

Between Norms and Pragmatism: Reassessing EU–China Development Approaches in Sub-Saharan Africa

Normlar ve Pragmatizm Arasında: Sahra Altı Afrika'da Ab-Çin Kalkınma Yaklaşımlarının Yeniden Değerlendirilmesi

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Citation/Atıf Durdu, M.B. (2026). Between Norms and Pragmatism: Reassessing Eu–China Development Approaches in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Africana*, 6(1): pp. 57–76.

doi 10.58851/africana.1800497

Received: 09.10.2025 / **Accepted:** 07.01.2026

Abstract

This study examines the perceived polarization between the European Union's (EU) normative, value- and conditionality-based development model and the People's Republic of China's (China) pragmatic, state-centered Beijing Consensus approach within the context of Sub-Saharan Africa. The central question of the research is whether the development strategies of the EU and China represent two genuinely opposing paradigms, or rather distinct responses to the shared structural constraints of the global political economy. Built upon a four-dimensional comparative analytical framework, policy design, implementation model, discursive perception, and strategic logic, the study covers the period from 2000 to 2024. Drawing on secondary sources, including development documents, implementation projects, and public opinion surveys, the analysis reveals that China's state-led and demand-driven investment model has achieved rapid infrastructural outcomes in countries with weak governance capacities, while indirectly undermining the effectiveness of the EU's political conditionality. However, public opinion data indicate that African societies continue to maintain a strong orientation toward democratic norms, transparency, and institutional accountability. This finding suggests a structural tension between the pragmatic preferences of political elites and the normative aspirations of African societies. Ultimately, the study argues that sustainable development in Sub-Saharan Africa can only be achieved by transcending this binary divide through the creation of hybrid and interdependent cooperation mechanisms that integrate the EU's normative power with China's flexible economic pragmatism.

Keywords: Development Policies in Sub-Saharan Africa, Beijing Consensus, European Union, Belt and Road Initiative, Global Gateway Initiative

Öz

Bu çalışma, Avrupa Birliği'nin normatif, değer ve koşulluluk temelli kalkınma modeli ile Çin Halk Cumhuriyeti (Çin)'in pragmatik, devlet merkezli Pekin Mutabakatı yaklaşımı arasındaki varsayılan kutuplaşmayı Sahraaltı Afrika bağlamında incelemektedir. Çalışmanın temel sorusu, Avrupa Birliği ve Çin'in kalkınma stratejilerinin gerçekten birbirine karşı iki paradigma mı yoksa küresel siyasal ekonominin benzer yapısal kısıtlamalarına verdikleri farklı tepkiler mi olduğudur. Politika tasarımı, uygulama modeli, söylemsel algı ve stratejik mantık olmak üzere dört boyutlu karşılaştırmalı bir analitik çerçeve üzerine inşa edilen araştırma, 2000–2024 dönemini kapsamaktadır. Kalkınma belgeleri, uygulama projeleri ve kamuoyu araştırmalarına dayanan ikincil kaynaklar üzerinden yürütülen inceleme, Çin'in devlet öncülüğündeki ve talep odaklı yatırım modelinin zayıf yönetim kapasitesine sahip ülkelerde hızlı altyapı kazanımları sağladığını, aynı zamanda Avrupa Birliği'nin siyasi koşulluluğunu dolaylı biçimde işlevsizleştirdiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Buna karşın, kamuoyu verileri Afrikalı toplumların demokratik normlara, şeffaflığa ve kurumsal hesap verebilirliğe yönelik güçlü yönelimlerini sürdürdüklerini göstermektedir. Bu bulgu, elit düzeyindeki pragmatik tercihler ile toplumların normatif yönelimleri arasında yapısal bir gerilim bulunduğuna işaret etmektedir. Sonuç olarak, Sahraaltı Afrika'da sürdürülebilir kalkınmanın yalnızca bu iki yaklaşım arasındaki karşıtlığın aşılmasıyla, yani Avrupa Birliği'nin normatif gücü ile Çin'in esnek ekonomik pragmatizmini bütünleştiren hibrit ve karşılıklı bağımlılığa dayalı işbirliği mekanizmalarının geliştirilmesiyle mümkün olabileceği ileri sürülmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sahraaltı Afrika'da Kalkınma Politikaları, Pekin Mutabakatı, Avrupa Birliği, Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi, Küresel Geçit Girişimi

STRUCTURED ABSTRACT

Purpose

This study examines the evolving development approaches of the European Union (EU) and China towards Sub-Saharan Africa, situating them within the broader post-colonial political economy. Despite the post-1945 decolonization wave, Africa remains in a peripheral position within global capitalism. The EU, bound by its colonial legacy and normative agenda, continues to frame Africa's development through paternalistic and conditional mechanisms. Conversely, China's rise since the 2000s driven by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has challenged the EU's historical dominance. The research explores whether the EU has developed a coherent strategy to preserve its traditional influence and compares how both actors' economic and political engagements shape Africa's trajectory. It also interrogates whether China's model, grounded in pragmatism and non-interference, provides a viable alternative to the EU's normative governance framework.

Methodology

The paper employs a qualitative, macro-level comparative analysis grounded in post-colonial discourse analysis. Relying on secondary data, it evaluates how the EU's and China's respective discourses and instruments of development construct Africa's position within the global economy. The analysis is structured around four hypotheses: (i) China's ascent has occurred at the EU's expense; (ii) Europe's colonial legacy perpetuates asymmetric and paternalistic relations; (iii) China's engagement primarily serves its need for raw materials and markets; and (iv) Beijing's pragmatic, non-conditional approach appeals to regimes resistant to Western conditionality. The paper contrasts two paradigms: Europe's normative development framework and China's pragmatic, state-led model across institutional, ideological, and operational dimensions.

Findings

The study finds that the EU's development paradigm, shaped by neoliberal reforms and the Washington Consensus, has historically imposed political conditionality and market-oriented prescriptions that disregard Africa's socio-political realities. This approach has reinforced dependency and generated disillusionment among African governments and societies. The EU's linkage of development to governance, migration control, and democratization, particularly through initiatives like Global Gateway (GG) reflects a securitized and self-referential model of cooperation. In contrast, China's Beijing Consensus emphasizes mutual benefit, infrastructure-led growth, and economic pragmatism without political interference. African governments, particularly those with authoritarian tendencies, perceive this as a more inclusive and flexible framework. By prioritizing resource access and market expansion while respecting national sovereignty, China has cultivated deeper trust and expanded its economic footprint.

Discussion

The divergence between the two models is rooted in distinct epistemologies of development. The EU's approach is normative, universalist, and prescriptive seeking to align African governance structures with liberal democratic norms. Its overemphasis on "good governance," environmental sustainability, and digital transition often neglects local constraints and capacities. Moreover, the Union's conditionality-based aid perpetuates the donor-recipient dichotomy, eroding its credibility as an equal partner. Conversely, China's development discourse, though criticized for potential debt-trap diplomacy presents itself as a form of South-South cooperation that rejects colonial hierarchies. State-owned enterprises and public institutions play central roles, aligning projects with local infrastructural needs rather than institutional reform agendas. However, China's model also raises concerns regarding transparency, environmental impact, and long-term debt sustainability.

The research identifies four key contrasts:

1. Normativity vs. Pragmatism: The EU's moralized development conditionality contrasts with China's interest-driven flexibility.
2. Actors and Instruments: While the EU relies on private sector liberalization, China privileges state-led development.
3. Perceptions of Legitimacy: The EU's top-down prescriptions reproduce asymmetry; China's rhetoric of equality enhances legitimacy.
4. Holistic vs. Fragmented Strategy: The EU's simultaneous pursuit of political, economic, and social transformation overwhelms weak African institutions, whereas China's segmented approach adapts to local capacity.

Conclusion

The findings suggest that China's economic pragmatism currently offers a more appealing and viable development model for Sub-Saharan Africa than the EU's conditional and paternalistic framework. The EU's strategy, constrained by its colonial legacy and securitized policy linkages, lacks the flexibility required to engage African partners as equals. Nonetheless, despite China's growing influence, the EU remains Africa's most significant political and trade partner. Moreover, surveys indicate that African publics still prefer governance models resembling those of EU states, reflecting a latent desire for democratization rather than mere economic growth. This duality highlights the complex interplay between economic pragmatism and political legitimacy in shaping Africa's external partnerships. The paper concludes that the future of Africa-Europe-China relations will hinge on whether the EU can transcend its normative paternalism and whether China can sustain its pragmatic engagement without replicating neo-colonial patterns of dependency.

1. Introduction

Rich in natural resources and strategically positioned along key global trade routes, Sub-Saharan Africa has undergone profound political and economic transformations since the early 1990s, increasingly attracting the attention of external development actors. Within this evolving landscape, the European Union's long-standing predominance has gradually eroded as the global development architecture has become more plural and competitive, most notably with the expansion of China's political and economic engagement through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This diversification of external engagement has not been limited to China; other emerging actors, including Turkey, Russia, and India, have also expanded their development cooperation strategies in Sub-Saharan Africa, further contributing to the fragmentation and contestation of the international development architecture. Among these actors, Türkiye has pursued an increasingly multidimensional development cooperation approach since the early 2000s, combining development assistance, humanitarian aid, trade, and diplomatic engagement under the broader framework of South-South cooperation. Turkish development policy in Sub-Saharan Africa emphasizes partnership, mutual benefit, and local ownership. Türkiye presents itself as an alternative development partner capable of navigating between normative commitments and pragmatic engagement.

Situated within the literature on international development cooperation and the changing modalities of external engagement with Africa, this article offers a comparative analysis of the European Union's traditional and contemporary development policy approaches and those advanced by China. Relying exclusively on secondary sources, the study examines how these two actors, each representing distinct development cooperation frameworks contribute to Sub-Saharan Africa's economic growth and development, while also interrogating the underlying political-economic motivations shaping their respective strategies. The article engages with ongoing debates concerning the transformation of development cooperation, the tension between normative and pragmatic approaches, and the role of conditionality in external development policies. It asks whether the European Union has articulated a coherent political economy strategy capable of sustaining its historical influence in Sub-Saharan Africa amid China's expanding economic and diplomatic footprint and it critically assesses the principal divergences in their policy instruments, narratives, and modes of engagement. Four hypotheses guide the analysis: (I) China's political-economic ascendancy in Sub-Saharan Africa since 2000 has unfolded largely at the expense of the European Union, (II) the European Union's colonial legacy and persistent paternalistic practices have contributed to a cooling of relations with African governments, (III) China's engagement is primarily driven by its demand for raw materials and access to new markets to sustain industrial production and (IV) Beijing's emphasis on non-interference and pragmatic economic cooperation presents an increasingly attractive alternative to the European Union's normatively conditioned development framework.

2. Development of the People's Republic of China towards Sub-Saharan Africa

The People's Republic of China's engagement with Sub-Saharan Africa has evolved through distinct historical phases shaped by ideology, geopolitics, and shifting economic priorities. Following the Sino-Soviet split, Africa became a strategic arena for Beijing to assert autonomy from both Western and Soviet blocs and to secure diplomatic recognition against Taiwan. The post-1978 reform era marked a decisive turn from ideological alignment to pragmatic economic cooperation, as China increasingly framed its Africa policy around trade, aid, and infrastructure development while maintaining a rhetoric of South-South cooperation and non-interference. This historical trajectory underscores that China's contemporary presence in Sub-Saharan Africa is not a sudden phenomenon, but rather the outcome of a long-term, adaptive engagement that has continuously recalibrated ideological commitments to align with changing domestic and international conditions. In this framework, this section will respectively address the following chapters: Historical Process of China-Africa Relations and China's Political Approach towards the Region, China's Development Policy Approach: A Comparison of the Washington and Beijing Consensus, Criticisms of China's Development Policies towards Africa: Neocolonialism and the Debt Trap, and China's Growing Influence in Africa: Belt and Road Initiative

2.1 Historical Process of China-Africa Relations and China's Political Approach towards the Region

The 1941 Atlantic Declaration by Roosevelt and Churchill advocated decolonization, free trade, and self-determination for emerging states. Since the 1950s, African nations have pursued state-building, economic autonomy, and diversified foreign policies to dismantle the asymmetric ties inherited from colonial rule (Zartman, 1976:328-330). During the most intense period of the Cold War, the Bandung Conference was convened in 1955, with the participation of 29 countries, aiming to deepen political and economic engagement among Third World countries (Shimazu, 2013:3).

The main purpose was to promote economic, political and cultural cooperation between Africa and Asia and to refuse the colonialism and neocolonialist practices. Bandung Conference was of vital importance in establishing friendship and cooperation between China and Africa. During the conference, Chinese Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai presented the “five principles of peaceful coexistence” based on the principles of respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs, coexistence in peace and equality, and mutual benefit. Even today, these principles constitute the pillars of China’s foreign policy discourse towards African countries (Zhengqin & Xiaoqin 2015:73). According to Agbebi and Virtanen (2017:432), Bandung Conference served as the primary impetus for Third World nations to establish diplomatic ties with China and for China to position itself as an alternative model.

In 1963, Premier Zhou Enlai’s visit to ten newly independent African states marked China’s initial diplomatic engagement with the continent. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the emergence of the United States as the sole hegemon and the ascendancy of the Western paradigm prompted African countries to embrace neoliberal, Western-oriented policies. The commitments regarding the acceptance of the Western paradigm allowed the financial flows to the continent to materialize and contributed to the growth trend of the region (Zagha & Nankani, 2005:270-273). Nevertheless, empirical studies demonstrate that this optimistic perspective was fleeting, and over time, economic indicators sharply declined (Easterly, 2005:4). The fact that, on the one hand, the development aid and financing provided by Western institutions to the region was tied to a set of political and social conditions that were independent of the sociopolitical reality of the continent, on the other hand, these practices demonstrated the normative and postcolonialist approach of the western countries towards the continent made the negative outlook possible. Taking into consideration the approaches in question, we may assess that determinist development policies can manifest differently in each economic structure. In parallel with that, Stone (2004:583) found that direct development aid provided to sub-Saharan Africa and neoliberal institutions has deteriorated the region’s economy and production dynamics.

In contrast to the above-mentioned approach, in 1980’s, Deng Xiaoping initiated to establish more symmetrical economic and diplomatic relations with African countries on a win-win basis. Increasing production and growth rates of China was triggered pragmatist approach towards Africa (Canen & Wantchekon, 2022:101-124). In 1996, Chinese President Jiang Zemin paid a visit to the continent, and 23 economic and technical cooperation agreements were signed, and the parties declared their will to increase cooperation, deepen political and economic engagement, and build a more just and inclusive political-economic global order (Shelton & Paruk, 2008:65). Established in 2000 to foster an equitable, mutually beneficial China–Africa partnership, the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) held its inaugural ministerial summit the same year, adopting the “Beijing Declaration” and the “China–Africa Cooperation Program in Economic and Social Development” to guide comprehensive strategic collaboration (King, 2019:2022)

2.2 China’s Development Policy Approach: A Comparison of the Washington and Beijing Consensus

China’s development strategies towards Africa can be explained through the Washington-Beijing Consensus dichotomy. Launched in 1989 in the form of 10 principles, the Washington Consensus aims at the integration of disadvantaged countries into the global system, the implementation of neoliberal economic policies and the creation of political institutions designed within the framework of the Western paradigm (Williamson, 1993:1332). Implemented and overseen within the framework of policies created by the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and international financial institutions, the consensus seeks to remove barriers to international trade and investment, liberalize markets, and enforce fiscal restraint (Raga et al., 2024:2). Under the unipolar world order, the Washington Consensus and neoliberal institutions became the dominant model. Since the 1990’s, the adoption and implementation of neoliberal policies have become a prerequisite for disadvantaged countries to access finance. Washington Consensus and the neoliberal approach trapped Africa in unbearable and unsustainable external debt that led to chronic poverty rather than sustainable development.

Since 2000, two points stand out in the literature on the development of China-Africa relations. Firstly, the development of a production-oriented economic structure based on the Beijing Consensus. This necessitated China to secure access to raw materials and energy. The second is the necessity of creating new markets for China’s cheap and low-quality products. According to Ahrens and Kalkschmied (2021:15), Chinese economy was in danger of collapsing by the 2000s as the western market for low-value manufactured goods had been saturated. The cooperation with African opened new markets for China. The most important factor which distinguishes China’s approach to Africa from the traditional Western approach is its Guanxi philosophy. This approach points to peaceful coexistence and cooperation based on mutual respect in the international system, constitutes the basic notion of China’s development policies

(Mulaka & Hongbo, January 25, 2021). The philosophical approach crystallizes in the political and economic sphere with the “Five no principles” announced by Zhou Enlai. China’s pragmatic approach is another factor that has enabled it to make effective progress in its relations with Africa. Due to its system of government, China can make decisions and act much faster than its Western counterparties (Jing, 2017:40). In contrast, Western actors’ ability to decide and act on policy sets is subject to intensive and lengthy bureaucratic processes involving multiple stakeholders, which delays a comprehensive and coherent response to urgent needs.

The 2008 financial crisis called into question the neoliberal policies and this allowed emerging economies to play an increasingly active role in the global economy (Raga et al., 2024:7). Following the crisis, Beijing began to openly challenge Washington’s global economic monopoly, arguing that a more equitable economic system was possible in line with the principles adopted in its political approach, and this new understanding of development and global political economy crystallized in China’s Beijing Consensus diplomacy (Womach, 2017:384-385). Beijing Consensus approach challenged the traditional powers operating in Africa and the Washington consensus imposed on the continent, creating a new Chinese model of sustainable growth based on cooperation. Main difference between these models is their political or economic prioritization, emphasizing that the Washington Consensus is a combination of liberal democracy, private property, free market and political rights, while the Beijing Consensus focuses on state capitalism and economic rights. The principles shaping China’s approach to Africa are embodied in the Beijing Consensus. This approach emphasizes state-led development, requiring active intervention to build infrastructure, establish strategic industries, and sustain production (Lijie & Yushan, 2015:143). Yao (2011:28) argues that China’s growth trend after the 2000’s is an inspiring model for African countries and that growth can only be achieved through decisive government intervention and that the obstacles to growth can be removed through institutional changes. In other words, it is argued that the Washington Consensus’s emphasis on the private sector has created an artificial barrier to development in addition to structural barriers by fueling conflicts of interest among stakeholders.

Akani (2017:148) argues that China has become an increasingly powerful alternative against the west on the continent because unlike the Washington Consensus, the Beijing Consensus supports development without imposing ideological requirements and can provide more reasonable financing for African countries. If we compare the projection of two policy documents in Africa in more detail, first, the Beijing Consensus neither stipulates political and economic liberalization, the establishment of democratic institutions and good governance, nor imposes political prerequisites for development aids, investments and project financing. Crystallized by China’s principle of non-interference, as opposed to the paternalistic approach of the West, the Beijing Consensus enables African governments with authoritarian tendencies to prefer China to the West. Secondly, unlike the Washington Consensus, the Beijing Consensus pursues a country-oriented strategy with the presupposition that each development process, each country and society has its own characteristics and each process has its own challenges and advantages, while the Washington Consensus and the institutions established within this framework have a deterministic approach that similar neoliberal prescriptions will yield the same results all over the world (Li, 2015:130). Beijing Consensus offers African states a valuable philosophical framework; instead of rigidly adhering to a single economic solution, policymakers set comprehensive benchmarks that consider the economic, political, and social experiences of peoples. China’s flexibility offers a comprehensive political economy to harmonize urban and rural development on the continent, achieve balanced regional development, integrate economic development and social development, and move the individual-nature balance to a sustainable threshold.

The MFA of China states that the Beijing Consensus is manifested in Africa in four ways: (i) Politically, the consolidation of friendship and the development of equal relations between societies and governments, (ii) Economically, the sharing of prosperity based on mutual benefit, (iii) Internationally, mutual support in international politics and close cooperation on global political issues, (iv) Socially and culturally, the pursuit of common development and mutual learning (Lammers, September 5, 2007). In this respect, it stands in sharp contrast to the Washington Consensus, which often ignores sociopolitical conditions, operates on orthodox principles, and disregards mutual interaction. Against this positive scenario, there are also studies that draw attention to the negative effects of the Beijing’s approach in the long run, arguing that it will make Africa dependent on China. Nyere (2013:22) notes that a significant portion of China’s projects in Africa rely on Chinese labor, which limits job opportunities in Africa and undermines technology transfer. The fact that skilled jobs are performed by the Chinese hinders the development of education and know-how on the continent and makes African countries exporters of raw materials or low-tech products.

2.3 Criticisms of China's Development Policies towards Africa: Neocolonialism and the Debt Trap

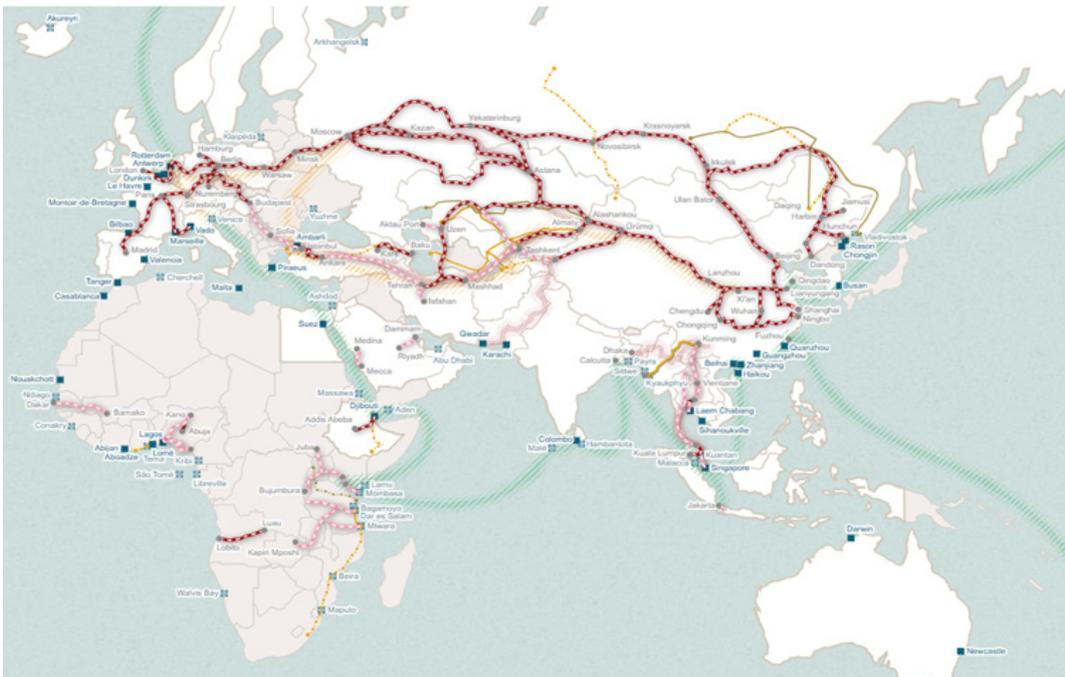
Neocolonialism is the control and manipulation of the economic and financial system in favor of the economic interests of another country. Neocolonialist instruments generally include asymmetric trade agreements, aids, licenses and permits, loans and official arrangements that enable multinational corporations to operate with privileges in the country (Nkrumah, 1965:60-62). Today, the most popular instrument in sustaining neocolonial relations is financial capital. There are four main factors motivating China's economic expansion in Africa with its opening up: (i) to maintain capital accumulation at the same pace, (ii) to ensure energy security, (iii) to ensure that Chinese companies become globalized and become game-changing actors, (iv) to compete with Western countries (Çolak, 2023:126-130). These four sources of motivation determine the extent to which China will develop relations with which African country and what kind of strategy it will follow. Thus, China shapes its investment strategies by considering oil reserves, natural resources, access to trade routes and logistics centers, and uses infrastructure financing, official development assistance and trade agreements for target countries in line with its strategies (Wo & Lam, 2006:180). China EximBank's long-term, low-interest and advantageous credit facilities for target countries have enabled China to invest in strategically important areas in a short period of time. Eximbank loans are granted for the realization of large infrastructure projects, especially in countries with natural resources of strategic importance to China. The contracts of such loans include the condition that the loans are repaid in raw materials but also require strategic equipment to be supplied from China, including at least half of the labor force from China (Sezen, 2011:999). There is no capital outflow from China within the framework of these loan agreements, in addition to that loans are concentrated in natural resource-rich countries. For instance, The Chinese National Oil Corporation's (CNOOC) purchase of 45% of the Nigerian oil company's shares for USD 2.5 billion in 2005 in exchange for EximBank's financing of the construction of the Lagos-Kano and Mambilla railways for the same amount (Shinn & Eesenman, 2012:153). China's lending policy has not only contributed to China's own economic dynamics to a sustainable level, but has also limited the influence of the USA and the EU in the region, and that China's low interest and non-political loans have strengthened its image as an alternative to the IMF and the World Bank for authoritarian African governments. This situation paves the way for the consolidation of the power of authoritarian governments in the continent while simultaneously making countries dependent on China. China has become not only an economic actor in the region but also a source of political legitimacy for traditional political elites, facilitating access to natural resources and strategic points.

Another element of China's economic policy towards Africa that is often criticized for serving to promote neocolonialism is the debt-trap discourse. China's cheap loans and development assistance in Africa do not always align with economic growth, as long-term, low-interest loans to countries with limited productivity can lead governments to overborrow, a phenomenon referred to in the literature as the debt trap (Himmer & Rod, 2022:250-253). Singh (2021:242) argues that in the long-run, the debt trap policy strengthens the possibility that debtor countries will start to implement policies in line with the interests of the lender country. Increasing asymmetric relationship between lenders and borrower countries puts debtor countries on a path towards having less say in their own destiny (Bajo & Roelants, 2011:72). Chellanay (December 20, 2017) defines debt-trap diplomacy as a scenario in which a creditor nation provides an excessive amount of loans to a borrowing country, frequently with repayment terms that are complicated. The lender exploits the debt burden to secure economic or political concessions when the creditor is unable to fulfill its obligations. Based on Chellanay's definition, it is possible to argue that China's provision of advantageous loans to African countries for infrastructure purposes is not actually wrong, but that China's main purpose through these investments and loans is to pragmatically access the infrastructure resources of the debtor country and to use them for new markets for low-cost goods exports, thus deliberately luring the continent into a debt trap. In effect, China is pursuing a debt trap by lending to Chinese capital and exerting pressure on the political sovereignty of countries (Rana & Xianbai, 2020:2). Green (Foreign Policy, April 25, 2019), on the other hand, argues that China's debt-for-strategic-asset swaps with countries in violation of generally accepted financial ethics such as transparency, accountability, and financial sustainability are clearly debt traps and neocolonialism. In addition, China's lending strategy for Africa is diametrically opposed to that of the World Bank and the IMF. While both organizations aim to improve policymaking, prevent debt crises, reduce corruption and increase accountability in addition to lending, China deliberately engages in debt trap diplomacy, thereby reinforcing authoritarian tendencies in the region.

The empirical analysis conducted by Himmer and Rod (2023:253-266) shows that following the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China's influence in the global economic and political arena has increased rapidly. It was revealed that China did not refrain from using its economic and financial power to expand its sphere of influence and harmonized relevant instruments, including the rule of law, human rights, sustainability and democracy, without any political emphasis. It is believed that the discourse of neocolonialism and debt trap diplomacy put forward in the Western literature on China's growing presence in Africa is subjective. Although studies that approach the issue from a more objective perspective have found that China has neocolonialist attitudes towards Africa from time to time, it is a big question mark whether this situation can be evaluated within the framework of the existing neocolonialism literature. Considering the different views on China's approach towards Africa, it is thought that China does not resort to neocolonialist means to increase its influence in the region but rather aims to increase its sphere of influence within the framework of pure economic and political pragmatism.

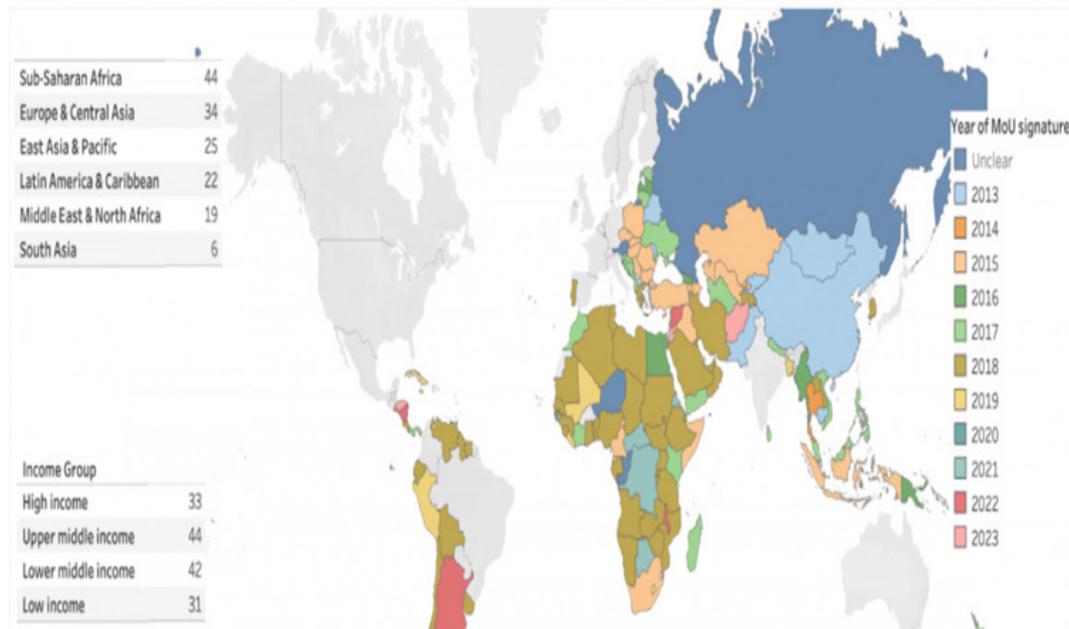
2.4 China's Growing Influence in Africa: Belt and Road Initiative

Figure 1: Belt and Road Initiative



The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was first put on the agenda in 2013 by Chinese President Xi Jinping under the name “21st Century Maritime Silk Road”. The BRI aims to improve China's trade relations with Africa, Asia and Europe, increase infrastructure investments and direct investments, and thus contribute to global development and economic growth (Githaiga et al., 2019:118) (Figure 1). By the end of 2023, the Chinese government had signed bilateral agreements with 150 countries under the BRI (Figure 2). According to 2024 data, more than USD 300 billion of the USD 1 trillion in financing committed by the Chinese government under the Belt and Road Initiative has been implemented (McBride et al., 2023). Today, the BRI is not only a complex tool developed in line with China's economic goals, but also one of the most important foreign policy instruments crystallizing China's new world order discourse (Githaiga et al., 2019:122). Nantulya (2019:3) defines the BRI as a key component of the Chinese Communist Party's twin goals of national revitalization and China's reemergence as a global great power. The three main drivers of the BRI are (i) security, (ii) creation of new markets, and (iii) energy (World Bank, March 29, 2018), aiming to improve the integration of Asia, Europe and Africa in terms of energy, infrastructure, trade, logistics, investment, culture and tourism. Through these drivers, the initiative aims to create interconnected corridors and ports to increase trade between regions, create a sustainable security basis, and facilitate access to markets.

Figure 2: Countries Included in the Belt and Road Initiative



Source: FISC Fudan University, 2024

Guo et al. (2021:51) explain the main reason for China's BRI strategy and increased engagement in Africa as China's overcapacity. The authors argue that China's high level of production will lead to an overcapacity problem, as production that is higher than consumption levels will soon be reflected in low profitability and rising unemployment rates in the real economy. In this context, the Chinese government has focused on two main strategies to cope with the potential crisis. First, China will increase consumption in its domestic market through large-scale infrastructure investments, which in turn will lower marginal costs. The second solution is to send excess production abroad through the BRI and expand the market by financing infrastructure investments in different countries with the profits (Boullenois & Jordan, 2024:3). Synthesizing both the macroeconomic approach to the issue and the official rhetoric of Chinese policymakers, the launch of the BRI can be attributed to three main strategies.

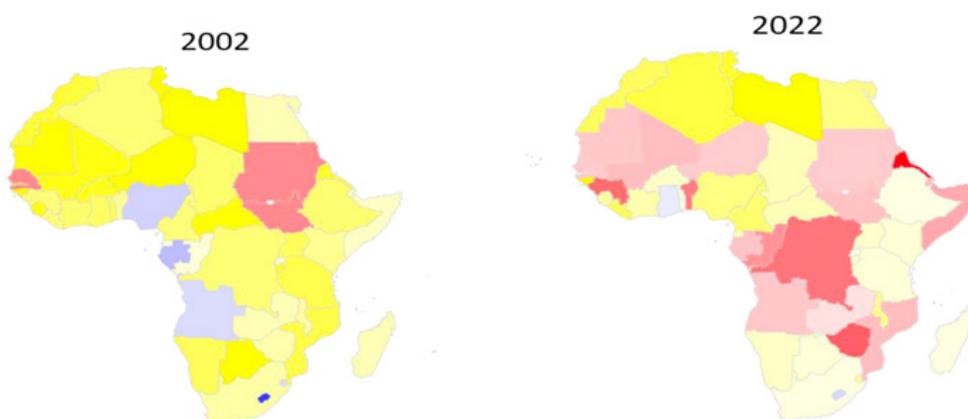
- i. National Revitalization Strategy
- ii. China as a Global Power
- iii. Exceeding Overcapacity

Despite its commercial and political success in Africa, the BRI also entails some risks. The dynamic and volatile nature of the African continent could completely change government attitudes towards China (Fitch July 30, 2018). Political developments in West Africa and the horn of Africa, civil conflicts, and acts of violence during election periods cause great damage to the socioeconomic structure of societies and cause political instability, political instability prevents China from investing in the region and weakens trade integration. In this context, China changes its strategy that focuses only on the economic structures of countries and creating a politically stable region will contribute positively to the continuity and sustainability of the BRI. Another challenge is the high level of corruption in the region. It is claimed that corruption is the reason why projects realized and planned in the region cost more than expected. For instance, the government, which secured USD 476 million in financing from China Eximbank for the Kampla-Entebbe Highway, was found to have deliberately miscalculated the project by more than \$16 million after the Ugandan Parliament ordered an investigation into bribery allegations. The average cost per kilometer of the highway was initially estimated at USD 2 million but was later increased to USD 9.2 million. The lack of transparency and accountability of projects implemented under the BRI has exacerbated imperfect competition in the region. This situation allows the established political paradigm on the continent to use resources in favor of the continuation of their own power (Nantulya, 2019:4-6). The World Bank's report on the BRI states that the political and economic obstacles China faces in Africa have prevented the BRI from realizing its full potential (World Bank, 2019). Gallagher et al. (2016:10) argues that Africa's cumbersome bureaucracy and business culture are the main political constraints to Africa's development, and without complementary

political reforms, the return on infrastructure investments will be low. Despite all these risks, the BRI is a very important project in terms of providing financing without political preconditions, as well as an alternative development strategy for Africa's development. It has transformed the economic and political relations between China and the continent and has largely become an important turning point in China-Africa and South-South relations. The BRI, which is the most important manifestation of China's growing interest in the continent in the last two decades, is thought to reflect its potential much better by minimizing the mentioned risks.

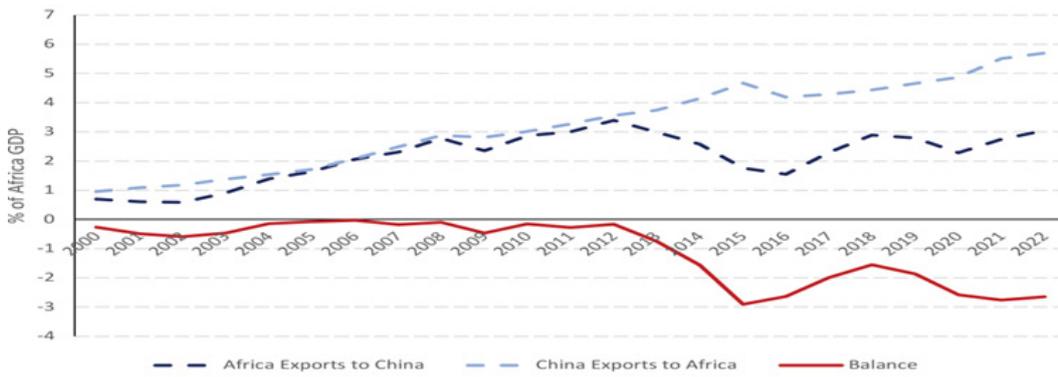
China has promoted economic growth and development in Africa, primarily by providing loans to expand transportation and energy infrastructure based on African countries' demand and its own supply. Gallgher (2023:20) finds that China's increasing political and economic engagement in Africa has led to economic growth in the region, but at the same time posed long-term environmental risks. Today, Africa is facing several structural problems while aiming to take its development processes to a sustainable threshold. The disruptive impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the current account balance of the countries and increased public expenditures keep the budget balance under pressure (AfDB, 2023:20). However, the Russia-Ukraine War that erupted in 2022, which had a devastating impact on the global supply chain, led to an increase in prices of energy products and staple foods such as wheat, of which Africa is a net importer, and exacerbated inflation. The increasing insecurity on a global scale and the USD effective exchange rate reaching its highest level in the last 20 years in 2022 increased the pressure of USD-denominated debts and interest payments on the budget. This has led to an increasing share of government revenues being devoted to debt repayments, while increasing the costs of implementing the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals and the Africa Union Agenda 2063. In response to Africa's embedded and acute economic challenges, African governments have opted to deepen their existing economic and political relations with China, aiming to increase overall prosperity. In this context, this section will discuss the course of trade relations between the two sides, development finance and sectoral priorities, and China's foreign direct investment in the region. China-Africa trade relations have undergone a major transformation in the last two decades, overtaking the United Kingdom and the United States. In 2000, the trade volume was USD 11.67 billion, rising to USD 282.1 billion by the end of 2022 (Silk Road Database, 2024). Today, although the European Union remains Africa's largest trading partner, it has lost its monopoly position in many African countries over the last 20 years (figure 3). Over the last decade, China-Africa trade relations have been characterized by two main trends. First, Africa's imports from China are much larger than its exports to China, resulting in a persistent trade deficit for Africa. Second, Africa-China trade relations for Africa are largely characterized by exports of raw materials and imports of manufactured goods (Moses et al., 2024:7-9).

Figure 3: Changes in Africa's Trade Partners (2002-2022)



Source: UNCTAD,2022. Eu is shown in yellow, the US in blue and China in red.

Figure 4: Africa-China Trade Balance (2000-2022)

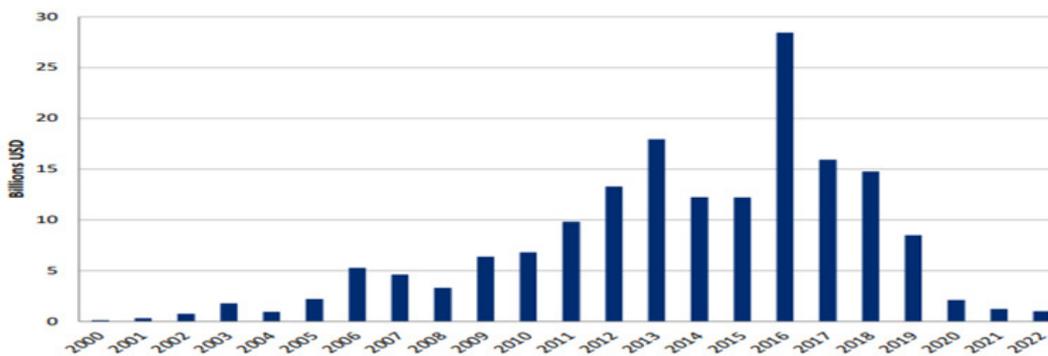


Source: UNCTAD, 2023

As seen in Figure 4, China-Africa relations, which followed a balanced course until 2012, eroded to the detriment of Africa with the implementation of the BRI, and although China-Africa trade relations improved, the balanced profile observed between the parties evolved into an asymmetric outlook.

After peaking in 2016, China’s lending to Africa has been on a downward trend since 2018 (Figure 5). There are three main reasons for this decline. First, the slowdown in economies due to the Covid-19 pandemic has also reduced China’s investment appetite. Secondly, the decline in growth rates and the increase in domestic debt burden observed in China, the economic and political instability in African countries, and the increasing debt burdens of countries have reduced China’s willingness to provide loans (Wang & Xu, 2023:16-18). The third reason stems from China’s revision of its Africa strategy. The “small and beautiful projects” narrative, first articulated by Jinping in 2021, is essentially a manifestation of China’s desire to shift its presence in Africa from financing infrastructure projects to the development of trade relations. In this context, China has evolved from the construction of large infrastructure projects and long-term strategy to a pragmatic attitude where it can achieve lower costs and faster results (Doğan, 2024). In line with the policies of development finance institutions (DFIs), China, which follows an energy-oriented financing program, mostly provides loans to fossil fuel projects in the context of DFI energy loans, ignoring Africa’s renewable energy potential. Between 2000-2022, CHEXIM and CDB have provided almost one-third of their loans, amounting to approximately USD 52.38 billion, to the energy sector in Africa. China’s current stance towards Africa has been criticized for hindering Africa’s sustainable development (CLA Database, 2023)

Figure 5: China’s Loans to Africa (2000-2022)



Source: Boston University Global Development Policy Center, 2024

3. European Union’s Development Policy towards Sub-Saharan Africa

The European Union’s development policy toward Sub-Saharan Africa has been shaped by a long historical trajectory rooted in colonial legacies, post-war reconstruction, and evolving global development paradigms. Initially framed through the association agreements of the 1950s and 1960s, particularly the Yaoundé and Lomé Conventions, EU–Africa relations emphasized preferential trade access, development aid, and a paternalistic partnership model reflecting Europe’s former colonial ties. From the 1990s onward, this approach gradually shifted toward a more normative and conditional framework, incorporating governance reforms, democracy promotion, human rights, and poverty reduction

as central pillars, most notably under the Cotonou Agreement. In the 2000s and 2010s, the EU increasingly aligned its development policy with broader security, migration, and sustainability concerns, integrating development assistance with conflict prevention, state-building, and climate objectives. In this framework, this section will respectively address the following chapters: Historical Development of Europe's Development Policy towards Sub-Saharan Africa, The European Union's Current Approach to the Development of Sub-Saharan Africa, and The Global Gateway Initiative: An Alternative to the Belt and Road Initiative.

3.1 Historical Development of Europe's Development Policy towards Sub-Saharan Africa

Despite China's expanding footprint, the EU remains Africa's foremost trade, investment and political partner. Europe's colonial legacy continues to shape contemporary relations: while post-1945 decolonization created new states, it did little to elevate Africa from its peripheral status. Olivier (2011:53) contends that prolonged European rule stunted inclusive governance and left fragile, ethnically riven polities. To maintain post-independence influence, former colonial powers institutionalized aid through bilateral agreements, while the 1957 establishment of the EEC reinforced ties with ex-colonies to secure raw materials and markets. Balkır (2010:571) portrays these arrangements, authorized under the Treaty of Rome, as aid-for-preference schemes that allowed Europe to retain a privileged economic position. France championed this logic in the Yaoundé I Agreement (1963), ensuring duty-free flows of West African resources. Yaoundé II (1969) widened coverage to twenty states and formalized grants and loans channeled through the European Development Fund. Yet critics quickly observed asymmetric gains. Senegalese President Léopold Sédar Senghor warned at the UN that while exports to the EEC rose 30 % between 1961 and 1966, African earnings barely grew 3 % (Ataöv, 1975:649-650). The Georgetown Agreement (1975) extended cooperation to seventy-nine African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) states. The accompanying Lomé Convention institutionalized Europe's privileged access to minerals such as lead, copper, zinc and uranium. It also relaxed political conditionality to blunt the spread of non-alignment and socialism (Holden, 2009:126). The Cold War's end redirected EU priorities toward post-communist Eastern Europe. Aid now came with democracy and human-rights strings. Coups and abuses in 1990s Africa triggered funding cut, while Europe was criticized for overlooking its own complicity such as France's monetary dominance in West Africa, thus instrumentalizing aid contrary to its professed values.

The 2000 Cotonou Agreement crystallized a normative turn, development cooperation, trade and political dialogue were fused, but disbursements could be suspended if governance benchmarks lapsed. Emphasis on privatization and deregulation drew fire for subordinating poverty reduction to market liberalism (Flint, 2008:145). Hurt (2004:164) deemed Cotonou a vehicle for Washington-Consensus orthodoxy; rising loans versus grants burdened already fragile economies. We can assert that there is a paradigm shift whereby neoliberal instruments sustain North-South domination. Rist (2002:103) argues that foreign aid, credit and FDI have furnished Europe with neo-colonial leverage in Africa, cloaked in democracy-promotion rhetoric. Khadiagala (2000:83) likewise reads persistent inequality in today's partnership. Bachmann (2013:20) labels EU policy a paternalistic, neo-imperial project aimed at Europeanising African institutions rather than fostering genuine development. After 2008 financial crises new pressures spurred Brussels to re-engage Africa. What began as a security-centered effort to police migration routes evolved into yet another development blueprint. Jakupec (2018:19-36) faults earlier donor-recipient models for neglecting African ownership; cash-transfer aid fostered dependency and corruption. We can also add that Cotonou largely served European corporate interests, obstructing sustainable growth. Recognizing this, EU strategists now seek a partnership ethos closer to China's demand-driven style. Yet, as Ahrens & Kalkschmied (2021:10) remind us, Brussels still dominates trade and investment flows. Europe's challenge is to reconcile its normative agenda with Africa's developmental priorities while facing Chinese competition. Beijing's offer of infrastructure finance free from political strings appeals especially to regimes averse to EU conditionality. Nonetheless, Europe retains structural advantages, deep cultural links, advanced technology, and integration into global value chains.

3.2 European Union's Current Approach to the Development of Sub-Saharan Africa

2015 has been an important turning point in the EU's development policy towards Africa, since then a new approach has been adopted by the EU within the framework of the principles emphasized in the UN Sustainable Development Goals, the New European Union Consensus on Development, the Global Strategy for EU Foreign and Security Policy and the African Union Agenda 2063 policy documents. One of the most important aspects that distinguishes the EU's new Africa approach from the development strategy of other actors operating in the continent is the articulation of

EU security policies to the EU's development strategy. The EU confirms that its development strategy for Africa will be implemented in line with the EU's common foreign and security policies (European Consensus, 2017, Article V). The idea of a new partnership between Africa and the EU crystallized in 2019 when the President of the European Commission, Ursula Von Der Leyen, paid her first official visit to the African Union Centre. This visit by the EU is an indication of its desire to cooperate with a growing continent with 8 of the 10 fastest growing countries in the world, while at the same time limiting the growing influence of China and Russia on the continent. The declaration "Towards a Comprehensive Strategy with Africa" signed during the visit emphasizes five main areas of cooperation between the parties.

- i. Partnership for Green Transformation and Energy Access
- ii. Partnership for Digital Transformation
- iii. Partnership for Sustainable Growth and Employment.
- iv. Partnership for Peace and Governance.
- v. A Partnership on Migration and Mobility.

Thus, reflecting the EU's revamped stance, its development policy has shifted toward a securitized and politically charged framework to address both irregular African migration and China's sweeping pursuit of the continent's natural resources. Bloj (2022) argues that this politicization has led to selective investment incentives, particularly in the areas of migration and security. However, institutionally, the EU has been seen implementing a systematic securitization policy towards migration from Africa, defining migration as a crisis and presenting the prevention of irregular migration as an election propaganda. The pandemic deepened Africa's structural vulnerabilities, widening the North-South gap and underscoring the continent's need for comprehensive development. Signaling renewed engagement, the EU earmarked EUR 20 billion to combat the pandemic and its spillovers (Okella, 9 Apr 2020). The Commission's strategy paper "Towards an Inclusive Strategy for Africa" pledged a new partnership covering poverty alleviation, digitalization, private-sector support, trade expansion, migration management, climate mitigation and broader political dialogue (Boidin, 2020:6-7). This agenda, wedded to security and governance tools, aspires to transcend the EU's aid-transfer model and foster tighter interdependence (Ahrens & Kalkschmied, 2021:10). Menkhoff (2019:164-166) state that folding Africa funds into the general EU budget, rather than ring-fencing a dedicated facility, renders support unpredictable and resource-thin. Because programming authority now rests largely with EU institutions, aid risks becoming an overt political instrument. Thus, while the post-2019 platform marks rhetorical progress toward an inclusive, resilience-focused model, doubts remain over finance, governance and genuine co-ownership. Whether the EU can overcome internal disagreements, secure stable funding, and balance political conditionality with African priorities will determine if this strategy departs meaningfully from earlier, largely economics-centric paradigms.

Ahrens and Kalkschmied (2020:12) argue that the new European approach to Africa is unlikely to have a groundbreaking impact, as yesterday's colonial relations are still lurking between the lines of the new approach. The emphasis on partnership only prioritizes development projects for economies that have accepted the EU's own values and norms and adopted the EU's style of governance, while preventing the funding of countries with different political approaches. This shows that rather than punishing governments with which the EU disagrees through economic instruments, it penalizes the people living in these countries. In the EU's development strategy towards Africa, it can be concluded that the EU is not developing African solutions to Africa's problems but rather retaining traditional paternalistic tendencies even in its new strategy, and that the overemphasis on security, irregular migration and green transformation in development is done to consolidate European development rather than African development. It is the fact that the green transformation and sustainable debates have increased the dependency of African states and states that green capitalism and green colonialism are intertwined concepts. Following the 2008 financial crisis, the green transformation strategy shows an imperial intervention of the global north, which causes global warming, in the way of life and production of the global south to protect its own interests and markets (Brockinton & Ponte 2015:2199). The EU's green transformation and sustainability goals, which is also backbone of its new development strategy for Africa, increase Africa's dependence on the EU, while at the same time producing an unequal development system, since going beyond the borders drawn by the EU means not receiving support from development aid. Dunlap (2021:920-922) describes the European Green Deal as a projection of reproducing and reshaping the existing order by greenwashing colonial relations. The contradictions in the EU's new approach to African development are masked by the global climate crisis. Hamouchene (2019:9) argues that the EU's concepts of green transformation and sustainability are not only about

creating dependency and maintaining asymmetrical relations, but also about energy security and energy exploitation. In this framework, he states that the costs of the destructive effects of the mining and energy industry are shifted from the North to the South that these impositions are a strategy of imperialist capital based on class hierarchies, and that environmental racism and energy colonialism are intertwined concepts created by the North.

3.3 The Global Gateway Initiative: An Alternative to the Belt and Road Initiative

Despite numerous cosmetic changes made from Yaoundé to Cotonou, the asymmetrical structure has remained unchanged. The post-2008 phase shows tentative movement toward more inclusive rhetoric, yet sceptics doubt whether practice will follow discourse. China's resource-for-infrastructure swaps now lay bare Europe's conditionality fatigue while heightening scrutiny of debt sustainability and labor standards, forcing the EU to balance two imperatives at once: shedding the paternalistic legacies that alienate African partners and protecting the norms that define its global identity. It remains uncertain whether contemporary European development initiatives can reconcile commercial competition with genuine development effectiveness; however, historical experience makes one point clear: Africa's own agency, and its evaluation of competing external actors, will ultimately determine the next phase of Euro–African relations.

As an external dimension of the EU's strategy for sustainable development and digital transformation, the Global Gateway (GG) was announced in 2021 in line with the objectives of reducing risk and promoting global development. The initiative was launched to tackle several geopolitical risks such as China's growing political and military influence, the Russia-Ukraine War, developments in the Middle East, post-pandemic recovery, and to protect the European Union's position in the international community. It also focuses on protecting the EU's border security, developing key technologies in the field of sustainable production, securing the supply chain, and facilitating access to strategic raw materials. The purpose of the initiative is stated by the European Council as follows: "It aims to ensure a geostrategic approach to connectivity, to ensure coherence between the EU's economic, foreign, security and development policy, to promote the EU's institutional values, and to promote the international community on the basis of human rights and international law" (CoEU 2021). In the context of ensuring economic growth and the resilience of the economic structure in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, the initiative, which is envisaged to contribute to the realization of the key principles and objectives of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement, has adopted the six principles presented by the Council of Europe as its philosophical basis (CoEU 2021).

- i. Democratic Values and High Standards
- ii. Good Governance and Transparency
- iii. Equal Partnership
- iv. Green and Clean Transformation
- v. Safety Orientation
- vi. Promotion of Private Sector Investments

Compared to previous investment and development programs put forward by the EU, the GG is not only economic aid but also a geopolitical instrument. The underlying philosophy of the GG is to reduce China's political influence in Africa by offering an alternative to the BRI. Thus, EU will not only strengthen its economic, political and energy security capacity, but will also be equipped with new tools to compete with China. Fabian (EPRS, May 7, 2024) argues that the GG has significant potential as it was implemented at a time when China was transforming both its domestic and foreign political economy, leaving an investment vacuum on the African continent. At a time when China is reassessing its strategy in the context of global development and political economy, the EU's aim to fill the gaps left by China's shrinking engagement gives the Union a chance to show itself as a reliable, long-term and stable partner. The competitiveness of the GG largely depends on the extent to which the EU integrates its objectives and how flexible it is, as the EU's normative approach is perceived as neocolonialism by most African countries, which want to deepen relations with partners that respect their independence and political choices. African peoples and governments perceive the EU as building an asymmetrical relationship and taking a paternalistic approach in projects with the EU or in direct development assistance provided by the EU. Another important issue that African researchers draw attention to is the discourse of competition with China. The projects put forward with the rhetoric of limiting China's sphere of influence

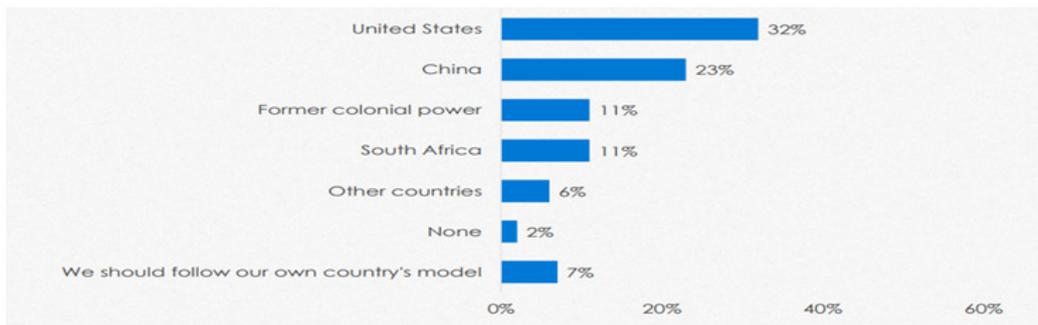
are thought to polarize the African continent and deal a blow to the continent's integration. The EU-China rivalry on the continent is said to further reinforce its asymmetric presence by turning Africa into a power playground. We can analyze China and the EU's approach to Africa's development and the economic and political process that led to the birth of the GG in three stages.

- i. 2013-2015 EU-China cooperation
- ii. EU-China conditional engagement in the context of 2016-2020
- iii. Competing approaches between BRI and GG since 2021

The EU-China transport-connectivity agenda initially rested on mutual interdependence. Early optimism faded when Beijing launched BRI several EU capitals were criticizing the governance and warning that core European interests were being sidelined (Friedrich Naumann Foundation, 2024:8). In 2016 the European Commission declared that cooperation would be re-evaluated, insisting continued engagement required Beijing to respect market rules and international norms (European Commission, 2016:9). High Representative Federica Mogherini reinforced the link between Asia's security and Europe's prosperity, urging deeper EU-ASEAN and ASEM ties (EUGS, 2016:40). Policy papers in this period sought to codify the EU's stance vis-à-vis China's expanding global influence. A partial reset followed. The 2018 Joint Communication on "Connecting Europe and Asia" advanced an EU model of connectivity centered on comprehensive, rules-based sustainability across transport, energy, digital and green networks (European Commission, 2018:8). Beijing signaled receptiveness, unveiling the "Green Silk Road" in 2018, issuing green investment principles and launching the BRI Green Development Coalition in 2019 to mirror EU environmental norms (China Daily, 15 May 2023). Yet convergence stalled as strategic rivalry sharpened. China's limited normative alignment and broader geopolitical frictions prompted Brussels to pivot from conditional cooperation to competitive positioning. In 2021 the EU announced the GG initiative as a direct alternative to the BRI. President Ursula von der Leyen, opening the GG Forum on 25 October 2023, cast the scheme as a superior offer for Africa, prioritizing environmental safeguards, labor rights and good governance, and implicitly criticized China's alleged debt-trap practices: "No country should be put in a situation where it has to sell its future to finance its basic infrastructure" (Leyen, Global Gateway Forum Opening Speech, 25 Oct 2023).

Thus, the trajectory from 2013 to 2023 traces a shift from collaborative interdependence to value-based competition. Initial EU hopes for joint connectivity gave way to concern over asymmetries and normative gaps, leading to efforts at rule-shaping and, finally, to the GG's launch as a strategic counteroffer emphasizing transparency, sustainability and reciprocity. Whether this competitive duality yields genuine cooperation or entrenches parallel spheres of influence remains a central question in EU-China relations and African development finance. Today, the GG is considered to be at a disadvantage in the competition between the two projects. The fact that most African states think that it is more economical to borrow from China and that the authoritarian administration in China can act much more flexibly and quickly compared to the EU's institutional structure, directs African countries towards China. However, China's deepening influence on the continent to the detriment of the EU over the last 20 years and the European Union's increasingly disadvantaged position in the eyes of African governments and public opinion reduce the EU's capacity to fight. In a survey conducted by Afrobarometer in 16 African countries, respondents were asked, "Which country or international organization has the best development model, and which model would you like to see implemented in your country?". The Chinese model of development increased to 23% in 2020, while the US development model declined from 33% to 32%. The approach to the development model of the former colonies was measured at 11% (Figure 6).

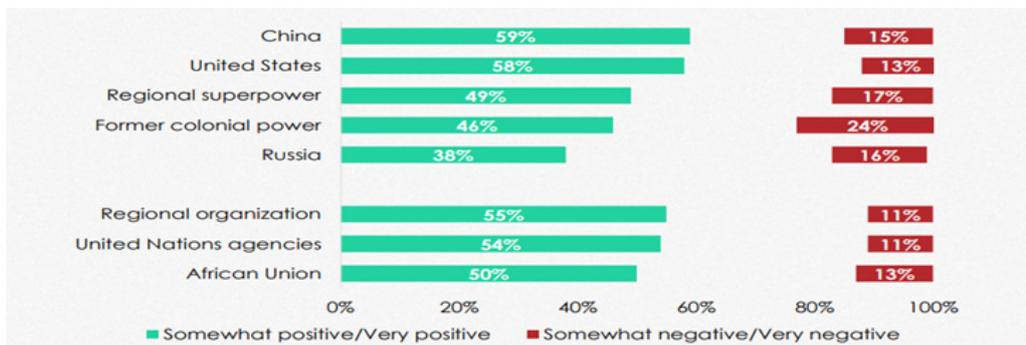
Figure 6: Preferred Development Model (2019-2020)



Source: Afrobarometer, 2024

In another study conducted by Afrobarometer, respondents were asked: “Indicate which country or international organization has the most positive influence?”. It was measured that China is the most influential power on the continent with 59%, followed by the US with 58%, while European states have 46% of the influence capacity. This confirms the above-mentioned loss of ground for the EU on the continent (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Positive External Impact Rating (2019-2020)



Source: Afrobarometer, 2024

However, skepticism towards China is also growing on the continent. A survey conducted by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation in 2022 among academics, journalists, think tanks, researchers and government officials found that while China is perceived to be more influential in Africa than the EU in some areas, the EU has an advantage in soft power, private sector promotion, gender and human rights, and good governance. On the other hand, it was also stated that the EU’s complex bureaucratic processes pose a problem in responding to Africa’s urgent needs and increase the tendency of African countries to prefer China, which has a high capacity to take quick action. There are two important differences between GG and BRI. First, both initiatives finance different types of projects. China’s funds focus on more traditional infrastructure sectors such as transport, energy, mining and telecommunications, while the EU’s funds are aimed at green transformation, accelerating digital transformation, strengthening the health system and expanding education. Second, China has officially committed not to interfere in the domestic politics of African governments, placing this maxim at the center of Africa-China relations. In contrast, of the six core principles of the GI, the principles of “democratic values and high standards” and “good governance and transparency” directly impose a political conditionality, formally stating that the political choices of governments will determine development.

Table 1: Comparison of the Belt and Road Initiative and the Global Gateway Initiative

	Belt and Road Initiative	Global Gateway Initiative
Focus Point	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Development strategy focusing on energy, mining, telecommunications and transportation sectors · Large-scale infrastructure projects · Creation of new markets · Principle of non-interference in internal affairs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Sustainable development and security-oriented approach · An approach in line with EU standards in digital transformation, renewable energy and transportation · Combating climate change and irregular migration · Democratic values
Investment Approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Government investments · State economic enterprises · Low interest loans 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Private sector incentives · Grants · Direct development assistance · Low interest loans
Value Approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Economic pragmatism · No political conditionality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Promoting liberal democratic values and institutionalization · Extensification of the principles of good governance, accountability and transparency · Adoption and periodic monitoring of human rights and rule of law principles · <u>Harmonization with international standards.</u>

Source: Table created by the author.

4. Conclusion

The EU’s development aid and paternalistic approaches to Sub-Saharan Africa made the continent both politically and economically dependent on the EU for a long period of time. With the end of the Cold War, the emergence of the US as the hegemonic power in the international arena paved the way for the spread of neoliberal policies and liberal democracies on the continent. In this period, the reform sets defined as the Washington Consensus started to be rapidly adopted in the continent, and Africa’s development strategy was started to be determined with various policy instruments of the IMF and the EU. The policies put forward in the name of the continent’s development, political conditions, disregarding of the continent’s needs, social, economic and political structure caused major economic and social crises in the countries of the continent. In fact, during this period, it was found that countries that rejected the neoliberal reforms implemented in accordance with the Washington Consensus grew economically, while countries that followed the policy sets for development shrank and entered a deep economic crisis. This situation, which began to be questioned by African governments and peoples, opened the door to the search for alternatives for development with the increase in intra-continental integration. By the 2000s, this alternative crystallized in the Beijing Consensus, proposed by China, which was based on the principles of mutual equality and economic interdependence without political preconditions. This new idea, which is diametrically opposed to the EU’s long-standing political conditionality-based approach to the continent’s development, diverges on four key points.

First, the EU’s approach to development is normative and asymmetrical, a projection of its traditional paternalistic relationship with the continent. The Eurocentric perspective does not ascribe universality to development strategies, offering the same prescriptions to all countries, ignoring the political, social and economic structure of the continent. The EU approach also securitizes the concept of development, arguing that without the adoption of liberal democratic values and western public administration principles, there cannot be stable and sustainable development. For the EU, Africa’s development also means preventing irregular migration to EU borders. However, the overemphasis on green transformation and digital transformation, which are at the core of the Union’s economic policies, do not fit the political and economic reality of Africa. In contrast to the EU’s normative and paternalistic approach, China adopts a country-specific development strategy, assuming that each country in Africa has its own political and social realities. In this respect, it displays a pragmatist approach, diverging from the EU’s paternalistic stance. As long as China does not impose

any political conditions on governments and if it has access to natural resources and export markets, it supports the development policies of countries in their own way.

Second, the actors differ in the development strategy of the EU and China. The EU emphasizes the importance of the private sector in private development according to the principles of free market, privatization and deregulation, and sets good governance, transparency, accountability, social cohesion and environmental conditions as political conditions for the promotion of the private sector. In contrast, China emphasizes development planning based on economic pragmatism, with state economic enterprises and government agencies assuming responsibility. While effective governance of public institutions and the prevention of corruption are critical to China's development strategy, they do not necessarily entail the adoption of democratic values. China's neutral stance towards democracy and its lack of political preconditions is perceived as an opportunity for authoritarian governments across the continent, which prefer to develop relations with China. This has led to an increase in China's market share and political engagement on the continent.

The fact that the EU offers political conditions for the establishment and development of cooperation is perceived by African peoples as a form of neo-colonialism. The strategies imposed by the EU on governments have caused reactions from both governments and African peoples, and in particular, the recent policies put forward under the headings of preventing irregular migration and effectively combating terrorism have led to an increasing acceptance of the thesis that the policies put forward under the headings of preventing irregular migration and effectively combating terrorism are shaping Africa in line with European interests. In the face of this approach of the EU, China's principle of non-interference in internal affairs has made Third, the EU's rigid development prescriptions and conditional cooperation are perceived by African governments and the public as paternalistic and deepening the existing asymmetry. Africa's problems and interests are ignored by the EU and the current approach is seen as far from a partnership between equals. This leads to the fact that EU standards and approach are always viewed with suspicion by African governments. In this sense, the Union's development strategies lack credibility in Africa. With each new interaction, the traditional donor-beneficiary dichotomy is recreated. In contrast, China, due to its historical channels of dialogue with Africa, is perceived as an advocate of South-South cooperation and an alternative to the existing political-economic system.

Fourth, the EU's development model for Africa is a holistic approach that aims to achieve economic, political and social development simultaneously. It is not possible to transform all structural features of societies in a short period of time. It is also costly for African governments with weak institutional capacity and commitments that may require them to act against their national interests. In contrast, China's approach to the continent is fragmented, variable and pragmatic rather than holistic. This structure, which envisages the implementation of reforms in line with the institutional capacities of governments, is preferable for African governments, as it minimally touches the political and social spheres.

Consequently, China's economic pragmatism offers a more inclusive and viable development model for sub-Saharan Africa than the EU's paternalistic development approach. It is observed that governments with authoritarian tendencies desire to develop relations with China, thus creating a balancing mechanism against the EU. While China's political and economic success on the continent is indisputable, the EU is still the continent's most important political and trade partner. Moreover, empirical studies analyzing the attitudes of African peoples towards the European Union and China have found that African peoples want their countries to be governed more like an EU member state than China. This can be considered as an indicator of the desire for democratization among African peoples.

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