

G20

Chinese Belt and Road Initiative and Chinese
investment in Africa

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Background of the issue

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Chinese investment in Africa grew out of longer historical ties but took their current form in the early 21st century, especially after 2013 under President Xi Jinping. The issue emerged as China shifted from a relatively limited partner to a central economic and political actor across Africa through large-scale infrastructure finance and trade.¹

Historical context: Belt and Road

The BRI was officially launched in 2013 when President Xi Jinping announced the overland "Silk Road Economic Belt" in Kazakhstan and the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road" shortly afterward, reviving the imagery of ancient Silk Road trade routes linking China with Eurasia and Africa.² Historically, China references the Han dynasty Silk Road and the voyages of admiral Zheng He in the 15th century to frame BRI as a return to long-standing patterns of connectivity rather than a completely new project.³

Political context: Belt and Road

Politically, BRI is central to China's foreign policy and economic strategy, designed to expand trade routes, export industrial overcapacity, and deepen economic interdependence with partner states.⁴ It also reflects China's rising-power status and strategic competition with

¹ Tsuji, Chinatsu. "Belt and Road Initiative | Asian Development Project | Britannica." *Www.britannica.com*, 22 Nov. 2023, www.britannica.com/topic/Belt-and-Road-Initiative.

² Feingold, Spencer. "China's Belt and Road Initiative Turns 10. Here's What to Know." *World Economic Forum*, 20 Nov. 2023, www.weforum.org/stories/2023/11/china-belt-road-initiative-trade-bri-silk-road/.

³ "The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) | Port Economics, Management and Policy." *Port Economics, Management and Policy*, 4 Jan. 2021, porteconomicsmanagement.org/pemp/contents/part2/port-hinterlands-regionalization/belt-and-road-initiative-bri/.

⁴ "China's Belt and Road Initiative in Africa: Kenya's Pivotal Role." *Global Affairs and Strategic Studies*, en.unav.edu/web/global-affairs/china-s-belt-and-road-initiative-in-africa-kenya-s-pivotal-role.

Western powers by offering an alternative model of development finance with an emphasis on infrastructure, state-to-state deals, and limited conditionality on domestic governance.⁵

Emergence of BRI as an issue

When first announced in 2013, BRI attracted limited attention, but within a few years it expanded to cover large parts of Asia, Europe, the Middle East, Latin America, and Africa, making it a defining feature of global infrastructure politics.⁶

Concerns over debt sustainability, project transparency, and geopolitical influence turned BRI into a major international issue by the late 2010s, prompting debates over whether it constitutes “win–win cooperation” or creates new dependencies on China.⁷

Historical context: China–Africa investment

Modern China Africa relations date back to the 1950s–1960s, when the People’s Republic of China supported anti-colonial movements and built symbolic projects like the TAZARA railway between Tanzania and Zambia in the 1970s.⁸ Economic engagement accelerated after the end of the Cold War, with growing trade, resource deals, and construction contracts, setting the stage for today’s large-scale investment flows.⁹

⁵ Rwangoga, Davis Ankunda . “China’s Belt and Road Initiative: A Curse or Blessing for African Countries.” *IRPJ = Intergovernmental Research and Policy Journal*, 25 May 2022, irpj.euclid.int/articles/chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-a-curse-or-blessing-for-african-countries/.

⁶ WANG, Christoph NEDOPIL. “Ten Years of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): Evolution and the Road Ahead – Green Finance & Development Center.” *Green Finance & Development Center*, 12 Oct. 2023, greenfdc.org/ten-years-of-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-bri-evolution-and-the-road-ahead/.

⁷ Skidmore, David. “The Complex Politics of China’s Belt and Road Initiative.” *The Diplomat.com*, The Diplomat, 19 Sept. 2025, thediplomat.com/2025/09/the-complex-politics-of-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative/.

⁸ w(‘#authname’).text. “\$W(‘#MainHeadline’).Text.” *Xtrafrica Media Group* , Xtrafrica Media Group, 2025, www.xtrafrica.com/news/timeline-of-how-china-became-africa%E2%80%99s-top-economic-partner. Accessed 25 Nov. 2025.

⁹ “4. The Role of FOCAC - China in Africa - AGE (African Growing Enterprises) File.” *Institute of Developing Economies*, www.ide.go.jp/English/Data/Africa_file/Manualreport/cia_04.html.

Political context: China–Africa investment

In 2000, China created the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), a triennial summit mechanism that institutionalized political dialogue, aid, and investment commitments with African governments.¹⁰ China presents this engagement as South–South cooperation based on non-interference and mutual benefit, while African leaders often contrast China’s loans and projects with Western conditional lending and structural adjustment.¹¹

Emergence of China–Africa investment as an issue

From the mid-2000s, China announced large credit lines, debt relief, and the China–Africa Development Fund, supporting Chinese firms in sectors such as infrastructure, energy, and telecommunications; this scale-up made China Africa’s top trading partner by around 2009. As investments multiplied, debates emerged over resource dependence, labor practices, environmental impacts, and whether Chinese finance creates “debt traps,” turning China–Africa investment into a central topic in the international political economy.¹²

How BRI and Africa intersect

Africa was formally linked to BRI in the mid-2010s, especially at the 2015 FOCAC summit, where China and African states agreed to explore synergies between BRI corridors and Africa’s own integration and development agendas. Since then, flagship BRI-branded

¹⁰ w('#authorname').text. "\$W('#MainHeadline').Text." *Xtrafrica Media Group* , Xtrafrica Media Group, 2025, www.xtrafrica.com/news/timeline-of-how-china-became-africa%E2%80%99s-top-economic-partner. Accessed 25 Nov. 2025.

¹¹ Wikipedia Contributors. "Forum on China–Africa Cooperation." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 27 July 2019, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forum_on_China%E2%80%99sAfrica_Cooperation.

¹² Rwangoga, Davis Ankunda . "China’s Belt and Road Initiative: A Curse or Blessing for African Countries." *IRPJ = Intergovernmental Research and Policy Journal*, 25 May 2022, irpj.euclid.int/articles/chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-a-curse-or-blessing-for-african-countries/.

projects in African railways, ports, power plants, and roads have made Chinese infrastructure finance a highly visible and politically sensitive element of China–Africa relations.¹³

Past resolutions

Several UN actions and related international documents have framed or referenced the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and China–Africa cooperation, often in connection with development, security, and regional cooperation.

UN Charter and 2030 Agenda

The UN system links BRI to the UN Charter’s development provisions, especially Articles 55 and 56, which call for international cooperation on higher living standards, full employment, and economic progress. BRI is also framed as supporting the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals, emphasizing infrastructure, connectivity, and inclusive growth.¹⁴

UN General Assembly resolutions

A 2016 UN General Assembly resolution on “strengthening the links between all modes of transport” explicitly welcomed or referenced the role of the “21st-Century Maritime Silk Road (the Belt and Road)” in enhancing sustainable transport and connectivity for development. More broadly, repeated General Assembly resolutions on sustainable transport

¹³ “China’s Belt and Road Initiative in Africa: Kenya’s Pivotal Role.” *Global Affairs and Strategic Studies*, en.unav.edu/web/global-affairs/china-s-belt-and-road-initiative-in-africa-kenya-s-pivotal-role.

¹⁴ Nations, United. “Belt and Road Legal Cooperation Forum | Naciones Unidas.” *United Nations*, 2025, www.un.org/es/desa/belt-and-road-legal-cooperation-forum. Accessed 25 Nov. 2025.

and infrastructure are cited by UN officials as providing a normative framework under which BRI-related connectivity projects should operate.¹⁵

UN Security Council and regional cooperation

In 2017, UN Security Council Resolution 2344 on Afghanistan called for stronger regional economic cooperation, explicitly mentioning the Belt and Road Initiative among the initiatives that could help support stability and development in the region.¹⁶

This reference signaled that major UN security organs recognize BRI as one of several frameworks potentially contributing to peacebuilding through economic connectivity.¹⁷

UN–BRI cooperation statements

UN departments and senior officials have welcomed BRI as a platform that can, if aligned with UN norms, advance the SDGs and global development, for example through statements at BRI legal cooperation forums hosted under UN auspices. These statements stress that BRI-related treaties and agreements should be interpreted within existing UN conventions, from the Law of the Sea to sustainable transport and environmental accords.¹⁸

¹⁵ Nations, United. "Belt and Road Legal Cooperation Forum | Naciones Unidas." *United Nations*, 2025, www.un.org/es/desa/belt-and-road-legal-cooperation-forum. Accessed 25 Nov. 2025.

¹⁶ The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. "The Belt and Road Initiative: A Key Pillar of the Global Community of Shared Future--the Third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation." *Www.beltandroadforum.org*, Oct. 2023, www.beltandroadforum.org/english/n101/2023/1010/c124-895.html.

¹⁷ "Full Text of President Xi's Speech at Opening of Belt and Road Forum_Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the UN." *China-Mission.gov.cn*, 2017, un.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/zgyw/201705/t20170527_8394285.htm. Accessed 25 Nov. 2025.

¹⁸ Nations, United. "Belt and Road Legal Cooperation Forum | Naciones Unidas." *United Nations*, 2025, www.un.org/es/desa/belt-and-road-legal-cooperation-forum. Accessed 25 Nov. 2025.

China–Africa and multilateral declarations

While not UN resolutions, China–Africa cooperation is structured around FOCAC declarations, such as the Beijing Declaration and later communiqués, which affirm commitment to UN principles, multilateralism, and greater representation of developing countries in UN bodies, including the Security Council.¹⁹

Recent China–Africa joint declarations also frame their cooperation, including BRI projects in Africa, as supporting multilateralism, the UN-centered international system, and implementation of the 2030 Agenda.²⁰

Key Actors and Stakeholders

The main actors around the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Chinese investment in Africa include China, African states and regional bodies, major external powers, international financial institutions, and various non-state groups. Their interests range from development and market access to geopolitical influence, which creates both partnerships and points of tension.

China and Chinese institutions

The core state actor is the People’s Republic of China, working through government ministries, policy banks such as the China Exim Bank, and state-owned enterprises that design, finance, and build BRI infrastructure. China’s interests include securing markets and resources, exporting industrial capacity, strengthening political ties with the Global South,

¹⁹ “Beijing Declaration of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation.” *China-Embassy.gov.cn*, 2025. za.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/jbwzlm/zfgxss/zywx/201206/t20120618_7682382.htm. Accessed 25 Nov. 2025.

²⁰ “China-Africa Changsha Declaration on Upholding Solidarity and Cooperation of the Global South_Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China.” *Fmprc.gov.cn*, 2025, www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zy/gb/202506/t20250611_11645736.html. Accessed 25 Nov. 2025.

and promoting its own development model, occasionally leading to friction with Western countries and multilateral lenders over standards and transparency.²¹

African governments and regional bodies

African national governments and regional organizations such as the African Union use BRI and broader Chinese investment to pursue infrastructure, industrialization, and regional integration goals, often via the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) as the main dialogue platform. Their interests focus on financing development and enhancing bargaining power, but there are internal debates over debt sustainability, local employment, environmental impacts, and the balance of dependence versus diversification of partners.²²

Other major powers and coalitions

The European Union, United States, Japan, and India are key external actors that view BRI and China’s role in Africa through strategic and economic lenses, sometimes cooperating with China on specific projects while also developing alternative connectivity and investment initiatives. India and Japan, for example, have promoted concepts like the Asia–Africa Growth Corridor and explore trilateral cooperation with the EU in Africa as a counterweight or complement to BRI, reflecting competitive as well as cooperative dynamics.²³

International financial institutions

²¹ “Diving into the Stakeholder Constellations behind the Implementation of Two Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Projects.” *RSA Main*, www.regionalstudies.org/news/blog2023-diving-into-the-stakeholder-constellations-behind-the-implementation-of-two-belt-and-road-initiative-bri-projects/.

²² Christine, Li; “FOCAC 2024: Moving Away from Large Infrastructure Deals towards Normative Power of China.” *Stiftung Wissenschaft Und Politik (SWP)*, 2024, www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/megatrends-spotlight-38-focac-2024-towards-normative-power-of-china.

²³ Grieger, Gisela. *Towards a Joint Western Alternative to the Belt and Road Initiative?* 2021.

Multilateral development banks such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) sometimes co-finance infrastructure with Chinese banks and firms, bringing their own safeguards and governance standards. Their involvement can align BRI-type projects more closely with international norms, but also creates complex project governance with multiple lenders, each with different priorities and risk assessments.²⁴

Non-state stakeholders

Chinese and African construction companies, local businesses, and workers are directly affected, gaining contracts and jobs but also facing issues like wage disputes, safety concerns, or competition between local and Chinese firms. Civil society organizations, local communities, and environmental groups engage as watchdogs, advocating for transparency, social and environmental protections, and fair compensation, which can delay or reshape projects and sometimes bring them into conflict with governments and companies.²⁵

Current Situation

As of 2025, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) remains central to China's global strategy, and Africa has become one of its main geographic focuses, with activity shifting toward energy, resources, and digital infrastructure while debt and governance concerns persist. A recent 2025 research report synthesizing academic and policy evidence shows that BRI is not

²⁴ "Diving into the Stakeholder Constellations behind the Implementation of Two Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Projects." *RSA Main*, www.regionalstudies.org/news/blog2023-diving-into-the-stakeholder-constellations-behind-the-implementation-of-two-belt-and-road-initiative-bri-projects/.

²⁵ Christine, Li; "FOCAC 2024: Moving Away from Large Infrastructure Deals towards Normative Power of China." *Stiftung Wissenschaft Und Politik (SWP)*, 2024, www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/megatrends-spotlight-38-focac-2024-towards-normative-power-of-china.

shrinking but evolving toward more selective, strategically important projects, especially in Africa and Central Asia.

Overall state in 2025

By mid-2025, roughly 150 countries had signed BRI memoranda of understanding, and cumulative economic engagement since 2013 passed about 1.3 trillion US dollars, according to a 2025 analytical briefing that combines data from the Green Finance & Development Center and academic work.²⁶ The same report notes that Africa and Central Asia overtook Southeast Asia as top destinations, with Africa attracting around 39 billion US dollars in construction and investment deals in the first half of 2025 alone, indicating renewed momentum rather than retrenchment.²⁷

Key trends in Africa

The 2025 research report finds that Africa's BRI portfolio is increasingly concentrated in energy, mining, and transport corridors, with state-backed Chinese firms leading railways, ports, and resource-linked projects.²⁸ It also documents intensifying debates over debt sustainability and project performance, highlighting cases where high-profile rail projects

²⁶ Sanchez, Christopher. "The State of Global Sovereign Wealth Funds: Strategic Assessment (August 2025)." *Christopher Sanchez & Co.*, Christopher Sanchez & Co., 15 Aug. 2025, www.sanchez.vc/geocoded-special-reports/the-state-of-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-august-2025.

²⁷ Асель Сатубалдина, and Асель Сатубалдина. "Central Asia Attracts \$25 Billion, as China's Belt and Road Investment Hits Half-Year Record - the Astana Times." *The Astana Times*, 19 July 2025, astanatimes.com/2025/07/central-asia-attracts-25-billion-as-chinas-belt-and-road-investment-hits-half-year-record/.

²⁸ Асель Сатубалдина, and Асель Сатубалдина. "Central Asia Attracts \$25 Billion, as China's Belt and Road Investment Hits Half-Year Record - the Astana Times." *The Astana Times*, 19 July 2025, astanatimes.com/2025/07/central-asia-attracts-25-billion-as-chinas-belt-and-road-investment-hits-half-year-record/.

faced cost overruns or underused capacity, prompting renegotiations and calls for “smaller and more bankable” ventures.²⁹

Debt, restructuring, and negotiations

The 2025 study reports that China has entered multiple debt restructuring deals with BRI countries, including African states, using mechanisms such as maturity extensions, interest reductions, and participation in multilateral frameworks. These negotiations aim to prevent defaults while keeping political relationships intact, but the report notes that several African borrowers remain at high risk of debt distress, and some are exploring options like debt-for-nature swaps.³⁰

Policy shifts and “high-quality” BRI

Since the third BRI Forum in 2023, Chinese leaders have promoted a “green, high-quality” BRI, emphasizing environmental and social standards, yet the 2025 evidence shows a gap between rhetoric and practice, with a strong rebound in fossil-fuel and resource-backed deals. The same paper observes a growing digital dimension—investment in 5G, data centers, and cloud services in African countries—raising new questions about data governance and technological dependence.³¹

International responses and competing initiatives

²⁹ Sanchez, Christopher. “The State of Global Sovereign Wealth Funds: Strategic Assessment (August 2025).” *Christopher Sanchez & Co.*, Christopher Sanchez & Co., 15 Aug. 2025, www.sanchez.vc/geocoded-special-reports/the-state-of-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-august-2025.

³⁰ Асель Сатубалдина, and Асель Сатубалдина. “Central Asia Attracts \$25 Billion, as China’s Belt and Road Investment Hits Half-Year Record - the Astana Times.” *The Astana Times*, 19 July 2025, astanatimes.com/2025/07/central-asia-attracts-25-billion-as-chinas-belt-and-road-investment-hits-half-year-record/.

³¹ “The Belt and Road Initiative: A Double-Edged Sword? (Part I).” *CaixaBank Research*, 17 Nov. 2025, www.caixabankresearch.com/en/economics-markets/recent-developments/belt-and-road-initiative-double-edged-sword-part-i.

The 2025 analysis situates BRI within a wider competitive landscape, noting that G7 and EU initiatives like PGII and Global Gateway, along with India–Japan partnerships, are financing alternative corridors and digital projects in Africa, though still smaller in scale than Chinese engagement. According to the report, this competition has led some African governments to diversify partners and occasionally cancel or renegotiate BRI projects, using rival offers as leverage in talks with Beijing.³²

Major challenges

The main obstacles are debt sustainability, weak governance and transparency, social and environmental impacts, and geopolitical tensions, which together make it hard to turn BRI investment in Africa into broadly sustainable development. A recent academic-style study, “China’s Belt and Road Initiative in Africa: Opportunities and Challenges,” synthesizes these problems using country examples such as Angola, Ethiopia, Zambia, and Kenya as its evidence base.

1. Debt sustainability and fiscal risk

The 2025 study highlights rising debt burdens from BRI loans as a core challenge, noting that countries like Angola (over 25 billion US dollars owed to China) and Ethiopia (around 13 billion US dollars) face significant repayment pressure that can undermine financial sovereignty.³³ It also cites cases such as Kenya, where BRI-related obligations exceed 8 billion US dollars and projects like the Mombasa–Nairobi railway have struggled to generate

³² Whitehead, Orlando. “Africa’s Digital Future Is Being Written in Beijing – When Will the West Wake Up?” *Euractiv*, 23 Nov. 2025, www.euractiv.com/opinion/africas-digital-future-is-being-written-in-beijing-when-will-the-west-wake-up/. Accessed 25 Nov. 2025.

³³ Thomas, Russel. *China’s Belt and Road Initiative in Africa Opportunities and Challenges*.

enough revenue, forcing the government to seek loan restructuring and raising fears of long-term debt distress.³⁴

2. Governance and transparency deficits

The same paper finds that opaque contract negotiations and limited public disclosure are widespread, with many BRI agreements kept confidential, which weakens accountability and increases the risk of corruption or unfavorable terms for African governments. Institutional capacity constraints—shortages of skilled negotiators, regulators, and project evaluators—mean many states cannot thoroughly assess project feasibility or enforce standards, leading to cost overruns and underperforming infrastructure.³⁵

3. Social and environmental impacts

According to the study, large BRI projects often involve clearing forests, wetlands, and other sensitive ecosystems, which damages biodiversity and threatens livelihoods that depend on agriculture, fishing, and traditional land use.³⁶ The paper also documents social problems such as community displacement, disruption of traditional lifestyles, and labor disputes, including reports of poor working conditions and limited protection of workers' rights on some Chinese-led construction sites.³⁷

4. Geopolitical dependence and strategic vulnerability

³⁴ Magalie Masamba. "Is China's Belt and Road Initiative in Africa a Development Catalyst or Debt Trap?" *The Republic*, 22 May 2025, rpublic.com/africa-2/china-belt-and-road-initiative-africa/.

³⁵ Thomas, Russel. *China's Belt and Road Initiative in Africa Opportunities and Challenges*.

³⁶ True, Towards. "Africa's Clean Energy Transition towards True Independence." *Discovery Alert*, 22 Nov. 2025, discoveryalert.com.au/african-clean-energy-transition-2025-strategic-pathways/. Accessed 25 Nov. 2025.

³⁷ Dollar, David. "Understanding China's Belt and Road Infrastructure Projects in Africa." *Brookings*, Sept. 2019, www.brookings.edu/articles/understanding-chinas-belt-and-road-infrastructure-projects-in-africa/.

The research emphasizes that heavy reliance on a single major financier—China—can heighten vulnerability to shifts in Chinese policy or global power competition, especially as Western conditional lending and multilateral frameworks weaken in relative influence. African governments must navigate growing strategic rivalry: deeper engagement with BRI may bring infrastructure and short-term gains, but it also raises concerns about long-term dependency, bargaining power, and exposure to external political pressures.³⁸

Blocs

The following groups can be your blocs. These are nations which share the same political views or values, with similar legal structures.

Western Bloc

Countries generally aligned with the United States, NATO, or Western liberal democratic institutions.

- Australia
- Canada
- European Union
- French Republic
- Federal Republic of Germany
- Italian Republic
- Japan

³⁸ Githaiga, Nancy Muthoni, et al. "The Belt and Road Initiative: Opportunities and Risks for Africa's Connectivity." *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, vol. 05, no. 01, Jan. 2019, pp. 117–141, <https://doi.org/10.1142/s2377740019500064>.

- Republic of Korea
- United Mexican States
- Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
- Republic of Türkiye
- United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
- United States of America

Eastern Bloc

Countries typically opposing Western dominance and promoting alternative political or economic models.

- People's Republic of China
- Russian Federation

Non-Aligned Bloc

Countries that traditionally avoid formal alignment with either major power bloc and prioritize strategic autonomy.

- Argentina
- Federative Republic of Brazil
- Republic of India
- Republic of Indonesia
- Republic of South Africa

Solution-Oriented Questions

The following are some solution-oriented questions to guide you during debate, this will help you think on motions for Moderated Caucuses as well as clauses for your resolutions.

1. How can African governments and China redesign BRI loan terms (for example through longer maturities, interest caps, or collective regional bargaining) to reduce debt distress while still financing critical infrastructure?
2. What specific transparency and oversight mechanisms (such as mandatory publication of contracts, independent audits, or parliamentary review) should be required for all BRI projects in Africa to limit corruption and ensure public accountability?
3. How can environmental and social safeguards be standardized and enforced across BRI projects in Africa so that infrastructure expansion does not undermine climate goals, biodiversity, or local communities' rights and livelihoods?
4. What role should regional organizations (like the African Union and AfCFTA institutions) and multilateral banks play in co-financing or co-screening BRI projects to align them with regional development plans and international best practices?
5. How can African states diversify partners and technology sources (e.g., combining BRI with EU, US, or regional initiatives) to avoid strategic dependence on any single actor while still benefiting from Chinese capital, technology, and market access?

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