New Partnerships, New Dependencies?

AiCE Africanism & Pan-African Studies — China, BRICS, and the Global South

China in Africa: Partner or New Coloniser?

No discussion of contemporary neocolonialism in Africa can avoid the question of China. China's engagement with Africa has grown exponentially since the early 2000s, making it the continent's largest trading partner and a major source of infrastructure investment. Chinese-built roads, railways, ports, stadiums, government buildings, and telecommunications networks are visible across the continent. The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), held every three years, has become one of the most significant diplomatic forums in African international relations.

The debate about whether China's engagement with Africa is more or less exploitative than the Western engagement it partly displaces is genuinely complex. On the positive side: China offers infrastructure financing without the governance conditionalities attached by Western institutions; it does not lecture African governments about democracy and human rights; its infrastructure investment addresses real bottlenecks in African economic development; and it provides a competitive alternative to Western creditors that gives African governments more room to negotiate.

On the negative side: Chinese loans come with their own conditions — often requiring that Chinese companies and Chinese workers be used in construction, limiting local economic benefit. Some Chinese loan agreements contain collateral clauses that pledge strategic assets — ports, railways, minerals — as security, raising the risk of asset seizure if loans cannot be repaid, the 'debt trap diplomacy' concern, though the extent of this risk is debated among scholars. Environmental and labour standards on some Chinese-backed projects have been problematic. And the trade relationship — Africa exporting raw materials to China, importing Chinese manufactured goods — replicates, in different form, the colonial trade pattern that has kept African countries as raw material exporters rather than industrialisers.

The honest assessment is that China is neither the saviour of Africa nor its new coloniser. It is a major economic power pursuing its own interests in Africa, as all major economic powers do. The question is not whether to engage with China, but how to engage on

terms that genuinely serve African development rather than merely Chinese demand for commodities and markets. This requires exactly what Nkrumah argued Africa needed: sufficient collective economic and political power to negotiate as an equal rather than as a supplicant.

Africa and the Global South: Building New Alliances

One of the most significant developments in African international relations in the twenty-first century has been the deepening of South-South cooperation — relationships between Africa and other developing regions, particularly Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East, that bypass the traditional North-South axis that has governed African international relations since independence.

The BRICS grouping — Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa — has provided a platform for South African engagement with major emerging economies outside the Western framework. In 2023, BRICS invited six new members, including Ethiopia and Egypt — the first African nations other than South Africa to join, signalling a significant expansion of African representation in this emerging alternative to Western-dominated institutions.

The African Union's 2023 accession to the G20 as a full member — alongside the AU's existing observer status at the UN — represents a genuine, if modest, increase in Africa's collective voice in global governance. These developments do not resolve the structural economic inequalities of the global system. But they expand the range of partnerships available to African states and reduce the leverage that any single external power — whether the US, France, or China — can exercise over African policy choices.

Key Takeaways

China's engagement with Africa is neither straightforward partnership nor straightforward exploitation — it is a major power pursuing its own interests, with real benefits (infrastructure, no governance conditionalities) and real risks (debt collateral clauses, replicated commodity trade patterns). The deepening of South-South cooperation through BRICS expansion and AU membership in the G20 gives African states a wider range of partnerships and somewhat more leverage than a single-power

relationship would allow. The next lesson turns to what genuine African economic sovereignty would actually require to build.