

SYMPOSIUM: CHINA AND EUROPE IN THE AFRICAN CONTINENT: ECONOMIC, LEGAL AND POLITICAL PERSPECTIVES

INTRODUCTION TO SYMPOSIUM ON CHINA AND EUROPE IN AFRICA

*Lorenzo Gasbarri**

Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies

*Melvis Ndiloseh***

Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies

Abstract

This paper introduces the symposium “China and Europe in the African Continent: Economic, Legal and Political Perspectives,” held at the Sant’Anna School of Advanced Studies (2023). It examines the evolving triangular relationship among China, Europe, and Africa within the shifting global order. As Africa emerges as a central actor in sustainability and development, China’s infrastructure-driven Belt and Road Initiative and Europe’s governance-oriented aid policies reveal contrasting strategies that shape the continent’s future. The symposium highlights Africa’s agency in navigating this competition and identifies research gaps concerning trilateral cooperation, debt sustainability, and long-term development outcomes. Contributions explore case studies across finance, health, and governance, emphasizing the need for partnerships that center African priorities. Ultimately, the symposium calls for a shift from rivalry to strategic collaboration, positioning Africa not as a passive recipient but as an active architect of equitable global engagement.

BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

As Africa ascends in the 21st century as a pivotal player in areas such as global sustainability, the green transition, and energy, its relationship with China and Europe is undergoing significant transformation within the framework of a rapidly shifting global order.¹ Both China and Europe, two of the most influential actors in Africa's economic landscape, are vying for dominance on the continent. This "new race for Africa" is characterized by distinct strategies: China's rapidly growing investments in infrastructure projects, particularly through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and Europe's sustained emphasis on development aid and governance. In recent years, this competition has attracted significant attention, as China has increasingly positioned itself as a leading economic partner for many African nations, challenging Europe's historical and long-standing role as a major economic and diplomatic force.²

As Africa's economic significance grows, so too does the importance of understanding the dynamics of this competition. The outcomes of this rivalry will directly impact Africa's economic future, its political landscape, and its ability to leverage its resources and geopolitical position in its dealings with both global powers. Africa's potential to shape the global future cannot be overstated. By recognizing Africa's growing influence, China and Europe are recalibrating their strategies, but the continent's ability to navigate this competition will determine its future trajectory. Understanding this evolving relationship is thus essential for assessing Africa's role on the world stage and how its development path will unfold in the coming decades.

It is against this backdrop that the symposium "*China and Europe in the African Continent: Economic, Legal and Political Perspectives*" was conceived. Held at the Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies in Italy from November 30 to December 1, 2023, the event convened an impressive cohort of scholars, practitioners, and subject matter experts from Africa, Europe, North America, Asia, and Australia. These experts brought diverse insights and extensive experience to the complex triadic relationship between China, Europe, and Africa. The symposium was uniquely positioned to foster

* Assistant Professor (RTDb) of Public International Law, Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna. *Corresponding Author*. E: Lorenzo.Gasbarri@santannapisa.it

** Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies, E: melvis.ndiloseh@santannapisa.it

1 DAWN C. MURPHY, *China's Rise in the Global South: The Middle East, Africa, and Beijing's Alternative World Order* 57 (2022).

2 R. AIDOO & S. HESS, *Non-Interference 2.0: China's Evolving Foreign Policy Towards a Changing Africa*, 44 J. CURRENT CHINESE AFF. 107 (2015); D. A. FORETIA, J. C. KOUAM, R. NANTCHOUANG, C. SOONG, A. VASSELIER & G. WIEGAND, *Competing with China in Africa: Strategic Suggestions on the EU Global Gateway* 7 (N. Fabian ed., 2024).

a multidimensional analysis of Sino-European engagements in Africa, addressing critical themes such as peace and security, trade and development, and the burgeoning health and pharmaceutical markets.

The symposium's key contributions lie in its comparative approach. By analyzing policies and engagements from both Chinese and European perspectives, the conference illuminated the distinct strategies employed by these global powers in Africa. For instance, while China's investments in infrastructure projects often emphasize rapid implementation and tangible outcomes, European efforts frequently center on long-term development aid, governance reforms, and sustainability goals.³ These differing paradigms highlight the growing competition between China and Europe, as African nations navigate partnerships that promise immediate benefits versus those that prioritize systemic development.

The symposium also emphasized Africa's agency, refraining from generalizing particular experiences and instead incorporating insights from diverse countries and regional organizations. This nuanced approach is essential for understanding the continent's evolving role in shaping its engagements with global powers. For instance, the African Union's Agenda 2063 explicitly calls for partnerships that align with Africa's developmental priorities, reflecting a shift from passive recipient to active participant in global dialogues.⁴

In the following pages, we will introduce the symposium by presenting a preliminary overview of the background, covering the main differences between the Chinese and European approaches to the African continent. Then, we will discuss the symposium rationale and briefly introduce its four contributions.

INTRODUCTION TO CHINA'S AFRICA STRATEGY

China's approach to Africa is centered on its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013 under President Xi Jinping. The BRI aims to enhance global trade routes and economic connectivity, positioning Africa as a key region in this strategy. Over the past decade, China has emerged as the largest trading partner for many African countries, with trade volumes surpassing \$200 billion by 2020.⁵ This engagement is defined by China's ambitious infrastructure development efforts, designed to connect Asia,

³ C. ALDEN & D. LARGE EDs., *New Directions in Africa-China Studies* (2018).

⁴ AFRICAN UNION, *Our Aspirations for the Africa We Want* (2015), <https://au.int/en/agenda2063/aspirations>

⁵ STATISTA, Africa-China Relations, STATISTA, <https://www.statista.com/topics/8411/africa-china-relations/#topicOverview> (last visited Dec. 20, 2025).

Europe, and Africa through a comprehensive network of trade routes and investments. Critics show how BRI development came at the expense of human rights protection, inaugurating a form of “racial capitalism”.⁶

China's presence in Africa is most prominently marked by its extensive investment in infrastructure projects, including roads, railways, ports, and energy facilities, which are critical to enhancing the continent's connectivity and trade. For example, the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway connects landlocked Ethiopia to the port of Djibouti, significantly boosting trade and economic activity in East Africa.⁷ Similarly, the Mombasa-Nairobi Railway in Kenya, a \$3.2 billion project funded through Chinese loans, has drastically reduced travel times between the two cities from 12 hours to just 4 hours, facilitating regional commerce and mobility.⁸ Another notable example is the Lamu Port-South Sudan-Ethiopia Transport Corridor (LAPSSET), designed to link landlocked South Sudan and Ethiopia to the Indian Ocean, highlighting China's strategic focus on enhancing regional connectivity.⁹ These initiatives, along with major developments in Zambia and Angola, underscore China's pivotal role in reshaping Africa's economic landscape. Through such large-scale projects, the BRI is fostering regional integration and creating new opportunities for global trade, while simultaneously consolidating China's influence across the continent.

China's involvement in African infrastructure development is seen as a critical driver of economic growth, particularly in countries with significant resource wealth. However, this growing influence raises questions about the long-term implications for African economies, especially in relation to the rising debt burden associated with these large-scale loans. Critics argue that China's massive loans could burden African economies, especially as the continent grapples with rising debt levels. As of 2020, the World Bank estimated that African countries' external debt had reached over \$700 billion, with China being one of the largest creditors.¹⁰ According to the China-Africa Research Initiative at Johns Hopkins University, China's loans to African countries have skyrocketed, with an estimated total of \$153 billion disbursed from 2000 to

6 VINCENT WONG, Racial Capitalism with Chinese Characteristics: Analyzing the Political Economy of Racialized Dispossession and Exploitation in Xinjiang, 3 AFR. J. INT'L ECON. L. 7 (2022).

7 THE DIPLOMAT, *The China-Built Addis-Djibouti Railway Gains Steam* (Feb. 5, 2024), <https://thediplomat.com/2024/02/the-china-built-addis-djibouti-railway-gains-steam/>

8 D. H. SHINN, China-Africa Ties in Historical Context, in *China-Africa and an Economic Transformation* 61 (A. Oqubay & J. Y. Lin eds., 2019).

9 A. J. BROWNE, *LAPSSET: The History and Politics of an Eastern African Megaproject* (2015), <https://www.refworld.org/reference/countryrep/rvi/2015/en/108834>.

10 A. VINES, C. BUTLER & Y. JIE, *The Response to Debt Distress in Africa and the Role of China* (Dec. 2022), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/12/response-debt-distress-africa-and-role-china>.

2019.¹¹ While China argues that its loans are a means of promoting development, others fear that Africa could become heavily dependent on Chinese financing, compromising its political and economic autonomy.¹² Some critics argue that the BRI is leading to a "debt trap diplomacy," where African nations may find themselves unable to repay Chinese loans, potentially leading to Chinese control over strategic assets.¹³ The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has raised alarms about countries like Zambia, which defaulted on its Chinese debt in 2020, highlighting the financial risks involved.¹⁴ As Dambisa Moyo has cautioned that China's growing footprint in Africa represents both opportunity and challenge: it is a harbinger of development but also a looming debt crisis.¹⁵

INTRODUCTION TO EUROPE'S AFRICA STRATEGY

The colonial era still imprints Europe's involvement in Africa, with the long-lasting effects of the control over large parts of the continent, the exploitation of natural resources, human rights violations, and the encroachment of the development of functioning public institutions. It goes without saying that many European countries maintain strong economic, political, and cultural ties with their former colonies, and that a paternalist approach does not help the creation of sustainable relationships based on equality and mutual trust.

Today, Europe's role in Africa is characterized by an ambivalent approach, based, on the one hand on development aid, trade agreements, and efforts to promote peace and security, democratic governance and human rights. On the other hand, postcolonial relationships persist based on economic dependency, especially in the energy sector, with the growing power of private companies with ties to European governments. The European Union (EU) is one of Africa's largest donors, providing aid through programs like the European Development Fund (EDF), which focuses on poverty reduction, infrastructure, education, and healthcare.¹⁶ Concerning the development

-
- 11 K. ACKER & D. BRAUTIGAM, Twenty Years of Data on China's Africa Lending (Briefing Paper No. 04/2021) (2021), <https://www.econstor.eu/handle/10419/248245>.
 - 12 D. M. TULL, China in Africa: European Perceptions and Responses to the Chinese Challenge (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP) 2008), <https://www.swp-berlin.org/fachpublikationen>
 - 13 D. BRAUTIGAM, *The Dragon's Gift: The Real Story of China in Africa* (2009).
 - 14 L. L. FERRY & A. O. ZEITZ, China, the IMF, and Sovereign Debt Crises, 68 INT'L STUD. Q. sqae119 (Sept. 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqae119>; AFRONOMICSLAW, Sovereign Debt News Update No. 144: Road..., <https://www.afronomicslaw.org/category/african-sovereign-debt-justice-network-afsdjn/sovereign-debt-news-update-no-144-road>.
 - 15 D. MOYO, Dambisa Moyo: Is China the New Idol for Emerging Economies? (June 2013) (video), TED Conferences, https://www.ted.com/talks/dambisa_moyo_is_china_the_new_idol_for_emerging_economies; D. MOYO, *Dead Aid: Why Aid Is Not Working and How There Is a Better Way for Africa* (2009).
 - 16 G. K. BOUNTAGKIDIS, K. C. FRAGKOS & C. C. FRANGOS, EU Development Aid towards Sub-Saharan Africa: Exploring the Normative Principle, 4 SOC. SCI. 85 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci4010085>.

of public institutions, the EU presents itself as a model of regional integration, leading critical voices to raise awareness on the colonial pitfalls of its self-perception, embedded in Eurocentric narratives.¹⁷ Despite development projects and economic support conditioned upon institutional reforms aimed at strengthening public institutions, the rule of law crisis in several African countries evidence the failure of European approaches.¹⁸

In this context, Europe's influence in Africa is being increasingly challenged by China's economic model. European investments tend to focus on long-term development goals, such as governance reforms, democracy building, and social development, which are often slower to deliver tangible results compared to China's rapid infrastructure projects. For example, while Europe has supported projects aimed at building education systems or enhancing public health in Africa, these initiatives tend to be smaller-scale and more aligned with the EU's soft power approach, emphasizing values like human rights and good governance.¹⁹ Europe has long been a proponent of debt relief and structural adjustment programs, often linked to conditions set by international financial institutions like the IMF and World Bank. However, these programs have been criticized for their stringency and for exacerbating economic inequalities in some African countries. Europe's more cautious approach to lending contrasts with China's more aggressive stance, with some African leaders opting for Chinese loans despite the risks, recognizing the immediate need for infrastructure development.²⁰

Europe's economic ties with Africa face increasing challenges due to shifting global trade patterns, rising competition from powers like China, and a growing backlash against neocolonialism, particularly in former French colonies. Although Europe remains a significant trade partner for many African nations, its influence is being increasingly tested. This dynamic is further shaped by China's ability to offer more appealing terms

17 A. CUYVERS & P. OUMA, *The European Union as a Model for African Regionalism: Decolonizing Regional Integration in Africa?*, 3 *AFR. J. INT'L ECON. L.* 159 (2022); M. M. MBENGUE & O. D. AKINKUGBE, *The Criticism of Eurocentrism and International Law: Countering and Pluralizing the Research, Teaching, and Practice of Eurocentric International Law*, in *The Oxford Handbook of International Law in Europe* (Anne Van Aaken et al. eds., 2025).

18 O. D. AKINKUGBE, *The Challenge to the Rule of Law and Democracy in Contemporary West and Central Africa*, in *The Rule of Law Under Pressure: A Transnational Challenge* (Gregory Shaffer & Wayne Sandholtz eds., 2025).

19 EUROPEAN COMMISSION, *Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: Towards a Comprehensive Strategy with Africa* (JOIN(2020) 4 final) (Mar. 9, 2020), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020JC0004>; EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, *EU Support to Democracy and Good Governance in Africa* (Briefing, Nov. 2017), [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2017/614578/EPRS_BRI\(2017\)614578_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2017/614578/EPRS_BRI(2017)614578_EN.pdf).

20 Y. WANG & Y. XU, *China and Africa: A New Narrative on Debt Sustainability and Infrastructure Financing*, 7 *J. INFRASTRUCTURE POL'Y & DEV.* 2181 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.24294/jipd.v7i1.2181>.

for infrastructure development, often bypassing the stringent governance and political reform conditions typically attached to European-backed loans.

RESEARCH GAPS AND SYMPOSIUM RATIONALE

While substantial research has examined the competition between China and Europe in Africa, significant gaps remain, particularly regarding Africa's agency in shaping its interactions with these powers. Much of the existing literature focuses on the policies and strategies of external actors, often sidelining the perspectives and priorities of African states themselves.²¹ This imbalance has led to a narrow understanding of how African states leverage this competition to secure developmental gains or assert their sovereignty. For instance, while China's Belt and Road Initiative and Europe's development aid frameworks have been extensively analyzed, less attention has been given to how African leaders strategically engage with these initiatives to negotiate better terms or mitigate associated risks. This omission is critical, as it overlooks Africa's potential to act as a broker of its destiny rather than a passive recipient of external influence.

Furthermore, there is limited discourse on the long-term sustainability of the competing strategies employed by China and Europe in Africa. Scholars have raised concerns about the environmental, social, and political implications of China's infrastructure-driven approach, including the debt sustainability of large-scale projects.²² At the same time, Europe's emphasis on governance and aid has been critiqued for its conditionalities, which can sometimes hinder swift implementation of development projects.²³ However, the intersection of these approaches, where they conflict or complement each other, and their combined impact on Africa's broader development goals remain underexplored. Addressing these gaps is critical for fostering a more balanced and informed discussion about the future of Africa's global partnerships.

Another significant research gap lies in the lack of discourse surrounding the potential for trilateral collaborations between China, Europe, and Africa. While the competitive dynamics between China and Europe in Africa have been extensively documented, the possibility of cooperative frameworks that align the interests of all three regions remains largely unexplored. Such collaborations could address critical global

21 C. ALDEN & D. LARGE EDs., *New Directions in Africa-China Studies* (2018), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315162461>.

22 D. BRAUTIGAM, *The Dragon's Gift: The Real Story of China in Africa* (2009).

23 ORGANISATION FOR ECONOMIC CO-OPERATION AND DEVELOPMENT, *Development Assistance and Conditionality* (2018), https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2018/03/development-assistance-and-conditionality_ae1298ae/e3a383cb-en.pdf.

challenges, including sustainable development, climate change, and global health crises. For instance, China's infrastructure expertise and financial resources could complement Europe's experience in governance reforms and capacity building, while African nations contribute local knowledge and strategic leadership to ensure that projects align with their developmental priorities. However, there is limited academic and policy-oriented dialogue on how to harmonize these approaches effectively.

The absence of a robust discussion on trilateral initiatives means missed opportunities to create synergistic solutions that could maximize benefits for Africa while fostering constructive relationships among global powers. Moreover, the lack of trust and differing ideological approaches between China and Europe often hinder the realization of such partnerships. While European policymakers frequently express concerns about China's debt-driven model, and Chinese officials critique Europe's slow bureaucratic processes, these disagreements overshadow the potential for joint action on shared interests, such as advancing Africa's green energy transition or improving cross-border trade infrastructure.²⁴ As scholars have noted, a framework for trilateral cooperation could be transformative, shifting the narrative from rivalry to partnership in addressing Africa's developmental challenges.²⁵ Research that explores mechanisms for building trust and fostering collaboration among these actors is essential for advancing Africa's global partnerships in ways that go beyond zero-sum competition.

SUMMARY OF SPECIAL ISSUE

This special issue builds on the outcomes of the symposium, synthesizing the diverse perspectives shared during the event. It captures critical debates on the nature of Sino-European competition in Africa, with particular attention to pressing concerns around debt sustainability, development priorities, and the broader implications for Africa's economic and political sovereignty. The featured papers delve into case studies from different regions and sectors, providing context-specific insights that challenge

-
- 24 L. LIU, *The EU and China's Engagement in Africa: The Dilemma of Socialisation* (Occasional Paper No. 93) (2011) <https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/occasional-papers/eu-and-chinas-engagement-africa-dilemma-socialisation>.
- 25 DELORS CENTRE, *An EU Trilateral Cooperation : Agenda with Africa and China for a Post-COVID-19 World* (2021), https://www.delorscentre.eu/fileadmin/2_Research/1_About_our_research/2_Research_centres/6_Jacques_Delors_Centre/Publications/JDI-VisionsPaper_2021-4-1_final.pdf; EUROPEAN INSTITUTE FOR ASIAN STUDIES, *Advancing EU-China-Africa trilateral partnerships: the role of joint business ventures in promoting sustainability, innovation and institutional synergies* (2019), https://www.eias.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/SaraMargherita_A-EU-CN-2.pdf; X. DONG & C. JIANG, *EU-China-Africa Trilateral Development Cooperation: A Global Governance Perspective*, in *Proceedings of the 7th International Conference on Humanities and Social Science Research* (ICHSSR 2021) 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.210519.016>.

oversimplified narratives. For example, contributions explore how China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects intersect with European Union (EU) trade policies, as well as their implications for local governance and regional stability.

By highlighting these intersections, this issue underscores the importance of addressing the gaps identified earlier. Beyond merely cataloging Chinese and European engagements in Africa, it advocates for a more collaborative and inclusive dialogue that takes Africa's aspirations and challenges into account. As emphasized during the symposium, the future of Africa cannot be written solely through the lenses of external powers; it must be a story shaped by Africans themselves, with partners who recognize and respect their sovereignty.

Jackline Nyaga (Riara Law School) expands this discourse in her article *"Financing Development in Africa: A Comparative Analysis of the Western Model and China's Approach."* Nyaga contrasts the development financing models of China and Europe, exploring how historical Western hegemony fostered neoliberal reforms that often imposed stringent conditionalities. She traces the rise of China as a significant partner, offering a financing model focused on infrastructure and the extractive industries with fewer political strings attached. Through case studies, Nyaga demonstrates how this model challenges Western dominance but also raises concerns about debt sustainability and resource dependency. She introduces the concept of "norm ambivalence," where China simultaneously mimics and challenges Western approaches, creating a paradoxical dynamic. Nyaga's work highlights the urgent need for African countries to leverage these competing models to craft a development trajectory that prioritizes sustainable growth and self-reliance.

Francesco Gaudiosi (University of Naples Federico II) delves into the health sector in his article *"Global Health Security in Africa: A Comparative Analysis of EU and China Regulatory Measures for Regional Health Partnerships."* Gaudiosi contrasts the European Union's fragmented approach to global health, hampered by internal complexities and member state autonomy, with China's centralized and development-driven health partnerships under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). His analysis of binding and non-binding agreements reveals the contrasting rationales behind EU and Chinese engagements, with the former emphasizing regulatory frameworks and the latter prioritizing pragmatic, infrastructure-focused interventions. Gaudiosi identifies a crucial gap in both approaches: the lack of alignment with Africa's long-term health priorities. He argues that any effective partnership in global health must integrate Africa's health security concerns as a cornerstone, rather than an afterthought.

The issue concludes with the work of Roberto Isibor and Caterina Coroneo, whose article *"The Future of African Pharmaceutical Market Harmonization: A Comparative Analysis Between the European and Chinese Approach to AMA Establishment"* examines the critical role of regulatory harmonization in Africa's pharmaceutical sector. They explore how the African Medicines Agency (AMA) could benefit from foreign investments, while comparing the strengths and weaknesses of European and Chinese approaches. Isibor and Coroneo highlight the EU's support for regulatory standardization, contrasted with China's infrastructure-focused strategy, which often bypasses regulatory complexities. They argue that both models offer valuable lessons, but neither fully aligns with the specific needs of Africa's pharmaceutical market, which requires a balanced approach that combines infrastructure with regulatory capacity building.

KEY INSIGHTS FROM THE SYMPOSIUM

The contributions reveal striking parallels in the engagement patterns of China and Europe across various sectors. Both powers, despite their divergent rhetoric, often replicate neocolonial dynamics. Europe, constrained by its colonial legacy and bureaucratic inertia, struggles to present itself as a genuine partner, while China's approach, though framed as "South-South cooperation," often perpetuates exploitative practices under the guise of pragmatism. This creates a competitive dynamic where African agency is frequently relegated to the background.

What emerges is a pressing need for Africa to assert itself as the central pole in any trilateral dialogue. African agency must move beyond rhetorical acknowledgment to tangible influence in shaping policies and priorities. Africa's future lies in its ability to harness its strategic position not as a battleground for external powers but as a platform for equitable and mutually beneficial partnerships.

By emphasizing Africa's role as an equal stakeholder, the symposium advocates for a transformative paradigm shift, one that departs from the competition-centric engagement models of China and Europe and fosters a collaborative framework that truly addresses Africa's developmental aspirations.