



## **A Critical Assessment of China-Africa Relations in the Post COVID-19 Dispensation**

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**Abstract.** The presence of China in Africa continues to grow despite the surge and menace of the COVID-19 pandemic. The argument remains that China sees a vacuum created by the US and the EU when it comes to critical issues concerning Africa and the African people; issues such as infrastructural development, maximization of human capital and enhancement of people-to-people engagement. Recent history shows that China has been actively involved in the activities of the African people for over five decades now; this cooperation China describes as the south-south affair. Chinese companies and investments in Africa are very noticeable, with South Africa playing host to about 300,000 – 400,000 Chinese citizens, the largest concentration of Chinese people in the continent. Some scholars particularly those from the West have more often than not criticized China and its activities in Africa, describing them as anti-thesis to African growth. However, these criticisms have not in any way slowed down the relations between the two partners. . As the world battles the threats posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, China and Africa have continued to explore new ways and opportunities to maintain their healthy relations, while seeking ways to improve it amid the economic pain caused by the outbreak. This relations no doubt has come under scrutiny since the pandemic broke out and the incident widely remembered is the alleged harsh treatment meted out to Africans living in Guangzhou. Some have argued that the escapade dented the relations between the two partners, but the effects still remain open to examination. Amidst the pandemic, FOCAC went ahead in Dakar, Senegal, in November 2021 and that forum availed China and Africa the opportunity to look at yearning economic issues in the wake of the pandemic and how to address them for the advancement of the exchange between the two, going forward. During FOCAC, the Chinese government rolled out a number of novel initiatives for China-Africa engagement; these are the nine programs on health, poverty reduction and agriculture, trade promotion, investment promotion, digital innovation, green development, capacity building, cultural and people-to-people exchange, as well as peace and security. The Dakar Declaration, the Dakar Action Plan 2022-2024, the China-Africa Cooperation Vision 2035, and the Declaration on China-Africa Cooperation on Climate Change were among the four outcome documents also released during the summit. These documents buttress the strength of the China-Africa relations even as the world continues to find answers to the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper highlights the foundation of this engagement and the gains accrued hitherto, while also exposing the losses during the same time. More critically, it looks to explore new areas and opportunities for the two partners as they continue to mastermind new socio-economic initiatives for a better and long-lasting cooperation as the world continues to pursue a permanent end to the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Keywords.** Africa, China, COVID-19, economic, engagement, FOCAC

## **Introduction**

Many African countries are still recuperating from the deterioration of nation-states' capacity to deliver public and social amenities directly to their people, many years after independence. The African state is unable to satisfy the demands of contemporary difficulties in the twenty-first century. As a result, one of Africa's current primary concerns is achieving development and better life for its people. The current focus of efforts is on how the government can improve its capacity to help development rather than what the government's "proper role" should be.

Because of China's high-profile involvement in Africa, the long-marginalized continent has recently gotten a lot of attention. Nonetheless, it is important to mention that China has given its African friends special attention since the 1950s. "Chairman Mao said that we were carried into the UN by African friends",<sup>1</sup> and the current President Xi Jinping's in a statement reiterated that by adding that China will be a reliable friend and genuine partner of African countries forever.<sup>2</sup>

Chinese involvement in African events dates back to pre-independence Africa. The China-Africa relationship, which is often regarded as a south-south relationship, has grown steadily and rapidly in recent decades. The continuous presence of Chinese businesses and investments, as well as the availability of various types of loans and China's visible contribution to Africa's infrastructure and development, has sparked widespread interest not only within the continent, but internationally. China's commercial interests, the operations of the Chinese government and Chinese institutions, and their socioeconomic repercussions in Africa are frequently highlighted by critics of China-Africa engagement.<sup>3</sup>

Since the start of the coronavirus pandemic that is still rocking the world, China and Africa have worked closely together to combat the virus's spread. In Africa, China's health diplomacy has been one of many ways China has intensified its commitment to the continent and its people. At the World Health Assembly (WHA) in May 2020, Chinese President Xi Jinping committed US\$2 billion in COVID-19 aid to impoverished nations. He also stated that China has 46 medical teams stationed around Africa, and that Chinese hospitals have been paired with 30 African hospitals to facilitate knowledge sharing. The most important thing that he said he would help with was the construction of the African Centers for Disease Control and Prevention headquarters (Africa-CDC).

On the 17th of June 2020, during the Extraordinary China-Africa Summit on Solidarity Against COVID-19, China and Africa reaffirmed their commitment to working together to combat the pandemic. President Xi stated at the 2021 World Health Assembly in May that his government has spent US\$2 billion on COVID-19-related assistance, supplying 280 billion masks, 3.4 billion protective suits, and 4 billion testing kits, with a large portion of them going to Africa.

Africa is lagging behind in the worldwide vaccination initiative, with only 7.8 doses per 100 people provided compared to the global average of 71 doses per 100 people. To put that in context, Europe is ranked 100th, North America is 95th, South America is 85th, Asia is 78th, and Oceania is 58th. Africa would struggle to manage the pandemic and revive its economy if vaccines are in short supply. China has been active in giving vaccines to African countries, with

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<sup>1</sup> Liu, Y (March 11 2011) Chinese Expert on Africa-China Relations Over Past Years In China.Org.cn (Ed).

<sup>2</sup> Yang, J (March 29 2013) China, Africa have shared destiny: Xi Global Times.

<sup>3</sup> Developmental Policy Review Vol 25 No 5 September 2007 (ed. Verena Fritz and Alina Rocha Menocal) Theme issue: Developmental states in the new millennium: concepts and challenges for a new aid agenda, Introduction 531.

56.3 million vaccines given to the continent so far. Africa has acquired 74.35 million vaccines and received donations from China totaling \$12.16 million.<sup>4</sup>

The post-COVID-19 African economy was something that the 2021 FOCAC Summit attempted to address. African leaders must make their priorities and strategies for their countries' economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic apparent from now on. As a result, the FOCAC Summit gave Africa a chance to talk about a lot of important things with its biggest trading partner, like how to speed up and expand the vaccination initiative, how to improve the healthcare system, and how to get the economy back on track after the crisis.<sup>5</sup>

Between FOCAC 2018 and FOCAC this year (2021), the world could not have been more different, with the Covid-19 pandemic dramatically altering our economic and political space in ways never witnessed before in the history of mankind. This year's financial pledges after the FOCAC Summit include a US\$ 10 billion loan to help African exports, as well as a goal of reaching US\$ 300 billion in total imports from Africa to China over the next three years. Other financial obligations included allocating 25% of China's IMF special drawing rights (SDR) to African countries, equivalent to US\$ 10 billion.<sup>6</sup>

The vaccination debate is entwined with talks of the FOCAC's 2021 solutions on trade, finance, and investment. There was a question about whether vaccine donations should be counted as part of the funding and investment package agreed to at the FOCAC Summit in 2021,<sup>7</sup> which has shrunk in contrast to previous years. According to analysts, the total of commitments under several receptacles showed that the total cash pledges were lower; some economists argue that this was kind of expected.

Despite a definite slowdown in finance-backed big infrastructure projects, China plans to invest in a number of African connectivity projects over the next three years. Such projects are vital for Africa's people and the continent's development. Effective connectivity is required if the continent is to raise the value of domestically produced goods and boost trade both internally and externally, as stipulated in the African Union's Agenda 2063.

China's long-term support for more integration across the continent is shown by its commitment to projects that will make the continent more connected.<sup>8</sup>

### **Statement of the Problem**

China is an emerging superpower with a tremendous appetite for economic dominance, cultural influence, energy and mineral resources, diplomatic alliances and export markets. With depleting sources of raw materials at home, China is looking for natural resources to feed the demands of its domestic economy. On the other hand, Africa is a resource rich continent.

China's interest in Africa is growing and spreading rapidly. Whilst the relationships between China and Africa are negotiated bilaterally, it may be in the best interests of Africa as a continent to craft a common position on issues of interest to the continent. In addition, Africa shares the common objective of accelerating the political and socio-economic integration of the continent.

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<sup>4</sup> Sino-African cooperation in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic &ndash; ACCORD 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> T.J Ma, China and Africa's post-Covid partnership: key takeaways from FOCAC8 2022.

<sup>7</sup> President Xi announces supplying Africa with additional 1 billion COVID-19 vaccine doses, pledges to jointly implement nine programs as well.

<sup>8</sup> What did FOCAC 2021 deliver for Africa? - African Business. (2022). Retrieved 1 March 2022, from <https://african.business/2021/11/trade-investment/what-can-africa-expect-from-focac-2021/>.

The problem that this study addresses is therefore to determine whether the nature of activities that China is engaged in Africa pose obstacles in the way of the benefits of growth post-COVID 19 dispensation, also to determine what the continent is doing to ensure a more balanced relation between the two partners, going forward.

### **Significance of Study**

In recent years, the question of China's presence in Africa has gotten a lot of attention. China has a long-term interest in Africa since it will require resources in order to maintain its economic progress. Few African academics have seriously studied the ramifications of Chinese involvement in Africa, particularly what the consequences might be post-COVID 19. Those who are not from Africa are more likely to think about how China will affect Western interests or to criticize China for doing things that have been common for Western investors to do in Africa for a long time now.<sup>9</sup>

There is strong reason for African researchers to consider the impacts of China on Africa from a variety of disciplines. Academics, in particular, need to start working with and using frameworks that will keep China's practices in Africa in check while it evolves.<sup>10</sup> They should also start to use positive economic models that are centered on this subject-matter.

### **Research Methodology**

This study's research is qualitative in nature. Secondary data from books and websites was used to conduct the material analysis.

This study focuses on certain key aspects of China-Africa relations that are relevant to its theme, namely, the challenges surrounding the two partners' post-COVID 19 pandemic response. In theory, this research aims to assess skepticism in assessing and interpreting African countries' previous stance on China's involvement.

It will also delve into the context of China's actions in Africa, particularly in the health sector, as the globe grapples with the threat posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. It will look at both primary and secondary sources to find out what analysts are saying about the subject. It will also look for important facts and other relevant issues that relate to the argument.

### **Policy Actions on the Effect of COVID-19 in Africa**

China was the first country to report the 2019 novel coronavirus disease, which was later christened COVID-19 by the World Health Organization (WHO) and is thought to be an infectious upper respiratory disease. Since then, the virus has spread around the world, posing one of the most catastrophic global health crises in history, with significant socioeconomic consequences. While the health repercussions are caused directly by the spread of the disease, the economic consequences are mostly due to the preventive measures taken by the governments to stop it.

Most countries have taken a lot of steps to stop the spread of the disease, like sealing their borders and putting in place partial or full business lockdowns, which have led to the temporary suspension of key business operations, schools, and even social services. Some of these policies have had big negative effects on African economies, mostly in terms of lost productivity and trade between and between countries. This is unfortunate, but it's correct.

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<sup>9</sup> Garth le Père, ed, *China in Africa: Mercantilist Predator, or Partner in Development?* (2006) Midrand & Johannesburg: Institute for Global Dialogue and South African Institute of International Affairs.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

Surprisingly, these policies have hampered practically all of Africa's important growth-enhancing industries, as well as its overall revenue. In addition, other government agencies have estimated how much money could be lost if these measures were taken.<sup>11</sup>

The International Air Transport Association (IATA) anticipated revenue losses of up to US\$13 billion, while the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) estimated revenue losses of at least US\$65 billion among Africa's top 10 petroleum exporting countries.<sup>12</sup>

Most people think that COVID-19 could have a big impact on Europe and Asia, depending on which industries are affected the most. But because Africa does not have a lot economic support and does not have a lot of diversified businesses, it has a lot more risk of having a big negative impact because of COVID-19.

First, being the latest region to report COVID-19 cases, Africa was already feeling the effects, mostly through its trading ties with the EU, USA, and China, which resulted in shrinking markets for African commodities. Second, while infection rates in these regions have begun to level off as a result of recent economic stimulus and investment recovery plans, the opposite is true in Africa.

Although the risk of a prospective economic recession in Africa is evident, mostly through international trade participation, few economies have the capacity to execute stimulus packages to help local firms weather an imminent COVID-19 global slump. In Africa, documents and other tools have been used to record the continent's major economies, but these do not cover all of the economies that have been adversely impacted by the illnesses. Cutting interest rates and giving money to people and businesses are two of the most controversial policies that have been used.<sup>13</sup>

Improved fiscal policy initiatives have boosted social protection funds to properly assist the poorest households during lockdowns. South Africa, for example, set aside approximately US\$ 160 million to mitigate the effects of losses for vulnerable businesses, approximately US\$ 8.4 billion for the unemployment insurance fund, tax subsidies for at least 75,000 small and medium businesses with a turnover of less than US\$2.7 million, and other effective fiscal and monetary policies.<sup>14</sup> Senegal has set up a Euro 2.1 million "Force COVID-19" response and solidarity fund, as well as a Euro 97.6 million contingency plan, to protect itself from the effects of COVID-19.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to the other stimulus packages approved by the various governments, other countries such as Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco have injected US\$6.4 billion, US\$0.9 billion,

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<sup>11</sup> World Bank (2020b) "The Potential Impact of COVID-19 on GDP and Trade: A Preliminary Assessment." Policy Research Working Paper 9211.

<sup>12</sup> IATA: <https://airlines.iata.org/news/potential-for-revenue-losses-of-113bn-due-to-COVID-19-%E2%80%9Ccrisis%E2%80%9D>.

<sup>13</sup> Wilmarth, A. E.. (2021). The pandemic crisis shows that the world remains trapped in a "global doom loop" of financial instability, rising debt levels, and escalating bailouts. *SSRN Electr. J.* 1–26. doi: 10.2139/ssrn.3901967.

<sup>14</sup> South Africa's Economic Response To the Covid-19 Pandemic. (2020, April 7). Global Policy Watch. <https://www.globalpolicywatch.com/2020/04/south-africas-economic-response-to-the-COVID-19-pandemic/>.

<sup>15</sup> Senegal - Measures In Response To COVID-19 - KPMG Global. (n.d.). KPMG. <https://home.kpmg/xx/en/home/insights/2020/04/senegal-government-and-institution-measures-in-response-to-covid.html>.

and US\$ 1 billion into their economies as part of their economic stimulus measures to enhance liquidity during COVID-19.<sup>16</sup>

### **Assessing the Impacts of China on Africa Pre Covid-19**

China has been perceived by some experts as having relations with Africa only on governmental level. In the words Van der Wath, he describes engagement between the two partners as “constructive, stable, friendly and co-operative”<sup>17</sup>. Other observers of this engagement look at the flow of Chinese developmental aid to Africa and compare it to aid flows from other Organizations such as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) members.<sup>18</sup>

Between 2001 and 2007, Chinese infrastructure finance promises to Sub-Saharan Africa were estimated to be worth US\$16 billion, based on information made public by the media. While some of this funding looks to be concessional, the majority of it falls short of the OECD's understanding of aid. It was given to Africa as a subsidy by China to assist low-cost loan initiatives.<sup>19</sup>

Broadman's work is one of the few microeconomic studies based on a survey of both Chinese and other foreign enterprises in South Africa, Ghana, Senegal, and Tanzania. According to him, China's trade and investment in Africa tend to go hand in hand, and that big investments have been made in non-primary industries like clothing and food.<sup>20</sup>

According to various researches on this topic, Chinese enterprises active in the African construction sector have discovered that their success is due to cost competitiveness as a result of low-cost capital, low-cost labor, and low-cost construction materials, as well as Chinese political assistance. It does not mean that Chinese construction companies do not have to deal with the same problems as other construction companies, like economic and political instability, poor quality of local support, and frail infrastructure, all of which are common in most African countries where they operate.<sup>21</sup>

Gu stated in his thesis that "China's Africa Policy and its Implementation in Terms of Private Sector Engagement is Lacking," in which he evaluates the features and motivations of Chinese private corporations in Africa and analyses their development successes. In practice, how Chinese businesses are assessed in Africa varies in so many ways and this is according to whom is measuring.

The perspective of the assessment team and the criteria utilized for this evaluation in terms of China's presence and operations in Africa are both important variables in appropriately determining China's presence in the continent. The three strands of thinking, "Sino-optimism, Sino-pragmatism, and Sino-pessimism," give a lens through which to examine both China's positive and negative interactions with Africa.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ozili, P. K., and Arun, T. (2020). Spillover of COVID-19: impact on the global economy. *SSRN Electr. J.* 1–27. doi: 10.2139/ssrn.3562570.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Bräutigam, D., & Tang, X. (2012). An Overview of Chinese Agricultural and Rural Engagement in Ethiopia IFPRI Discussion Paper 01185: Development Strategy and Governance Division.

<sup>19</sup> Foster, P., & Sanchez, R. (March 03 2022). Barack Obama warns China it must live up to its international responsibilities *The Telegraph*. Retrieved from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/barackobama/9082533/Barack---Obama---warns---China---it---must---live---up---to---its---international---responsibilities.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Broadman, H. G. (2007). Africa's Silk Road: China and India's New Economic Frontier. Washington D.C.: World Bank.

<sup>21</sup> Chen, C., Chiu, P. C., Orr, R. J., & Goldstein, A. (2007). An Empirical Analysis of Chinese Construction Firms' Entry into Africa. International Symposium on Advancement of Construction Management and Real Estate, August.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

Regardless of whether credit or criticism is derived from the views of the West or Africa, China's strengths and limits within Africa are given little consideration. Because China's actions on the continent are influenced by a variety of circumstances, it's difficult to get a complete picture and make an informed decision without taking into account a wider range of factors. Second, the research on macro and minor interactions is separated from one another, with either central policy or business activity being examined.<sup>23</sup> As a result, it lacks the high-powered interplay between the two levels.

Some keen observers have claimed that China isn't as difficult to deal with as many people believe. This point is also relevant to the China-Africa debate. A fragmented China has grown involved in Africa, and vice versa: the image of the country in Africa is shaped at several levels (central government, private firms, and individuals). It's important to look into the ever-changing engagement between different Chinese institutions in Africa in this scenario.

When studying the connection between Africa and China, few scholars have paid attention to parallels between African countries. In the words of Taylor, while speaking of Africa, we must generalize while still acknowledging that each African state is unique, and that, as a result, Chinese engagement with any given African country will always be dependent on the latter's political economy. The majority of studies on China in Africa focus on either appraising the continent as a whole or discussing specific bilateral relationships, such as China-Ethiopia, China-Nigeria, or China-Egypt, among others.<sup>24</sup>

### **China's contribution in Africa's digital infrastructure**

In recent years, there have been several conversations about the contributions of Huawei's Safe City and ZTE's Smart City projects in Africa and around the world. The two Chinese tech giants' urban surveillance solutions are layered and somewhat distinct, but they both rely on operation centers analyzing large volumes of data in real time gathered from sensors and cameras installed around the city.<sup>25</sup>

These businesses provide a range of digital services, from small smart metering to more concerning emergency evaluations aimed at maintaining peace and security and enabling predictive police. Their widespread deployment has been met with skepticism and moral panic, with critics pointing to Huawei and ZTE's solutions as a threat to civil freedoms.<sup>26</sup>

They have the ability to supply these items, but their reactions are predicated on a paradoxical notion of what technology is capable of. They appear to believe that surveillance technologies, aided in some way by their more nefarious and crafty character, will succeed in achieving their desired consequences, where liberation technologies, which we had hoped would free the world from abuse and authoritarianism for many years, have failed. However, data from Asia and Africa is beginning to show how Huawei's own promises of reducing crime and improving centralized city management collide with the —quite predictable— complexity of diverse places' socio-political and technological reality.

From information gathered, Pakistan is one of the main beneficiaries of China's Belt and Road Initiative; after a minor reduction following the installation of Huawei's Safe City in

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<sup>23</sup> Grimm, S. (June 2011). China as Africa's Ambiguous ally why china has a responsibility for Africa's development. Center for Chinese Studies, Stellenbosch Univeristy.

<sup>24</sup> Taylor, I. (2012). The Forum on China- Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) Routledge.

<sup>25</sup> Hannah Ryder, "Two China-Africa Experts on the Stereotypes They're Surprised to Still Be Unpacking," Quartz, 2021, <https://qz.com/africa/1991048/china-africaexperts-on-the-stereotypes-that-persist>.

<sup>26</sup> Samantha Hoffmann, "Double-Edged SwordChina's Sharp Power Exploitation of Emerging Technologies" (National Endowment for Democracy, 2021), <https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Double-Edged-SwordChinas-Sharp-Power-Exploitationof-Emerging-Technologies-HoffmanApril-2021.pdf>.

the country's major urban areas in the country, violent crime has been on the increase. Kenya, one of the earliest African countries to subscribe to Huawei's Safe City, experienced a similar situation, with crime rates evidently not affected by the installation of new surveillance technologies in Nairobi and Mombasa.<sup>27</sup>

Liberation technologies must take into account the complicated techno-political realities of nations that have witnessed a surge in the transformation of their information societies, which are not the same as China's. When they aren't adjusted for different societies, they frequently fail or falter, as the two examples above demonstrate.<sup>28</sup> To summarize, while China's involvement in digital infrastructure in Africa has been substantial, it has also provided immense opportunities for simplicity, reducing complicated processes to the power of a single actor, and adhering to stereotypical Internet impositions.

State surveillance is ubiquitous in practically every country on the globe, and African countries are no exception, and this is seen as a threat to the African users who are thought to be influencing cyberspace. There are a lot of factors in this equation, and we can't just try to help African users by focusing on one part of it.

Prior to the epidemic, Chinese enterprises were already involved in the digitization of public services and other government tasks. In 2017, the AU collaborated with ZTE to build a Smart Health Monitoring Room. Businesses' saw an opportunity to export their solutions to foreign governments while the IT sector produced products and services to combat the coronavirus in China.<sup>29</sup>

According to statistics examined by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Huawei has 23 e-government and cloud service deals throughout Africa as a single company. Senegal is one of the most recent countries to move its government data to a national data center being built by Huawei with a loan from the Chinese government.<sup>30</sup> The Covid-19 pandemic may provide Chinese companies with a strong foothold in Africa's e-health sector, allowing them to expand their involvement in the digitalization of public services through digital efforts dubbed "smart city" projects.

China has had the ambition of exporting smart cities into Africa for quite some time now. It can be recalled that during a special Covid-19-focused China-Africa summit in June 2020, the Chinese leader, President Xi Jinping once again mentioned smart cities, along with clean energy, 5G, and the digital economy, as an area where cooperation should be deepened.<sup>31</sup>

Similarly, the Covid-19 pandemic has helped increase cross-border e-commerce business between China and Africa. At the core of this interconnection initiative is Alibaba's electronic World Trade Platform (eWTP), a one-stop solution for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) encompassing e-commerce, mobile payment systems, transportation, cloud computing, and digital entrepreneurship workshops. Alibaba Group established the eWTP to reduce barriers to digital trade and increase financial incorporations. As some analysts

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<sup>27</sup> Prasso, "Huawei's Claims That It Makes Cities Safer Mostly Look Like Hype," Bloomberg.Com, November 12, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-11-12/huawei-ssurveillance-network-claims-face-scrutiny>.

<sup>28</sup> Joe Parkinson, Nicholas Bariyo, and Josh Chin, "Huawei Technicians Helped African Governments Spy on Political Opponents," Wall Street Journal, August 15, 2019, sec. Tech, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/huawei-technicians-helpedafrican-governments-spy-on-politicalopponents-11565793017>.

<sup>29</sup> China's Evolving Role in Africa's Digitalization: From Building Infrastructure to Shaping Ecosystems | ISPI 2022

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Yusuf, M. (2021, October 22). *China's Reach Into Africa's Digital Sector Worries Experts*. VOA. <https://www.voanews.com/a/china-reach-into-africa-digital-sector-worries-experts/6281543.html>.

explained it, Alibaba did not only use the eWTP for the supply of medical donations during the outbreak; the core idea was to promote Africa's exports to China.<sup>32</sup>

Chinese tech companies are preparing to play a key role in Africa's digital space, which aligns with China's ambition of creating a China-centric global infrastructure and supply structure. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has always been driven by passion, but China is now accelerating this to strengthen China's economic resilience in the face of rising geopolitical tensions with the United States and other trading partners.

### **Model China's Health Diplomacy during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

To Africa and its people, China's engagement with their governments is seen mostly in a positive light. Some scholars view it as strategic and vital importance to the two partners in terms of infrastructure projects and other investments, although this perception is perceived differently from the West.<sup>33</sup> Over the last year and a half, China's Covid-19 pandemic diplomacy in Africa has focused on maintaining a positive image and strong reputation as a responsible partner and a trustworthy friend.

However, the pandemic's widespread repercussions on African people's social and economic well-being, as well as the continent's extremely delayed vaccination rollout, have proven to be severe obstacles for China as a serious partner of choice. As of right now, China's diplomacy with PPEs has been more successful than its diplomacy with vaccines; at the 2021 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation in Dakar, Senegal, health cooperation was put on the drawing board.

In spite of China's previous experience in giving medical help in Africa for numerous outbreaks, the COVID-19 pandemic was unique. This was a time when both the Chinese government's lack of expertise and the fact that it had to tread carefully between providing all resources possible to respond to the domestic health crisis while also not withdrawing from the global stage and performing solidarity and responsibility were factors.

Much of this was accomplished through public messages and social media usage. China's vaccine diplomacy, as the world knows it, has been quite well-mediatized, to say the least.<sup>34</sup> This health diplomatic campaign (primarily carried out by Chinese diplomats and embassies, as well as other players) was critical in getting the message out and raising awareness of China's intervention and provision of vaccines to Africans.

China's vaccine diplomacy potential in Africa has been hampered by a number of obstacles, and what is reported on the continent does not reflect the genuine situation. As of August 22, 2021, China had given out 40 million doses, according to data from a Beijing-based vaccine tracker.<sup>35</sup> Over 620 million doses have already been given, making the total amount of doses sold over a billion. This means that China's vaccination donations account for less than 4% of total donations, which is a very small percentage and far less than media reports claim.

As a result, statistics suggest that just 52 million of the 620 million doses given by China so far are being delivered to Africans in need. China's closest neighbors, unsurprisingly, are getting a much larger part (almost half of the overall amount goes to Asia Pacific), followed

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<sup>32</sup> EWTP Promotes Global Trade During Covid-19 | Alizila. (2020, May 15). eWTP Promotes Global Trade During Covid-19 | Alizila. <https://www.alizila.com/ewtp-promotes-global-trade-during-covid-19/>.

<sup>33</sup> Alden, Chris and Yu-Shan Wu. 2014. "South Africa and China: The Making of a Partnership," SAIIA Occasional Paper 199: 1-35.

<sup>34</sup> Benabdallah, Lina. 2021. "Don't believe the hype about China's 'vaccine diplomacy' in Africa" Washington Post <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/03/05/dont-believe-hypeabout-chinas-vaccine-diplomacy-africa>.

<sup>35</sup> Tracking China's COVID-19 Vaccine Distribution - Bridge Consulting 2022.

by Latin America, which received nearly a third of the whole amount. When donations are separated from sales, Africa ranks second, with 8 of the 40 million donated doses.<sup>36</sup>

Sinopharm and Sinovac, both Chinese-made vaccines, are currently accessible in over thirty-seven African countries, and in many cases, these are the only options for African frontline workers, first responders, and vulnerable populations to get vaccinated. In addition to the vaccine delivery, Egypt, Morocco, and Algeria are currently in the early stages of local manufacturing, which will allow them to create these Chinese vaccines locally.<sup>37</sup>

These local productions come with a caution, stating that production will be limited in the various host nations, and vaccines will not be manufactured in sufficient quantities to meet the population's needs unless intellectual property rights are surrendered.<sup>38</sup> Following the deadly wave of the Omicron Variant, which was initially reported in South Africa, the conditions are ripe for African governments to speed up the manufacture of these vaccinations, especially given the pressing need to get more Chinese vaccines to a bigger African population. FOCAC 2021 gave a tremendous chance for African governments to engage the Chinese in the problems of the continent's people, notably in the area of public health, which is a problem in Africa.<sup>39</sup>

### **Conclusion**

While it is important to understand the China-Africa relationship on its own terms and in the context of its unique historical development, it is also increasingly relevant to see the relationship in a broader global context. In the wake of a different type of economic initiatives designed for Africa and launched by US and EU to challenge China's Belt and Road Initiative in the continent, it appears like the three year period between now and the next FOCAC will see increasing big power arm-wrestling over Africa's development roadway.

Historically, Africa has always found itself in the middle of powerful competing initiatives for its development. Indeed, competition is not actually a bad thing for Africa and its population. With agency, prudence, and a strategic vision, African governments may be able to orchestrate their own development initiatives and build their own channels for the kind of Africa they wish to see.

This is how China's participation on the continent should be viewed at all times. With this in mind, the most essential aspect of China-Africa space engagement to watch in the future is how ongoing activities change the approach of partners and groups of like-minded countries in intra-continental and international conventions. This is significant for two reasons. To begin with, the international landscape of space governance allegiances appears to be fracturing between countries allied with the United States and those aligned with China. There are also current efforts in Africa to build a Pan-African approach to space governance. This could lead to a more consistent voice on a range of geopolitical and space governance issues.

China's help with Africa's digital infrastructure has been important, but it has also been a good thing because it has made things easier for people to do. For example, it has made it easier for one person to do a lot of things and to make the internet open and closed.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Egypt Today. 2021. 5M additional Egyptian made Sinovac doses to be available in September <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/107038/5M-additional-Egyptian-madeSinovac-doses-to-be-available-in>

<sup>38</sup> Eric Olander. 2021. China Moves Ahead With Vaccine Distribution While COVAX, U.S. Efforts Falter <https://chinaafricaproject.com/podcasts/china-moves-ahead-with-vaccine-distributionwhile-covax-u-s-efforts-falter>.

<sup>39</sup> Benabdallah, Lina. 2021. "Don't believe the hype about China's 'vaccine diplomacy' in Africa" Washington Post <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/03/03/dont-believe-hypeabout-chinas-vaccine-diplomacy-africa>

This paper was able to connect the dots in the post-Covid-19 engagement between China and Africa, while also highlighting areas that require immediate attention and improvement, particularly in the health sector. It concludes that, like with any other economic engagement, Africa must assess whether China's sustained presence on the continent is in the continent's best interests post-Covid-19 and beyond. The need for an African China strategy is important because it will help Africa become more focused and effective, and it will help Africa put its own interests first.

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