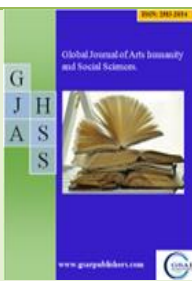
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REVISITING DEPENDENCY THEORY IN THE 21ST CENTURY: IS AFRICA'S ENGAGEMENT WITH CHINA A NEW FORM OF ECONOMIC DEPENDENCE?

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Abstract

This study rigorously reassesses dependence theory as initially articulated by Raúl Prebisch, Andre Gunder Frank, and Samir Amin against the backdrop of Africa's contemporary economic relationship with China. The structural echoes of traditional dependence theory are evident as China's bilateral commerce with Africa exceeded \$295 billion in 2024, with African nations purchasing primarily manufactured commodities and exporting 89% of their exports to China in the form of raw materials. But the link between China and Africa is much more complicated than just a simple repeat of colonial-era dependence. This paper contends that an examination of trade patterns, debt structures, infrastructure financing under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and African agency within this dynamic reveals significant dependency-like characteristics, including persistent trade deficits, resource extraction, debt vulnerabilities, and restricted technology transfer. It presents a complex, contested, and evolving variant of South-South dependency that neither entirely supports nor completely contradicts classical dependency theory. The paper adds to the growing body of work on the political economy of China and Africa by putting real-world evidence into a new theoretical framework and making a set of policy suggestions for African countries to change how they work with China so that the results are fairer.

Keywords: Africa-China Relations, Belt and Road Initiative, Debt-Trap Diplomacy, Neo-colonialism, South-South Cooperation

INTRODUCTION

An assumption about dependence has long underpinned notions of progress. Developed from what became regarded as structural inconsistencies in the post-colonial world-system, dependency theory provided a satisfactory explanation for how the governments of formally colonised states could continue to grow poorer despite exponential development within industrialised nations of the Global North. Building off of the works of Raúl Prebisch (1950), Andre Gunder Frank (1966, 1967), and Samir Amin (1974), economists posited that the global economic system was rigged in favour of wealthy industrialised 'core' countries which siphoned resources and capital-surplus from the developing 'periphery' in order to maintain their own economic dominance at the expense of underdevelopment (dos Santos, 1970). The ideas that stemmed from these findings would prove to become instrumental in analyses of Africa's development.

Despite appearing successful for three decades, the framework of global economic interaction has shifted immensely. China's ascent to global economic powerhouse has added a wholly unprecedented actor to Africa's development. Initiatives include the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and multibillion-dollar bilateral investment and loan agreements have stationed China as Africa's largest trading partner, creditor, and financier of infrastructure development. Since China began development loans in 2000, it has provided over \$170 billion to African governments. In 2024, bilateral trade between China and Africa hit a record high of \$295 billion. (Booth, 1985)

Along with this new investment comes a newly revived question: Does Africa's growing economic relationship with China constitute a new and pernicious form of economic dependence masquerading in the language of South-South cooperation, reminiscent of the dependence-creating core-periphery relationship identified by dependence theorists in the colonial and neo-colonial



context; or does it not? More than just an academic exercise, the future of Africa's sustained growth, economic autonomy and capacity to fulfill ambitions laid out in Agenda 2063 depends on it.

The purpose of this research paper is to reassess dependence theory through the lens of Sino-African relations in the modern era. We will first address key arguments made by traditional dependency theory literature, then analyze data about Africa and China's economic relationship, highlight dependency-confirming and rejecting qualities of this relationship, and draw our own conclusion that while Africa's involvement with China does feature important aspects of neo-dependency, it does so within a context unlike any before; one that requires aggressive policy response and new theorisation.

The structure of this paper serves as follows. The abstract is displayed in section 2. Section 3 contains the literature review. An empirical review of Africa-China relation is presented in section 4. Section 5 shows the gap on literature. The theoretical framework is discussed in section 6. Section 7 is about methodology. Section 8 is the main discussion while conclusion in on section 9. Recommendation and references follows.

Literature Review

Dependency theory emerged as an explicit rejection of Modernisation theory which asserted that all cultures progress through similar linear stages of development (Habakkuk, 1961). Dependency theory began to emerge when the price changes affecting commodities caused the terms of trade for peripheral countries exporting these raw materials to systematically decline, theorists at the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA), especially Raúl Prebisch, began to focus on this problem. Prebisch (1950) developed the theory that became known as the Prebisch-Singer hypothesis which argued that the prices of manufactures imported by primary commodity producers from core countries were always higher than the prices of the raw materials these periphery countries exported. Thus developing countries will always fall behind in the global trade system due to this built-in inequity.

Andre Gunder Frank (1966) provided a stronger formulation of this structuralist argument. In his pathbreaking essay "The Development of Underdevelopment" Frank argued that underdevelopment was not a natural state or lack of wealth/modernity, but rather underdevelopment was being created by the world capitalist system and is created continuously. Frank argued that in his metropolis-satellite model, wealth was systematically extracted from the satellites (the developing states) to the metropolis (the industrialized states) which created a feedback loop of dependence that enriched the metropolitan core over time. Frank's (1967) assertion that breaking with the world capitalist system was the only alternative resonated with many liberation movements in Africa and Latin America.

Through his concepts of "unequal exchange" and "peripheral capitalism," Samir Amin (1974), writing primarily on Africa, expanded Frank's argument. Amin contended that colonialism had

organised African economies to suit the accumulation demands of Western capital rather than local growth. Long after nominal independence, they continued to purchase export low-value basic materials while producing high-value manufactured items as part of their subservient integration into the global economy. These concepts were further developed into world-systems theory by Immanuel Wallerstein (1974), who used the term "semi-periphery" to describe the more intricate stratification of the global economy.

Dependency theory has been continuously criticised despite its intellectual impact. According to Lall (1975), the theory was fundamentally deterministic and did not take into consideration how domestic policy, state capacity, and internal class dynamics influence development results. According to Booth (1985), dependence theory has reached an "impasse," unable to produce specific, verifiable claims. The theory's main claim that progress was impeded by integration into the capitalist global system seemed to be clearly contradicted by the remarkable economic growth of South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and other East Asian economies (Gereffi & Wyman, 1990) Critics noted that these states had exploited global market integration as a deliberate development strategy rather than a barrier to growth.

One more balanced assessment came from Cardoso and Faletto in 1979. They introduced the concept of "associated-dependent development", meaning that development could take place within the system but only in distorted, dependent forms. This standpoint criticized the determinism of Frank's model but accepted that structural dependency limited societies. Many analysts, such as Mkandawire in 2001, believe that the idea of a "developmental state" should be reconsidered with regard to Africa. What occurs inside a country, such as institutional aptitude and political will, matters just as much as the external frameworks of dependency.

Despite these critiques, however, dependency theory has experienced something of an academic revival with regards to Africa's relationship with China in the 21st century. Some scholars that have sought to use and adapt dependency models for the Sino-African relationship are Carmody and Kragelund (2016), Taylor (2006) and Mohan and Lampert (2013). The concern that Africa is simply swapping one dependency for another has been reignited by the persistence of extractive-exportation of raw materials in exchange for Chinese manufactures, structural trade imbalances, and African nations' growing debt to China.

China in Africa: Competing Narratives

One body of scholarship on China in Africa has taken a favorable view of China's engagement on the continent, pointing to Chinese finance for infrastructure development, loans that do not come with conditionality attached (as do the IMF and World Bank's structural adjustment loans), growing Chinese investment in manufacturing and agriculture in Africa, and China's potential to act as a counterweight to traditionally Western-centric development partners (Brautigam, 2009) (Dollar, 2019).

For example, Brautigam (2009) pushed back against accusations of "debt-trap diplomacy" by arguing that Chinese lending in Africa is

not unusually predatory nor strategically motivated to acquire infrastructure assets.

The opposing body of literature has focused on secrecy around loan agreements, Chinese laborers comprising the majority of workers on large infrastructure projects, unfavorable trade relationships, limited technology transfers, and broader strategic motivations behind China's engagement in Africa (Gore, 2012) (Whiteside, 2009). Despite China's South-South development overtures, authors in this field argue that Chinese engagement in Africa perpetuates a colonial style relationship on structural levels: Africa as a source of markets and raw materials to fuel China's manufacturing sector and continue to relegate it to low-value-added commodity production.

Situating this paper between these two debates, I seek to apply a new dependence framework that accounts for both the parallels to traditional dependence as well as the genuinely new elements of today's China-Africa relationship.

The African Intellectual Tradition on Dependency and Underdevelopment

It would be remiss not to mention the extensive body of African and Caribbean scholarship on dependency produced both alongside and independently of the Latin American dependencia tradition. Indeed, one of the clearest articulations of the dependence thesis within an African context can be found in Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972). Rodney's historical research demonstrated that Africa was made, not born, underdeveloped through colonial capitalism and the Atlantic slave trade. Africa developed Europe at the same time and to the same extent that Europe underdeveloped Africa, Rodney's central argument presaged world-systems analysis and provided a historically contingent explanation for the systematic transfer of Africa's material and human wealth to fuel Europe's industrialisation. Writing on the anniversary of the book's publication, Apata (2022) recently reflected that 'the continent is less developed now than it was in 1972. Africa's debt has been tripled and its capacity to produce what it needs drastically reduced'. Rodney's argument has aged remarkably well.

Stretching the dependence paradigm beyond the period of formal colonial rule is Kwame Nkrumah's (1965) concept of neocolonialism, which speaks to continued economic control by indirect means. Speaking to future Ghanaian president Nkrumah in a letter, former UN Secretary General U Thant said political independence 'would be of little meaning if economic independence could not be achieved at the same time'. Nkrumah theorised that neocolonialism created a class of formally independent, post-colonial governments that were in reality still saddled to their former colonial rulers through economic agreements, investment strategies, and manipulation of the terms of trade. Nkrumah's thinking has proven prescient for understanding Sino-African relations because it highlights how indirect forms of control (debt burdens, trade dependence, positioning of African economies as commodity appendages to Asian industrialisation)

don't require any formalized political subjugation to constrain independent development.

Writing primarily on Africa, Samir Amin (1974, 1972) popularised the concept of 'peripheral capitalism' to explain the mode of capital accumulation that existed in African economies. African economies were not underdeveloped versions of capitalist core-states nor did they represent transitional forms of capitalism that would, given time and the right policies, develop into their richer counterparts. Instead, Amin saw postcolonial Africa's peripheral capitalism as an entirely different formation designed for accumulation outward (i.e. towards Europe, Asia, and the US) instead of inward development. Because the peripheral economy was 'disarticulated' the expansion of one sector did not create multiplier effects or depth in other sectors of the economy. Increasing the production of export agriculture or mining alone would not feed into industrial expansion in other parts of the economy. Centring on the concept of 'delinking' (i.e. a policy of selective disengagement from the world market), Amin (2018) argued that Africa's only hope for independent development lay in delinking from the capitalist core. Delinking speaks directly to the phenomenon under consideration here: if Chinese investment comes with conditions that further entrench African economies' extractive disarticulation, then Amin's proposal to delink from world capitalism maintains its relevance both as an analytic and prescription.

Also included in the African dependency canon are several thinkers who tried to ground dependency theory in the unique political economies of African states. Looking at Chinese activity in Africa, Taylor (2006) highlights how this activity has been strongly shaped by the interests of African governments themselves. African elites tend to privilege quick wins that they can personally benefit from politically and financially over longer-term development outcomes. Taylor's analysis complements extensive research on the "resource curse" and "rentier states" in Africa which argues that the continent's dependence on exporting primary commodities is bolstered by political systems that give African leaders few incentives to reverse this dependence (Yates, 1996). Whatever the causes of Africa's dependence on China, we would be foolish to assume it is solely created by Chinese actors.

The Debate on South-South Cooperation and Its Theoretical Limits

The broad revival of interest in South-South Cooperation (SSC) as an alternative framework to North-South development discourse has paralleled increased Chinese engagement on the African continent. Solidarity, non-conditionality, mutual benefit and respect for national sovereignty are, for advocates of SSC, the guiding principles of collaboration between developing countries and stand in stark contrast to the conditions on governance and structural adjustments tied to traditional Western official development assistance (ODA). China has long couches its engagement in Africa within this SSC narrative, characterizing itself to its African interlocutors as a like-minded developing country with relevant experiences and lessons to share on infrastructure-led development and poverty alleviation.



Recent years, however, have seen increased scepticism in academia over the usefulness of the SSC framework to describe China's relationship with Africa. Mohan and Lampert (2013) argue that SSC discourse obscures the growing power imbalance between China, a \$19 trillion economy and sitting member of the UN Security Council, and the fragmented markets of sub-Saharan Africa. Other scholars have interrogated the celebrated 'win-win' narrative that dominates Chinese official discourse on Africa and found that the benefits of China-Africa trade have disproportionately accrued to China (Carmody, 2016). After comprehensively analysing China-Latin America relations, which shares remarkable similarities with China's African engagement, Stallings (2020) concluded that "unless the terms of trade begin to shift away from raw-materials for manufactures, we may need to update the dependency framework to describe the nature of China's new relationships with the global South". SSC's ability, or lack thereof, to decouple developing countries from traditional partners in the Global North is one of the largest open questions in the development literature. Indeed, Kvangraven (2021) points to a broader Global South intellectual tradition of dependency thinking, including within African scholarship, with far richer and nuanced insights to offer on evaluating SSC than what is typically discussed in mainstream debates obsessed with the caricature that dependency theory was "somehow only developed in Latin America as a part of 'Latin American structuralism'". Agbebi and Virtanen (2017) made direct use of a dependency theory lens to analyse China in Africa. They conclude that dependency theory, if updated to account for African agency and the politics of South-South relations, remains an important, if incomplete, theoretical tool to understand structural dynamics of China-Africa engagement.

Global Value Chains, Structural Transformation, and Africa's Developmental Impasse

The tradition of dependence is critically supplemented by an emerging literature on global value chains and structural change when contemplating Africa's development experience and how that may relate to China. Gereffi (2018) argues that producers in developing countries have various upgrading paths that are determined by how production is organised within global value chains. These tend to be buyer-driven commodity chains dominated by large transnational corporations. Instead of in manufacturing, branding, or design where most value added is appropriated, African economies are primarily engaged in the least valuable added segments of GVCs as providers of raw materials. There has been a consistent focus on trade policy, industrial policy, and the terms of engagement with external partners in dependency theory, all of which are present in this position and which is determined by something beyond factor endowments.

Africa's entrenched negative position in GVCs has not been meaningfully altered by Chinese engagement on the continent. Although Chinese investment in BRI-related infrastructure is sizable, Africa-China trade is dominated by 89 percent of African exports to China consisting of extractive commodities and 94 percent of African imports from China being manufactured goods.

Structural transformation calling for industrial upgrading is instead entrenched by this commodity-export specialisation. Mkandawire (2001) previously argued that rather than a lack of external engagement it was the weakness of the developmental state's institutional capacity to translate foreign capital into domestic industrialisation that caused Africa's economic stagnation. Grasping why even China's investment, unlike the scale we've seen from any country before can't spur structural transformation if we want to see what the dependency theorists would view as dependent rather than genuine development requires this insight, which links together dependency theory and the institutional political economy.

Development economics has long considered the notion of structural change vital. The concept refers to the continual movement of labour and capital out of low-productivity agriculture into higher-productivity sectors such as industry and services since Lewis's (1954) and Kaldor's (1967) groundbreaking papers. Africa's inability to experience sustained structural transformation since independence has been extensively chronicled by Rodrik (2016) and others through the lens of premature deindustrialization. Before attaining the levels observed in prior successful development examples, manufacturing in African countries has declined. Chinese manufacturing strength and continuing extraction are intentionally hastening this early deindustrialisation according to critics of China-Africa ties (Carmody, 2016) (Whiteside, 2009). This assertion provides another facet to the neo-dependency argument: Africa's underdevelopment's structural conditions could be exacerbated by Chinese engagement rather than just duplicated.

Empirical Review

Statistics regarding trade patterns between China and Africa provide strong evidence of asymmetry that dependence theorists would find credible. Circa 2009, China became Africa's largest bilateral commercial partner. As of 2024, two-way trade reached an all-time high of \$295 billion, up from \$10 billion in 2000 (CARI, 2024; China's General Administration of Customs, 2025). This thirty-fold increase in twenty years is staggering when considering the extent to which China has penetrated Africa economically. Yet this trade is extremely unbalanced. According to the Global Development Policy Center at Boston University (2024), from 2000 to 2022, 89 percent of African exports to China came from the extractive sector, comprising goods such as crude oil, copper, iron ore, cobalt, and alumina. On the other hand, manufactured items such as electronics, cars, machinery, textiles, and telecommunications equipment accounted for 94% of Africa's imports from China over the same time period. The trade dynamic that Prebisch (1950) and Amin (1974) described as the structural motor of reliance is exactly reflected in this exchange of raw commodities for finished goods.

The imbalance in trade has significantly increased. Africa and China had a \$64 billion trade imbalance in 2023, with China purchasing just \$109 billion from the continent and exporting \$173 billion worth of commodities to Africa (China's Ministry of

Commerce, 2024). Africa's exports to China reached \$99 billion in 2024 compared to \$179 billion in imports, creating a roughly \$80 billion imbalance. Due to a 24.7 percent increase in Chinese exports to Africa and a mere 2.3 percent increase in African exports to China, this imbalance had already reached \$59.55 billion in the first eight months of 2025, almost equal the whole 2024 gap. (Agency, 2025). The China-Global South Project (2025) characterises this growing disparity as a chronic structural limitation rather than a transient imbalance, even as bilateral trade volumes increase.

Debt Dynamics: Financing Development or Creating Dependence?

Another facet of the dependence issue is China's status as Africa's largest bilateral creditor. According to the Chinese Loans to Africa Database, which is updated by Boston University's Global Development Policy Center (2024), China's two main policy banks, the China Development Bank and the China Exim Bank, loaned around \$170 billion to African governments between 2000 and 2022. China's largest African debtors in 2022 were Angola (\$20.98 billions), Ethiopia (\$6.82 billions), Kenya (\$6.69 billions), Zambia (\$5.73 billions), and Egypt (\$5.21 billions).

International financial organisations are quite concerned about the debt crisis. Chinese loans were a major factor in the World Bank's 2024 prediction that over 40% of low-income nations, many of which are African, were either in financial trouble or at high danger of doing so (The Geopolitics, 2024). Within three years, Zambia, Ghana, and Ethiopia, three of China's ten biggest African borrowers defaulted on their debts. Zambia's debt issue has become iconic: 69 percent of Zambia's construction sector was controlled by Chinese lenders, namely the China Development Bank, while Chinese debt accounted for 17.6 percent of Zambia's total foreign debt payments. The debt-trap diplomacy narrative, most notably linked to the Hambantota Port issue in Sri Lanka, has been reinforced by this trend of using infrastructure management as quasi-collateral for loan repayment.

Chinese President Xi Jinping promised to provide Africa with 360 billion yuan (\$50.7 billion) in financial support over the next three years, including a combination of loans, aid, and business investment, during the FOCAC meeting in September 2024. Crucially, it notably lacked an explicit promise of debt relief for distressed African borrowers, suggesting a move in Chinese lending policy towards commercial lending and smaller-scale, sustainable projects in line with Xi's professed "small and beautiful" project ethos.

Belt and Road Initiative: Infrastructure, Employment, and Technology Transfer

President Xi Jinping introduced China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, and it has since grown to be the main means of Chinese infrastructure investment in Africa. African countries got \$21.7 billion in BRI projects in 2023 alone, which included investments in ports, railroads, electricity, and telecommunications. By 2023, 53 African countries had joined the BRI in various capacities. Flagship projects include the Mombasa-Nairobi

Standard Gauge Railway in Kenya, the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway in Ethiopia, and Angola's hydropower facilities.

In some African nations, the BRI has clearly increased infrastructural connection. According to Li and Lu's (2024) quantitative research, BRI infrastructure projects help African economies undergo structural change by promoting industrialisation in non-agricultural sectors, with local government quality serving as a crucial moderating factor. However, local worker employment is scarce, Chinese construction companies and materials are used in BRI projects, and industrial knowledge transfer to African countries is minimal, all of which have long been worries of academics. According to the ORF (2020) study, about 90% of Chinese BRI projects in Africa focused on four sectors: ports (45%), connectivity (20%), energy (15%), and industry (10%). These sectors were all primarily focused on extracting African resources and connecting them to export routes rather than developing diverse domestic industrial capacity.

Particularly frustrating has been the issue of knowledge transfer, which is one of the most important possible advantages of working with a technologically advanced China. Through the Digital Silk Road, China has made investments in digital infrastructure, such as telecom networks and undersea cables, but detractors contend that rather than developing indigenous technical capabilities, these investments increase Africa's reliance on Chinese proprietary technology. (Carmody, 2016).

Despite the increasing amount of research on Sino-African relations and dependence theory, there are still a number of important gaps in the corpus of knowledge.

Firstly, much of the analysis regarding China-Africa either wholly discounts any ideas of dependency and talks only of partnership from a pragmatic standpoint or wholly accepts ideas of traditional dependence theory, painting China as a neo-colonial actor. Neither of these techniques do justice to the complex, contested, and ever-evolving nature of the relationship. If one were to use dependence theory in a South-South context with a non-Western power, it would need further conceptual development that acknowledges both the enduring relevance of such theory as well as its weaknesses.

Secondly, Studies focusing on trade imbalances, debt-trap diplomacy, BRI infrastructure projects, and African agency exist mostly siloed from one another. Creating much dispersed literature around this topic. In order to assess whether or not the Sino-African relationship is creating a new form of dependency one must look at these issues through an interconnected lens.

Third, both classic dependence theories and many contemporary accounts downplay African agency, that is the capacity of African governments, regional bodies, and civil society to resist, contest, and renegotiate terms of engagement with China. The increasing evidence that African governments actively negotiate, strategically exploit, and occasionally oppose Chinese participation is ignored by dependency theory's propensity to portray periphery states as

structurally passive beneficiaries of exploitation. (Giles Mohan, 2013)

Fourth, current theoretical analyses have not sufficiently taken into account the most recent data on China-Africa trade dynamics, especially the sharp increase in the trade imbalance in 2024–2025 and China's strategic shift to African markets in reaction to US tariff demands. By offering a theoretically sound, empirically up-to-date, and agency-sensitive treatment of the dependence question, this work aims to fill all four holes.

Theoretical Framework

Dependency Theory

Dependency theory, namely the formulations of Prebisch (1950), Frank (1966, 1967), and Amin (1974), as well as Wallerstein's world-systems analysis (1974), serve as the main foundation for this study. One common theoretical claim shared amongst these perspectives is that dependency is the natural result of the relationship between core and periphery, instead of peripheral underdevelopment merely being an unfortunate byproduct of world capitalism. Terms of trade, imported manufactured goods, capital flight, and client financial organizations are the channels through which surplus is siphoned from the periphery to the core, thus blocking autonomous development.

Classical dependence theory is not mechanically applied in this study. Rather, it uses what may be called a "revisited" dependency structure with three changes. First, it keeps the core-periphery analytical framework but permitting South-South dependence interactions, where the "core" actor is an emerging economy that has successfully negotiated dependency throughout its developmental history rather than a Western industrialised power. Second, it makes use of Cardoso and Faletto's (1979) idea of "associated-dependent development," which permits limited growth within a dependence relationship without supposing that development and reliance are irreconcilable. Third, it integrates ideas from the critical political economy tradition on the role of African agency, acknowledging that peripheral governments are strategic actors with interests, capacities, and alternatives, however limited, rather than being passive objects of core exploitation.

World-Systems Theory

A parallel framework for placing the Africa-China relationship within the long-term dynamics of the capitalist global economy is provided by Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems theory from 1974. Wallerstein provides a structural map for comprehending the status of African economies within global commodity chains by conceptualising the world system as a hierarchical division of labour in which core, semi-periphery, and periphery positions are differently occupied. This paper's main theoretical focus is China's transition from semi-peripheral to core status and the consequences of this change for its involvement with Africa.

South-South Cooperation Theory and Its Limits

The rhetoric of South-South Cooperation (SSC), a type of international development cooperation among poor nations based on the values of solidarity, non-interference, and mutual benefit,

has constantly defined China's involvement with Africa. The 1955 Bandung Conference and the Non-Aligned Movement served as the philosophical foundation for this paradigm. This essay, however, critically examines whether SSC adequately captures the structural dynamics of the Sino-African relationship by treating it as a normative and rhetorical framework rather than an analytical one. In order to compare China's claimed justification for its involvement in Africa with the actual data of its effects, the research employs SSC as a lens.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research technique. A thorough examination and study of secondary sources, such as peer-reviewed journal articles, institutional reports, book chapters, policy papers, and statistical databases, is the main technique for gathering data. The approach taken in this analysis is political economy. The political economy perspective emphasizes the interactions between power and political interests, and economic organizations, and how these interactions produce development outcomes. The political-economic nature of dependence ties makes this perspective particularly appropriate for the analysis of dependence. The research employs comparative case studies, highlighting examples from across sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), Kenya, Zambia, Angola, Ethiopia and Nigeria, which together with data for SSA as a whole, are used to illustrate the dependence thesis.

In order to assure trustworthiness and prevent the distortions of politically influenced narrative, the article purposefully triangulates data from numerous sources. The study discusses and assesses the conflicting empirical claims and theoretical interpretations when there is substantial scholarly controversy, such as on the issue of debt-trap diplomacy, and draws judgements based on the weight of the available evidence.

This study's limitations include the difficulties in obtaining reliable and accessible data in the African context, the dynamic nature of the China-Africa relationship, which renders any snapshot evaluation somewhat time-bound, and the methodological difficulties involved in applying a theory primarily developed in the Latin American context to the diverse political economies of Africa.

Results and Discussion

The Dependency-Affirming Case: Structural Continuities

The empirical data examined in this work offers strong support for the claim that Africa's interactions with China show notable dependency-like traits. The continuance of the raw material-manufactured goods trade arrangement is the most basic of these. According to Section 3.1, between 2000 and 2022, extractive commodities accounted for 89% of Africa's exports to China, while manufactured products made for 94% of China's imports. Prebisch (1950) and Singer recognised this structure as the mechanism of uneven exchange and deteriorating terms of trade that sustains underdevelopment in the periphery.

The reliance thesis is strengthened by the structural trade imbalance. China-Africa trade imbalance grew from \$46.9 billion in 2022 to \$64 billion in 2023. The trade gap grew further in 2024 and 2025 after Beijing diverted productive capacity away from shrinking US markets amid intense pressure from accelerating tariff increases (Agency, 2025). As the African periphery bears the brunt of adjustment costs from externally generated economic shocks produced in the core, world-systems analysis appears entirely applicable here. Africa's systemic role as a marketplace for Chinese manufactured goods becomes all the more pronounced when China can no longer access its traditional markets.

Dependency-consistent attributes also characterize the debt relationship, which is more nuanced than the simple debt-trap narrative would suggest. In some cases Chinese finance has contributed to rather than alleviated African economic fragility. Examples include opaque Chinese loan contracts, natural resource assets (particularly oil) serving as de facto collateral for loans, and three out of China's ten largest borrowers in Africa having defaulted over the course of three years. The situation of Zambia is instructive: Chinese lenders controlled 69 percent of the construction industry, despite the fact that Chinese loans accounted for just 17.6 percent of all foreign debt payments. This shows a disproportionate structural penetration in relation to the nominal debt share.

Another characteristic that is compatible with reliance is the restricted transfer of industrial technology and skills to African economies. Africa has not seen substantial industrial upgrading or technology deepening as a result of BRI participation, despite the size of Chinese investment in the region. Rather than facilitating diversification into manufacturing and high-value-added production, infrastructure initiatives mainly extend the extractive economy by connecting African resource reserves to export routes. From the perspective of the metropolis, Frank (1966) contended that this was not coincidental but fundamentally required: if the core's accumulation dynamic is to be maintained, the periphery must continue to serve as a market for manufactured products and a source of inexpensive inputs.

Although the dependency-affirming argument is strong, it has to be qualified. A number of aspects of the relationship between China and Africa are difficult to include into the traditional framework of dependency and indicate really unique characteristics that require further theoretical development.

First, China's involvement in Africa has clearly improved the continent's roads, railroads, ports, and power plants. The African Development Bank estimates that the region has a persistent infrastructure deficit of more than \$100 billion a year. Although it falls short of revolutionary industrialisation, infrastructure development has real development value since it lowers production and trade costs, increases access to energy, and enhances market linkages. (Dollar, 2019). According to Li and Lu's (2024) quantitative research, BRI projects have a favourable impact on structural change in African economies, especially in non-agricultural sectors. It implies that some types of associated-

dependent development, as defined by Cardoso and Faletto (1979), are taking place, which is contrary to what traditional dependency theory would predict.

Second, traditional dependence theory, which was developed in the setting of connections between historically colonial developing nations and Western industrialised powers, finds it difficult to account for the complexity introduced by the South-South aspect of the relationship. In contrast to the World Bank and IMF's conditionality-laden lending, China's own experience of colonial exploitation, underdevelopment, and successful development has shaped a unique approach to African engagement that is driven by strategic and commercial interests but is structured around non-conditionality and respect for national sovereignty (Brautigam, 2009). Dependency theory's structural determinism tends to prohibit this kind of action, but African leaders have aggressively exploited Chinese funding as leverage against Western conditionality.

Third, the academic literature has presented serious challenges to the debt-trap diplomacy concept. According to the debt-trap narrative, Brautigam and Rithmire (2021) could not find any systematic evidence of Chinese lenders taking strategic assets from African borrowers who were in default. Zambia's example shows that debt crises in Africa have several causes, including internal mismanagement, the IMF, and Western commercial investors in addition to Chinese lenders (Review, 2023). Jones and Hameiri (2020) concluded that debt-trap diplomacy is a politically motivated narrative rather than an accurate description of Chinese lending practice. According to a 2025 Lowy Institute report, poor nations' loan obligations to China now surpass those owing to Paris Club nations; however, this is more due to the sheer volume of Chinese financing than to conditions that are particularly predatory.

Fourth, a potentially significant structural intervention in the trade relationship is China's pledge to zero-tariff treatment for imports from 33 African least developed nations, which was announced at FOCAC 2024 and put into effect starting in December 2024. This strategy might start addressing the structural trade deficit at its root if African countries successfully use it to increase exports of manufactured and processed goods rather than merely more raw materials. China has pledged to assist the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), which might increase these profits by generating the size of the local African market required to maintain industrial diversity.

Towards a Revised Understanding: South-South Neo-Dependency

The conclusion that Africa's engagement with China constitutes what could be called South-South neo-dependency is supported by the weight of the evidence reviewed in this paper. This type of economic dependence differs from colonial-era dependency in its political-ideological framing, the degree of African agency it permits, and its potential as yet largely unrealized for associated-dependent development. However, it shares structural

characteristics of classical dependency (resource extraction, trade asymmetry, debt vulnerability, limited technology transfer).

This idea of South-South neo-dependency is different from partnership equality, which disregards the structural inequalities of the connection, and simply neocolonialism, which suggests a planned and methodical effort of exploitation akin to colonial extraction. While acknowledging that China's engagement with Africa is motivated by its own strategic and commercial interests, managing excess industrial capacity, expanding diplomatic influence, opening export markets, and securing resource supplies, it also recognises that African governments are strategic actors negotiating a limited range of options rather than passive victims.

The analogy of the "sinking lifeboat," which Izu (2024) employs in the related context of irregular migration, is instructive here: African states are increasingly burdened by the structural terms of an unequal engagement that restricts their developmental options rather than drowning in Chinese dependency. The threat is not cataclysmic collapse but rather slow trajectory lock, a steadily increasing reliance on resources, specialisation in commodity exports, and debt payment responsibilities that limit the budgetary and policy room for the structural change necessary for Africa's growth.

Africa's greatest developmental difficulty is its structural position in the global economy, which Chinese intervention has replicated rather than changed, as predicted by Wallerstein's (1974) world-systems theory. Africa's place in the global division of labour has not changed much as a result of China's ascent; rather, it has given Africa a strong new patron within a system that is still essentially based on the extraction of primary commodities from the periphery.

Conclusion

In light of Africa's current economic interactions with China, this research has conducted a critical reevaluation of dependence theory. A qualified yes response has been given to the main topic, which is whether this interaction represents a new kind of economic reliance. The empirical data clearly shows that Africa's relationship with China demonstrates the structural characteristics of dependency, including a persistent and growing trade deficit, the exchange of raw materials for manufactured goods that has defined the relationship since its beginning, debt vulnerabilities in a number of important African economies, and limited industrial technology transfer. The structural asymmetries that Prebisch (1950), Frank (1966), and Amin (1974) described as the processes of core-periphery exploitation are completely compatible with these traits.

Nonetheless, it has been argued that orthodox dependence theory, originally formulated to understand Latin America's underdevelopment within a structure of Western dominance but requiring serious reform, must first shift to fully comprehend the new dynamics of the Sino-African relationship. China's South-South rhetoric, its absence of conditionalities in its aid packages, its visible role in creating African infrastructure, African agency in

the relationship and debate over the legitimacy of the debt-trap discourse all caution against simple neocolonial conclusions. The concept of South-South neo-dependency put forward in this paper attempts to offer one resolution to this dilemma. Accepting both the new political-economic context in which these dynamics play out as well as the structural similarities to old patterns of dependence. While dependency theory remains useful for understanding Africa's development predicament, it must be critiqued, expanded upon, and adapted to better fit the landscape of the 21st century global economy. This paper argues that this has significant implications for both academia and policy makers alike.

If African states are able to negotiate better deals that allow for value-added production, industrialization, and technology transfer then Africa will be able to avoid dependency and use its relationship with China as a tool for transformation. This depends on whether Africa can develop the institutions, leadership and pan-African solidarity necessary to leverage their comparative advantage in natural resources into something more sustainable and beneficial for the continent.

Recommendations

Based on the foregoing discussion, this paper makes the following recommendations to African governments, African regional institutions, and Africa-China engagement:

i. Managed Diversification of Africa's Export Basket:

While import substitution is unrealistic for African countries, there should be managed diversification of their export baskets away from primary commodities and towards more processed and value-added goods. Africa can leverage on the tariff-free access commitments secured at FOCAC 2024 by making complementary investments in resource beneficiation, light manufacturing, and agro-processing facilities. Such investments should be buttressed by industrial policies that incentivise value addition.

ii. Horizontal Cooperation across Africa:

China has significant structural leverage over individual African countries. Coordination between the African Union and AfCFTA secretariat will allow for a common African negotiating position with China to be agreed upon. Bilateral trade deals and investment agreements, FOCAC deliverables, and Belt and Road projects should thus be centrally informed by pan-African development objectives, instead of being hashed out on a country-by-country basis.

iii. Improving Debt Transparency and Resolution Mechanisms:

Details on Chinese loans (interest rates, collateral requirements, consequences of default) should be fully disclosed to the African governments concerned. Participation in global debt transparency and restructuring mechanisms such as the G20 Common Framework should be normalised rather than treated as a last resort. Where new loans are negotiated, explicit criteria should be put in place— including measurable milestones and timelines for localisation of labour and skills transfers.

iv. Domestic Capacity Building through Technology and Skills Development:

Of course, building African capacity in technology and skilled human capital will be required in the long-run to decrease dependence on China (or any external actor). Beyond negotiating technology transfers, joint ventures, and skills development programs as part of Chinese investment packages, African countries should invest heavily in STEM programs at home.

v. Conceptual:

Perhaps most importantly, African policymakers should engage with Chinese involvement neither euphorically nor cynically, but with the conceptual tools that dependence theory provides. The goal should be to both optimally manage the relationship for developmental gains in the near term, while laying the groundwork for autonomous industrialisation in the future.

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