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# IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT? AFRICAN AGENCY AND CHINESE POWER AT FOCAC, THE AU AND THE BRI

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*African perspectives. Global insights.*

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Cover image: Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta flags off a cargo train as it leaves the container terminal for its inaugural journey to Nairobi, at the port of the coastal town of Mombasa on 30 May 2017. More than a century after a colonial railway gave birth to modern Kenya, the country is betting on a new Chinese-built route to cement its position as the gateway to East Africa. The $3.2 billion railway links Nairobi with the port city of Mombasa
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## ABSTRACT

While Africa's partnership with China has undeniably led to a jump in trade and investment, especially over the past two decades, many on the continent remain concerned about the relationship's lack of equality. This issue is particularly striking during the triennial Forum on China–Africa Cooperation summit, when dozens of African leaders gather to meet a single Chinese counterpart. Calls for bolstering African decision-making power in interactions with China are common in the China–Africa space. This paper argues that for Africa to increase its agency – that is, its ability to make independent decisions and strengthen its bargaining power – the continent first needs to unpack the nature of African decision-making in the China–Africa relationship. What does agency mean in this relationship, and how can Africa improve its bargaining position in relation to China? This paper explores these questions by thinking through how African agency has been conceptualised in the past, and comparing those ideas of agency with two real-world case studies: China's relationship with the AU, and Africa's relationship with China's Belt and Road Initiative.


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## ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

| | |
|---|---|
| AfCFTA | African Continental Free Trade Agreement |
| AIIB | Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank |
| ASEAN | Association of Southeast Asian Nations |
| AU | African Union |
| BRI | Belt and Road Initiative |
| FOCAC | Forum on China–Africa Cooperation |
| GDP | gross domestic product |
| OAU | Organization of African Unity |
| RECs | regional economic communities |
| SEZs | special economic zones |

## INTRODUCTION

2018 marks the seventh Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), held from 2–4 September. FOCAC, a massive triennial meeting between Chinese leaders and their African counterparts, both celebrates and reviews progress in the China–Africa relationship, and offers an opportunity to take its pulse and set new targets. The forum was formed in 2000, an opportune moment to redirect the long history of political links between China and the continent, and to take advantage of parallel processes on opposite sides of the world. On the one hand, China's own rapidly developing economy drove closer links to strategic regions of the world, on the other, Africa, undergoing economic reform programmes, was open to commercial opportunities. FOCAC was not the first time that China had engaged in trans-regional links with Africa, but, unlike the 1955 Bandung Asian–African Conference, relations became less ideological and more commercial. The forum grew to reflect the influence of a wider range of actors, including Chinese state-owned and private companies, state-directed banks and an increasing number of migrants from both regions looking for opportunities. It came to be described by Chinese policymakers as 'a model for South–South cooperation'.[1] Yet almost two decades since its inception, questions linger around the nature of this cooperation, particularly Africa's ability to shape and even lead it. The continent's power to make its own decisions, advance its chosen development agenda and gain optimum deals from China can be summed up in the term 'agency'. In this context the term is shorthand for Africa's ability to drive a fair bargain with China or, conversely, the extent to which African ambitions are subsumed in China's. However, as this paper argues throughout, this should not be seen as a definition, but rather as a prompt towards a conversation about the definitions, limitations and embodiments of African agency within the China–Africa relationship in general and in platforms such as FOCAC, the AU and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) specifically.

The issue of African agency drew increasing attention as China–Africa relations became an academic field. African agency came to function as a prism through which to examine the entire relationship, and concerns about the power gap between China and various African countries led to the relationship's being condemned as neo-colonial.[2] This in turn drove analyses that both underscored this power gap and emphasised how African governments managed to gain leverage in their negotiations with China.[3] While scholars have argued that simplistic categories such as 'China' or 'Africa' should be interrogated more closely,

1 Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of South Africa, 'China–Africa Cooperation, A Model of South–South Cooperation, Complementarity, Equality and Real Results', Information and Public Affairs Office, 11 December 2014 [email].

2 Thabo Mbeki's 2006 warning that Africa's export of raw materials to China and import of finished goods from China risk replicating colonial relationships is a key example. See *Mail & Guardian*, 'Mbeki warns Africa on relationship with China', 13 December 2006, https://mg.co.za/article/2006-12-13-mbeki-warns-africa-on-relationship-with-china, accessed 13 August 2018.

3 Corkin L, *Uncovering African Agency: Angola's Management of China's Credit Lines*. London: Routledge, 2013; Mohan G & B Lampert, 'Negotiating China: Reinserting African agency into China–Africa relations', *African Affairs*, 112, 446, 2013, pp. 92–110.

much work remains to be done to articulate the nature of African agency in its interaction with China. This is especially true as conditions on the ground change in response to new initiatives by both China and African countries. Recent discussions of the impact of debt, and its possible strategic uses, have made it even more urgent to think through what African agency means in relation to Chinese power.

This paper seeks to move beyond current discussions of African agency towards exploring the deeper complexities of the term: Where is agency located? Who is included in the term 'Africa'? What actions constitute 'agency'? Contributing to this conversation is important for China–Africa studies, especially because FOCAC tends to flatten these complexities into the optics of handshakes and funding announcements. It also casts light on the wider issue of decision-making power within South–South cooperation.

This paper seeks to move beyond current discussions of African agency towards exploring the deeper complexities of the term: Where is agency located? Who is included in the term 'Africa'? What actions constitute 'agency'?

This paper avoids definitions of African agency in favour of exploring the nature of the concept instead, with the goal of contributing to a conversation about its nature. Instead of posing a premature definition, it suggests parameters within which a conversation about Africa's agency in relation to Chinese power should be located. The paper starts with a brief discussion of why the issue matters, both for Africa and for the world. It then moves on to two case studies that raise crucial complications that should shape future conversations about African agency within China–Africa relations. The AU and the BRI both enable and limit various forms of African agency. Through engaging in detail with these two cases, the paper aims to delineate a space for future discussions of African agency in the context of China's global ascendance.

## AFRICAN AGENCY AND EMERGING POWERS

Africa's agency in international relations is a useful departure point from which to examine a set of trends shaping current global politics. These include uneven globalisation, identity politics and dangerous power transitions. In this volatile context, one could think of African decision-making as a response to a radically unequal global power hierarchy. This sometimes leads to a tendency to celebrate any African decision – even decisions that break key norms – as a strike by excluded, marginalised populations against Western dominance. However, agency also can and often does express itself through tactics used by incumbent governments to shore up their own power or exclude other groups. More attention should be paid to agency's role in shaping international relations between developing countries, which is increasingly a site of contestation, compromise and collaboration over norms and practices. More research on these South–South relations is needed, not least because they will shape the post-Western world.[4]

China–Africa/Africa–China engagements provide the clearest depiction of agency in the context of emerging power relations

In this regard, China–Africa/Africa–China engagements provide the clearest depiction of agency in the context of emerging power relations. China stands out as the foremost economic and military actor in the developing world, seeking to present itself as both a

4 See Gadzala A (ed.), *Africa and China: How Africans and Their Governments Are Shaping Relations with China*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015.

leader of a victimised Global South and a developer of just alternatives to international norms and institutions portrayed as advancing Western interests.

Against this background Africa emerges as a key case study. This is because it functions simultaneously as a set of actors in South–South decision-making, a set of targets (some more voluntary than others) for the implementation of these decisions, and a set of physical, political and cultural geographies included in and excluded from the world economy in complex ways. Africa is a useful starting point to think about who is actually involved in making and implementing South–South decisions. Rather than just focusing on governments, the continent evidences the role of elite conduct, institutional activism, civil society and public mobilisation. In other words, Africa demonstrates the workings of agency in its various forms – from the global to the local, and across various levels of power. This paper focuses on doing some of the groundwork for a conversation about how different forms of African agency manifest in China–Africa relations, and how instances of broad-based China–Africa engagement at the level of the AU and the BRI shape a broader conversation about African agency.

## Outlining agency: A first step

Foreign policy analysis is the sub-field within international relations that gives the fullest expression to the study of agency in action.[5] Foreign policy analysis theorist Valerie Hudson argues against seeing institutions or other larger abstractions such as the state as the source of political action in international affairs. Rather, she puts human agency at the core of these transnational dynamics.[6] For Hudson, motivation or intentions give meaning to political action. Actors derive their authority to act from the prevailing social context. Within that context, these roles are defined by social conventions that structure social relations. These include positions such as leader, negotiator, manager, and so on.[7]

Foreign policy analysis tends to focus on the role of individuals occupying structurally important positions within the state, rather than thinking of the state itself as an abstract actor. The impact of these individuals is seen to be most salient at the moment of decision-making. This elevation of the decision itself to a point of intellectual primacy implies that actors, their intentions and the structural context within which they act are only meaningful when they coalesce into a directive policy.

As noted above, a strong undercurrent of the agency debate is emancipatory – ie, that there is a belief that any act of agency by weaker actors within a system dominated by

5 For writing in this tradition, see, for example, Cornelissen S, Cheru F & T Shaw (eds), *Africa and International Relations in the 21st Century*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2012.

6 Wight C, *Agents, Structures and International Relations: Politics as Ontology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006; Hudson V, 'Foreign policy analysis: Actor specific theory and the ground of international relations', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 1, 1, 2005, pp. 1–30.

7 See Walker S, 'Role theory and the origins of foreign policy', in Hermann C, Kegley C & J Rosenau (eds), *New Directions in the Study of Foreign Policy*. London: Harper Collins, 1987, pp. 269–284.

global powers is a normative good, because that act necessarily challenges this lopsided power hierarchy. This outlook complicates the analysis of African agency, as it ascribes moral purpose to the conduct of African actors *because* they occupy a weaker position compared to major powers, rather than sufficiently engaging with the specific impacts of the act itself. For example, such an analysis might praise an African elite's flouting of international norms as striking a blow against the structural marginalisation of African states in the international system, while not critiquing how these acts monopolise power and exclude groups domestically.

This analysis aims to avoid such assumptions because they oversimplify the concept of agency itself. It assumes instead that agency can be both constructive and destructive. It can manifest both as progressive challenges against global power imbalances and as problematic local attempts to consolidate power or exclude rivals.

When unpacking these issues, one arrives at a few important areas of investigation. The first surrounds the notion of 'Africa' in African agency. Who are we talking about? Which African actors are constituted as agents? Whom do they represent? What is the source of their authority? These questions nudge the debate away from the assumption that agency is only possessed by the state, in favour of questioning the role of regional bodies, the AU and non-state actors. Beyond this, it is also important to look at the various actors (both individuals and bureaucratic sub-units) within these different bodies.

The second area of investigation revolves around the actual process of agency. What constitutes agency in the African context? Which actions reflect agency, and which do not? Surely all actions and outcomes cannot be weighted the same? How do shared assumptions both within and beyond the African continent shape outcomes?

The third area emerges around the issue of how African actors have managed to increase their agency in the face of global power imbalances. There are clearly some distinctive features of African agency that provide a more nuanced picture of the concept. One of these is 'agency through compliance/non-compliance', that is to say, Africans' strategically not fulfilling the terms of agreements to which they had ostensibly assented. This form of passive resistance provided crucial agency to Africa in the face of colonial oppression and later global power imbalances during the post-independence era.[8]

It is crucial that all these complications be factored into discussions of African agency. It becomes even more important when that agency is exercised in the context of South–South cooperation, and China–Africa relations specifically. This is because China brings its own constellation of institutional, state and non-state actors to the interaction. The

8 See Bush B, *Imperialism, Race and Resistance: Africa and Britain, 1919–1945*. London: Routledge, 1999; Harrison G, *Issues in the Contemporary Politics of Sub-Saharan Africa: The Dynamic of Struggle and Resistance*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002. The classic example in independent Africa is the response of the Tanzanian peasantry to Julius Nyerere's collectivisation policies in the late 1960s. See Hyden G, *Beyond Ujamaa: Underdevelopment and the Uncaptured Peasantry*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980.

complications of decision-making in this context must be mapped and analysed in order to reveal the emerging topography of a post-Western world.

In the following sections some of this complexity is clarified by looking at African decision-making in the wake of greater continental integration and China-centred globalisation.

## CASE STUDY 1: CHINA AND THE AU

The AU's relationship with China raises interesting issues about African decision-making in relation to China. This section will focus on a series of reforms proposed by Rwandan President Paul Kagame since 2017. These reforms cover a range of issues, but the paper will focus on those that seek to bring about a common continental approach to external partnerships.[9] The proposed reforms have the potential to impact African decision-making about its partnership with China, and could shape future thinking about African agency. The main question is whether the proposed reforms could give Africa more weight in its partnership and negotiations with China. This section identifies whether the continent could in fact derive a degree of authority from this developing reform process, and where this may be located.

### The history of AU–China links

In 2002 the Organization of African Unity (OAU) – founded in 1963 – transformed itself into the AU during an assembly of African states held in South Africa.[10] In essence, the former focused on decolonisation and state-centric political integration while the latter shifted its attention to the social and economic issues that accompany globalisation, with particular attention paid to human rights.[11] The OAU's sovereignty-based principles of non-intervention and its limited legal powers prevented it from getting involved in internal conflicts on the continent. This changed with the founding of the AU, whose Constitutive Act allows intervention in the case of human rights abuses.[12]

9 This is not the first time the AU's external partnerships have been reviewed. For example, see AU Commission, 'Strategic Plan 2014–2017', June 2013, https://au.int/sites/default/files/pages/32028-file-the_au_commission_strategic_plan_2014-2017.pdf, accessed 22 August 2018.

10 Adejo AM, 'From OAU to AU: New wine in old bottles?', *African Journal of International Affairs*, 4, 1–2, 2001, p. 119.

11 Kakaya D, 'African in Unison', FOCAC (Forum on China–Africa Cooperation), 27 May 2013, http://www.focac.org/eng/jlydh/mtsy/t1044133.htm, accessed 12 June 2018.

12 Sharpe M, 'From Non-Interference to Non-Indifference: The African Union and the Responsibility to Protect', IRRI (International Refugee Rights Initiative), September 2017, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/AU%20R2P%20-%20final.pdf, accessed 3 July 2018; Amvane G, 'Intervention pursuant to Article 4 (h) of the Constitutive Act of the African Union without United Nations Security Council authorisation', *African Human Rights Law Journal*, 15, 2, 2015, pp. 282–298.

These intra-African developments coincided with the continent's growing relationship with China. In fact, China had engaged with the OAU since its establishment, sending congratulatory messages during summits as well as delegation exchanges.[13] China later voiced its support for the AU in the 2000 and 2003 FOCAC documents. Its commitment to supporting African integration was most notable in 2006, at the FOCAC summit in Beijing, when then president Hu Jintao pledged to help build an AU conference centre at the AU headquarters in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.[14] The AU attended the 2003 and 2006 FOCAC summits as an observer. By late 2008 the first AU–China dialogue was initiated to discuss cooperation as well as a series of 'hot issues' (including Darfur, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia and Zimbabwe).[15] Chinese contractors handed over the new AU headquarters' conference centre and adjoining office complex in 2012. The complex, estimated to have cost $127 million, was paid for by China. China also announced increased financial support to the organisation.[16] The AU eventually participated in the 2012 FOCAC in Beijing as a full member. This participation was accompanied with the hope that the organisation would make important contributions to the formulation of FOCAC projects, oversee their implementation and coordinate African activities.[17] China established a permanent mission to the AU headquarters in 2015 (distinct from its diplomatic presence in Ethiopia) as a means to enhance its diplomatic engagements and to allow better coordination of joint projects.

**TABLE 1** SELECTED MILESTONES IN THE CHINA–AU RELATIONSHIP

| | |
|---|---|
| 2002 | AU is established |
| 2003 | China supports the establishment of the AU in the Addis Ababa Action Plan |
| 2006 | China pledges to build a conference centre for the AU, to support African integration |
| 2008 | The AU–China dialogue is launched |
| 2011/12 | AU conference centre is completed |
| 2012 | AU Commission becomes a full member of FOCAC |

Source: compiled by the authors

13 Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Kingdom of Norway, 'Organization of African Unity – OAU', 17 May 2004, http://no.china-embassy.org/eng/wjzc/gjdqwt/dqzz/t110997.htm, accessed 10 June 2018.

14 Hu J, 'Full text: Address by Hu Jintao at the Opening Ceremony of the Beijing Summit of the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation', People's Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 16 November 2006, http://www.focac.org/eng/wjjh/t404126.htm, accessed 11 June 2018.

15 FOCAC, 'China–AU strategic dialogue officially launched', 1 December 2008, http://www.focac.org/eng/zxxx/t524344.htm, accessed 8 June 2018.

16 Zhang Z, 'African in Unison', FOCAC, 27 May 2013, http://www.focac.org/eng/jlydh/mtsy/t1044133.htm, accessed 12 June 2018.

17 *ChinAfrica*, 4, 'AU optimistic on FOCAC membership', February 2012, http://www.chinafrica.cn/china_report/txt/2012-01/30/content_422295.htm, accessed 5 June 2018.

## AU REFORMS

AU–China links are shifting with the evolution of the African organisation itself. The most notable shift is the set of organisational reforms proposed by Kagame. These reforms are articulated in the report *The Imperative to Strengthen Our Union*, published in January 2017 at the 28th AU summit.[18]

The report criticises the AU for its inadequate response to key contemporary issues, including climate change, mass migration and terrorism. It highlights four overarching priorities:[19]

- political affairs;
- peace and security;
- economic integration; and
- strengthening Africa's global representation and voice.

Added to this was a proposal for a clear division of labour between the AU (including the annually rotating AU chairperson chosen from member states and the AU Commission, the administrative body), regional economic communities (RECs) and member states.[20]

This 'less is more' approach and the focus on organisational efficiency could impact the AU's relationship with China most directly. The main impact would fall on how the continent manages its external relations. The report also calls for an amendment to the structure of partnership summits (such as FOCAC).[21] This means that only a handful of African representatives (including the previous, current and future AU chairpersons and REC officials) would, in essence, negotiate and meet with China on behalf of the continent. In contrast to the 2015 FOCAC summit, where some 48 African leaders met with China, the reforms propose deploying a more unified African voice. This acknowledges that a lack of consistency and continuity has hampered external negotiations to date.[22] On a wider level, the proposed reforms can be seen as an attempt to address the power gap that has structured Africa–China relations.

18 For the full report see Kagame P, *The Imperative to Strengthen our Union: Report on the Proposed Recommendations for the Institutional Reform of the African Union*, AU, 29 February 2017, https://au.int/sites/default/files/pages/32777-file-report-20institutional20reform20of20the20au-2.pdf, accessed 20 August 2018.

19 AU, 'AU reforms continental priorities', https://au.int/AUReforms/areas/continental, accessed 4 June 2018.

20 For an infographic explaining the reforms, see Institute for Peace and Security Studies, 'Infographic on AU reform: Hard-pressed to embrace change', 26 June 2017, http://www.ipss-addis.org/news/news_and_events/infographic_on_au_reform-_hard-pressed_to_embrace_.php, accessed 4 June 2018.

21 Wu Y, 'The AU's new institutional reforms: Implications for its relations with China', *The Conversation*, 23 February 2017, https://theconversation.com/how-the-african-unions-planned-overhaul-may-affect-its-ties-with-china-73160, accessed 23 February 2017.

22 *Ibid.*

On 21 March 2018, 55 African states took a giant step towards implementing one of the Kagame report's key recommendations: economic integration. They signed an agreement[23] to launch the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), which was first proposed 40 years ago.[24] The step represents a clear commitment to multilateralism and will open up competition and cooperation among firms in Africa, with the hope of increasing intra-African trade, which – at 15% – is lower than in any other region.[25] A total of 44 countries committed to ending cross-border tariffs and another 27 signed a protocol for the free movement of people, which could eliminate serious restrictions on doing business in Africa.[26] The AfCFTA could create a single market across the continent for the promotion of agricultural development, food security and industrialisation.[27]

A raft of other issues was discussed in tandem with the single trade area. These included the establishment of a common currency or even digital currency; the launch of a Single African Air Transport Market (a flagship project of the AU's 50-year development vision Agenda 2063); and outstanding visa regulation issues.[28] Added to this was the election of Kagame as the new AU chairperson for 2018, taking over from Alpha Condé, President of Guinea. In this entrenched position, Kagame has the 'double trust' that could aid him in promoting his proposed reforms.[29] Part of his tenure will include promoting new ways to independently fund the organisation and establish a visa-free regime on the continent.[30] 2018 saw the AU closer than ever to transforming itself, and its continent. However, notable challenges remain.

23 However, there was selective signing of the three accompanying legal instruments.

24 tralac (Trade Law Centre), '10th Extraordinary Session of the Assembly of the African Union on AfCFTA held in Kigali', 21 March 2018, https://www.tralac.org/news/article/12865-10th-extraordinary-session-of-the-assembly-of-the-african-union-on-afcfta-held-in-kigali.html, accessed 10 June 2018.

25 *Ibid.*

26 Allison S, 'Africa's free trade fairy tale', *Mail & Guardian*, 22 March 2018, https://mg.co.za/article/2018-03-22-africas-free-trade-fairy-tale, accessed 15 May 2018.

27 *Ibid.*; Dludla S, 'Ramaphosa punts single African currency at crucial AU summit', *iol*, 20 March 2018, https://www.iol.co.za/news/africa/ramaphosa-punts-single-african-currency-at-crucial-au-summit-13943041, accessed 6 June 2018.

28 AU, 'African Union Commission gears up to launch highly-anticipated Single African Sky', Press Release, 22 January 2018, https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20180122/african-union-commission-gears-launch-highly-anticipated-single-african-sky, accessed 13 June 2018; Dludla S, *op. cit*.

29 Kimanthi K, 'President Kagame takes over as AU chairman', *Daily Nation*, 28 January 2018, https://www.nation.co.ke/news/africa/President-Kagame-takes-over-as-AU-chairman/1066-4282546-13adxcpz/index.html, accessed 6 June 2018.

30 Bissada AM, 'Kagame promises assertive Africa as he takes over AU chair', *rfi*, 29 January 2018, http://en.rfi.fr/africa/20180128-rwandas-paul-kagame-ushers-new-era-reforms, accessed 11 June 2018; Mumbere D, 'Kagame takes over AU leadership, commits to visa-free regime', *africanews*, 28 January 2018, http://www.africanews.com/2018/01/28/kagame-takes-over-au-leadership-commits-to-visa-free-regime//, accessed 11 June 2018.

## Challenges

The most obvious obstacle is the multiple voices that contribute to the AU. The AU reform process has met with some African resistance, including from officials who feel there should have been more consultation during its drafting.[31] Nigeria, the largest economy in Africa, has (up to the time of writing) been reluctant to join the AfCFTA, owing to domestic pressure against it.[32] There is also debate over how the AU will become financially independent. Foreign donors reportedly provide 73% of the body's annual budget, excluding peacekeeping operations,[33] although other sources state the self-financing of AU programmes increased from 26% in 2016 to 40% in 2017.[34] There has also been resistance to the January 2017 imposition of a 0.2% levy on African states' imports to contribute to AU funding, with complaints that this counters national legislation in some countries, as well as regional and global trade agreements.[35]

These issues also trickle into the AU's relations with China, which is the main financial contributor to FOCAC. While China has sent official representation to the AU, the African body itself has yet to establish its representation in China (as well as other strategic locations) owing to financial and procedural limitations.[36] Indeed, the invitation to set up an AU representative office had already been extended in 2009, at the fourth FOCAC meeting. However, an AU footprint in Beijing could soon be a reality, as discussions on this and the broader AU–China partnership – including FOCAC – were undertaken in May 2018.[37] This could bring about better coordination between the continent's priorities and the actions of African ambassadors in Beijing, who are involved in the FOCAC process and consultations.

31 Bedzigui Y, 'ISS Today: 28th AU summit – AU reform can't be fast-tracked', *Daily Maverick*, 29 January 2017, https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2017-01-29-iss-today-28th-au-summit-au-reform-cant-be-fast-tracked/#.WyIZnhlrG8p, accessed 12 June 2018.

32 Allison S, *op. cit*.

33 *News24*, 'Cash, conflict and Kagame top AU summit agenda', 26 January 2018, https://www.news24.com/Africa/News/cash-conflict-and-kagame-top-au-summit-agenda-20180126, accessed 5 June 2018.

34 tralac, 'Secretary Tillerson's meeting with African Union Commission Chairperson Moussa Faki Mahamat', 9 March 2018, https://www.tralac.org/news/article/12828-secretary-tillerson-s-meeting-with-african-union-commission-chairperson-moussa-faki-mahamat.html, accessed 17 June 2018.

35 Du Plessis C, 'SA, Rwanda clash over AU reforms', *Mail & Guardian*, 2 February 2018, https://mg.co.za/article/2018-02-02-00-sa-rwanda-clash-over-au-reforms, accessed 3 March 2018.

36 Ryder HW, 'Forget bugging – the African Union needs to be in China', Africa Portal, 8 February 2018, https://www.africaportal.org/features/forget-bugging-african-union-needs-be-china/, accessed 12 February 2018.

37 This was announced on Twitter by El-Ghassim Wane (Chief of Staff and Chief Advisor of the AU Commission Chairperson), during his follow-up visit to China on 29 May 2018.

While there have been multiple calls for a common African strategy towards China, even at the regional level,[38] these efforts are sometimes diluted by individual bilateral relations. For example, the 2015 FOCAC summit in Johannesburg doubled as President Xi Jinping's official bilateral visits to South Africa and neighbouring Zimbabwe – where an impressive list of agreements was signed. Significantly, the bilateral agreement to establish China's first overseas military base, in Djibouti in the Horn of Africa, was announced on the sidelines of the same summit. Given these dynamics, the African co-chair[39] of FOCAC has a difficult task of coordinating over 50 country positions, in contrast to China, which represents a single voice.

The African co-chair of FOCAC has a difficult task of coordinating over 50 country positions, in contrast to China, which represents a single voice

From China's perspective, there are some misgivings about the AU's capacity to represent the continent, because the body is still gaining momentum and support. Chinese analysts also predict that stronger African member countries will not defer all decision-making power to the AU, in order to protect their own interests, weakening the AU's proposed leadership position.[40] They point out that the AU's position as Africa's representative in its dealings with China is complicated by internal AU controversies, for example around Morocco's claims to Western Sahara [41] and the fact that eSwatini (formerly known as Swaziland, an AU member state) does not recognise the People's Republic of China (because of its diplomatic relationship with Taiwan). In addition to the diplomatic complexities of the AU's standing in for African leaders in their negotiations with China, the change would also sacrifice the optics of large numbers of African leaders meeting their Chinese counterpart. FOCAC is partly a media event built around the ritual reaffirmation of the China–Africa relationship; one that raises China's own diplomatic profile in Africa and beyond. Changing the summit to a meeting with an AU delegation would diminish this symbolic function.[42]

## African agency in the China–AU relationship

It appears as though the AU will not be financially independent or making decisions on behalf of the continent in the near future. Still, this does not mean that Africa is passive in its dealings with China. In fact, it exercises a degree of agency in both direct and indirect ways.

38 For example, see *Africa-China Policy Brief*, 'Regional Industrialization in Southern Africa: The Role of African–Sino Partnerships', University of Johannesburg, Confucius Institute, May 2017, 1. The issue was also discussed at the 'High Time for a Common Integrated African Policy on China' symposium, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 20 July 2017.

39 Held by South Africa (2012–2018), which will be handing over to another African country around the seventh FOCAC meeting.

40 Two separate interviews conducted in Beijing on 9 July 2018, and in Shanghai on 11 July 2018. The respondents requested anonymity in order to freely express their opinions.

41 International Crisis Group, 'Seven Priorities for the African Union in 2018', *Crisis Group Africa Briefing*, 135, 17 January 2018, p. 3.

42 Wang J & J Zou, 'China goes to Africa: A strategic move?', in Zhao S (ed.), *China in Africa: Strategic Motives and Economic Interests*. London & New York: Routledge, 2015, p. 86.

One way that this agency is displayed is through Africa's pro-active affirmation of its relationship with China. Take, for instance, a 2016 Afrobarometer survey in which 63% of Africans surveyed perceived China's influence as positive.[43] At the elite level, African leaders make a point of demonstrating the closeness of the relationship, even in awkward moments. For example, the seventh China–AU Strategic Dialogue was held in February 2018 – off the back of allegations by French newspaper *Le Monde* that China had bugged the AU headquarters. While the allegations led to much gleeful coverage in the global press, African leaders stood with China in rejecting the allegations. The AU–China Strategic Dialogue took place as planned and, despite the scandal, the delegates agreed to cooperate on five key areas:[44]

- African infrastructure;
- AU capacity building;
- peace and security;
- public health and disease prevention; and
- tourism and aviation.

These cooperation areas happen to fit squarely with Africa's own target areas for continental development (as encapsulated in Agenda 2063). In fact, Agenda 2063 – as well as the continent's ambitions for industrialisation – has frequently been referenced in Chinese official discourse since its inception in 2015. It has also been included in documents such as China's Second Africa Policy.[45] This suggests that China is also tailoring its engagement to include issues that Africa has determined as interest areas.

This perception is strengthened by Chinese statements that imply that China is responding to African 'requests', for example the continent's appeal to establish FOCAC in the first place.[46] At the very least this shows awareness of the image of FOCAC as one that is driven by China. Chinese diplomats have also stated that FOCAC 2015 was upgraded to a summit at the request of many African countries; more recently in 2018, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi remarked that '[a]t the strong request of African countries, China will host the summit of FOCAC in Beijing within this year'.[47] Similarly, over and

43 Lekorwe M *et al.*, 'China's growing presence in Africa wins largely positive popular reviews', *Afrobarometer*, 2016, p. 122.

44 Tiezzi S, 'Rebutting spying allegations, China pledges to be Africa's "most reliable" partner', *The Diplomat*, 9 February 2018, https://thediplomat.com/2018/02/rebutting-spying-allegations-china-pledges-to-be-africas-most-reliable-partner/, accessed 13 June 2018.

45 See, for example, Xinhua News Agency, 'Full text: China's Second Africa Policy paper', *Xinhua Global Edition*, 4 December 2015, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-12/04/c_134886545.htm, accessed 25 January 2016; Niu H, 'President Xi Jinping delivers speech at FOCAC summit: Full text', *CRI English*, 5 December 2015, http://english.cri.cn/12394/2015/12/05/4083s906994.htm, accessed 6 December 2015.

46 Li A *et al.*, 'FOCAC Twelve Years Later: Achievements, Challenges and the Way Forward', Discussion Paper 74. Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2012, p. 16.

47 Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Kingdom of Lesotho, 'FOCAC Johannesburg summit, a new milestone of China–Africa relations', 28 November 2015, http://ls.china-embassy.org/eng/sgdt/t1323547.htm, accessed 12 June 2018; People's

above student exchange activities at the bilateral level, the AU is also administering scholarships to China on behalf of the continent.[48] These examples reflect that while there are concerns over how future links will be structured and administered, there are degrees of African determination regarding the content of relations, in specific areas. This is supported by Alden and Alves,[49] who find that while China holds most of the structural power in FOCAC, it is actually subject to an ongoing socialisation process, where its own behaviour is shaped.

There are other developments that could impact the AU–China dynamic. This includes the influence of the incoming African co-chair of FOCAC. South Africa occupied this role between 2012 and 2018 – a period of rapid engagement between China and Africa. Who the new co-chair will be and how this will shape the relationship into the future remain unclear at the time of writing. On a wider scale, many questions remain regarding the AU and its ability to represent Africa at partnership summits. This will have an impact not only on the continent's links with China but also on the extent of support from other external partners (Japan, India, South Korea and, more recently, Indonesia)[50] for the organisation's proposals.

It is important to look beyond summits to developments that affect how China engages with Africa. Certain African realities are shaping the continent's interaction with China, and therefore impact its agency in complex ways

That said, it is important to look beyond summits to developments that affect how China engages with Africa. Certain African realities are shaping the continent's interaction with China, and therefore impact its agency in complex ways.

First is the African peace and security landscape. Developments such as the evacuation of thousands of Chinese citizens during the Libya crisis in 2011, and wider security risks to Chinese citizens and investments, caused China to expand its engagement areas from mostly commercial dealings to participating in peacekeeping and establishing a security presence on the continent.[51]

In 2012 China's peace and security relationship with the continent was institutionalised as the 'Initiative on China–Africa Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Security'. The

Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'China and Africa can definitely become closer partners in the joint construction of the "Belt and Road": Wang Yi talks about feelings of his visits to four African countries', 17 January 2018, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1527058.shtml, accessed 10 June 2018.

48 For example, see AU, '2018 call for applications for master's scholarship tenable at universities in the People's Republic of China', https://au.int/sites/default/files/announcements/34231-annc-2018_call_for_chinese_scholarships.pdf, accessed 14 August 2018;

49 Alden C & AC Alves, 'China's regional forum diplomacy in the developing world: Socialisation and the "Sinosphere"', *Journal of Contemporary China*, 26,103, 2017, pp. 151–165.

50 See, for example, Wicaksono E, 'Fostering a new era of modern Indonesia–Africa relations', *Jakarta Post*, 4 April 2018, http://www.thejakartapost.com/academia/2018/04/04/fostering-a-new-era-of-modern-indonesia-africa-relations.html, accessed 3 September 2018,

51 People's Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Wang Yi meets with President Paul Kagame of Rwanda', 13 January 2018, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1525997.shtml, accessed 2 June 2018.

main focus of the agreement was the provision of financial and technical support to the AU's peace-support operations.[52] The 2015 FOCAC declaration expanded on these issues and referred to the settlement of disputes through dialogue and consultation; emphasised a collective response to non-traditional security threats (from terrorism to food security); and included the implementation of the initiative launched in 2012. China is increasingly engaging the AU and regional organisations, as they have a 'unique political, moral, and geographical advantage in handling conflict prevention and solution'.[53] The changing security context in Africa is therefore an instance where the local environment is moving China to adjust its engagements.

Second is the instance of the illegal wildlife trade. In the lead-up to the 2015 FOCAC summit, the spiralling impact of elephant and rhino poaching to feed Chinese demand for ivory and rhino horn occupied the headlines. Cases such as the 'Chinese ivory queen' – described as a kingpin in the ivory trade in Africa and who was arrested for smuggling over 700 elephant tusks from Tanzania – galvanised African criticism of China.[54] However, the wildlife issue was transformed from a diplomatic crisis for China into an opportunity to publicly signal its engagement with Africa. The run-up to the summit saw a flurry of events held jointly by Chinese and South African groups, with support from further afield. An example was the China–South Africa Youth Volunteers Programme in Wildlife Conservation Forum, held in Pretoria on 17 November 2015.[55] The African Wildlife Foundation and the Aspen Institute also hosted a three-day dialogue at South Africa's Kruger National Park. This saw the participation of business leaders, former ambassadors and celebrities, who together drafted a proposal to encourage the inclusion of wildlife and environmental issues in the FOCAC agenda.[56] The Kenya-based organisation China House also hosted an event: 'Is the China–Africa Nexus an Emerging Partnership to Combat Wildlife Poaching and Trafficking?', on 2 December 2015. This event brought together local stakeholders, Chinese businesspeople in South Africa and a retired Chinese ambassador.

Chinese participation in these events demonstrated a willingness to engage on the issue, and the activism can be said to have influenced the FOCAC agenda. Wildlife was eventually addressed at the 2015 FOCAC summit for the first time, and included in the

52 Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of South Africa, 'The Fifth Ministerial Conference of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation Beijing Action Plan (2013–2015)', 23 July 2012, http://www.chinese-embassy.org.za/eng/zfgxss/zywx/t954880.htm, accessed 14 August 2018.

53 Wang J & J Zou, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

54 Smith D, 'Chinese "ivory queen" charged with smuggling 706 elephant tusks', *The Guardian*, 8 October 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/oct/08/chinese-ivory-queen-charged-smuggling-706-elephant-tusks, accessed 28 February 2017.

55 Wekesa B, 'A review of FOCAC side-events 2015', Wits Journalism Africa–China Reporting Project, 9 February 2016, http://china-africa-reporting.co.za/2016/02/a-review-of-focac-side-events-2015/, accessed 15 June 2016.

56 AWF (African Wildlife Foundation), 'At China–Africa summit, a call for wildlife on agenda', 16 November 2015, https://www.awf.org/news/china-africa-summit-call-wildlife-agenda, accessed 30 November 2015.

Johannesburg Action Plan. China was even congratulated at the global Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, hosted by South Africa in 2016, for the measures it had taken to combat illegal wildlife crime. In December 2016 China finally announced that it would shut down its domestic ivory trade by December 2017, and it has in fact undertaken significant measures to close ivory carving workshops.[57]

These examples show that AU–China engagement depends on more than just the priorities of China and the AU. This engagement is fundamentally shaped by on-the-ground realities in Africa. The way in which China has responded to these realities has proven that, despite the power gap between it and individual African countries, it is amenable to African concerns, and that these concerns show up at the highest (FOCAC) level. At the same time, Chinese reservations are not the only factors holding back the AU reforms. African member states have shown that they possess agency of their own, and that they will use this agency to shape the China–Africa interaction to their benefit, both by directly appealing to China and by selectively supporting and undermining AU attempts to change its own role in the relationship.

## CASE STUDY 2: AFRICA AND THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

The relatively contained nature of both the AU and FOCAC – contained to the relationship between China and Africa and contained to elite economic and political decision-making – stands in contrast to China's BRI. A key initiative of the Xi administration, the BRI is a massive global rollout of infrastructure aimed at connecting China to Europe via Africa, across both land and sea. More than a trade route, it should be seen as a grand trans-regional integration scheme. It increasingly functions as a Chinese alternative to West-centric globalisation. At present its cost is estimated at between $1 trillion and $8 trillion, involving about 70 countries (although this number keeps changing).[58] The BRI draws in a much bigger range of actors and a wider swath of territory than FOCAC. Beyond the (already complex) relationship between Africa and China, it offers Africa closer interaction with other stakeholders, including Europe and the Middle East. It also draws in many non-governmental actors, both Chinese and from elsewhere.

The BRI offers attractive opportunities for African development, including infrastructure financing and access to new markets. But it also contains significant risks. While the BRI promises new forms of multilateralism, the risks fall to national governments, particularly in the form of debt. The BRI therefore offers the potential to track African decision-making power and the latitude the China–Africa relationship allows for the continent's pursuit of its own development agenda.

57 Haas B, 'Under pressure: The story behind China's ivory ban', *The Guardian*, 29 August 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/aug/29/story-behind-china-ivory-ban, accessed 14 August 2018.

58 Hillman JE, 'How big is China's Belt and Road?' CSIS (Centre for Strategic and International Studies), 3 April 2018, https://www.csis.org/analysis/how-big-chinas-belt-and-road, accessed 8 August 2018.

## History of the BRI in Africa

The BRI has a complex genesis: despite being swathed in the rhetoric of history, it emerged as if out of thin air in 2013.[59] Xi first announced a new measure for enhancing cross-border cooperation with Central Asia in Kazakhstan in September 2013, roughly replicating the historic Silk Road trade route.[60] This announcement was followed by a similar call to expand this cooperation across the ocean a month later at a meeting between China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Indonesia.[61] If the first announcement was the debut of the overland Silk Road Economic Belt, the second was the symbolic debut of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, which promises development along the south-east Asian coast and beyond. This was also the occasion for the announcement of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) – a major conduit for Chinese BRI financing.

Since these announcements, the BRI has moved through different iterations. The famous map of its dual routes was widely circulated, and formalised the BRI as a geographically bounded project. However, from the beginning the possibility that these routes could be extended was not omitted. The conceptualisation of the BRI also operated retroactively, with earlier planned economic corridor initiatives (for example, one linking China, Mongolia and Russia, and another between China and Pakistan) gaining renewed impetus by being rebranded as BRI projects. The formalisation of the BRI extended to the establishment of large financial institutions to funnel financing to various areas. This includes the AIIB, the Silk Road Fund and the China–Eurasia Economic Cooperation Fund.

The formalisation of the BRI culminated in a 2015 document entitled *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road*, which made it clear that the main energy behind the massive initiative was economic rather than geostrategic, as claimed in some Western press outlets. This did not mean that geostrategic concerns were excluded, but rather that the main focus of the plan fell on economic synergy and to provide markets for China's domestic industrial overcapacity.[62] However,

59 While the coining of the BRI specifically might have been unexpected, its genesis is arguably older. It has been linked to China's 'going out' strategy, the extension of development to the western provinces, and to the Obama administration's so-called 'pivot to Asia'. Shortly before the announcement of the BRI as a unified scheme, its general westward trajectory was presaged by scholars such as Wang Jisi. See Sun Y, 'March West: China's response to the US rebalancing', Brookings Institution, blog, 31 January 2013, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2013/01/31/march-west-chinas-response-to-the-u-s-rebalancing/, accessed 23 August 2018.

60 Wu J, 'Xi proposes a new "Silk Road" with Central Asia', *China Daily*, 8 September 2013, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2013xivisitcenterasia/2013-09/08/content_16952228.htm, accessed 8 August 2018.

61 Wu J, 'President Xi gives speech to Indonesian parliament', *China Daily*, 2 October 2013, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2013xiapec/2013-10/02/content_17007915_2.htm, accessed 8 August 2018.

62 People's Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Commerce, National Development and Reform Commission, 'Vision and action on jointly building Silk Road

the initiative also demanded considerable political and logistical reforms along its routes. The 2015 document identified five key pillars of multinational cooperation underlying the BRI:

- state-to-state policy coordination,
- trans-frontier connectivity of facilities,
- removal of trade and investment barriers,
- financial integration, and
- people-to-people connectivity.

Each of these breaks down into numerous sub-initiatives. For example, in trade and investment alone the 2015 document suggests 12 separate sub-initiatives, ranging from customs reform to measures mitigating climate change.

The 2015 document also made it clear that China planned to work via institutions it had set up to facilitate cooperation between itself and regional blocs. These include ASEAN Plus China, the Asia–Europe Meeting, the China–Arab States Cooperation Forum, etc. It also showed that the BRI was as much about China's domestic development integration as its external links. The document lists extensive measures for linking different Chinese provinces and autonomous regions to the route.

The BRI was further expanded and refined in 2017. By then, China had signed 46 cooperation agreements with 39 countries along (and adjacent to) the BRI route. It had also signed BRI-related cooperation agreements with the UN Development Programme, the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, and the World Health Organization.[63] The BRI was also praised in UN Security Council Resolution 2344 for aiding reconstruction in Afghanistan:[64]

> [The UN Security Council] [w]*elcomes and urges* further efforts to strengthen the process of regional economic cooperation, including measures to facilitate regional connectivity, trade and transit, including through regional development initiatives such as the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road (the Belt and Road) Initiative.

Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road', News Release, 28 March 2015, http://en.ndrc.gov.cn/newsrelease/201503/t20150330_669367.html, accessed 8 August 2018. See also Johnson CK, 'President Xi Jinping's "Belt and Road Initiative": A Practical Assessment of the Chinese Communist Party's Roadmap for Chinese Global Resurgence', CSIS Report, March 2016, https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/160328_Johnson_PresidentXiJinping_Web.pdf, accessed 8 August 2018.

63 Office of the Leading Group for the Belt and Road Initiative, 'Building the Belt and Road: Concept, Practice and China's Contribution', May 2017, https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/wcm.files/upload/CMSydylyw/201705/201705110537027.pdf, accessed 8 August 2018

64 UN, 'Security Council authorizes year-long mandate extension for United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, adopting Resolution 2344 (2017)', 17 March 2017, https://www.un.org/press/en/2017/sc12756.doc.htm, accessed 8 August 2018.

The BRI gained additional political support at the May 2017 Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation Summit, which was attended by 30 world leaders (including the heads of state of Ethiopia and Kenya, and ministers from Egypt and Tunisia)[65] and resulted in a communiqué expressing support for the initiative.[66] It is notable that even by this relatively late date, Africa was still characterised as marginal to the agreement. The official communiqué reads: '[W]e welcome and support the Belt and Road Initiative to enhance connectivity between Asia and Europe, which is also open to other regions such as Africa and South America.'[67] The equation of Africa (which is on the 'official' BRI route) with South America (which is not) reveals not only the relative flexibility of the parameters governing the BRI concept but also that Africa was at best marginal to the main work envisioned for the BRI.

Despite Africa's initial marginalisation in the BRI, the scheme has become increasingly important to the continent's relationship with China. South Africa signed a memorandum of understanding joining the BRI in 2015,[68] as did Egypt in 2016,[69] while Kenya and Ethiopia followed suit at the 2017 Belt and Road Forum.[70] In addition, China's engagement with Djibouti, including situating its first overseas military base there, arguably further consolidated Africa's place in the BRI. In January 2018 the Chinese government announced that the BRI would be one of the central themes of the upcoming FOCAC summit in September, indicating that its importance had moved beyond engagement with particular countries towards defining China's engagement with the entire continent.

Despite Africa's initial marginalisation in the BRI, the scheme has become increasingly important to the continent's relationship with China

Africa's increasingly prominent positioning in the BRI reveals two wider aspects of the initiative. In the first place, despite the impression of a predetermined set of BRI routes captured on the widely disseminated official map, the scheme is actually relatively flexible. The 2015 white paper mentioned above states that 'the development of the [BRI] is open and inclusive, and we welcome the active participation of all countries and international and regional organizations in this initiative'.[71] This view of the BRI as not geographically determined was confirmed in an interview with an official in the Chinese Ministry of

65 *The Diplomat*, 'Belt and Road attendees list', 12 May 2017, https://thediplomat.com/2017/05/belt-and-road-attendees-list/, accessed 23 August 2018.

66 *China Daily*, 'Joint communiqué of the leaders roundtable of the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation', 15 May 2017, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-05/16/content_29359366.htm, accessed 8 August 2018.

67 *Ibid.*

68 Brand South Africa, 'South Africa, China sign trade and industry deals', 4 December 2015, https://www.brandsouthafrica.com/investments-immigration/business/chinese-south-africa-trade-041215, accessed 8 August 2018.

69 *Xinhuanet*, 'China, Egypt sign MoU on boosting cooperation under Belt and Road Initiative', 21 January 2016, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-01/21/c_135032599.htm, accessed 8 August 2018.

70 Breuer J, 'Two Belts, One Road? The role of Africa in China's Belt & Road Initiative', Stiftung Asienhaus Blichwechsel, https://www.asienhaus.de/uploads/tx_news/Blickwechsel_OBOR-Afrika_01.pdf, accessed 8 August 2018.

71 People's Republic of China, 28 March 2015, *op. cit*. See also Wu Y, Sidiropoulos E & C Alden, 'China's Belt and Road Initiative: Where does Africa fit?', SAIIA (South African

Foreign Affairs, who said that not only was the BRI open to all countries in Africa but it could eventually include even the US.[72] Rather than a bonded route linking China to Europe, the BRI is increasingly seen in Beijing as a development zone circling the globe. The announcement during Xi's state visit to Africa in July 2018 that Senegal will join the BRI seems to support this assertion.[73] Several Chinese foreign policy officials and analysts interviewed in Beijing in July 2018 expressed their expectation that the 2018 FOCAC summit would provide an occasion for an announcement that the BRI would be expanded conceptually to include the whole African continent.[74]

Africa's increasing involvement in the BRI also shows that the scheme tends to include earlier infrastructure projects retroactively. Just as the China–Pakistan development corridor was initiated before the coining of the BRI and subsequently reimagined as an emblematic BRI project, so the Chinese-funded trans-frontier railway expansion in East Africa – originally planned before the adoption of the BRI as the centrepiece of Chinese development outreach – was retroactively integrated into the scheme. This arguably positioned East Africa as more than simply a harbour on the far end of the route. If the BRI comes to include the whole African continent, China's commitment to aiding the AU's scheme to radically expand trans-frontier road and rail infrastructure, committed to by Premier Li Keqiang in 2014 and followed up with memoranda of understanding in 2015 and 2016, could also retroactively join the BRI.[75] The myriad other port, rail and road projects currently being planned and executed by Chinese companies across the continent could potentially also be listed as BRI projects.

## Africa's current and future role in the BRI

The relative flexibility of the BRI is perhaps best exemplified by Ethiopia. In the original conceptualisation of the BRI, Ethiopia was not mentioned. As a landlocked country it seemed ineligible for the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. Yet Ethiopia has become a notable early example of how the BRI might impact local economies. This is largely owing to two Chinese-funded and -built infrastructure projects that preceded and then coincided with the rapid ascent of the BRI as the key paradigm in contemporary Chinese foreign policy. The first was a railway line connecting Addis Ababa with the coast of Djibouti. The second was China's first overseas military base, in Djibouti. This base supports China's anti-piracy work in the Gulf of Aden, as well as its peacekeeping operations in states such

Institute of International Affairs), 29 May 2017, http://www.saiia.org.za/opinion-analysis/china-s-belt-and-road-initiative-where-does-africa-fit, accessed 8 August 2018.

72 Interview, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Beijing, 9 July 2018.

73 Huang K, 'Xi Jinping signs up Senegal for Belt and Road plan, pledges closer Africa ties', *South China Morning Post*, 22 July 2018, https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2156327/president-xi-jinping-pledges-closer-africa-ties-during, accessed 8 August 2018.

74 Interview, Zeng Aiping and He Rui, Chinese Institute of International Studies, 9 July 2018; interview, Wang Yongzhong, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 10 July 2018.

75 Breuer J, *op. cit*.

as South Sudan.[76] While neither development was directly related to the BRI, both had the effect of positioning Ethiopia on the route. First, the railway development connected Ethiopia to a port, facilitating imports and exports. Second, Chinese anti-piracy efforts helped to secure shipping along Africa's eastern seaboard. Third, the base's development came with the establishment of enhanced data networks and an expanded port. Finally, the Ethiopian government committed to low-cost mass manufacturing in special economic zones (SEZs) focused on exports. This development model was not only based on Chinese precedents but also facilitated by Chinese funding.[77] Addis Ababa attracted Chinese companies to invest in the zones, especially in the garment and shoe sectors. These companies are not focused on the African market, but rather on low-cost manufacturing for the European market. While some critics have pointed out that early growth was slower than projected and that the Ethiopian adoption of Chinese-style central planning is in fact hampering the full success of the zones,[78] Western clothing brands such as H&M and Gap have also located some of their assembly for European markets in Ethiopia.[79] The result is that Ethiopia is in essence already participating in trade along the BRI route.

The way in which the Ethiopian government managed to insert itself into the BRI route via engagement with Chinese funders, contractors and investors arguably shows that the BRI is responsive to initiatives from African governments. It also shows that the BRI does not only facilitate trade and investment between China and Africa but can also jumpstart trade and investment flows between different poles along the route, for example between East Africa and Europe. In other words, the BRI is Beijing-directed but not necessarily Beijing-controlled. Yet it remains to be seen whether other African countries will be able to emulate Ethiopia. The country's adoption of SEZ-located low-wage manufacturing was arguably aided by its highly centralised, authoritarian system of government.[80] Whether the BRI will respond to other modes of African agency is still an open question.

Despite Africa's marginal position in its initial planning, the BRI has moved to the centre of the China–Africa debate. This inclusion integrates Africa into a new kind of global system, by shifting its role from being the target of development assistance to competing with other BRI countries for trade and investment while opening up new opportunities for Africa to court trade and investment from other BRI countries. However, Africa's inclusion also raises issues that could impact African agency.

76 Fei J, 'China's overseas military base in Djibouti: Features, motivations, and policy implications', *China Brief*, 17, 17, 22 December 2017.

77 Nicolas F, 'Chinese Investors in Ethiopia: The Perfect Match?', IFRI (French Institute of International Relations) Centre for Asian Studies, March 2017, https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/nicolas_chinese_investors_ethiopia_2017.pdf, accessed 8 August 2018.

78 *Ibid*.

79 Maasho A, 'Ethiopia bets on clothes to fashion industrial future', *Reuters*, 21 November 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-textiles/ethiopia-bets-on-clothes-to-fashion-industrial-future-idUSKBN1DL1VU, accessed 8 August 2018.

80 Manson K, 'The Ethiopia paradox', *Financial Times*, 24 July 2015, https://www.ft.com/content/68d05fe2-30b3-11e5-8873-775ba7c2ea3d, accessed 23 August 2018.

## African agency and the BRI

If the BRI expands as planned, it will grow beyond trade and investment to encompass policy and financial integration and people-to-people exchange. One could characterise it as a new form of globalisation, albeit one not emanating from the West but rather aimed at re-centring the global order towards Beijing. In other words, it can be framed as a form of South–South cooperation. However, the initiative comes in the wake of China's growing claim to territory in the South China Sea, and an explicit push by the Xi administration to expand the reach of the People's Liberation Army Navy. This, together with the abolishment of presidential term limits, has raised questions about how China will act as it becomes the world's largest economy. The unprecedented sweep of the BRI puts it at the centre of these questions. In addition, despite the fact that both China and its African partners can be seen as emerging economies or members of the Global South, there is a massive power gap between them. The issue of African agency is therefore key in gauging wider impact.

One of the principal concerns is financing. While BRI-related projects are funded by China, this financing mainly comes in the form of loans. The rollout of the BRI therefore also means an increase in debt. This is of particular concern to poorer countries that already struggle with debt. A recent report by the Centre for Global Development calculated the debt risk to 68 BRI-adjacent countries, and designated eight of these countries as particularly sensitive to debt distress. Djibouti is the only African country on this list.[81]

Djibouti is highly indebted to China. Its ratio of debt to gross domestic product (GDP) has increased from 50% to 85% in the last two years, with project-specific loans from China's Exim Bank amounting to $1.4 billion – about 75% of GDP.[82] China is Djibouti's top foreign direct investor and has key strategic interests there. Djibouti's indebtedness to China is seen as potentially providing China with leverage over its government. This came to a head in February 2018 when the government of Djibouti announced that it was suspending a contract with the port firm DP World (based in the United Arab Emirates) to manage its Doraleh Container Terminal.[83] This has led to speculation that control of the port will be ceded to China's state-owned China Merchants Holdings, which already owns 23.5% of the port. In addition, Chinese companies have been contracted to build a number of other infrastructure projects, including an SEZ, with an eight-lane access highway.[84] While all these projects are viewed as BRI projects, the debt burden falls on Djibouti.

81 Hurley J, Morris S & G Portelance, 'Examining the Debt Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative from a Policy Perspective', CGD (Center for Global Development) Policy Paper, 121, March 2018, https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/examining-debt-implications-belt-and-road-initiative-policy-perspective.pdf, accessed 8 August 2018.

82 *Ibid*.

83 Allen & Associates, 'Investment Risks in Djibouti: Beyond the Headlines', https://allanandassociates.africa-newsroom.com/files/download/f87c1579e629ef5, accessed 1 August 2018.

84 Pieper D, 'How Djibouti became China's gateway to Africa', *Der Spiegel Online*, 8 February 2018, http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/djibouti-is-becoming-gateway-to-africa-for-china-a-1191441.html, accessed 8 August 2018.

Recent reports[85] have charged that these high levels of debt are being deployed for strategic purposes. These critics claim that China deliberately uses so-called 'debtbook diplomacy' to trap poor countries in debt, which forces them into onerous deals to avoid defaulting on the repayments.

The case most cited in these accounts is that of Sri Lanka. The island state took on successive loans from China to construct its Hambantota port. While the port deal was originally signed in 2010, it was retroactively designated a BRI project.[86] The port project had been deemed commercially unviable from the start, but it enjoyed the political support of Sri Lanka's then president Mahinda Rajapaksa, whose political campaign China supported financially, according to the *New York Times*.[87] By 2015 it had become clear that Sri Lanka was in danger of defaulting on the loan. The government tried to negotiate a form of debt relief, but Chinese creditors reportedly insisted on an equity transfer and gained a 99-year lease over the port, as well as a large parcel of land adjacent to the port to develop an SEZ. Sri Lanka thus lost control of its port – as well as sovereignty over part of its territory.

One of the reasons for the crisis was that the Hambantota port was repeatedly deemed unviable for commercial shipping, and proved a predictable failure once it started operations. There was thus little chance of the port's earning sufficient revenue to assist in the loan repayments. The port's low commercial value raised rumours that China had agreed to the debt relief deal in order to use the port for military purposes. The loan deal makes such use dependent on permission from the Sri Lankan government, but critics have pointed out that the country's continued high levels of Chinese loans give it insufficient leverage to resist.[88]

It is important to point out that the Sri Lanka case has as yet not been repeated in Africa. However, it has become an oft-cited example in criticism of the BRI. Comparisons were also made with East Africa. For example, while Kenya is thus far not considered as vulnerable as Djibouti, its debt-to-GDP ratio stood at 56.2% in 2017, with many

85 Parker S & G Chefitz, 'Debtbook Diplomacy: China's Strategic Leveraging of its Newfound Economic Influence and the Consequences for US Foreign Policy', Harvard Kennedy School, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs Paper, May 2018, https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/files/publication/Debtbook%20Diplomacy%20PDF.pdf, accessed 26 June 2018.

86 Abi-Habib M, 'How China got Sri Lanka to cough up a port', *New York Times*, 25 June 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/25/world/asia/china-sri-lanka-port.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=photo-spot-region&region=top-news&WT.nav=top-news, accessed 26 June 2018.

87 *Ibid.*

88 Panda A, 'Sri Lanka formally hands over Hambantota port to Chinese firms on 99-year lease', *The Diplomat*, 11 December 2017, https://thediplomat.com/2017/12/sri-lanka-formally-hands-over-hambantota-port-to-chinese-firms-on-99-year-lease/, accessed 26 June 2018.

expecting it to surge past 60% in 2018.[89] China accounts for 66% of Kenya's total bilateral debt.[90] In 2017 the World Bank issued a warning about Kenya's rapidly climbing public debt.[91] Infrastructure spending makes up a significant part of this debt, with the BRI-related Standard Gauge Railway alone amounting to about 6% of the country's GDP. The rapidly spiralling debt, together with concerns that the Standard Gauge Railway was more expensive per kilometre than comparable projects elsewhere, has led to a debate in Kenya about the impact of the BRI on its national development agenda.[92]

The issues raised by the Sri Lanka, Kenya and Djibouti cases point to the complex implications for African agency posed by the BRI. This challenge is not simply one of state sovereignty seen in isolation, but also about African integration into global systems. The BRI promises integration into a new system of global trade, and with it easier access to desirable markets such as China, Europe, the Middle East and South Asia. However, taking advantage of these opportunities depends on infrastructure, ranging from ports and railways to power and data networks to SEZs, to lure foreign direct investment. In a challenging global financing environment, small governments can draw on only a limited number of lenders. The decision to take on more debt can be seen both as lessening African agency (owing to external debt pressure) and as African governments' using the little agency they have in a highly unequal global system to maximise their development.

These governments are also under domestic pressure to both address systemic underdevelopment and avoid increasing public debt. In fact, more attention should be paid to domestic politics as a factor in governments' decision-making in the context of the BRI. For example, in Malaysia a recent change in government led to the withdrawal of government support for several BRI-related projects.[93] This follows a contentious election focusing on popular concerns about debt and official corruption. Similar issues have been raised in Indonesia, and will arguably feature in other elections along the BRI route in the future.[94] The fact that political and financial responsibility for BRI projects ultimately falls on the partner government, with no buffer of multilateral decision-making, paradoxically

89 Cytonn Investments, 'Kenya's public debt: Should we be concerned', 18 February 2018, https://www.cytonn.com/topicals/kenya-s-public-debt-should-we-be-concerned, accessed 26 June 2018.

90 Omondi D, 'China now controls 66 per cent of Kenya's bilateral debt', *The Standard*, 3 May 2018, https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/business/article/2001279079/kenya-s-debt-to-china-balloons-to-sh478-6b, accessed 14 August 2018.

91 Ngugi B, 'World Bank in fresh warning as Kenya's debt hits Sh3.8 trn', *The Daily Nation*, 19 April 2017, https://www.nation.co.ke/business/World-Bank-warns-of-public-debt-risk/996-3896296-13iilwv/index.html, accessed 14 August 2018.

92 Kacungira N, 'Will Kenya get value for money from its new railway?', *BBC*, 8 June 2017, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-40171095, accessed 14 August 2018.

93 Beech H, '"We cannot afford this": Malaysia pushes back against China's vision', *New York Times*, 20 August 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/20/world/asia/china-malaysia.html, accessed 23 August 2018.

94 Bland B, 'Malaysian backlash tests China's Belt and Road ambitions', *Financial Times*, 24 June 2017, https://www.ft.com/content/056ae1ec-7634-11e8-b326-75a27d27ea5f, accessed 14 August 2018.

leaves Beijing vulnerable to its key foreign investment initiative's being partially derailed by local politics. BRI partner governments face a dilemma. Domestic political opponents can brand them as Chinese puppets, but they also have limited negotiating power with China over BRI projects. A recent report by Stratfor pointed out that the BRI had led to increasing local political polarisation in member states, with governments indeed using the promise of new BRI projects to strengthen themselves domestically. In some cases this leverage is entrenched by governments' playing off China against other potential investors worried about eroding strategic influence in the Global South.[95]

The BRI can thus both enable and inhibit African agency at the governmental level. However, it also necessitates a more comprehensive analysis of the different forms of African agency enabled and inhibited by the BRI. Ding Fei[96] has argued that China's model of development via SEZs raises fundamental questions about the nature of power in Chinese development. Far from SEZs' being only imposed from above, they are also implemented by provincial and city governments. In the process they pull in the energies of state-owned enterprises, private firms, urban bureaucracies and workers possessing many different levels of agency. The result is development as a form of bricolage, characterised by top–down initiatives while enabling various forms of bottom–up agency exercised by many different actors. The SEZ model is an integral part of the BRI. It raises the possibility of African provincial and urban authorities, state-owned and private companies, civil society organisations and workers exercising their own forms of agency that might impact the BRI, even as it also shapes their own agency. However, more work needs to be done to explore the nature of this agency – what options are there for these African actors other than either simply going along with Chinese-directed projects or refusing and/or disrupting them? The issue of whether Africa can creatively shape its interaction with the BRI should be explored further.

More work needs to be done to explore the nature of this agency – what options are there for these African actors other than either simply going along with Chinese-directed projects or refusing and/or disrupting them?

The BRI provides a complex case study of African agency in the context of China's growing global influence. While more work needs to be done, an initial discussion raises a few key points. First, it is important to think beyond pure state-to-state relations. As South-East Asian examples show, African decision-making around the BRI will simultaneously be affected by local political concerns and by commercial opportunities that extend far beyond member countries' bilateral relationship with China.

Second, it is important not to assume that the power gap between individual African countries and China means that Africa is the only vulnerable partner. An interview with an official in the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs revealed concern about African debt sustainability. China is vulnerable not only to the financial impact of an African default but also to its reputational impact. Far from describing the Sri Lanka case as a strategic victory, the official complained that it had fuelled negative press coverage of the

95 Stratfor Worldview, 'China's Belt and Road Initiative, five years in', 22 June 2018, https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-five-years, accessed 14 August 2018.

96 Fei D, 'Worlding developmentalism: China's economic zones within and beyond its borders', *Journal of International Development*, 29, 2017, pp. 825–850.

BRI. In response, the Chinese government is considering implementing more stringent sustainability surveys in order to avoid similar situations in the future.[97]

Third, amid growing African pressure for local labour and procurement to make up a larger part of BRI projects, it will also become necessary to think with more nuance about Africa agency as it extends beyond national governments. African firms, non-governmental organisations and local communities are actors with their own varying levels of agency. It is therefore important to think of African agency not simply as constituted through an unequal bilateral relationship but also as dynamically contingent, affected by multiple actors, and with global ramifications outside the continent. The BRI is a test of the reach and impact of this agency. Do the various forms of African agency cohere to more than the ability to make the best of what China offers? Can African agents proactively shape the BRI for the good of the continent?

## CONCLUSION: THE QUESTION OF AFRICAN AGENCY AT FOCAC

The issue of the power imbalance in Africa–China relations remains at the heart of many Africans' misgivings about the continent's burgeoning ties with China

The issue of the power imbalance in Africa–China relations remains at the heart of many Africans' misgivings about the continent's burgeoning ties with China. The rise of the BRI and wider shifts in the global geopolitical architecture have sharpened discussion of this issue, even as African leaders move to set up new forums for continental trade and decision-making.

This makes it crucial to think more critically about African agency, and this paper is an early attempt to examine it in the context of Africa's relationship with emerging powers. The relationship between China and Africa is simultaneously highly unequal in economic terms and yet described as South–South cooperation. By positioning the issue of African agency in the context of China–Africa relations, the paper attempts to cast fresh light on the issue, away from the overly stark contrast between Africa and its former colonial masters.

In the specific context of FOCAC, this paper identifies three main expressions of African agency.

African agency can be found in the broad frameworks of discussion at FOCAC events. It is clear that these are not simply set by China, but that African perspectives are also incorporated in the process in significant ways. The explicit integration of the AU's Agenda 2063 into the FOCAC VI Action Plan underscores this aspect. At the same time, the limitations of this approach are highlighted by the frustration of South African officials at the fact that they had no advance notice of the Chinese president's speech at FOCAC VI, which crucially laid out details of China's positions and contributions in support of the FOCAC agenda for 2015.[98] These discussions around the FOCAC agenda and ad hoc issues highlight how Africans exercise a measure of agency in the relationship with China

97 Interview, Beijing, 9 July 2018. The interviewee requested anonymity.

98 Private communication, senior South African Department of International Relations and Cooperation official, November 2017.

while demonstrating its limitations. Moving to a more formalised structured engagement, arguably through the mechanism of an AU–China–FOCAC Secretariat, is for some African governments a logical next step in institutionalising the relationship.[99]

Second, more attention should be paid to the issue of locating African agency within institutions such as the AU, sub-regional organisations, national governments or elements of civil society. Each of these entities, as illustrated above, plays a role in shaping different policy agendas with China – with varying degrees of success. Partnerships that cut across the state–business–civil society divide seem as important as state-led initiatives within the AU or sub-regional organisations in articulating policy agendas that draw a constructive response from China. A careful audit and assessment of contemporary China's combination of recognised economic interests and reputational concerns, both of which seem to factor in securing successful African activism, would contribute to a refinement of African approaches. Conducting similar audits of other external powers would help to provide a comparative context and, potentially, strengthen African policymaking.

Third, it is important to think through the changing terms of agency as African governments face Chinese economic pre-eminence through initiatives such as the BRI. Greater dependency on Chinese financing for African infrastructure development has exposed these countries to the pressures of debt repayment in a climate of relatively weak commodity prices and US dollar-denominated debt. While this significantly raises risk on the African side, China faces the paradox of high African indebtedness translating into reputational risks to itself if it handles this in ways that offend national pride, for example using assets as collateral or in-kind payments (as in the Sri Lankan case) or introducing conditionalities tied to the rescheduling of African debt. Beijing will have to tread carefully if it is to avoid fuelling the kind of uproars across Africa that accompanied high indebtedness to Western donors and their efforts to encourage debt repayment. This potentially volatile situation gives African governments room for manoeuvre to set more favourable terms, paradoxically expanding the scope for African agency.

The paper demonstrated the need for nuance in discussing Africa's indebtedness to China. It is especially important to temper Western discussions of China's so-called 'debtbook diplomacy' and theories of China's strategic deployment of debt. This is because the current discussion both overestimates China's agency and underestimates Africa's. In addition, the debtbook discourse overestimates African countries' access to sources of financing other than Chinese debt and under-emphasises their existing non-Chinese debt, in some cases from private Western lenders. More glaringly, these accounts also tend to diminish African agency by not taking into account how strategic non-compliance has historically been used on the continent to gain greater manoeuvrability in relations with stronger partners. This, as well as Africa's successful use of parallel bargaining with both Chinese and Western stakeholders, has allowed it to gain small amounts of agency despite massive power inequality.

99 Alden C & AC Alves, 'China's regional forum diplomacy in the developing world: Socialisation and the "Sinosphere"', *Journal of Contemporary China*, 26, 103, 2017, pp. 151–165.

The case studies of the AU and BRI allow thinking about the potential for new forms of collective decision-making, without glossing over the remaining dominance of the nation state and its government in these forums. In the process, the paper attempts to add to conversations about how Africa should maximise the development potential of the '55 plus one' meetings between African leaders and Asian powers. These include not only FOCAC and the Tokyo International Conference on African Development but also mooted meetings between Africa and South Korea and Indonesia, as well as the Africa–Asia Growth Corridor currently proposed by India and Japan. As the paper points out, the proposed AU reforms championed by Kagame could fundamentally reshape these forums.

Within the context of the AU, it is also important to point out the impact weak and strong states have on each other and on Africa's ability to collectively bargain with China. A potential leadership role for the AU is not only affected by perceived weaknesses in implementation but also undercut internally by differences between member states. The dominant state-to-state structure of China–Africa relations has been criticised for weakening decision-making by individual states, but one should also ask how it affects attempts to foster collective decision-making through forums such as the AU. At the same time, African determination is expressed in subtle ways, beyond formal structures. For instance, China has become more responsive to continental priorities (such as industrialisation). At the same time, African pressure for a greater voice within China–Africa relations is characterised as continental approval of the relationship, for example in the narrative that it was an African initiative that had led to the establishment of FOCAC. This is also true for the enhanced African membership of the BRI – pressure from Africa to be more explicitly included is re-narrated as evidence of African support for the reshaping of the global political order via the BRI. While these narratives put China at the centre, they also bind it to a certain level of support for African collective decision-making: if Africa collectively advocated for BRI inclusion, there is fundamentally a place for collective African decision-making vis-à-vis China. In other words, the local environment is shaping how China engages with Africa and, in the process, interaction with Africa is shaping China's global engagement. Deeper analysis of this complex process is necessary in order to arrive at a more realistic and useful understanding of African agency in relation to emerging powers.

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