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China in Africa: Assessing the Consequences for the Continent’s Agenda for Economic Regionalism

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Abstract

Africa has become a major arena in the so-called “multiplex world.” The growing presence of China and other emerging countries on the continent in the last two decades has turned Africa into an area in which there are a large number of different patterns of interaction between state and non-state actors. International debates are polarised over whether these new South–South dynamics generate new dependency relations or whether they provide genuine opportunities for transformation. This article focuses on China’s role in the ongoing processes of economic integration in Africa. Far from merely reproducing a neoliberal pattern, this interaction may highlight a certain convergence between the African regional integration projects and China’s desire to promote structural transformation strategies, with investment in infrastructure being an example. However, the article concludes that rather than reinforcing African regional integration, this essentially bilateral and highly pragmatic Chinese strategy may have some indirect returns on regional integration but is actually showing some signs of decline.

Keywords

Africa–China relations; African Continental Free Trade Area; Agenda 2063; Belt and Road Initiative; regional integration; South–South cooperation

Issue

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1. Introduction

The current international political economy of Africa cannot be explained without China. During the first decade of the 21st century, the Asian country evolved from being a marginal partner to having significant economic influence on the continent. China’s presence encompasses trade, lending and direct investments, mining, and construction firms operating across the continent, and even significant migrations in both directions. The nature and extent of this presence have prompted heated debates. For some authors, the increased presence of China (and other emerging powers like India or Brazil) is part of a new imperialism that does not significantly change Africa’s subordinate position in the global economy. For

others, China provides an opportunity for some African countries to secure access to much-needed finance and to develop key economic infrastructures without the rigorous conditionalities enforced by Western borrowers.

Development policies in Africa have always included regional economic integration strategies, especially since the 1960s. The failures of the structural adjustment era in the 1980s and 1990s have reinforced the choice for regional economic integration strategies in the 21st century. A significant step in this direction is the African Union’s launch in 2012 of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), a component of the wider Agenda 2063 for economic transformation. The crisis of the multilateral order (the focus of this thematic issue) has accelerated a drive towards the establishment of

broad regional arrangements in the global economy. These include the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). These “megaregions” are major economic blocs that threaten to further exclude African economies from global flows (Colom Jaén, 2019, p. 35).

Against this background, this article considers the particular impact of China on the regional economic strategies established by the African Union and African governments. As pointed out by the African Development Bank (2018, pp. 63–92), a major constraint to these integration strategies is the lack of economic infrastructure. In this regard, the contribution of China in building infrastructures has been significant in countries like Ethiopia and Kenya and illustrates what makes China’s strategy in Africa unique. As some authors have pointed out, rather than reproducing a neoliberal approach, the interaction between China and the African regional integration project demonstrates a certain convergence in promoting structural transformation. This convergence, however, does not translate into direct support from Beijing for the regional integration project, as its strategy remains essentially bilateral. This article also discusses the possibility, as demonstrated by the deployment of the Belt and Road Initiative and the type of financial commitments made by China in the last Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in December 2021 in Dakar, that infrastructure investment policy is beginning to show some signs of decline.

In the following section, we offer a review of the debates about the nature of the Chinese presence in the African international political economy and how this presence shapes the developmental options available to African governments. In the third section, we review the current state of regional integration initiatives in Africa, focusing on the role played by infrastructures and how China has contributed thus far—and may contribute in the future—in the context of the African Union’s Agenda 2063 and China’s Belt and Road Initiative. We also illustrate the coming changes in China’s lending policy to African countries. In the fourth section, we offer some conclusions.

2. China in the Contemporary Political Economy of Africa

Africa has become an important part of the multiplex world suggested by Acharya (2017). Questions have been raised over the ultimate intentions and effects of the new South–South dynamics, especially China’s role on the African continent. Some of the main debates and discussions in this regard are outlined below.

2.1. Africa in the “Multiplex” Order

The front pages of the *Economist* magazine on the subject of Africa (especially those in 2000 and 2011)

have caused a degree of controversy (Mateos, 2015). The covers represented a sudden shift in international discourse on Africa: From “the hopeless continent” of the 2000 cover, which represented the traditional “Afro-pessimistic” discourse on the continent, the *Economist* went on to champion an “Africa rising” discourse in 2011. Particularly intense during the first years, this label gave birth to a new “Afro-optimistic” discourse in the new international imaginary, a new view that hailed Africa’s economic leap forward.

Many have criticised the simplification of this new “single story” about Africa. Among other things, the “Africa rising” discourse ignores the fact that economic growth does not imply development and improved social welfare per se (Mateos, 2015) and may in fact be a manifestation of increasing dependency (Taylor, 2016). Other authors have also pointed to the uneven regional picture behind this image, with a few countries, mainly those that have carried out neoliberal reforms or those rich in natural resources, being able to attract a large share of foreign direct investment (Carpintero et al., 2016, p. 203).

Beyond the discourses that have tended to simplify a complex reality, what is certain is that the growing influence of “emerging countries” on the African continent goes a long way to explaining the economic and political transformations that have taken place in the region over the last two decades. According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA, 2012), Africa, seen as a “big store,” has come to the forefront of capitalist competition and is a cornerstone in the redefinition of the world order. What is perhaps new in this dynamic, in Taylor’s words (2016, p. 42), is the expanded range of competitors vying for attention. In no way does this imply the withdrawal of Western interest in the continent, but it is rather an expression of increased competition for influence and tension between actors in the region (Carpintero et al., 2016, p. 194). This new global “scramble for Africa,” as it has been widely labelled, is not merely economic or commercial; most emerging countries have also understood the political and diplomatic potential of Africa for their national interests in global forums (Alden, 2019).

The growing global competition for the continent is not only conducted by nation-states. In addition to the governments of Western and emerging countries and international organisations, there are numerous non-state actors (corporations, private security companies, NGOs, etc.), that make up a fragmented and complex scenario—the “multiplex” order referred to by Acharya (2017).

2.2. South–South Cooperation Reloaded?

In this context, the debate on South–South cooperation (SSC) has acquired a new and growing relevance. The United Nations Office for South–South Cooperation (UNOSSC) defines SSC as “a broad framework for collaboration among countries of the South in the political,

economic, social, cultural, environmental and technical domains....Developing countries share knowledge, skills, expertise and resources to meet their development goals through concerted efforts” (UNOSSC as cited in Morvaridi & Hughes, 2018, p. 1). According to Gray and Gills (2016, p. 557), SSC needs to be understood as a key organising concept and a set of practices in pursuit of historical changes. Based on mutual benefit and solidarity among the disadvantaged of the world system: “It conveys the hope that development may be achieved by the poor themselves through their mutual assistance to one another, and the whole world order transformed to reflect their mutual interest vis-à-vis the dominant global North.”

For Buzdugan and Payne (2016), however, this debate is not new. The global South’s attempt to influence global governance is part of a “long battle” that began after the configuration of the post-World War II global architecture. Since then, the global South has tried to articulate proposals and political spaces that counter Western hegemony and better represent its interests. For Freeman (2018), actors such as the G77 (a political space created in the second half of the 1960s that groups the bulk of developing countries) are instrumental to this purpose.

The crisis in the liberal international order (Ikenberry, 2018) and the re-emergence of the countries of the global South in the context of globalisation have intensified the debate on changes in the international system. For authors such as Hurrell (2018), however, overly simplistic narratives to explain the effervescence of the global South and the reconfiguration of the international order should be avoided. The emerging countries as a group, the author points out, are not a homogeneous or solid force. They all face the same problems and have similar weaknesses to those experienced by all states at the global level in an environment characterised by vulnerability and uncertainty. That said, Acharya argues (2017), there are reasons to assert that the new globalisation is driven more by South–South links than by those between the North and the South. The South has increased its global output from one-third in 1990 to almost a half today and has increased its share of world merchandise from 25% in 1980 to 47% in 2010 (UNCTAD, 2016). Although SSC has become an important trend, the loss of Western hegemony does not confer exclusive competence on the SSC in Africa but coexists with a global North in full crisis and undergoing a process of reconfiguration (Bachmann, 2019, p. 5). All this, Hurrell (2018, p. 93) argues, is leading to an international system that is increasingly characterised by:

A diffusion of power, including but not limited to emerging and regional powers; by a diffusion of preferences, with many more voices demanding to be heard both globally and within states as a result of globalisation, democratisation, and the backlash against globalisation; and by a diffusion of ideas and values.

The literature that has analysed the rise of the new SSC, particularly in relation to Africa, is highly polarised. In Cheru’s (2016) view, there are at least four competing perspectives on the impact of SSC on development in Africa. The “alarmists” see the rise of emerging Southern actors as a threat to the dominance of traditional Western powers in the field of economics, culture, and geopolitics; the “sceptics” are largely aid bureaucrats who defend the current development aid system, while acknowledging some of its shortcomings; and there are also the “critics of new imperialism” and the “cheerleaders.”

These last two groups have undoubtedly generated the most academic debate on the issue. For authors such as Bond (2016) and Taylor (2016), the emerging countries in Africa, especially China, are substitutes for traditional Western powers; they are new faces that perpetuate the usual dynamics of exploitation. According to Bond, new institutions such as the New Development Bank represent forms of “sub-imperialist finance” and serve as mechanisms for redirecting the world’s surplus capital. For Taylor, the increasing interaction between the BRICS and Africa serve to increase Africa’s dependence on the global economy, since the bulk of the growth in African exports is largely based on mining-related commodities. The presence of emerging economies is associated, Taylor (2016, p. 51) argues, with a lack of serious structural change in the continent’s economies. Furthermore, the authors state that the well-being of the average African citizen has been almost totally neglected. Morvaridi and Hughes (2018), meanwhile, consider that the current SSC has used the disguise of the original SSC, created in the 1960s and motivated by genuine solidarity between the countries of the South. Both authors argue that far from being motivated by the same ideals, the new patterns of relations and aid between emerging countries and the African continent strengthen new forms of neoliberalism and do not challenge the interests of global capital. The current SSC, therefore, “ushers in a variety of new forms of state-company collaboration that intensify the integration of areas of the global South into new forms of global capitalist accumulation and exploitation” (Morvaridi & Hughes, 2018, p. 5).

Other authors such as Cheru (2016), Muhr (2016), and Alden (2017, 2019) have challenged this view for being over-simplified and for dispossessing African actors of agency. According to Cheru (2016, p. 594), “the rise of emerging powers in Africa neither necessarily produces a new colonial-type relationship nor automatically guarantees policy space for African countries.” Along the same lines, Muhr (2016) criticises the dichotomy deployed in the existing literature between “national interests” and solidarity. The heterogeneity of the global South, the author argues, does not mean one party always reaps greater monetary gains through trade. In fact, in SSC arrangements parties can reap more intangible benefits such as experience, knowledge and cultural exchange, capacity building, diplomatic solidarity,

human rights promotion, and the visibility and recognition of the South. In this regard, Muhr establishes a difference between what he labels as “dependency” (understood as a form of neo-colonial exploitation) and dependence (conceived as an unavoidable consequence of the unevenness of the global South). SSC, he argues, thus seems to create a system of “asymmetric interdependence.” This nuanced explanation, Cheru (2016a) points out, does not mean that Africa’s relations with the emerging Southern partners are free of tensions, but it does make them highly complex. Nevertheless, Taylor acknowledges that this changing pattern of global interaction has led to a growing diversity of partners that offer some options and opportunities for Africa by “strengthening its bargaining position with a number of actors” (Taylor, 2016, p. 44) and by offering “an additional, and different, choice of cooperation partners” (Bachmann, 2019, p. 16).

2.3. Sino-African Relations in African Development

Debates on China–Africa relations have also tended to be polarised, or at least ambivalent. The main narrative critical of China’s historical deployment on the African continent is that China’s presence has not brought about any meaningful structural transformation. Taylor (2016) has even pointed out that the presence of emerging countries in Africa, and of China in particular, has led in general terms to a certain de-industrialisation of the continent, producing hardly any industry, and that the composition of GDP by sector has not changed significantly between the 1960s and the present. In the same vein, Mohan and Power (2009) consider that China’s presence in Africa will not result in substantially different outcomes from those recorded with traditional actors, as Beijing has not encouraged diversification or value-added industrialisation or even redistribution of economic benefits. Some authors such as Clapham (2008) have gone further, asserting that China’s role in this new SSC model has been precisely to reinforce the old one.

Zezeza (2014), however, has problematised this critical view of the China–Africa relationship. He observes that “the discourse of the Chinese model for Africa reprises the pernicious tendency of reducing Africa into a hapless tabula rasa always waiting for the inscription of a development model from elsewhere” (Zezeza, 2014, p. 165). The reality, the author holds, is a lot more complex and contradictory: It reflects the intermingling of the agencies, subjectivities, and interests of African and Chinese actors and it involves government-to-government, people-to-people, and sector-to-sector relations, including business, media, education, sports, culture, and civil society. Bräutigam (2009), in turn, has stated that while China, like many countries, gives aid to advance its foreign policy agenda, Chinese aid policies in Africa differ in some ways from those that are in line with the Washington Consensus. Asante (2018, pp. 260–261) also claims that the consequences of growing Chinese

involvement in Africa are actually quite mixed: “While there are positive signs that the trade gap between both sides is narrowing, there are questions about its sustainability.” China’s imports from Africa, Asante holds, are still dominated by natural resources and exports of manufactured products and there is limited diversification and technology transfer. Furthermore, the impact of rising debt on African countries could have dire consequences for the sustainability of the limited progress achieved thus far, turning the interaction into a form of “neo-imperialism.”

Alden (2019) has emphasized the fact that the Chinese presence in Africa has brought meaningful change for African countries. The disguised discourses of the SSC rhetoric of the 1960s (transformational change, solidarity, and historical affinity) provided Beijing with the ideological substructure necessary to exercise the role of an asymmetric economic power, a power that nonetheless displaces the neoliberal consensus that has guided Western countries since the 1980s. According to Alden (2019, p. 11), the promotion of alternative sources of development finance and the provision of infrastructure as a backbone is leading to palpable economic and social changes in African societies.

Some analysts have contested the idea that Chinese presence is not leading to structural transformations in African countries. For Xiaoyang (2018), Beijing’s failure to follow the instructions of Western donors in the past has meant that China was able to take control of the policy-making process while receiving complementary aid and loans from external sources. It is this “pragmatic spirit,” Xiaoyang notes, that characterises Chinese aid to African countries, enabling China to build on its existing comparative advantages, such as in infrastructure construction and light industry.

3. Regional Integration in Africa: The Chinese Factor

As mentioned above, regional economic integration initiatives have always been part of Africa’s modern development strategies. The African Union’s launch of the AfCFTA in 2012 is a major step towards deeper economic integration. It is important to keep in mind that the AfCFTA is a component of the wider African Union Agenda 2063 for economic transformation. In this regard, this plan is consistent with China’s particular approach to cooperation in Africa and is focused mainly on economic issues, as we have seen in the previous section. Thus, it is pertinent to explore the intersection between China’s cooperation efforts and the African regional economic integration agenda and see whether there is a contribution, albeit indirectly.

3.1. Regional Economic Integration in Africa: From Nkrumah to the “Spaghetti Bowl”

Regional economic integration initiatives in Africa are a key component of the contemporary political economy

of the continent. In the 1960s and 1970s, the different regional integration projects were clearly influenced by Pan-Africanist ideals and the struggles attached to the decolonisation process. The famous quote from Kwame Nkrumah's speech at the Organisation of African Unity in 1963 summarises this view: "We must unite now or perish" (Kaba, 2017). Despite the political rhetoric, powerful factors impeded the effective deployment of regional integration initiatives: reluctance to cede significant parts of the recently-acquired sovereignty, Cold War dialectics, a succession of coups d'état in the 1960s, and, last but not least, the enormous institutional and economic challenges that any project of regional integration in Africa would entail in the 1960s (Bidaurratzaga-Aurre et al., 2021). Nevertheless, there were some significant attempts to establish regional economic communities (RECs), such as the Central African Customs and Economic Union (UDEAC) in 1964 (now CEEAC-ECCAS), the East African Community (EAC) in 1967, and the CEDEAO-ECOWAS in 1975, amongst others.

The financial and institutional distress of many African states that followed the implementation of the World Bank and the IMF sponsored market-oriented structural adjustment programs in the 1980s prevented the establishment of effective regional economic integration initiatives. Furthermore, the rush towards globalisation of markets led by the World Trade Organization and the Bretton Woods Institutions in the 1990s meant that regional integration was seen as less important than the opening up of markets to global competition. However, some advances were made in this area in the 1990s, like the launch of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) in 1992 or the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) in 1994. The approach taken to regional integration in Africa in the 1990s was consistent with the neoliberal underpinnings of globalisation, however, meaning that it focused mainly on opening up market exchanges at a regional level.

The failure of the WTO Doha round at the beginning of the 2000s was a turning point and revived interest in regional integration as an economic policy strategy in the developing world, including Africa. In fact, in 2001, the UNECA launched a biennial flagship report series entitled *Assessing Regional Integration in Africa*. Accordingly, with a critical view of past liberalising policies, this renewed interest in economic regional integration has a slightly different approach. In this emerging view, market liberalisation is not a goal per se, but an instrument for making African economies more productive, with a particular focus on industrialisation. Debates over how to incorporate this agenda of economic transformation within the design of Africa regional integration initiatives are indeed present in the literature and in major initiatives like AfCFTA (Bidaurratzaga-Aurre et al., 2014; Colom Jaén, 2019; Lopes, 2019, pp. 65–82; UNECA, 2017, pp. 129–141). Nonetheless, the reality is that despite the integrationist rhetoric displayed by

the African Union and African governments, as well as the deployment of some institutional arrangements, the scope of the regional integration processes is clearly limited. If we take intra-regional exports as an indicator of economic integration, we can see that, for 2018, only 20.37% of EAC exports went to another EAC country, while for ECCAS-CEEAC it was merely 1.77%. Internal trade within ECOWAS was only 8.22%. These are really low numbers compared to the European Union (63.63%) or NAFTA (49.41%). Thus, we can conclude that despite the rhetoric, the achievements in terms of economic integration lag behind other RECs in the global economy (Bidaurratzaga-Aurre et al., 2021, p. 13; UNECA, 2019, pp. 5–6).

There are at least three main reasons to explain this poor performance. First, African economies specialise mainly in the production of raw materials that are exported to industrialised countries. Thus, there are economic complementarities that would be conducive to intra-African trade. Second, the institutional design of RECs in Africa is incoherent at a continental level: There are numerous overlapping regional integration processes, which can be summarised in the well-known metaphor of the "spaghetti bowl." Out of the 55 African Union countries, 13 are in three RECs, 29 in two, and only 13 in one (UNECA, 2017, p. 112). Third, the deficit in economic infrastructures (roads, ports, energy generation plants, ICTs) adds a key constraint. A colonial legacy, the existing infrastructures, especially transport infrastructures, are usually designed to facilitate exports outside the continent. The African Development Bank has estimated the yearly financial needs to fill this gap are between 68 and 108 billion USD (African Development Bank, 2018, p. 70).

3.2. Regional Integration in the African Union's Agenda 2063

The failures of the Washington Consensus agenda in Africa paved the way to a different approach to development, which now includes policies to encourage the transformation of productive capabilities. Now development is about economic structural transformation rather than opening up and deregulating markets, as it was during the structural adjustment period. The Asian experience of economic change—especially in China, but also in Japan and South Korea—has exerted a significant influence in this emerging approach to development in Africa (Colom Jaén, 2019, p. 39; Lopes, 2019, pp. 65–82).

In 2013, the African Union launched Agenda 2063, an ambitious 50-year plan of economic transformation that somehow replaces the Washington Consensus framework with a structural transformation approach. Agenda 2063 includes an array of programmes and initiatives for different areas. Concerning economic integration, the most prominent initiative is the AfCFTA, a plan to create a single market covering the whole continent. The project was launched in 2012, and it was

enthusiastically approved at the African Union summit in Kigali in 2018, prompting major interest worldwide. Although it is still far from being a free trade area, the start of trading under the AfCFTA agreement began on 1 January 2021. If it is consolidated, it will be, in terms of the number of countries, the largest regional integration project in the world.

A particular feature of AfCFTA is that it is not only a free trade agreement aiming at liberalising exchanges; it is regarded as an instrument for economic transformation and is embedded in the wider Agenda 2063. From this point of view, AfCFTA aims to support economic diversification; industrial exports can potentially benefit most from the agreement and help to counter the dependence on exports of commodities. With the goal of industrialisation in mind, the launch of AfCFTA in 2012 came together with the introduction of the Boosting Intra-African Trade Programme. The Agenda encompasses other programmes, such as the Accelerated Industrial Development for Africa and the critical Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa. The latter, in particular, consists of 329 projects and programmes in strategic areas like energy, transport, water, and ICTs. Some of these projects have a continental scope, like the Trans-African Highway Network (African Union, 2020, pp. 10–11; Lisinge, 2020, p. 427).

In sum, the approach to regional integration in Africa has changed in the last decade and is now embedded in a wider industrialisation and economic transformation framework. As some authors and institutions have acknowledged (African Development Bank, 2018; Lopes, 2019), the main challenge preventing deeper regional economic integration in Africa is the lack of appropriate infrastructures. Since the establishment of the FOCAC in 2000, China has shown considerable interest in financing and constructing economic infrastructure in the continent, especially since the 2nd FOCAC Ministerial Conference in 2003. We now examine the extent to which the Chinese economic agenda has contributed to African integration to date, and how it may contribute to it in the near future.

3.3. The Contribution of China to the Construction of Infrastructure in Africa

A key characteristic of Chinese lending in Africa is its focus on infrastructure. Comparing the sectoral distribution of bilateral ODA and loan commitments by OECD-DAC countries and China between 2005 and 2019, Usman (2021) found that 65.5% of disbursements from China were allocated to economic infrastructure and services projects, whereas OECD-DAC countries allocated only 12.9%. This huge difference may be explained by different factors. First, China's programmes focus on what China can offer most efficiently. That is, they encourage what their companies (either state-owned or private) do best, which is infrastructure (ports, roads, railways, civil buildings, etc.). Second, this approach to international

cooperation is consistent with what we may call the "Asian model of development," which focuses on upgrading productive capabilities. Third, this pattern of cooperation intrudes little on internal affairs like policy design or macroeconomic management, and China has consistently followed the rule of non-interference in internal affairs in its diplomacy (Calabrese & Tang, 2020).

A particular feature of this specific type of cooperation is that it also addresses Chinese domestic issues. These include the management of an increasing quantity of foreign-exchange reserves, the productive overcapacity created by the post-2008 financial crisis stimulus package (especially in the heavy industries and in the construction sector), and the need for a strong strategic presence abroad to play a role in global geopolitics and geoeconomics (Sum, 2019).

One example of Chinese engagement in Africa can be found in Ethiopia. The East African country has been pursuing an economic transformation agenda since 2010 and the country's Growth and Transformation Plans I and II rely heavily on loans for infrastructure from China. For example, the Ethiopian government took out a loan of 3 billion USD from the EXIM Bank of China to completely refurbish the Addis Ababa-Djibouti railway (759 km), which was completed between 2011 and 2016 by the China Railway Group and the China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation. Along with this investment, the Ethiopian government purchased nine cargo ships for international transport from Djibouti to facilitate exports arriving on the train. Other significant investments financed with Chinese loans in the domain of transport include the Addis Ababa Light Rail and the Addis Ababa-Adama Expressway. We can add to these projects the financing and construction of the electricity grid associated with the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (the largest hydroelectric power plant in Africa when completed), and the setting up of a 4G Internet network by ZTE and Huawei (China Africa Research Initiative & Boston University Global Development Policy Center, 2021; Morgan & Zheng, 2019, pp. 14–15).

Similar arrangements can be observed in Nigeria and Kenya. In Nigeria, 18 out of the 19 loans from China between 2000 and 2019 were for infrastructure: transport (nine projects, including the Lagos-Ibadan railway modernisation), power (three projects), and ICT (six projects), totalling 6.8 billion USD. In Kenya, the pattern was similar for the same period, with loans for transport totalling 6 billion, including funding for the Mombasa–Nairobi Standard Gauge Railway, a project that will enable a significant increase in transport capacity in the country (China Africa Research Initiative & Boston University Global Development Policy Center, 2021).

The announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013 brought a shift in the geographical focus of Chinese external policies. Chinese lending to Africa is less central in the Belt and Road Initiative than it had been in the previous decade (Calabrese & Tang, 2020). In this regard,

we can observe that there is no direct Chinese commitment to the deployment of the AfCFTA. Although there are public statements from the Chinese government supporting the African Union's Agenda 2063, which implicitly means supporting the AfCFTA, and there is financial support for the construction of international transport corridors as in Ethiopia, China has a preference for bilateral arrangements in line with the national sovereignty doctrine mentioned above. The Chinese contribution to the regional integration agenda in Africa will therefore be a policy of national economic transformation that will eventually boost the regional agenda in the continent (Abegunrin & Manyeruke, 2020, Chapter 9).

As shown in the examples above, China appears to have made a major financial commitment to the construction of economic infrastructure in Africa. And the construction of this infrastructure (especially transport corridors and energy production and distribution) is essential in promoting a degree of regional economic integration in the continent, not to mention economic transformation.

Nevertheless, and despite the fact that some authors point out that the contribution of these projects to regional integration was factored in (Calabrese et al., 2021; Carrai, 2021; Nantulya, 2019), practice by Chinese lenders may be regarded as a collection of bilateral arrangements rather than the execution of a long-term lending programme aimed at supporting regional integration efforts. This view is supported by evidence provided by Otele (2020, pp. 12–15) for East Africa, where despite the significant amount of investment allocated to economic infrastructure by private and public Chinese economic actors in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, there is no explicit and co-ordinated planning.

In this regard, one of the challenges that the AfCFTA will have to face in order to achieve some degree of success will be the need to provide the economic infrastructure to facilitate exchanges among African countries; in this respect, the Chinese contribution will make a difference in some regions like East Africa. Yet, as pointed out in Section 3.1, this will not be the only obstacle to regional integration in Africa. Institutional arrangements (either collective or by individual countries), peace, stability, and a global trade environment more oriented to supporting developing countries' efforts will also be essential.

These interactions allow us to observe the extent to which a dichotomous view of the China–Africa relationship and its impact on regional integration is insufficient to explain the degree of complexity. If we assume multiplicity and complexity as defining features of the idea of “multiplex order,” China's pragmatic involvement in African regional integration processes involves a large number of dynamics, tensions, and agendas with ambiguous outcomes. The Beijing Consensus, in this sense, does not seem to follow the neoliberal pattern, as some claim, but rather demonstrates a relationship of “asymmetric interdependence,” which also has an impact on development.

3.4. China–Africa Finance in the Post-Covid-19 Era

In the recently published China's White Paper on international cooperation, there is a drive to set tighter financial conditions on those taking out loans from Chinese institutions (State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2021). Warnings about domestic financial stability issues in China have been translated to the international lending sphere. And it is true that in 2021 there were no major announcements of significant Chinese investment in Africa. The post-Covid-19 recovery period may be more inward-looking for China, and hence there may be less investment abroad, Africa included.

The trend in China–Africa financing can be observed in the announcements made at the successive FOCACs. The last conference, held in Dakar in November 2021, brought the total financial commitment by the Chinese government to 40 billion USD, down from the 60 billion announced in 2018. Nevertheless, the volume of financial engagement of China in the successive FOCAC conferences had been remarkable, with China becoming one of the most important external financiers in the continent. From 5 billion USD in 2006, Chinese investment increased to 10 billion in 2009, 20 in 2012, and 60 in 2015, within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative. A significant feature of the 2021 financial commitment is the decrease in the degree of concessionality. Of the 40 billion pledged in 2018, 10 billion will be allocated to non-concessional credit lines, 10 will help stimulate imports from Africa, 10 are expected to come from the private sector, and another 10 more billion will be a transfer of IMF's Special Drawing Rights allocated by China to African countries to increase their financial capacity. In sum, there is a much more cautious calculation of the risks.

When one looks at the detail, one can see that the amount that China lends to Africa is still large, but it is declining. China is the largest provider of bilateral loans to African countries, but the nature of these loans is changing. Chinese financial institutions committed 153 billion USD to African public sector borrowers between 2000 and 2019. After rapid growth in the 2000s, annual lending commitments to Africa peaked in 2013 (the year that the Belt and Road Initiative was launched). In 2019, new Chinese lending commitments amounted to only 7 billion USD to the continent, down 30% from 9.9 billion USD in 2018. Moreover, Chinese lenders are increasingly private and commercially oriented (China Africa Research Initiative & Boston University Global Development Policy Center, 2021; Usman, 2021).

4. Conclusions

Debates on the effects and implications of the new SSC and, in particular, China's role in Africa, are somewhat dichotomous and fail to take into account the nuances and complexity of this interaction. This article attempts to analyse the interaction between China and the continent

in light of the processes of economic integration that are taking place at the regional level. An analysis of China's strategy reveals differences between Beijing's strategy and neoliberal approaches, highlighting the fact that China is committed to a pragmatic approach that focuses on investments for production and is thus geared towards the transformation of African economies.

This strategy also seems to be aligned with the rhetoric and practice of the African regional integration project within the framework of Agenda 2063, which, through the AfCFTA, aspires to bring about the economic transformation of the African countries as a whole. However, the article highlights how, beyond this alignment, China's strategy continues to prioritise bilateral relations over the direct promotion of the African integration project.

This pattern of interaction also differs from the SSC of the 1960s and 1970s, despite the rhetorical use of some of its postulates, and does not reproduce the Washington Consensus, giving rise to a different pattern with specific characteristics. The article finally raises the question of whether we might be witnessing a shift in the dynamics of intense interaction between China and Africa since there appear to be some symptoms of decline.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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