

Outlining African Agency Against the Background of the Belt and Road Initiative

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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 in the midst of the rising prominence of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and questions around Africa's role in it. Calls for bolstering African decision-making power in its interactions with China are very common in the China-Africa space. This article argues that for Africa to increase its agency—that is, its ability to make independent decisions and to increase 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 the China-Africa relationship and how can Africa improve its bargaining position in relation to China? This article explores these questions by thinking through how African agency has been conceptualised in the past and comparing those ideas of agency a real-world case study: Africa's relationship with the BRI.

Introduction

In June 2019, shortly after the second Belt and Road Forum (held from 25-27 April 2019) Chinese and African leaders met in Addis Ababa for the Belt and Road Dialogue for China-Africa Cooperation, co-hosted by the Chinese government and the African Union (AU). The event was aimed at highlighting African support for the BRI, and it was striking that it was hosted by the AU, a body that has questioned the structure of the China-Africa relationship. Sure enough, during the event Ethiopia's then Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn emphasised the importance of expanding the BRI partnership from its inherently bilateral nature to a "multilateral platform by bringing Africa, under the AU, and China together."¹ These remarks indicate a new development in China-Africa relations. It initially seemed unlikely that Africa or the continental body would play a role in China's BRI, formally established in 2013, which emphasised China's links to neighbouring Central Asia. However, this changed around 2015 (as is explained later).

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As a key initiative of the Xi Jinping administration, the BRI is envisaged as a massive global rollout of infrastructure aimed at connecting China to Europe via Africa (initially only Kenya and Egypt via the Suez Canal), both across land and sea.² More than a trade route, it has been framed as a grand trans-regional integration scheme. It increasingly functions as a Chinese alternative to West-centric globalization. At present its cost is estimated at between \$1 trillion and \$8 trillion, involving about seventy countries (although this number keeps changing).³ So the BRI draws in a much wider range of actors, and a wider swath of territory than just the African continent. Yet 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 does, however, offer 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 lie on the shoulders of national governments, particularly in the form of debt. The BRI therefore offers a case study of African agency in relation to China beyond the confines of the China-Africa relationship, putting it in a global context. Yet like the inception of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), a massive triennial meeting between Chinese leaders and their African counterparts that was formed in 2000, questions linger about Africa's true ability to shape and even lead in such engagements. In this article we explore Africa's relative power to make its own decisions, advance its chosen development agenda, and to gain optimum deals from China as summed up in the term "agency." It refers to the extent to which Africa can drive a fair bargain with China, or conversely, the extent to which African ambitions are subjugated to China's.

The issue of African agency has drawn increasing attention as China-Africa relations grew into an academic field. African agency came to function as a prism through which to examine the entire relationship, and concerns about a radical lack of African agency led to the relationship being condemned as neo-colonial.⁴ This in turn drove analyses that both underscored the power gap between the two sides, and emphasised how African governments managed to gain leverage in their negotiations with China.⁵ While scholars have argued that simplistic categories such as "China" or "Africa" should be interrogated more closely, much work remains 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. The prominence of the BRI has made it even more urgent to think through what African agency means in relation to Chinese power.

This article 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" and does it always serve a moral purpose of maximising self-determination for the continent? To which extent is agency vis-à-vis China shared within African societies, or does it remain in the hands of certain elite actors? Taking a first step in articulating these issues is important for China-Africa studies, especially as broad initiatives and general official statements 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. We offer the notion that agency is both multifaceted (sometimes with or without moral purpose) and also relational. To explore these issues we first discuss the theory of agency. Second is the exploration of the BRI

and Africa. By locating different factors at the multilateral and bilateral level, it is clear that opportunities for agency as well as lack thereof exist at the same time.

African Agency and Emerging Powers: In Theory

This section problematizes the concept of African agency as it has been applied, as well as outlines current debates about agency in International Relations.⁶ Africa's agency in International Relations provides a useful departure point to talk about a set of trends shaping current global politics. These include uneven globalization, identity politics, and dangerous power transitions. In this volatile context, African decision-making is frequently described 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, marginalized populations against Western dominance. Evidence suggests, however, that agency can and often does express itself through tactics used by incumbent governments to shore up their own power, or to exclude other groups. In fact, with a few exceptions the research on agency to date has yet to examine critically or systematically its role in shaping international relations between developing countries, 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.⁷

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 portray itself as both a leader of a victimized 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 many of these south-south decisions are implemented in Africa, making it an important space to track both decision-making and implementation. In the second place, Africa provides a useful starting point to think through the issue of who are actually involved in the making and implementing of these decisions. Rather than just focusing on governments, Africa reflects the role of elite conduct, institutional activism, civil society, and public mobilization. In other words, Africa demonstrates the workings of agency in its various forms. Understanding how local agency manifests itself in relations between China and Africa, how this engagement is reflected in changing international norms and practices, and what the constraints on such activism are, form the focus of this study.

Questioning Agency

Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) is the sub-field within International Relations that gives the fullest expression to the study of agency in action. FPA 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.⁸ 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.⁹

FPA 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, takes us to a viewpoint that actors,

their intentions, and the structural context within which they act, are only meaningful when they coalesce into a directive policy. Studies of African foreign policymaking have, however, made only limited use of these conceptual sources to interpret agency.

Importantly within the domain of African IR, a key concept that implies a theory of agency (without calling it as such) is Bayart's notion of "extraversion."¹⁰ According to his historical reading of Africa's engagement with external powers, the responsiveness of African actors to outside incursions has been guided by their recognition of opportunities to mobilize these resources in the service of their own localized power struggles. He identifies these rent-seeking strategies as defining relations within the larger framework of asymmetrical power. By decoupling meaningful expressions of African assertiveness from the institutional foundations of a Western-like state system, Bayart importantly for this paper, allows us to think more broadly about sources of agency as residing within a relational context that is both linked to the external environment but mediated through the African political system. In other words, analysis of the formation and operationalization of African agency can focus on conduct within state institutions, including that of foreign policy actors, as well as outside amongst non-governmental organizations.

The question of African agency is bound up in the larger matter of Africa's marginalization in the study of International Relations. Beswick and Hammerstad point out how the dominant concern for scholars is "the way in which marginalised, poor and weak African countries are acted and impacted upon by great powers and international institutions."¹¹ For conventional academia, it is the weakness of African state structures which exercises determining influence over the ability of African actors to project power and influence in the international system.¹² Critical scholarship by Chipaike and Knowledge (2018), Nkiwane (2001), Brown and Harman (2013), Dunn and Shaw (2001), and others has, however, underscored the systematic and simplistic positioning of Africa within the field variously as a supplicant, powerless, and generally incoherent actor in the international system.¹³ African agency exists, in their reading, but is given over to actions that are largely embedded in state conduct, rather than that of other actors, episodic in nature and undifferentiated in content.

As noted, a strong undercurrent of the contemporary agency debate is emancipatory — that is to say that there is a belief that any act of agency by weaker actors within a system dominated by global powers is a normative good, because that act necessarily challenges this lopsided power hierarchy. This outlook complicates the analysis of African agency because 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 marginalization of African states in the international system, while not critiquing how these acts monopolize power and exclude groups domestically.

This analysis aims to avoid such assumptions because they oversimplify the concept of agency itself. Instead, building on Bayart's work, it puts forward that agency is positional and multifaceted in its expressions and, emanating from this, assumes operational forms which are as likely to reflect a causal logic rooted in internal political dynamics as any international systemic factors. It can therefore manifest both as progressive challenges against global power imbalances and as problematic local attempts to consolidate power or exclude rivals. It can take place within the institutional structures of the African state or outside these in the wider domestic and even regional environment. Moreover it

understands agency as relational, where "structures and agency are continuously reproduced over time and co-constitutive."¹⁴

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 favor 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? The role of purposive intent and action must be accounted for in assessments of the impact of agency. Moreover, how do shared assumptions contribute to co-constituted policy agendas that ultimately shape outcomes? Do these outcomes include, following from Campbell, the reproduction of identity ("we are Africans" or "we are part of the emerging South" etc.) in relation to the international system?¹⁵

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 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.¹⁶

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, and it is likely that they will shape south-south relations in the future, especially in the context of the BRI. The 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 section some of this complexity is made clear by looking at African decision-making in the wake of a possible China-centred globalization.

Case Study: Africa and the Belt and Road Initiative

Genesis of the BRI and Africa's Growing Role

Since its coining, the difficulty of defining the contours of the BRI has become one of its salient features. This is because of its massive scale and cost—inevitably generating competing estimates—but also because the project itself has been subject to multiple revisions. As a result, vagueness and changeability are integral to the BRI, and inevitably shape how we talk about it. While it is frequently treated as a historically unique phenomenon, the BRI is perhaps more usefully understood as a super-charged extension of the 1990s Going Out strategy. Like its predecessor, it gains impetus from the over-supply of corporate capacity and capital in China, and the need to expand towards new markets and investment destinations, and for Chinese companies to gain foreign experience. Like the Going Out strategy, it is not

purely corporate, but also draws on the tools of diplomacy, including a strong focus on people-to-people exchange. However, it differs in foregrounding connectivity via hard and soft infrastructure between China and the rest of the world.¹⁷ This focus on infrastructure has made discussions about the BRI much more focused on geographical connectivity. It has also put Africa at the center of key discussions about the global impact of the initiative.

When President Xi Jinping announced the initiative in 2013, it was initially focused on Central Asia and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) zone.¹⁸ Since these announcements, the BRI has evolved through different iterations. The famous Xinhua map of its dual routes was widely circulated and contributed to formalizing the BRI as a geographically bounded project—an understanding that was challenged by later iterations. The changes made clear that the BRI was an evolving project, and that it could be conceptualized 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 formalization of the BRI also extended to the establishment of financial institutions to funnel financing to various areas. This includes the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the Silk Road Fund, and the China-Eurasia Economic Cooperation Fund.

Early conceptualizations of the BRI, including the much-circulated map of the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, and the Chinese government's 2015 document, entitled *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road*, which provided the first comprehensive outlining of the initiative, included Africa. South Africa was the first African signatory of the BRI memorandum of understanding, in 2015. However, despite these early overtures, Africa remained marginal to the BRI's conceptualization for a surprisingly long time. For example, the May 2017 Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation Summit was a key moment in the formalization of the BRI. Attended by thirty world leaders, it resulted in a communiqué expressing support for the initiative.¹⁹ Yet even by this relatively late date, Africa was still characterized 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."²⁰ The equation of Africa (which is on the "official" BRI route) with South America (which isn't) not only reveals the relative flexibility of the parameters governing the BRI concept, but also reveals that Africa was at first marginal to the main work envisioned for the BRI.

This was despite the fact that some African countries signed on to the BRI relatively early. South Africa had already signed a memorandum of understanding joining the BRI in 2015, Egypt in 2016, and Kenya and Ethiopia followed suit at the 2017 Belt and Road Forum.²¹ However, as the BRI grew to become the central expression of China's foreign policy, it also started to become more important in China-Africa relations. For example, the 2015 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) Johannesburg Declaration barely mentions the BRI.²² However, the 2018 Beijing Declaration puts the BRI front and center.²³ It didn't only reveal how central the BRI had become to Chinese foreign policy in the intervening period, but also how its emerging status as a centerpiece of President Xi Jinping's vision of China's role in the world gave it a central valence in China-Africa relations too (albeit it remained difficult to ascertain what specific projects in Africa were related to the BRI).

As the BRI has become increasingly central to Chinese foreign policy, it has also expanded beyond geographically-bonded belt and road routes towards circling the globe. While this

has been described as a departure, it was arguably already built into its original conception. 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.”²⁴ This view of the BRI as not geographically delimited was confirmed in an interview with an official in the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who confirmed that not only is the BRI open to all countries in Africa, it could eventually include even the United States.²⁵ This flexibility has led to several more African states joining the BRI, including West African states like Senegal and Nigeria.²⁶ Several Chinese foreign policy officials and analysts interviewed in Beijing in July 2018 argued that the 2018 FOCAC Summit would include an announcement expanding the BRI to include the whole African continent, a prediction that was borne out in September of that year by the official FOCAC 2018 declaration.²⁷

In April 2019, a second Belt and Road Forum was hosted by China. The event was widely characterized as an attempt to rebrand the BRI, in response to criticism around debt and corruption.²⁸ Compared to 2017’s initial Belt and Road Forum, the 2019 forum was marked by more subdued language about the BRI’s scope, and the announcement of several measures to mitigate some of its failings. Notably, the 2019 communique added new language emphasizing that BRI projects should maximize debt sustainability and ecological responsibility.²⁹ These adaptations can be seen as an indication that China responds to external pressure through a process of dynamic adaptation. This has wider implications for the exercise of African agency. We take a closer look at these dynamics below.

Implications: African Agency and the BRI

The Belt and Road Initiative is a case study that can help us to outline African agency in relation to external actors. This is because as a result of its size and complexity the BRI functions across both multilateral and bilateral levels. For example, the BRI is structured by both bilateral treaties between governments and facilitated through multilateral bodies such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. It also moves beyond the study of China and Africa (a relationship with its own unique language and structures) to allow one-to-one comparisons between Africa, and other comparable countries along the BRI’s interactions with China, as is explored in this section. This allows us to spot exercises of agency that are obscured by the specificities of the China-Africa relationship, but that are still indicative of how agency is exercised in the context of massive power differences. In this section we outline African agency on two levels—multilateral and bilateral relations.

Multilateral Factors

Africa’s role in the BRI cannot be discussed without the AU, whose priority areas have intersected with that of the BRI. There are both scenarios where the body can direct BRI engagement for the benefit of the continent and in others, it is curtailed from deeper engagement. By looking at agency through the multilateral lens, it is not only bound by moral underpinning or geopolitical interest. Rather, the continental political environment (i.e. context) has an impact on the nature of ties. One example is the proposed reforms led by Rwandan President Paul Kagame, articulated in a report entitled “The Imperative to Strengthen Our Union” circulated in January 2017 at the 28th AU Summit.³⁰ He proposed increased organizational efficiency and hence streamlining partnership summits like the FOCAC, by having a selected group of representatives negotiate with China on behalf of Africa, replacing the current unwieldy process dominated by bilateral negotiations. Discussions related to this could

affect links with China by restructuring external partnership agreements to include a handful of representatives, which could affect the diplomatic optics of fifty-plus African heads of state meeting with China. This “restructuring” has however not yet taken place, as seen by the 2018 FOCAC. Another example is the possibility of greater continental integration through the launch of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). These developments could potentially change the structure of relations with China, including deeper intra-continental competition and cooperation as well as fast-track linkages with the BRI.

Africa’s continual reinforcement of relations should also be taken as a proactive gesture that constitutes agency. Take for instance a 2016 Afrobarometer survey, where 63 percent of Africans surveyed perceived China’s influence as positive.³¹ African leaders have also demonstrated the closeness of ties, even in awkward moments. An example is the 7th China–AU Strategic Dialogue held in February 2018—off the back of allegations by French newspaper *Le Monde* that China bugged the AU headquarters. While the allegations led to gleeful coverage in the global press, African leaders stood with China in rejecting the allegations. An AU-China Strategic Dialogue took place as planned, and despite the scandal, the delegates agreed to cooperate on five areas: African infrastructure; AU capacity building; peace and security; public health and disease prevention; and tourism and aviation.³² These areas happen to fit squarely with Africa’s own targets for continental development (as encapsulated in Agenda 2063). In fact, Agenda 2063 – as well as the continent’s ambitions for industrialisation – has been frequently referenced in Chinese official discourse since its inception in 2015. Likewise, in 2019 the AU renewed relations with Chinese telecoms company Huawei despite the U.S. campaign against such cooperation.³³

There are other developments that could impact the AU-China dynamic, however. This includes the influence of individuals who direct relations at a multilateral level, such as AU chairpersons as well as the African co-chair countries for FOCAC.³⁴ At the same time, this level shows signs of curtailed African negotiation capacity. The most obvious obstacle is the multiple voices that contribute to the AU. The body’s reform process encountered some resistance, including from officials who felt there should have been more consultation during its drafting.³⁵ There are also other nuances with China, being the main financier of FOCAC and the BRI (through a variety of means, including loans). While China sent official representation to the AU since 2015, the African body itself only established its representation in Beijing in late 2018—with reportedly, the support of China—due to financial and procedural limitations.³⁶ Moreover there are also situations where the AU’s power “valve” is somewhat closed. For instance, eSwatini (formerly known as Swaziland, an AU member state) does not recognize the People’s Republic of China (because of its diplomatic relationship with Taiwan). This affects the degree that China would accept the body as representative of the entire continent. Finally, and linked to the next section, is the bilateral dynamic and the relative agency derived by individual states in the AU and their own unique ties with China—that further complicates relations at this level.

Bilateral Factors

One of the BRI’s fundamental fault lines is the fact that its projects are negotiated bilaterally between governments. The power difference between China and other states is particularly glaring at the state-to-state level. It is therefore at the bilateral level where the exercise of African agency is particularly salient. In outlining African agency, however, it is also important to not simply assume that the difference in power between African states and China means

that Africa is powerless. Rather, the BRI reveals how African states can exercise agency even in the face of significant power imbalances.

One of the principal concerns at the moment 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 sixty-eight BRI-adjacent countries. It designated eight of these countries as particularly sensitive to debt distress. Djibouti is the only African country on this list.³⁷ Djibouti is highly indebted to China. Its debt-to-GDP ratio has increased from 50 percent to 85 percent in the last two years, with project-specific loans to China's Exim Bank amounting to \$1.4 billion—about 75 percent of GDP.³⁸ China is Djibouti's top foreign direct investor and has key strategic interests there. Chinese debt is seen as potentially providing China with leverage over Djibouti's government. This came to a head in February 2018 when it was announced that the government of Djibouti is suspending a contract with the UAE-based port firm DP World to manage its Doraleh Container Terminal.³⁹ The announcement led to speculation that the control of the port will be ceded to China's state-owned China Merchants Holdings, which already owns 23.5 percent of the port. In addition, Chinese companies have been contracted to build a number of other infrastructure projects, including a special economic zone, with an eight-lane access highway.⁴⁰ While all these projects are seen as BRI projects, the debt burden lands on Djibouti.

Debt has become a political flashpoint in recent discussions of the BRI, and China-Africa relations. The U.S. government has accused China of so-called “debt trap diplomacy,” that is, deliberately luring poor countries into debt in order to gain leverage over them. This narrative was repeated frequently by Western press outlets in 2018 and 2019, fueled in part by reiterations by U.S. government officials.⁴¹ The narrative continued despite rebuttals from prominent academics focusing on China-Africa relations.⁴²

The debt trap narrative originally assumed relatively low levels of African agency. This was true if one assumed African countries took on debt from a lack of capacity among leaders (this would locate agency narrowly within government-to-government relations) or that corrupt leaders took on debt to line their own pockets, and leaving citizens to pick up the tab (which would locate agency across a wider range of society.) It also, ironically, echoes some of the original presumptions of African weaknesses in the negotiating with Western donors and multilateral institutions on debt issues in the 1980s and 1990s. However, subsequent developments lead one to question the basis of the debt trap narrative as a whole. At the second Belt and Road Forum in 2019, China (perhaps in reaction to the debt trap narrative, but also probably due to growing concerns in Beijing about Chinese exposure to debt in the developing world) focused a lot more attention on debt sustainability. The Chinese Ministry of Finance released its *Debt Sustainability Framework for Participating Countries of the Belt and Road Initiative*.⁴³

The document was the first official guidelines of Chinese lending published in English. While it provides a set of standards to ensure greater debt sustainability, it also differs from IMF standards in revealing ways. In the first place, it does not state the lending terms of Chinese loans, leaving the possibility of individual banks to charge market rates (rather than the IMF's blanket recommendation to only lend to vulnerable countries at fully concessional

rates) and presumably for developing countries to choose to borrow at these rates.⁴⁴ Secondly, it explicitly states that it does not necessarily see debt distress as disqualifying countries from additional lending:

However, it should be noted that an assessment for a country as “high risk” of debt distress, or even “in debt distress”, does not automatically mean that debt is unsustainable in a forward-looking sense. In general, when a country is likely to meet its current and future repayment obligations, its [public and publicly guaranteed] external debt and overall public debt are sustainable.⁴⁵

In contrast, the IMF specifies that additional lending to debt-distressed countries “would be allowed only under exceptional circumstances.”⁴⁶ While both of these differences might not augur well for debt sustainability in the developing world, one should note that both serve to put individual governments’ power of decision-making at the center of the lending debate. In contrast to the IMF’s guardrails keeping at-risk countries from accessing more debt, however, in the Chinese case the decision is left much more to the countries’ own discretion. The reaction of (some) African nations to this distinction became clear in late 2019, at a contentious meeting between the director of the IMF, Kristalina Georgieva, and six African leaders. The leaders (led by Senegalese president Macky Sall) directly challenged these rules, arguing that African debt sustainability is underestimated, and in the process the continent is unable to make its own development decisions.⁴⁷

The debate about how much debt African countries should be allowed to take on lies at the heart of the wider discussion around African agency and how it functions in the context of the BRI. Behind that is the question as to what happens in the case of a massive loan default. The original case on which the debt trap narrative was based was that of a port in Sri Lanka. Supporters of the debt trap narrative argued that Chinese investors seized the Hambantota port as collateral after the Sri Lankan government couldn’t repay the loans it took to construct.⁴⁸ Subsequent analyses have shown that the decision to grant the Chinese investors a 99-year lease cannot be seen as an asset seizure, but rather as a way to generate enough funds to service other pending loans. In fact, the original loan for the port still has to be repaid.⁴⁹

It is important to point out that the Sri Lanka case has as of yet not been repeated on that scale in Africa. However, it became an oft-repeated example in criticism of the BRI. Comparisons were also made to debt levels in East Africa. For example, while Kenya is so far not considered as vulnerable as Djibouti, its debt-to-GDP ratio stood at 59.2 percent in December 2019.⁵⁰ China accounts for 66 percent of Kenya’s total bilateral debt.⁵¹ In 2017 the World Bank issued a warning about Kenya’s rapidly climbing public debt.⁵² Infrastructure spending makes up a significant part of this debt, with the BRI-related Standard Gauge Railway alone making up about six percent of the country’s GDP. The rapidly spiraling debt, together with concerns that the Standard Gauge Railway was more expensive per kilometer than comparable projects elsewhere, raised a debate in Kenya about the impact of the BRI on Kenya’s national development agenda.⁵³

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 the sovereignty of states seen in isolation, but also raises questions 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 like China, Europe, the Middle East, and South Asia. However, taking advantage of these kinds of opportunities depends on infrastructure, from

ports and railways to power and data networks to special economic zones in order to lure foreign direct investment. External limits on lending impinge directly on a government's ability to maximize such opportunities, as the above-referenced interaction between the IMF leader and African presidents show.

That said, these governments are also under dual domestic pressures to both lessen systemic underdevelopment, and to avoid increasing public debt. In fact, more attention should be paid to domestic politics as a factor in governments' decision-making power in the context of the BRI. For example, in Malaysia a recent change in government cast a number of BRI-related projects into doubt. This follows a contentious election focusing on popular concerns about the cost of the projects, land allocation, and engaging local companies and labor. Similar issues have been raised in Indonesia and will arguably feature in other elections along the BRI route in the future.⁵⁴ Some of the imbalances this article points out in the context of the AU are arguably also present in the BRI. The Belt and Road countries are not in a position to negotiate with China collectively. On the one hand, this implies a large power imbalance between the negotiating partners. However, the fact that the political and financial responsibility for the project ultimately falls on the partner government, with no buffer of multilateral decision-making, paradoxically leaves Beijing vulnerable to its key foreign investment initiative being partially derailed by local politics. The Southeast Asian examples show that it is possible for a government to be criticized domestically for being overly close to China, or even of profiting through corruption from BRI-related funds, while simultaneously enjoying limited negotiating power with China over BRI projects. At the same time, a recent report by Stratfor has pointed out that the Belt and Road has led to increasing local political polarization in member states, with governments using the promise of new BRI projects to strengthen themselves domestically. The same report also points out that 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.⁵⁵

The BRI provides a compelling case study of African agency in the context of China's growing global influence. While this article lacks the space to explore the issue in detail, an initial discussion raises a few key points. First, it is important to think beyond pure state-to-state relations. As Southeast 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 not only vulnerable to the financial impact of an African default, but also its reputational impact. Far from describing the Sri Lanka case as a strategic victory, the official complained that it fuelled negative press coverage of the BRI. In response, the Chinese government is considering implementing more stringent sustainability surveys in order to avoid similar situations in the future. African agency therefore does not only exist in terms of how it reacts to Chinese actions. In certain (albeit extremely limited) ways, the exercising of African agency can also have an impact on China.

Third, as African pressure for local labor and procurement to make up a larger part in BRI projects increases, it will also become necessary to think with more nuance about African agency as it extends beyond national governments. It will be important to start thinking of African firms, NGOs, and local communities as actors with their own varying levels of

agency. As they exercise this agency, they will also have an impact on the BRI as a whole. It is therefore important not to think of African agency as simply constituted through an unequal bilateral relationship, but also as dynamically contingent, affected by multiple actors, and with global ramifications outside of the continent.

Discussion and Conclusion: The Question of African Agency

The issue of African agency remains at the heart of many Africans' misgivings about the continent's relationship 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 towards setting up new forums for continental trade and decision-making. This makes it crucial to think more critically about African agency, and this paper represents one 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 contains an element of striving to realize sovereign equality as a form of South-South cooperation. By positioning the issue of African agency in the context of China-Africa relations, this article 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 the BRI and Africa, this article identifies three main expressions of African agency. One clear expression of African agency can be found in the process of deciding on the broad frameworks of discussion at multilateral events. It is clear that these are not simply set by China, but that African perspectives are incorporated into the process in significant ways. The explicit integration of the AU's Agenda 2063 into the FOCAC VI Action Plan for instance, underscores this aspect. These discussions around the FOCAC agenda and ad hoc issues highlight how Africans both exercise a measure of agency in the relationship with China while, nevertheless, demonstrating its limitations. Moving to more formalized structured engagement, arguably through the mechanism of an AU-China-FOCAC Secretariat, is for some African governments a logical next step in institutionalizing the relationship, which will also impact on how African countries participate in the BRI.⁵⁶ Hence Africa's role in the BRI cannot be divorced from developments in the FOCAC.

Second, more attention should be paid to the issue of locating African agency within institutions such as the AU, sub-regional organizations, 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. The recent civil society-driven court intervention in a planned Chinese-financed coal-powered electricity plant in Lamu, Kenya can be seen as an illustration of this trend.⁵⁷ Partnerships that cut across the state-business-civil society divide seem as important as state-led initiatives within the AU or sub-regional organizations in articulating policy agendas that draw a constructive response from China. A careful audit and assessment of contemporary China's combination of recognized economic interests and its reputational concerns, both of which seems to factor into securing successful African activism, would usefully contribute to a refinement of African approaches. Conducting similar analyses of other external powers would help to provide a comparative context and, potentially, strengthen African policy making.

Third, it is important to think through the changing terms of agency as African governments face new realities of 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, particularly an issue for commodity-backed loans. While this significantly raises risk on the African side, China faces the paradox of high African indebtedness translating into reputational risks to China if it handles it 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 fueling the kind of uproars across Africa that accompanied high indebtedness to Western donors and their efforts to encourage debt repayment. This potentially volatile situation could give African governments room for maneuver to set more favorable terms, paradoxically expanding the scope for African agency.

The article demonstrated the need for nuance in discussion of Africa's Chinese debt. It is especially important to temper Western discussions of China's so-called "debt trap diplomacy" and theories of China's strategic deployment of debt. This is because the current discussion both overestimates China's agency (by seeing it as impervious to risk) and underestimates Africa's. In addition, the debt book discourse simultaneously overestimates African countries' access to other sources of financing than Chinese debt, or under-emphasizes their existing non-Chinese debt. For example, Kenya's rising debt was funded both by China and by multilateral lenders like the World Bank.⁵⁸ More glaringly, these accounts also tend to diminish African agency by not taking into account how strategic non-compliance has historically been used by Africa to gain greater maneuverability in its 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. Moreover, in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic and global economic slowdown, this is an issue which is increasingly defining China's leadership on the continent and the Global South. Ghana's finance minister and current chair representing developing countries at IMF, Ken Ofori-Atta, called on China to forgive spiraling debt in response to the collapse of commodity export earnings and diminishing trade.⁵⁹

The BRI example allows thinking about the potential for new forms of collective decision-making, while not glossing over the remaining dominance of the nation state and its government over other forms of collectivity in these forums—all these elements are relational and demonstrate the pockets of relative agency but equally the forces that counter them. In the process, the article attempts to add to conversations about how Africa should maximize the development potential of the "55 plus one" meetings between African leaders and Asian powers. These do not only include FOCAC, and the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD), but also mooted meetings between Africa and South Korea, Indonesia, as well as the Africa-Asia Growth Corridor currently proposed by India and Japan. As the article points out, the proposed AU reforms championed by Rwandan President Paul Kagame could fundamentally reshape these forums, through the deployment of representative negotiators representing the continent, rather than the large numbers of leaders representing their own countries.

That said, it is also important to acknowledge that these reforms are made less likely by the impact of weak and strong states on each other and on Africa's ability to collectively bargain with China. A potential leadership role for the AU is affected not only 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 criticized for weakening decision-making by individual states, but one should also ask how it affects attempts to foster collective decision-making through forums like the AU. At the same time,

African determination is expressed in subtle ways, beyond formal structures. For instance, the evolution of FOCAC priorities has shown that China has become more responsive to continental priorities (such as industrialization), as well as promoting the fact that it was allegedly African initiative that led to the establishment of platforms like FOCAC. This is also true for the enhanced African membership of the BRI—pressure from Africa to be more explicitly included can be narrated as evidence of African support for the reshaping of the global political order via the BRI. In other words, African domestic agendas influence China's engagement with the continent, and also sets patterns for China's global engagement. Underlying relations at the same time is the fact that agency is not always a moral pursuit and state action can also counteract progress in multilateral forums at the continental (AU) level. It is important to be realistic about African agency, and the question remains, does any act of non-compliance or rejection of status quo directly equate to agency? Deeper analysis of this complex process is necessary in order to arrive at more realistic and useful understanding of African agency in relation to emerging powers.

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Notes

1 Global Times 2019.

2 As expressed in Xinhua's original map: Xinhua News Agency 2016.

3 Hillman 2018.

- 4 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 2006.
- 5 Corkin 2013; Mohan and Lampert 2013
- 6 Achieng 2014.
- 7 See Gadzala 2015.
- 8 Wight 2006; Hudson 2005.
- 9 See Walker 1987.
- 10 Bayart 2000.
- 11 Beswick and Hammerstad 2013, p. 472.
- 12 Jackson and Rosberg 1986.
- 13 For a survey of the literature on Africa's marginalization see Chipaike and Knowledge 2018; also see Cornelissen, Cheru, and Shaw 2012, and in addition, Brown and Harman 2013, Dunn and Shaw 2001, and Nkiwane 2001.
- 14 Beswick and Hammerstad 2013, p. 472.
- 15 Campbell 1998, pp. 207-83.
- 16 See Bush 1999; Harrison 2002. The classic example in independent Africa is the response of the Tanzanian peasantry to Julius Nyerere's collectivization policies in the late 1960s. See Hyden 1980.
- 17 Whereas "hard infrastructure" refers to physical structures like roads, ports and data networks, "soft infrastructure" denotes the services needed to run economic, health, and other systems.
- 18 For Central Asia, see Wu 2013a; for ASEAN, see Wu J 2013b.
- 19 China Daily 15 May 2017, p. 8.
- 20 China Daily 15 May 2017.
- 21 Brand South Africa 2015; Xinhua News Agency 2015; Breuer 2017.
- 22 FOCAC 2015.
- 23 FOCAC 2018.
- 24 National Development and Reform Commission 2015. See also Wu, Sidiropoulos, and Alden 2017.
- 25 Interview conducted on 9 July 2018 at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Beijing.
- 26 Huang 2018; FOCAC 2019.
- 27 Interviews with: Zeng Aiping and He Rui at Chinese Institute of International Studies conducted on 9 July 2018; Wang Yongzhong at Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, conducted on 10 July 2018.
- 28 Goodman and Hillman 2019.
- 29 Ruwitch 2019.
- 30 For the full report see: <https://au.int/sites/default/files/pages/32777-file-report-20institutional20reform20of20the20au-2.pdf>
- 31 Lektorwe et al. 2016, p. 122.
- 32 Tiezzi 2018.
- 33 Udin 2019.
- 34 Kagame handed over to Egypt's Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in 2019, who was then succeeded by South Africa's Cyril Ramaphosa in 2020
- 35 Bedzigui 2017.
- 36 Ryder 2018; Shaban 2018.

- 37 Hurley, Morris, and Portelance 2018.
- 38 Hurley, Morris, and Portelance 2018.
- 39 Allen and Associates, n/d 'Investment Risks in Djibouti: Beyond the Headlines" <https://alanandassociates.africa-newsroom.com/files/download/f87c1579e629ef5> accessed 1 August 2018
- 40 Pieper 2018.
- 41 For the Western press narrative, for example see The Editors 2018; Dahir and Kazeem 2018.
- 42 Brautigam 2019b.
- 43 Ministry of Finance of People's Republic of China 2019.
- 44 Malm 2019.
- 45 Ministry of Finance of People's Republic of China 2019.
- 46 International Monetary Fund 2014.
- 47 Olander 2019.
- 48 Parker and Chefitz 2018.
- 49 Brautigam 2019a. Also see Moramudali 2019.
- 50 CEIC Data nd.
- 51 Omondi 2018.
- 52 Ngugi, B. 2017.
- 53 Kacungira 2017.
- 54 Bland 2017.
- 55 Stratfor 2018.
- 56 Alden and Alves 2016.
- 57 UN Environment Program 2019.
- 58 Irungu 2019.
- 59 Al Jazeera 2020.