

China's Foreign Policy toward Sub-Saharan Africa Since 2012: Strategic Goals, Policy Instruments, and Global Implications

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Abstract: This article examines China's foreign policy toward sub-Saharan Africa since 2012, analysing how Beijing's strategic objectives are operationalized through a coordinated set of political, economic, security, and cultural instruments. Using a mixed-methods design—policy-document analysis, case studies and descriptive trade and investment data—the study maps a clear “goal–instrument” linkage that structures China's regional engagement. Findings show that institutional platforms provide the architecture for multilevel engagement; economic instruments advance structural economic influence and market access; security contributions consolidate political trust and global leadership claims; and cultural tools build social acceptance and reduce political risk. The paper argues that China's policy has moved from transactional resource-seeking toward an integrated, normative-institutional model aimed at reshaping aspects of global governance and securing long-term strategic influence in the Global South. By synthesising instruments across domains, the article fills a gap in the literature on China–Africa relations and offers policy-relevant insights for host governments and multilateral actors.

Keywords: China–Africa Relations; Sub-Saharan Africa; Foreign Policy Instruments; FOCAC; Belt and Road Initiative; Global Governance

1. Introduction

The year 2012 marked a significant turning point in the development of China's foreign policy. During this period, China gradually moved away from the relatively low-profile approach of Deng Xiaoping's era, characterized by the principle of “keeping a low profile while making modest contributions,” and shifted toward a more proactive and ambitious global diplomatic strategy. This transformation aimed not only to safeguard China's core national interests but also to position the country as a responsible major power actively participating in the reform of the global governance system. Such a strategic shift in diplomacy bears significance not only for China's own national interests but also for the evolving dynamics of global politics, economics, and security, injecting new momentum into the shaping of international relations in the new era.

Since the late 1990s, China's engagement with Africa has deepened, especially in infrastructure and sustainable development (Grimm, 2012). Existing research has analyzed China–Africa relations from economic, political, and soft power perspectives, highlighting issues of trade, FDI, loans, institutional cooperation, and cultural diplomacy (Biryukov et al., 2021; Jenkins, 2018; Benabdallah, 2020). While these studies provide valuable insights, they often focus on single dimensions—economic cooperation, soft power, or political principles—and remain largely descriptive. Few works systematically examine how China integrates multiple instruments into a coordinated strategy or reveal the underlying “goal–tool” linkage mechanism. Addressing this gap, this study adopts an integrated perspective to analyze China's foreign policy instruments in sub-Saharan Africa and their coordination.

2. Research Methodology

To ensure a systematic and reliable analysis of China's foreign policy goals and tools in sub-Saharan Africa, this study adopts a mixed research approach that primarily relies on qualitative methods and supplements them with quantitative methods. It comprehensively employs various methods such as case studies, text analysis, and descriptive statistics to achieve a multi-dimensional interpretation of policy motives, mechanisms, and effects. The following section will detail the research methods and data

sources of this study. In terms of research methods, this study mainly adopts a qualitative research design, focusing on in-depth interpretation of policy texts, behavioral logic, and strategic intentions. Specifically, it is carried out through case study and policy document analysis, aiming to extract key patterns and mechanisms from actual policy practices and official statements.

In terms of data collection, this study relies on multiple sources of text and data. The first type of data consists of public documents from the government and international organizations, including policy white papers, bilateral agreement texts, and action plans from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Commerce of China, as well as the FOCAC (Forum on China-Africa Cooperation) communiqués and action plans. Reports from the African Union, the United Nations, and the World Bank are also included in the analysis to provide an international perspective and a benchmark for comparison. The second type of data comes from academic literature and authoritative think tank reports, which are used to identify existing academic consensus and points of contention, lay the foundation for literature, and identify research gaps. The third type of data is publicly available statistical information, such as trade and investment data from the UN Comtrade database and the AEI (American Enterprise Institute) "China Global Investment Tracker", as well as annual economic and trade cooperation reports released by the Chinese government. Although these quantitative data are not used for causal inference, they can be used for trend description and phenomenon verification, enhancing the intuitiveness and persuasiveness of the argument.

3. China's Foreign Policy towards Sub-Saharan Africa: Political Assumptions & Goals and Instruments

3.1 Political Assumptions & Goals

Since the beginning of the 21st century, emerging market countries and developing nations have rapidly risen, promoting the process of global multipolarization and gradually establishing an irreversible trend (Hongfei et al., 2018). Against the backdrop of deepening South-South cooperation, the BRICS, G20, ASEAN, and the African Union have played increasingly significant roles in global affairs, driving the international order towards greater fairness and rationality (Ali & Rassias, 2024). However, the United States and the West still control the international system through resource allocation mechanisms and discourse power, solidifying structural injustices and leading to global challenges such as development imbalances and geopolitical conflicts (Wang et al., 2022). In this context, China has reaffirmed its commitment to "advocating an equal and orderly world multipolarization." The term "equality" here means that in the multipolarization process, regardless of their size or strength, all countries should participate, benefit, and have a say in global governance on an equal footing (Wang, 2024), and it advocates promoting multilateralism within the framework of the United Nations, opposing value-based bloc politics and unilateral intervention. This stance not only provides sub-Saharan African countries with a political space to counter external powers and safeguard their autonomy but also makes the region a key area for China to build a multipolar order and implement its "Global South" strategy (Lala, 2020). Through mechanisms such as the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, China not only maintains the sovereignty and development autonomy of African countries but also shapes an image of an equal partner and strengthens the counterbalance against Western discourse hegemony (Gilpin, 2023).

In the post-Cold War era, although sub-Saharan Africa has achieved a certain degree of economic growth and institutional transition, the cross-border infiltration of terrorism, tribal armed conflicts, fragile state governance, and the inefficiency of regional cooperation mechanisms still make its security landscape fraught with structural predicaments (Badurdeen, 2024; Magaji, 2024). For China, the stability of this region not only concerns the safety of its citizens and assets in Africa but also directly affects the advancement of its overall Africa strategy. Therefore, it has gradually established a strategic framework of "parallel development and security tracks", incorporating the maintenance of regional security and the deepening of political mutual trust as core goals. From a realist perspective, security is the foundation of diplomatic strategy. China's large-scale infrastructure construction, "Belt and Road" cooperation, and enterprise operations in Africa are highly dependent on a stable environment. Turmoil could undermine cooperation mechanisms and the image of soft power. Thus, security cooperation not only reflects the moral responsibility of a "responsible major country" but also represents a rational choice to safeguard overseas interests. At the same time, from the perspective of international institutionalism, China builds security partnerships oriented towards a "community with a shared future for mankind" through multilateral and bilateral mechanisms. Under the principle of "non-interference in internal affairs", it promotes capacity building, personnel training, and dialogue cooperation, and continuously dispatches

peacekeeping forces under the framework of the United Nations, making it the largest contributor of peacekeeping forces among the permanent members of the UN Security Council in Africa (ISDP, 2018). This has shaped China's international image as a "security provider" and enhanced strategic recognition among African countries. The political mutual trust between China and Africa is also reflected in the institutional compatibility of development priority, sovereign equality, and the principle of non-interference, which contrasts with the Western model of "aid-reform linkage". This has won the general recognition of African governments (Shinn & Eisenman, 2020) and structurally counterbalances the discourse hegemony of Western security governance.

Against the backdrop of increasing diversification and fragmentation in the global governance system, China has progressively integrated the pursuit of a leadership role in the international order into the core of its foreign strategy. Moving beyond mere adaptation to Western-dominated rules, it now emphasizes promoting structural reforms in global governance through constructive participation, shifting from a "rule-taker" to a "rule-shaper" (Xinbo, 2018). In this process, Sub-Saharan Africa has become a critical region for China to enhance its international discourse power and strategic support network.

On the one hand, the 48 United Nations member states in the region carry substantial voting weight within multilateral institutions. Through coordination and cooperation in forums such as the General Assembly and the Human Rights Council, China has established stable voting alliances and consensus on positions. This has yielded broad support, particularly on issues concerning China's core interests, thereby strengthening its national security and fostering a political community with other developing nations. On the other hand, China has advanced new multilateral agendas such as the Global Development Initiative and the Global Security Initiative (Chen, 2025), offering institutional solutions for the "Global South" in development and security domains. These efforts demonstrate China's capacity for rule-making and its leadership initiative (Arase, 2023). Sub-Saharan African countries have generally responded positively, reflecting not only converging values between China and Africa but also the shared aspirations of developing countries during a period of international order transformation.

3.2 Political Instruments

Since its establishment in 2000, the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) has evolved into the most significant institutionalized and regularized multilateral platform between China and sub-Saharan African states. It has not only deepened cooperation in political, economic, and cultural dimensions but also reflected China's broader strategic considerations in advancing "South–South cooperation" and expanding its partnership network across the Global South. After 2012, China–Africa relations entered a new stage. At the Johannesburg Summit, China released the China's Africa Policy Paper, which elevated bilateral ties from a new type of strategic partnership to a comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2015). By aligning the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with the African Union's Agenda 2063 and the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, China underscored Africa's central role in its global strategy (Zhang, 2015). Within this framework, the institutional development of FOCAC has deepened through notable institutional innovations and organizational expansion, gradually forming a multi-level, broad-coverage cooperation structure. This demonstrates its role as a crucial vehicle for advancing China's vision of global governance and multilateralism.

With regard to implementation, the coordinators' meetings held in 2016 and 2019 significantly enhanced the effectiveness of FOCAC's follow-up mechanisms, ensuring continuity in the delivery of commitments (Zhang & Tao, 2020). Such institutional safeguards not only improved the stability of China–Africa cooperation but also laid the foundation for China's sustained influence on the continent. Moreover, FOCAC has established forums in multiple fields, achieving a systematic expansion of cooperation areas. For instance, in the realm of political dialogue, the creation of the China–Africa Peace and Security Forum and the China–Africa Forum on Local Government Cooperation has facilitated greater coordination on global governance issues, contributing to the construction of a Global South discourse beyond the traditional North–South paradigm. This reflects China's strategic intention to promote multipolarity and counterbalance Western discursive dominance. Under the FOCAC framework, issues such as poverty reduction, healthcare, and education have also been incorporated into implementation plans, including the multi-level Dialogue on Poverty Reduction and Rural Development, the Public Health Policy Dialogue and Technology Exchange Mechanism, and the China–Africa Digital Education Regional Cooperation Center (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2024). These initiatives not only address African development concerns but also illustrate China's efforts to shape international norms through "soft mechanisms." In the fields of science and military affairs, the establishment of the China–Africa Beidou Cooperation Forum in 2021 and the China–Africa Defense and Security Forum in

2018 marked China's proactive construction of new models of South–South cooperation on security and frontier technologies, aligning with both the global zeitgeist and the evolving needs of China–Africa relations (Li, 2018).

In the process of elevating China's leadership role in the international order, enhancing political trust with sub-Saharan African states, and expanding political influence, bilateral agreements and high-level visits have played a pivotal role. The former provides a legalized framework that specifies the content and responsibilities of cooperation, thereby laying a stable and predictable foundation for policy implementation. The latter, serving as the highest-level political exchange platform, reinforces strategic communication and political will, deepening direct dialogue among leaders (Zhongping & Jing, 2014). In sub-Saharan Africa, China has signed institutional arrangements covering investment protection, cultural exchange, visa exemptions, and tax agreements, which not only optimized the investment climate and people-to-people channels but also strengthened the institutional foundation for aligning economic cooperation with African development agendas (Ministry of Commerce of the PRC, 2015). These multi-layered institutional designs have formed a progressive cooperation architecture of "culture–capital–strategy," simultaneously promoting mutual trust and supporting China's political influence in the region as well as its leadership role in global governance. Between 2017 and 2023, China signed a series of bilateral agreements with sub-Saharan African countries—including Senegal, Burkina Faso, Tanzania, Angola, Côte d'Ivoire, Rwanda, and Madagascar—covering culture, visa exemptions, and double taxation avoidance (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2025). These agreements not only strengthened political trust and strategic relations but also facilitated cultural exchange, official contacts, and capital flows by optimizing trade and investment environments. Through this institutionalized framework of cooperation, China has consolidated its economic influence in Africa and reinforced its global leadership ambitions, reflecting its broader strategic goal of promoting new forms of international relations and reforming global governance.

Table 1 The number of mutual visits between senior leaders of China and Sub-Saharan African countries ranges (2012 -2024) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2018; 2019; 2021; 2022; 2023; 2024)

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Angola	1	4	4	5	1	1	6	0	1	0	3	3	6
South Africa	9	18	11	22	7	7	11	11	3	2	7	14	9
Ethiopia	8	8	10	5	7	7	6	7	3	1	1	13	5
Kenya	8	6	4	8	6	6	6	10	0	1	3	9	4
Nigeria	0	9	6	5	5	5	4	1	0	3	3	4	4
Tanzania	2	8	8	4	2	5	2	0	1	3	4	3	4
Senegal	1	2	11	1	5	3	6	4	3	2	5	2	6
Zambia	3	4	2	8	5	4	3	2	1	4	4	4	5

Meanwhile, high-level visits have shown a trend of increased frequency and diversified agendas. For instance, Wang Yi's visits to Namibia, Chad and Nigeria in 2025 covered core issues such as trade, infrastructure, climate and security (Zhang & Li, 2025). These visits not only facilitated the formation of strategic consensus but also achieved interactive and supportive positions between China and Africa on global governance issues such as climate change and UN reform (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2021). As shown in Table 1, the inter-visit data (2012 - 2024) indicate that China maintains high-density interactions with core partners such as South Africa and Ethiopia, and adjusts strategic priorities based on economic scale, geographical value and cooperation potential, gradually shifting from early infrastructure cooperation to digital governance, green transformation and reshaping of resource supply chains. This "agreement + inter-visit" institutionalized and interactive parallel model enables China to gradually break away from the single narrative of "resource acquirer" and shape an international image of "development partner". Overall, bilateral agreements provide institutional guarantees for cooperation, while high-level visits strengthen strategic communication and trust building, and the two complement each other, jointly promoting China-Africa cooperation to become a model of South-South cooperation and enhancing China's discourse power and institutional leadership in global governance. However, in

the future, attention should be paid to the effectiveness and balance of cooperation implementation to ensure the sustainability and inclusiveness of "global leadership" construction.

In the process of advancing global governance reform and expanding its international influence, China's security engagement in sub-Saharan Africa has become increasingly active, with peacekeeping operations and military cooperation emerging as important pillars of its foreign policy (Mabera, 2021). Such involvement not only extends beyond traditional diplomacy and economic cooperation but also responds to African states' demands for security and stability. At the same time, it helps China project the image of a "responsible major power" while providing a practical arena to strengthen its voice within the United Nations system and the broader global order (Badawi, 2024). Since the introduction of the China–Africa Peace and Security Partnership Initiative in 2012, China has institutionalized security issues within the FOCAC framework. This was followed by the Peace and Security Cooperation Plan in 2014 and the inclusion of "peace and security" as one of the "Eight Major Initiatives" in 2018, underscoring that China's actions reflect not only its own policy extension but also the pressing demands of African partners (Li, 2014; United Nations, 2018).

At the operational level, China's peacekeeping activities exhibit three prominent characteristics. First, the scope and scale of its deployments have expanded considerably: from dispatching a guard detachment to Mali in 2013, to deploying an infantry battalion to South Sudan in 2014, and later sending a helicopter unit to Darfur in 2017, indicating both an increase in mission complexity and geographic reach (The State Council Information Office of the PRC, 2020). Second, China has deployed 2,277 peacekeepers, making it the largest troop-contributing country among the permanent members of the UN Security Council, and it has established an 8,000-strong standby peacekeeping force, with over 80 percent of its capacity allocated to Africa (United Nations Peacekeeping, 2023; Xinhua, 2021; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2019). Third, China has made significant financial and material contributions, accounting for 18.69 percent of UN peacekeeping assessments—the second largest globally—while also establishing a US\$1 billion Peace and Development Fund and providing military assistance and logistical support to the African Union (United Nations Peacekeeping, 2025; African Union, 2015). Overall, China's security engagement in sub-Saharan Africa has achieved three interrelated political objectives: first, enhancing its international leadership role through large-scale troop deployments and financial contributions; second, fostering political trust with African states through military and training assistance; and third, safeguarding regional stability and China's overseas interests through institutionalized security cooperation. Taken together, these dynamics demonstrate that security cooperation has become a key political instrument in China's Africa strategy, while also serving as a crucial pathway for reshaping the international order and strengthening its claim to global leadership.

4. China's Diplomatic Policy towards Sub-Saharan Africa: Economic Assumptions & Goals and Instruments

4.1 Economic Assumptions & Goals

In China's overall diplomatic strategy towards Sub-Saharan Africa, political goals and economic goals often complement each other and advance in tandem. The political dimensions mentioned earlier emphasize that China consolidates bilateral relations and multilateral influence through high-level interactions, institutional arrangements, and strategic commitments. However, without a solid economic foundation and an institutionalized framework for economic cooperation as support, political commitments would be difficult to translate into lasting strategic stickiness. Therefore, the economic objectives of China's foreign policy towards Africa not only serve the country's overall development strategy but also constitute an important guarantee for the effectiveness of its diplomatic policy to a large extent.

China's economic strategy in Sub-Saharan Africa is systematic and forward-looking. Its first core objective can be summarized as two dimensions: one is to strengthen the economic presence of Chinese enterprises through industrial chain integration and market expansion, and the other is to build a cross-border financial system centered on the RMB, thereby enhancing the currency's discourse power. This dual strategy not only responds to the inherent demands of China's "new dual circulation" development pattern but also forms strategic synergy with the construction of the African Continental Free Trade Area.

Firstly, in terms of industrial chain and market expansion, the rapid urbanization process, demographic dividend, and expansion of the middle class in Sub-Saharan Africa provide vast space for China's manufacturing, construction, and communication technology industries. Most African countries

are in the early stage of industrialization, with relatively weak industrial chains and infrastructure, which creates an institutional opportunity for Chinese enterprises to invest through industrial parks, engineering contracting, and local production (Sun, 2017). During this process, the Chinese government relies on multilateral mechanisms such as the "Belt and Road Initiative" and the China-Africa Cooperation Forum to provide financing, policies, and legal guarantees for enterprises, forming a composite model of "national guidance - enterprise entity - market operation", effectively enhancing the competitiveness and institutional embedding of Chinese enterprises in the region. Secondly, in the financial aspect, China actively promotes the use of the RMB in African economic and trade activities to break the dominance of the US dollar. Sub-Saharan Africa has long faced a shortage of US dollars and exchange rate fluctuations, and has a real demand for diversified currency arrangements. The currency swap agreements between China and South Africa, Nigeria, etc., enable some trade and investment to bypass US dollar settlement, reducing transaction costs (Xinhua News Agency, 2024; Global Times, 2024). At the same time, policy banks increasingly offer RMB-denominated loans to Africa, and Chinese-funded financial institutions establish branches in major economies, building infrastructure for cross-border RMB settlement (Mihalyi et al., 2022; Lendzoumbou, 2024). With Sub-Saharan Africa's leading experience in mobile payment, China is also exploring the cross-border application of digital RMB, providing a potential technical breakthrough for the internationalization of the RMB. It is worth emphasizing that the global layout of Chinese enterprises and the internationalization of the RMB have formed an interactive linkage in Sub-Saharan Africa. On the one hand, Chinese investment and trade have created real scenarios for RMB settlement; on the other hand, the application of RMB in cross-border payment and financing has, in turn, reduced the exchange rate risks and transaction costs of enterprises, thereby enhancing their competitiveness. In the process of striving for high-quality development, ensuring the continuous, stable and diversified supply of energy and key resources has become the second core economic objective of China's foreign policy. As China's economic structure shifts towards technology-intensive and green low-carbon sectors, traditional high-energy-consuming industries are gradually transitioning to high-value-added fields, and the reliance on clean energy, strategic minerals and new raw materials has significantly increased. Sub-Saharan Africa, as a globally important resource reserve area, has thus seen its strategic position continuously rise.

Unlike earlier approaches primarily oriented toward "resource acquisition," China's resource cooperation is increasingly embedded within the global development vision of a "community of shared future for mankind." This strategic shift reflects not only China's domestic development needs but also a redefined recognition of its global responsibilities. Against the backdrop of climate change and energy transition becoming central issues of global governance, China's energy strategy in Africa places greater emphasis on green cooperation and low-carbon development. Specifically, cooperation in solar, wind, hydropower, and geothermal energy has deepened. Projects such as Chinese investment in wind farms in Kenya and the construction of photovoltaic facilities in South Africa have become critical components of local renewable energy systems (Chiyemura et al., 2021; Baker & Shen, 2017). These initiatives not only enhance African countries' energy autonomy and capacity for green transition but also provide platforms for China to export its green industrial chains and promote clean technologies. More importantly, such green cooperation not only optimizes China's own energy structure and diversifies its external supply channels but also highlights its proactive role as a responsible power in advancing the global sustainable development agenda. By promoting green infrastructure, expanding renewable energy applications, and enhancing ecological protection, China aligns its developmental logic with the objectives of global environmental governance (Dong et al., 2018). In this sense, it is gradually transforming from a mere demander of resources into both a promoter of green concepts and a provider of global public goods. Energy and resource cooperation thus serves China's industrial upgrading and energy security, while simultaneously becoming a key lever for reshaping global economic structures.

Ultimately, China's Africa policy has evolved from a focus on resource access and market expansion to a multifaceted strategy serving its broader national development agenda. The underlying logic of this transformation lies in China's pursuit not only of immediate economic gains but also of enhanced discursive and institutional power within global economic governance through institutionalized and structured forms of cooperation. Against the backdrop of a globalized system in transition and intensifying geoeconomic competition, China leverages South-South cooperation to shape a more favorable international economic environment, while advancing the diversification of global governance models.

From the perspective of international division of labor, China is accelerating its move from the lower segments of the global value chain toward higher-end production. Classical theories of comparative advantage emphasize that specialization and international trade enhance overall welfare (American Economic Association, Royal Economic Society, & Chenery, 1965). In practice, through its "going out"

strategy, Chinese enterprises not only bypass trade barriers but also leverage sub-Saharan Africa's abundant labor, raw materials, and market potential to establish new production nodes and industrial layouts. Through investments in industrial parks and the relocation of manufacturing capacities, China promotes African industrialization while simultaneously upgrading its own position in global value chains. Moreover, as sub-Saharan Africa constitutes an extension of the Belt and Road Initiative, China is fostering regional connectivity through free trade agreements, port development, and cross-border transport networks, thereby enhancing its institutional influence over global trade flows. At the policy level, the Chinese government has continually refined its external strategies by issuing measures that promote high-level opening-up and support enterprise internationalization (Wen, Liu & Zhou, 2023). These initiatives not only facilitate the move of Chinese firms toward technology-intensive and higher value-added industries but also provide diplomatic resources and policy support to mitigate host-country risks and bolster overseas competitiveness (Peirong & Al-Tabbaa, 2021). This complementarity between enterprise internationalization and governmental diplomatic support underpins China's broader national strategy.

4.2 Economic Instruments

To effectively achieve the multiple economic goals proposed in 4.1, the Chinese government has employed various economic tools as policy instruments to implement the diplomatic strategy towards sub-Saharan Africa. These economic tools mainly include import and export trade, foreign direct investment (FDI), and the implementation of the "Belt and Road Initiative" in the region. The following paragraphs will analyze how each tool contributes to China achieving its economic goals towards sub-Saharan Africa in specific practices.

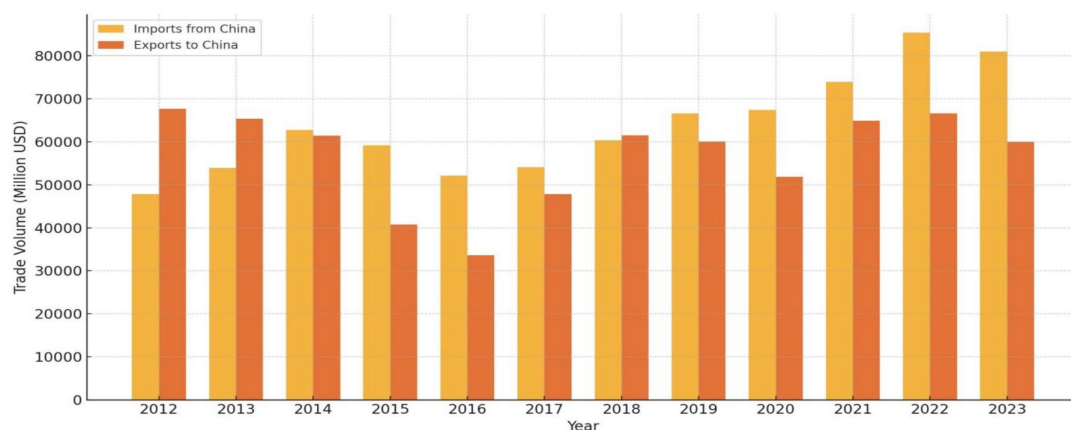


Figure 1 Bilateral trade between China and Sub-Saharan Africa (2012-2023) (United Nations, 2024)

Firstly, Import and export trade, as the earliest and most fundamental economic link between China and sub-Saharan Africa, has long been central to bilateral cooperation. With China's economic transformation and Africa's opening-up, trade volume has steadily expanded and diversified across energy, minerals, agriculture, and manufactured goods. Between 2012 and 2023, as shown in figure 1, bilateral trade showed strong resilience (United Nations, 2024). China's exports rose from USD 47.8 billion in 2012 to USD 85.3 billion in 2022, before slightly declining to USD 80.9 billion in 2023, while Africa's exports to China shifted from primarily energy and minerals toward agriculture and industrial goods. To improve trade balance, China has recently expanded market access, abolishing tariffs on 98% of goods from 21 African states and pledging zero tariffs for all least developed partners by December 2024 (Ecofin Agency, 2025). Trade serves more than commercial logic, and it secures resources for China's industrial upgrading and green transition, expands the overseas presence of Chinese enterprises, and strengthens manufacturing influence. Moreover, the gradual use of RMB in settlement reduces reliance on the US dollar and builds institutional capacity for China's role in global financial governance.

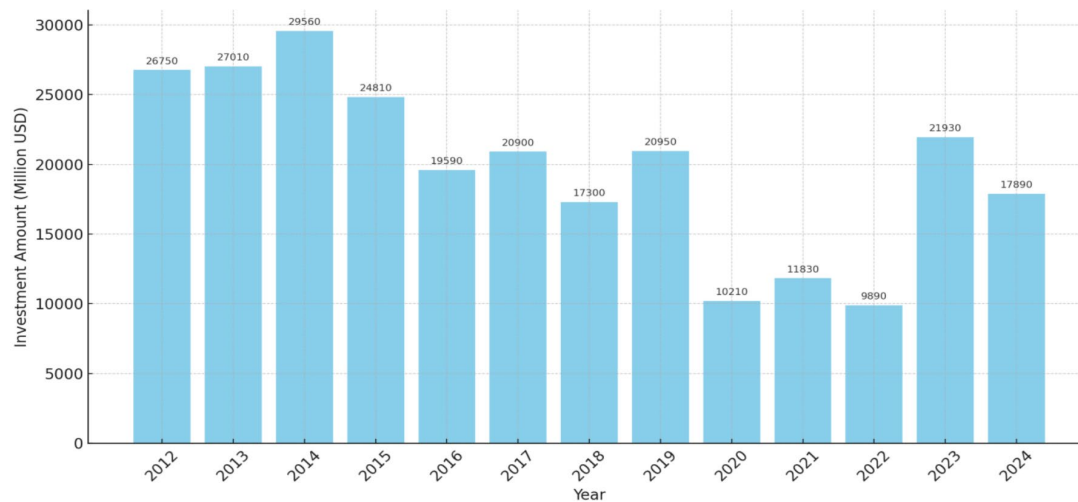


Figure 2 China's investment in Sub-Saharan African countries ranges from 2012 to 2024
(American Enterprise Institute, 2025)

Secondly, foreign direct investment (FDI) has become a central tool for China's economic cooperation with sub-Saharan Africa, supporting both domestic transformation and global strategic goals. Chinese enterprises, guided by government platforms such as the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation and policy banks, have established industrial parks, energy projects, transport infrastructure, and manufacturing bases, thereby expanding markets and embedding new nodes in global value chains.

Although fluctuating, China's investment scale has remained high, as shown in figure 2, peaking at USD 29.56 billion in 2014 and rebounding in 2023–2024, underscoring Africa's strategic role in China's "high-quality development" agenda. The significance of FDI lies in more than capital expansion: it secures critical resources like oil, gas, and cobalt, strengthening China's bargaining power in energy transitions (Wang et al., 2021); alleviates domestic overcapacity through industrial capacity transfer aligned with African industrialization (Zhu et al., 2024); and builds integrated regional value chains that diffuse Chinese standards and enhance institutional influence. In parallel, FDI promotes RMB-denominated loans and settlements, with financial institutions such as the Export–Import Bank and ICBC laying the foundation for RMB internationalization (Kondratov, 2021).

China's FDI in sub-Saharan Africa has thus undergone a transition from "quantitative expansion" to "qualitative upgrading." It serves both to ease domestic structural pressures and to advance industrial upgrading, while also shaping an international developmental environment more conducive to China's long-term interests through resource cooperation, capacity transfer, and value-chain integration. Such economic engagement represents more than a collection of commercial transactions; it constitutes the concrete implementation of China's "global economic engagement strategy" in Africa, carrying profound strategic and institutional significance.

Since its introduction in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has become China's flagship project for promoting global connectivity and economic cooperation, as well as a major platform for advancing multiple economic and strategic goals in its Africa diplomacy. As a key extension of the BRI, sub-Saharan Africa encompasses many states that face infrastructural deficits and financing constraints yet possess considerable economic potential. Through the initiative, China has actively invested in local infrastructure, transportation networks, energy development, and industrial parks, thereby constructing a new regional economic configuration centered on China–Africa cooperation.

This process embodies the logic of the "Right Approach to Justice and Interests" and the vision of a "community of shared future for mankind." In pursuing its own national interests, China simultaneously seeks to account for the long-term development needs of its partners, striving for outcomes of mutual benefit. By building transnational connectivity networks, promoting regional industrial coordination, and advancing trade facilitation, China aims to foster a more equal and inclusive structure of global economic governance within the framework of South–South cooperation. This normative and institutional foundation injects moral legitimacy into China–Africa cooperation, extending its significance beyond traditional economic interests.

The implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in sub-Saharan Africa has advanced its economic goals primarily through infrastructure construction, which supports bilateral trade and foreign

direct investment (FDI). Significant projects include Kenya's Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) from Mombasa to Nairobi, which reduces logistics costs and fosters regional economic growth; clean energy projects such as South Africa's De-Ai Wind Farm and Kenya's Garsir Solar Power Station, which address power shortages and promote carbon reduction; and port development, including Cameroon's Kribi deep-water port and Tanzania's Kilwa Fishing Port, expected to boost local fisheries (Xinhua News Agency, 2024). These projects not only enhance transportation, energy, and port operations, but also strengthen the foundation for Chinese enterprises' trade and investment, embodying the BRI's vision of mutual benefit, win-win cooperation, and the building of a community with a shared future for mankind.

5. Cultural Objectives and Policy Instruments of China's Foreign Policy toward Sub-Saharan Africa

5.1 Cultural Objectives of China's Foreign Policy toward Sub-Saharan Africa

Within China's overall strategy toward Sub-Saharan Africa, cultural objectives and people-to-people exchanges have become indispensable. As China's influence grows, emphasis is placed on shaping a positive national image, enhancing soft power, and fostering enduring Sino-African relations. Strategically, cultural diplomacy rests on two assumptions: enhancing global recognition of Chinese culture to elevate discourse power, and deepening nongovernmental exchanges to strengthen mutual understanding as a foundation for long-term cooperation.

Beyond economic or geopolitical interests, China increasingly highlights cultural legitimacy as a source of international influence (Karim & Faheem, 2025). To counter Western-led narratives of "neocolonialism," it promotes values such as "harmony in diversity" and the "Right Approach to Justice and Interests," which are embedded in mechanisms like the FOCAC Dakar Action Plan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2021).

Such initiatives aim to generate cross-cultural "emotional resonance," creating a social foundation for political trust and economic cooperation (Iftikhar & Iftikhar, 2023). Public support is crucial, as research shows that opinion can shape policy outcomes (Rasmussen et al., 2018). By fostering a positive image of peace, mutual benefit, and respect, China not only mitigates negative Western narratives but also provides reputational support for Chinese enterprises abroad.

5.2 Cultural Policy Instruments in China's Africa Diplomacy

Achieving China's cultural objectives in sub-Saharan Africa requires more than macro-level diplomatic promotion; effective cultural influence depends on concrete and sustainable people-to-people exchange mechanisms. To this end, China has deployed a set of institutionalized tools to strengthen the foundation for interaction. Among these, Confucius Institutes and medical assistance programs serve as critical channels for cultural transmission and social integration, conveying Chinese narratives, enhancing cross-cultural understanding, and building affective ties.

Since 2004, Confucius Institutes have expanded globally, with their African presence deepening over time. Following the introduction of the Belt and Road Initiative, their function and positioning became increasingly strategic. At the 11th Confucius Institute Conference in 2016, the Institutes were formally incorporated into the BRI framework, highlighting their role in cross-cultural communication and national image-building (Xinhuanet, 2016). By promoting Chinese language and culture, Confucius Institutes respond to African states' educational and linguistic needs, providing local societies with a systematic understanding of Chinese society and values, thereby reducing "cultural distance," enhancing China's cultural attractiveness and interpretive capacity, and supporting the objectives of cultural recognition and social integration discussed in Section 5.1.

The operation of Confucius Institutes aligns with scholarly consensus that enduring influence cannot rely solely on economic or military power; cultural, linguistic, and ideological engagement are critical components of soft power (Dominique, 2020). Historically, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States have used similar institutions to establish discursive dominance in Africa. However, China has not sought to replicate Western models of cultural hegemony. Instead, Confucius Institutes are conceived as symbols of friendship and bridges for equal exchange, externally manifesting the principle of "Right Approach to Justice and Interests." Within the BRI context, Confucius Institutes function as cultural symbols of China in Africa, not as instruments of political or military intervention, but as carriers of soft power through education and cultural dissemination, enabling China to accumulate and expand its

international cultural influence.

Second, in the process of China's promotion of cultural strategic goals in sub-Saharan Africa, medical assistance, as a "low-political, high-humanistic" diplomatic tool, has gradually demonstrated its significant value in enhancing cultural identity and social integration. Different from traditional cultural dissemination models, medical cooperation pays more attention to directly responding to the actual needs of the local society, by improving living standards and providing public services, linking China's international image with the concrete interests of the people, thereby enhancing emotional identification and trust foundations. This is not only a specific practice of the "community of shared future for mankind" concept, but also an important way for China to shape the image of a "responsible major country".

Medical assistance takes the form of sending medical teams, providing health services, and conducting capacity building, and its essence is a kind of soft assistance centered on technology and human resources (Zuo, 2015). This assistance goes beyond simple material donations and demonstrates China's moral responsibility and soft power influence through cooperation in the field of public health. Since the 21st century, China's medical support in sub-Saharan Africa has continuously expanded in scale and depth, from responding to the Ebola crisis to combating the COVID-19 pandemic. China has demonstrated an increasingly prominent role in global health governance. Especially in 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic spread, China controlled the domestic epidemic and quickly provided medical supplies and dispatched expert teams to Africa, and in 2021, it shifted to vaccine supply and anti-epidemic material support, benefiting almost all African countries (Lucas, 2022; Xinhua News Agency, 2021). For example, China provided COVID-19 vaccines to Equatorial Guinea and Zimbabwe in February 2021, and provided epidemic prevention supplies to multiple countries in March. The prominent position of sub-Saharan Africa in China's external medical assistance strategy has thus been further highlighted.

Through these practices, China not only helps alleviate the public health pressure in Africa but also, to a certain extent, breaks the Western narrative about China's "instrumental cooperation" or "new colonialism". More importantly, this process provides important support for the discussion of national image shaping and cross-cultural mutual trust in Section 5.1, demonstrating China's pragmatic path in promoting the construction of the community of shared future for mankind.

6. Conclusion

Amid profound shifts in the global power structure and China's own strategic transition in development, its diplomacy toward Sub-Saharan Africa increasingly reflects a strategically integrated and interactive logic of goals and instruments. This approach spans political, security, economic, and cultural dimensions, demonstrating a synergistic evolution between national intentions and international practices.

On the political front, China seeks to reshape the structure of international norms by weakening Western dominance over the global order, thereby enhancing its own discourse power and leadership in global governance. Through institutional tools such as the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), high-level exchanges, and bilateral agreements, China has effectively expanded its political network across the Global South, transitioning from traditional diplomacy to active engagement in global governance. Economically, China's foreign policy toward Sub-Saharan Africa not only supports Chinese enterprises "going global," the internationalization of the renminbi, and resource security strategies but also promotes the formation of a new China-led global production and economic system through institutional embeddedness in regional markets. Furthermore, in non-traditional domains such as security and culture, China employs diverse approaches—including UN peacekeeping, military cooperation, educational exchanges, and medical collaboration—to strengthen its dual identity as a responsible great power and a civilizational partner. These efforts enhance political trust among Sub-Saharan African countries and reflect a strategic emphasis on coupling hard and soft power while advancing both institutions and values.

In summary, China's diplomatic engagement with Sub-Saharan Africa not underscores the region's role as a southern pivot in China's global strategy but also exemplifies its efforts to construct a major-power identity in the post-Western global era. This marks a new phase of institutional integration and export in China's strategic layout within the Global South.

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