes more confrontational in preventing China’s influence from growing further.<sup>7</sup> This offensive realist position works off of the presumption that

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<sup>7</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, “The Inevitable Rivalry: America, China, and the Tragedy of Great-Power Politics,” *Foreign Affairs* 100, no. 6 (2021): 48-58.

China's military is the main vehicle through which its diplomacy is driven, and that the influence and gains it makes are used to further aid its military capabilities.

This view is dangerous in its own right because it suggests that American policy should be to act even more aggressive and more invasive than it already has by maintaining a military presence in the regions around China, further provoking an aggressive response. If the presumption is to be believed that China's recent diplomatic strategy can be defined as aggressive and assertive, then a similar response from the US would do nothing but worsen the situation. But this presumption is already faulty if one looks at China's actions in Africa. China's diplomacy and investments in African countries show softer methods to gaining influence, rather than the militaristic and underhanded methods that theorists such as Mearsheimer assume is the dominant method by which China is expanding its international reach. As this piece will demonstrate, China's primary diplomatic methodology is fundamentally economical and resource-based, with diplomatic influence being gained through actions that benefit nations it engages with, making these countries more likely to deal with China and building a relationship of cooperation.

The views that China is engaging in "neo-colonialism" or that it is trying to create allies in order to prepare for a war with the United States are the primary arguments levied against China's foreign investments. These arguments must be recognized, both in substance and in meaning, for any objective analysis of Chinese investment in Africa to be done. An objective analysis of this topic shows a successful model for development that other world powers can utilize to help alleviate the burden that many lesser-developed states deal with at a time when international cooperation is most needed. In order to combat the existential threat that climate change poses, the effects of which has already begun to be felt across the Global South, and

create a better world in the future, the responsibility lies on world powers to emulate this successful development model that prioritizes human need over profit or political dominance.

### ***Forms of Chinese Development in Africa***

The main forms in which Chinese development have taken place in Africa are through transportation infrastructure and energy development. Although these are not the only ways in which China invests in African countries, they make up 66 percent of the overall amount of investment, and this is a very intentional act.<sup>8</sup> Infrastructure development acts as the primary source of further development, as a strong infrastructure system is necessary for other forms of development projects to take effect. Energy investment is important for similar reasons, increasing Africa's power supply will allow other forms of investment to be of more utility, especially digitally based service jobs. A deeper look into each of these main sectors further demonstrates the overall goals of Chinese development in Africa and what its long-term plan is for its relationship with African countries.

Infrastructure projects are heavily connected to China's Belt and Road Initiative, an undertaking by which China hopes to more closely connect the world, mainly Asia, Africa, and Europe through trade and sponsor economic development.<sup>9</sup> By investing in African transportation infrastructure, China is hoping to build a framework on which trade will grow in these countries, which will in turn bring more development in other sectors. This strategy is based on the Chinese saying: "if you want to become rich, build roads first."<sup>10</sup> As a result of the Belt and Road Initiative, several African countries have seen the construction of roads, railways,

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<sup>8</sup> Mariama Sow, "Figures of the week, China's investment in Africa," *The Brookings Institution*, September 6, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2018/09/06/figures-of-the-week-chinese-investment-in-africa/>.

<sup>9</sup> Caroline Freund and Michele Ruta, "Belt and Road Initiative," *World Bank*, March 29, 2018, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/regional-integration/brief/belt-and-road-initiative>.

<sup>10</sup> "China is a true all-weather friend to Africa," *Global Times*, July 21, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202007/1195194.shtml>.

and ports. For example, Uganda was able to build the Entebbe-Kampala Expressway, the first expressway ever built domestically, which connected its capital with the country's largest airport and features the longest bridge in East Africa.<sup>11</sup> Although it may not seem like a large advancement to those in more developed countries, the fact that it was not until 2018 that Uganda had an expressway is telling of the disparity between much of Africa and more developed countries. The expressway was mostly funded by loans to the Ugandan government by a state-owned Chinese bank and built by a Chinese construction firm.<sup>12</sup> This shows both the direct involvement of the Chinese government in projects such as this one and demonstrates that China's method is not just throwing money at its projects but taking a much more hands-on approach.

The building of roads has proven to be a successful endeavor, but the focus on roads pales in comparison to the focus on railways. Railways have received more attention due to the superior amount of both goods and passengers that can be transported at a single time as well as faster travel speeds, both of which play directly into the desired efficiency of trade of the Belt and Road Initiative. One of the landmark advances in respect to railway investments is the fully electric Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway, a 466 mile long line that stretches from the Ethiopian capital to the port city of Djibouti.<sup>13</sup> This railway is an example of the trade benefits that are desired with the Belt and Road Initiative, as its creation significantly shortened the amount of time it takes to transport Ethiopian goods to a major port, shortening what would be a three day road trip to about twelve hours.<sup>14</sup> Given that the Ethiopian capital is located far inland, a great

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<sup>11</sup> Paul Ampurire, "Museveni, China's Wang Yang Commission Uganda's First Ever Expressway," *SoftPower News*, June 16, 2018, <https://www.softpower.ug/museveni-chinas-wang-yang-commission-ugandas-first-ever-expressway/>.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> "Ethiopia-Djibouti electric railway line opens," *BBC News*, October 5, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-37562177>.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

deal of effort had previously been spent transporting goods between Addis Ababa and the Red Sea. With this railway, a major hub of East African commerce was able to be connected in a much more efficient manner to the Red Sea and Indian Ocean trading hubs.

Another major railway that China funded and constructed is the Mombasa-Nairobi Standard Gauge Railway, which spans from the Kenyan capital of Nairobi to the country's second largest city, Mombasa. This railroad acts as a means for goods and passengers to travel the nearly 360-mile journey between Kenya's two largest cities and is planned to be a part of a larger network of rail-lines to span across East Africa.<sup>15</sup> This new rail shortened what was a 12-hour rail trip on the previous line to about four and a half hours, with tickets priced lower than the usual nine hour bus ride.<sup>16</sup> Similar to the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway, this railway acts as a means for goods to enter and exit the interior of the country at much quicker rates than were previously capable. Given that this railway gives increased attention to passenger transportation, it provides a quality-of-life benefit to Kenyan citizens as well.

One of the important factors in the topic of these infrastructure projects is the actual control of the infrastructure and the jobs created by building and maintaining these projects. Although these projects are owned by the respective governments of the countries where they are built, the standard practice in Chinese projects is that Chinese firms build and operate them for five to six years, slowly rolling over jobs and operation to the host country as new employees and administrators are trained. In many cases, the actual construction of these projects is done by Chinese companies that hire citizens of that country to do the work, using resources purchased from that country, both of which provide a boost to that nation's economy. In the case of the

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<sup>15</sup> "Kenya opens Nairobi-Mombasa Madaraka Express railway," *BBC News*, May 31, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-40092600>.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

Entebbe-Kampala Expressway, over 2,000 Ugandan workers were hired by the China Communications Construction Company, a majority state-owned company, to plan and physically build the highway.<sup>17</sup> In the case of the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway, the China Rail Engineering Corporation and the China Railway Group both built and have a six year contract to manage the railway, after which a joint company formed by the governments of Ethiopia and Djibouti will take complete control of the line.<sup>18</sup>

Additionally, the Chinese companies involved provide training to the incoming Ethiopian workers that will take control when the contract ends.<sup>19</sup> Finally, in the case of the Mombasa-Nairobi Standard Gauge Railway, the China Communications Construction Company hired around 25,000 Kenyan workers, training 2,700 of them for more technical jobs, and even creating a training center for future railroad operators and technicians.<sup>20</sup> Similar to these other projects, this railway is being gradually filled with Kenyan workers in all job sectors, and control of the railway will be fully in the hands of Kenya in 2022.<sup>21</sup> As is evident from these three major projects, it is not a priority for Chinese firms to maintain a permanent hold over them and keep a presence in these countries. Instead, China is making sure that its initial investments are successful while helping prepare these countries to sustain them on their own.

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<sup>17</sup> “Ugandan youths get jobs, skills from Chinese companies,” *New China*, November 22, 2017, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-11/22/c\\_136772041.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-11/22/c_136772041.htm).

<sup>18</sup> “Commissioning of the railway line between Djibouti and Ethiopia,” *Oxford Business Group*, November 27, 2017, [https://oxfordbusinessgroup.com/news/mise-en-service-de-la-ligne-de-chemin-de-fer-entre-djibouti-et-l%e2%80%99ethiopie?utm\\_source=Oxford%252520Business%252520Group&utm\\_medium=e-mail&utm\\_campaign=8927570\\_EU%252520-%252520Djibouti%252](https://oxfordbusinessgroup.com/news/mise-en-service-de-la-ligne-de-chemin-de-fer-entre-djibouti-et-l%e2%80%99ethiopie?utm_source=Oxford%252520Business%252520Group&utm_medium=e-mail&utm_campaign=8927570_EU%252520-%252520Djibouti%252).

<sup>19</sup> “Ethiopia-Djibouti electric railway line opens,” *BBC News*, October 5, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-37562177>.

<sup>20</sup> Hou Liqiang, “Chinese company helps build new railway in Kenya,” *China Daily*, September 20, 2015, [http://africa.chinadaily.com.cn/africa/2015-09/20/content\\_21926960.htm](http://africa.chinadaily.com.cn/africa/2015-09/20/content_21926960.htm).

<sup>21</sup> Shem Oirere, “Kenya Railways to end SGR contract with Afristar,” *International Railway Journal*, March 12, 2021, <https://www.railjournal.com/africa/kenya-railways-to-end-sgr-contract-with-afristar/>.

With the construction of roads and railways, China is hoping to lay the groundwork that will put Africa on a fast-track to further development in other sectors. One main sector that China has focused on investing in past infrastructure development is energy production. Energy development has become a focus, similar to transport infrastructure, because of the relative lack of energy infrastructure in many African countries—as well as the role it plays in further economic sectors such as those in the service industry. Not surprisingly, this sector of investment also receives criticism from Western countries, with one of the main critiques being that this energy development is not sustainable enough and will only worsen the climate crisis.<sup>22</sup> In order to judge the validity of this concern, an analysis must be made in regard to how China's energy development has played out in recent years as well as recent trends in its pursuit to combat climate change in its investment policy.

Mary Blankenship and Christina Golubski from the Brookings Institute have noted the large effort China has made towards developing the energy infrastructure throughout Africa, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, which they have shown constitutes 75 percent of the total population living without electricity worldwide.<sup>23</sup> One study by Luka Powanga and Irene Giner-Reichl describes how between 2010 to 2015, China alone accounted for 30 percent of all new power generation in sub-Saharan Africa after investing 13 billion USD.<sup>24</sup> While China has invested in energy development in Africa for decades, there has been a notable shift in scale since the Belt and Road Initiative was created. Projects such as the Isimba Hydroelectric Power

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<sup>22</sup> Jill van de Walle, "China's Empty Promises of Green Energy for Africa," *The Diplomat*, September 26, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/09/chinas-empty-promises-of-green-energy-for-africa/>.

<sup>23</sup> Mary Blankenship and Christina Golubski, "Figure of the week: Increasing access to electricity in sub-Saharan Africa," *The Brookings Institution*, June 18, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2021/06/18/figure-of-the-week-increasing-access-to-electricity-in-sub-saharan-africa/#:~:text=Importantly%2C%20though%2C%20while%20the%20number,du%20to%20rapid%20population%20growth.>

<sup>24</sup> Luke Powanga and Irene Giner-Reichl, "China's Contribution to the African Power Sector: Policy Implications for African Countries," *Hindawi*, February 14, 2019, <https://www.hindawi.com/journals/jen/2019/7013594/>.

Station and Garissa Solar Power Station are more recent examples of this energy development in action. The Isimba Power Station, located in Uganda, was completed in 2019 and provides over 183 megawatts of power to the country.<sup>25</sup> The Garissia Solar Power Station, also built in 2019, provides about 50 megawatts of power to the northeastern part of Kenya.<sup>26</sup> These two examples are of particular relevance, being some of the last major energy projects to be completed before COVID-19 halted the construction of other projects. They are also noteworthy because they are examples of how the most recent large-scale projects are in fact geared towards green energy. Their construction marks an end to large scale energy production projects using fossil fuels, as has been signaled in other ways by the Chinese government.

A landmark shift in China's foreign energy investment came this year, when Xi Jinping committed to stop the construction of all coal-powered energy plants overseas.<sup>27</sup> While President Xi did not state when this measure was to take effect in his address to the United Nations, the confirmation of this initiative should be regarded as a fundamental progression in combating climate change and addressing the lack of green energy development in Africa. Although it is true that much of China's past energy investments use fossil fuels, a trend towards green energy is certainly noticeable in practice, and this affirmation from China's president should quell fears that it will continue moving in the direction of fossil fuels.

An additional piece to note is that Chinese investment in energy directly correlates to the receiving nation's environmental policies. In the case of Kenya, local laws mandate more green development which has guided the forms in which energy development has taken place, as is the

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<sup>25</sup> Jean Marie Takouleu, "Uganda: CWE commissions 183.2 MW Isimba hydroelectric dam," *Afrik 21*, January 26, 2019, <https://www.afrik21.africa/en/uganda-cwe-commissions-183-2-mw-isimba-hydroelectric-dam/>.

<sup>26</sup> Xiang Bo, "Kenya launches Chinese-built 50MW solar power plant," *Xinhua*, December 14, 2019, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-12/14/c\\_138631253.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-12/14/c_138631253.htm).

<sup>27</sup> Robin Brant, "China pledges to stop building new coal energy plants abroad," *BBC*, September 22, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-58647481>.

case with the aforementioned solar plant.<sup>28</sup> As more African countries adopt green measures, the forms of energy development will follow suit and concerns over energy development worsening climate change will diminish.

### ***“Debt-Trap Diplomacy” and African Perspectives***

Often left out of these discussions are the people at the receiving end of this investment: the people and nations of Africa. Scholarship and media are keen to describe their own perspective of Chinese investment in Africa, often inserting moral arguments that posture that this relationship is harmful, all without accounting for the opinions of the people that are affected by these development projects. An analysis of how benevolent or malevolent Chinese foreign investment is should be rooted in the opinions of actual Africans. By looking at the common criticisms levied by Western countries against Chinese investment, and then the responses of actual Africans have made in regard to these criticisms, a much different picture becomes clear regarding the relationship between Africa and China.

Although China’s grand development projects have provided an immediate benefit to several African nations, many observers have claimed that this widespread development may be detrimental in the long term. Specifically, some have claimed that China is loaning to countries that it believes will not be able to pay them back, such as former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who additionally described this trend as a threat to America’s geostrategic position.<sup>29</sup> This is a legitimate fear, and it is worth proper analysis.

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<sup>28</sup> Xiang Bo, “Kenya launches Chinese-built 50MW solar power plant,” *Xinhua*, December 14, 2019, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-12/14/c\\_138631253.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-12/14/c_138631253.htm).

<sup>29</sup> Nick Schiffrin and Dan Sagalyn, “China’s massive Belt and Road initiative builds global infrastructure — and influence,” *PBS*, September 27, 2019, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/how-historic-belt-and-road-infrastructure-project-is-building-chinas-global-influence>.

The concept of “Debt-Trap Diplomacy” is not new in the conversation regarding Chinese loans to African nations. The common argument levied, as is done by the Indian strategist Brahma Chellaney who created the debt-trap term, is that Chinese lending to many countries often results in several countries defaulting on their loans, putting them at the whims of the Chinese government, which subsequently uses this opportunity to strengthen its global influence.<sup>30</sup> The evidence shows that this is not the case. The high rate of Chinese lending in Africa was forged by China’s historical record of debt forgiveness and leniency for many countries. One study by the Rhodium Group shows that debt forgiveness and renegotiation were common practices between China and African countries, although this study does acknowledge that this renegotiation process is open ended and does lend to the possibility that China will push for more geopolitical influence in specific countries.<sup>31</sup> The researchers in this study note, however, that there is not sufficient evidence to show that this avenue has been taken in any large effect, and that the common conjecture regarding this option overestimates the power of this tool in making any fundamental impacts of the defaulting country such as influencing domestic or geopolitical policy.

Using this study as evidence, Dr. Darren Lim of the Australian National University has stated that the debt-trap narrative was intentionally publicized by the Trump administration to justify its condemnation of the Chinese government.<sup>32</sup> Other scholars have commented on this notion, broadening the scope beyond the Trump administration to the entirety of US diplomacy towards China for the past decade. Dr. Deborah Bräutigam from Johns Hopkins University, who

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<sup>30</sup> Mark Akpaninyie, “China’s ‘Debt Diplomacy’ Is a Misnomer. Call It ‘Crony Diplomacy’ .,” *The Diplomat*, March 12, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/03/chinas-debt-diplomacy-is-a-misnomer-call-it-crony-diplomacy/>.

<sup>31</sup> Agatha Kratz, Allen Feng, and Logan Wright, “New Data on the “Debt Trap” Question,” *Rhodium Group*, April 29, 2019, <https://rhg.com/research/new-data-on-the-debt-trap-question/>.

<sup>32</sup> Kirsty Needham, “Data doesn’t support Belt and Road debt trap claims,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, May 2, 2019, <https://www.smh.com.au/world/asia/data-doesn-t-support-belt-and-road-debt-trap-claims-20190502-p51jhx.html>.

has done extensive research on Chinese foreign investment, has said that the debt-trap criticism is the latest addition to a trend of American condemnation for Chinese foreign investment that is used solely to try to stifle China's growing prominence. She attributes the widespread nature of the debt-trap myth to "negativity bias," whereby humans are psychologically driven to assume the bad intentions of outside actors. Bräutigam says that, inadvertently or not, this negativity bias has been the basis of the West's view of China's relationship with African countries ever since it became a prominent topic in the realm of international affairs. From the exaggerated reports surrounding failures in development projects, which Bräutigam notes were small in scale but hyperbolized by Western media, to the modern debt-trap story that dominates headlines, there has rarely been any positive recognition of Chinese investments abroad by those that see China as a rival.<sup>33</sup>

While it is technically true that China has the capability to influence its debtors' politics through the open-ended debt agreements, the evidence shows that it has not taken advantage of this. Rather, China seems to use this as an opportunity to bring nations closer to itself, which is further aided by the intermittent forgiveness of certain types of loans or interest-free loans.<sup>34</sup> Instead of being taken as gospel, the narrative of debt trap diplomacy should be seen as another weapon by which Western countries, particularly the United States, have successfully turned public perception against China and its actions abroad in order to combat its rising global influence.

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<sup>33</sup> Deborah Bräutigam, "A critical look at Chinese 'debt-trap diplomacy': the rise of a meme," *Area Development and Policy* 5, no. 3 (2019): 1-14, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/337816614\\_A\\_critical\\_look\\_at\\_Chinese\\_%27debt-trap\\_diplomacy%27\\_the\\_rise\\_of\\_a\\_meme](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/337816614_A_critical_look_at_Chinese_%27debt-trap_diplomacy%27_the_rise_of_a_meme).

<sup>34</sup> Giorgio Cafiero and Daniel Wagner, "The Geopolitics of Gay Rights in Uganda," *International Policy Digest*, March 6, 2014, <https://intpolicydigest.org/the-geopolitics-of-gay-rights-in-uganda/>.

Other pieces of evidence shed more light onto the form of Chinese investment that explain why they are the preferred lender for so many African countries. One study by Okoye Obiora Jude concluded that Chinese private investment in Africa was primarily resource seeking; however, it also concludes that this trend is not unique to Africa, and that this trend fits hand-in-hand with Chinese investment worldwide.<sup>35</sup> This article does not, however, focus on investment on behalf of the Chinese government. The findings of this study show one simple thing: Chinese private investment is similar to and follows the same motives as private investment coming from any other nation. Chinese private investment cannot be viewed, in the same vein to investment from the government, as any more malicious towards the receiving state than its counterparts and follows the same environmental and labor practices that companies from other states follow in accordance with local laws. Condemnation aimed at the practices of Chinese companies often follows a pattern that these companies abuse their workers and exploit Africa's resources. This criticism is another addition in the barrage of condemnations fired at China, but, as this study shows, Chinese companies operate just the same as companies from anywhere else.

This finding can be contrasted with how some African leaders feel about their Western lenders, who they feel are lending specifically for the purposes of resource exploitation and gaining political leverage over them.<sup>36</sup> The irony here is obvious: the same critiques the West often use against China to portray it as an exploitative and domineering force are the same words that many Africans, the very people the West claims to be looking out for, use to portray the West's style of diplomacy towards them. The "debt-trap" issue is certainly one of importance

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<sup>35</sup> Okoye Obiora Jude. "Investing for Resources? Comparison of Chinese Outward Foreign Direct Investment in Africa with the Rest of the World." *Africa Insight* 49, no. 2 (September 2019): 16–31.

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=sih&AN=139910733&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

<sup>36</sup> Mehari Taddele Maru, "Why Africa loves China," *Al Jazeera*, January 6, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2019/1/6/why-africa-loves-china>.

and should not be glanced over, but as for African leaders, government officials, and citizens, this one particular fear does not overshadow the great improvements that have come about as a result of their relationship with China.

Favorability towards China can be seen in several African countries across the continent. Many African leaders and government officials have not only spoken positively of China's lending practices and development projects but show a general favorability towards dealing with China over other partners. Uganda is a prime example of this, as its president has stated that China has been the only foreign power that has shown the interest and ability needed to help Uganda complete projects that were seemingly impossible mere decades ago.<sup>37</sup> Likewise, the former president of Senegal Abdoulaye Wade noted his preference for Chinese investment, specifically because of the rapidity at which China was able to carry out plans and the benefits of having a lack of excessive oversight on the behalf of the Chinese government.<sup>38</sup>

As for the citizens of African countries, studies consistently show that public perception of China is generally positive. In a 2020 study by Afrobarometer that surveyed citizens from 18 African countries, 59 percent of the respondents had positive views of China's influence in Africa, the highest opinion out of the nations and organizations that they were asked about.<sup>39</sup> The highest favorability rates could be seen in Kenya, Tanzania, Chad, Niger, Mali, Botswana, and Zambia, where favorability ranged from 71 percent and above. In South Africa, Mozambique, Angola, and Nigeria, favorability ranged from 51 percent to 70 percent. The lowest numbers, telling in their own right, are seen in Algeria, Morocco, and Egypt, where the lowest levels of

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<sup>37</sup> Rodney Muhumuza, "As China builds up Africa, some in Uganda warn of trouble," *Associated Press*, October 24, 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/economy-uganda-financial-markets-global-trade-international-news-62ab13badad04dd7b38a69b69eac61d1>.

<sup>38</sup> Larry Hanauer and Lyle J. Morris, "Chinese Engagement in Africa: Drivers, Reactions, and Implications for U.S. Policy," *RAND Corporation* (2014): 57-58, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/10.7249/j.ctt6wq7ss.12.pdf>.

<sup>39</sup> Eric Olander, "China's surprisingly durable reputation in Africa," *The Africa Report*, September 11, 2020, <https://www.theafricareport.com/41380/chinas-surprisingly-durable-reputation-in-africa/>.

favorability were 31 percent to 40 percent.<sup>40</sup> The top factors that contributed to favorability in this study were infrastructure development and business development. Perhaps surprisingly for some, the highest negative factor attributed to China by those surveyed was not related to geopolitics or economics, but an image of Chinese imported goods as being low quality. This study makes it apparent that most people across Africa not only have a favorable position towards China, but when asked about what they like most in regard to China, infrastructure development is at the forefront. This shows how significant China's development projects have been in impacting the lives of ordinary people.

The Sino-African relationship is not perfect. Within Africa, there are those who cling to the debt-trap narrative and fear growing Chinese influence on the continent such as Ssemujju Ibrahim Nganda, a Ugandan opposition leader. He has pushed back against the Ugandan government's cooperation with China, fearing that Uganda will become a neo-colony.<sup>41</sup> Additionally, many Africans hold negative views of Chinese immigrants, who they believe are taking their jobs.<sup>42</sup> Emma Mawdsley of Cambridge University, however, notes that these negative perceptions largely come from the fact that Western media is still predominant in Africa over all other media outlets. Although this is significant, these grievances cannot be explained solely on the role that Western media plays.<sup>43</sup> Instead, it must also be acknowledged that mistrust will inherently exist between nations and China must put more of an effort into proving that the large role it has taken in Africa's affairs are well-intentioned and mutually beneficial.

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<sup>40</sup> "Africans' perceptions about China: A sneak peek from 18 countries," *Afrobarometer*, September 3, 2020, [https://afrobarometer.org/sites/default/files/africa-china\\_relations-3sept20.pdf](https://afrobarometer.org/sites/default/files/africa-china_relations-3sept20.pdf).

<sup>41</sup> Rodney Muhumuza, "As China builds up Africa, some in Uganda warn of trouble," *Associated Press*, October 24, 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/economy-uganda-financial-markets-global-trade-international-news-62ab13badad04dd7b38a69b69eac61d1>.

<sup>42</sup> Hangwei Li and Jacqueline Muna Musiitwa Esq, "China in Africa's Looking Glass: Perceptions and Realities," *Rusi*, August 3, 2020, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/china-africas-looking-glass-perceptions-and-realities>.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

*The Greater Picture and the “Chinese Century”*

China’s massive investment effort into developing Africa has been a dominant subject in foreign policy circles for much of the past decade. The discourse surrounding this subject has been largely influenced by changing perceptions of China and its role in the world, seeing its influential role in Africa as a microcosm of a larger trend of nations aligning themselves with the Chinese economic sphere. When biases are put aside, it is clear that China has played an immense role in helping African nations’ development and integration further into the world economy.

It is true, though, that this subject coincides with the challenge China poses to American hegemony. This challenge is not inherently one of hostility or war, rather it is an existential challenge to America’s position at the top of the international hierarchy of economic, military, and political dominance over the world system. While this may appear to be a hostile situation to the United States, it can only be understood in the context of the threat that China feels the US poses to its sovereignty. Scholars like John Mearsheimer acknowledge that China sees the US as a threat to its sovereignty and growth but flip this to say that if this threat were eased, China would be much more aggressive, and the threat of war would be much higher as China reaches to usurp America as the world hegemon. China does not seek to dominate the United States, much less the world, but instead rise to a position where China no longer feels threatened by the US and is able to pursue prosperity without the United States posturing its military power for the sake of keeping China at bay. Many commentators like the renowned British journalist William Rees-Mogg have long referred to this century as “the Chinese Century,” in contrast to the previous century that was defined by America’s rise to hegemony.<sup>44</sup> The implications of a

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<sup>44</sup> William Rees-Mogg, “This is the Chinese century,” *The Times*, January 3, 2005, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/this-is-the-chinese-century-3fbqb8qz7tk>.

Chinese Century are not known to many, but by looking at China's explicitly stated goals for the near future, its meaning becomes clear.

Xi Jinping and the CPC have vowed that by 2049, the centenary of the founding of the People's Republic of China and the near midway point of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, China will be a fully developed country, or a "great modern socialist country." The characteristics of this stage are that China will have a military, economy, and global reach on par with the United States for the purpose of creating a "shared future for mankind."<sup>45</sup> This shared future, according to the Communist Party of China (CPC), is one of mutual development and prosperity. As is evident in the case of Chinese investments across Africa, the methodology behind this path to development is sound, and has proven to lead to an increase in quality of life and economic improvement for the citizens of several African countries.

Regardless of how China's rivals view these aspirations and the ideological implications of these goals, the CPC firmly believes it is on track to meet these goals as planned, and its actions abroad show that it is trying to build the foundations of its image of a shared future with itself leading the way. If taking into account the evidence provided by China's development of Africa, this leadership would mean focusing on the needs of underdeveloped countries and integrating their economies with the rest of the world. While China has already been able to accomplish this in part, being on par with the US at the very least, is necessary for it to fully carry out this goal, seeing US hegemony as a hindrance. In part, this is because of the various demonizing claims the US has made about Chinese foreign investment which has been used to turn countries away from Chinese diplomacy. Time will tell if China is able to accomplish its goals and how the rest of the world will react to such a paradigm shift.

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<sup>45</sup> Ivaylo Valchev, "China's 2049 plan a big challenge before the world," *South Asia Monitor*, April 11, 2021, <https://www.southasiamonitor.org/china-watch/chinas-2049-plan-big-challenge-world>.

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