

# Going Viral? The Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Sino-African Relations

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**Abstract:** How are we to understand the impacts of COVID-19 on geopolitics and specifically the relations between China and Africa? Is the pandemic a conjunctural event, which will not have lasting impacts, or does it represent a “critical juncture” where the nature of Sino-African relations is recast in significant ways? This paper explores this issue with a focus on African agency in the reproduction and reshaping of Sino-African relations. It argues that while the Belt and Road Initiative is declining in importance in terms of Sino-African engagements, COVID-19 has offered an opportunity for China to increase its soft and “productive-relational” powers on the continent, while reconfiguring some African elites’ “strategy of extraversion.” As such, the impacts of the pandemic seem to be reinforcing extant trajectories and path dependencies rather than fundamentally reshaping them.

**Keywords:** China, Africa, COVID-19, geopolitics, mask diplomacy

## Introduction

China shall always remember the invaluable support Africa gave us at the height of our battle with the coronavirus. In return, when Africa was struck by the virus, China was the first to rush in with assistance and has since stood firm with the African people...No matter how the international landscape may evolve, China shall never waver [sic] its determination to pursue greater solidarity and cooperation with Africa.<sup>1</sup>

The unprecedented level of interconnection and interdependence among countries binds them into a global community of shared future. Guided by this vision, China’s international development cooperation in the new era has a more profound philosophical basis and clearer goals, which lead to more concrete actions.<sup>2</sup>

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<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v20/v20i3a1.pdf>

Until recently the study of geopolitics and development were largely conducted separately.<sup>3</sup> However, generally deepening processes of globalisation and the emergence of China as an economic superpower are partly responsible for changing this, as its international engagements are often different from those of other world powers given the greater importance of state-owned companies in overseas investment and loans.<sup>4</sup> Chinese state-sponsored projects, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), announced by President Xi in 2013, are both geoeconomic and geopolitical in motivation, blurring the distinction between the two.<sup>5</sup> This “Chinese-inflected globalisation” gives the relations between China and the countries with which it engages internationally a different flavour or character, which has been explored elsewhere.<sup>6</sup>

There have historically, over the last two decades in particular, been strong complementarities between the Chinese and African economies. China’s rapidly growing economy, with a doubling time of seven years when it was growing at 10% a year, has required access to strategic raw materials and resources, such as oil, and the continent serves as an important market for that country’s products given strong demand for often cheap manufactures. However, as the Chinese economy has slowed in recent years, natural resource demand growth has slackened and some argue that China has deliberately attempted to diversify energy supply to the Gulf, Russia, and the United States to avoid excessive dependence on the continent as part of a broader policy of diversification of economic relations in the wake of a trade war with the US and a refocusing on the domestic market. Whereas Africa used to account for approximately one-third of Chinese oil imports this has now fallen to 14 percent.<sup>7</sup> However this level of imports still shows the centrality of Africa to economic accumulation in China, rather than reflecting a peripherality or marginality.<sup>8</sup>

China’s trade with the continent is more colonial in structure than with other major partners however, as imports are heavily concentrated in low value-added primary products. “China lags behind other development partners in the proportion of non-agricultural or mining products imported from Africa at only 16% - versus 40% or more by several others – likely due to higher Chinese tariffs on African consumer goods.”<sup>9</sup> In 2020, 39 percent of goods imported into the European Union from Africa were non-primary goods.<sup>10</sup>

As China becomes a superpower all world regions are of interest to it, as remains the case for the United States. Chinese engagement in Africa is typically “full-spectrum,” depending on the country involved, ranging from high-level public diplomacy, through to the foreign minister’s yearly visits to Africa and the Forum on China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), to military training and economic investment. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has occasioned massive disruption around the world, economically and politically. How have Sino-African relations been affected by this? Is the pandemic a “critical juncture” in Sino-African relations or a conjunctural event that will not fundamentally change the nature of the relationship?

### **Critical Juncture or Fleeting Conjuncture? The Impact of COVID-19**

Global value chains are being reconfigured by COVID-19, with many countries realizing their extensive reliance on China for supplies of personal protective equipment (PPE) and members of the European Union talking about the necessity of “health sovereignty” for example.<sup>11</sup> This may result in increased processes of in- or re-shoring for supply chains deemed to be of

strategic national importance—a type of deglobalization. China is also engaged in a process of disarticulating from US-led supply chains in technology, given the trade war with the United States under Donald Trump and the disruption of advanced component supplies that entailed.<sup>12</sup> To-date, the Biden Administration has not reversed the tariffs on Chinese goods imported into the United States imposed during the Trump years and indications are that Sino-African relations are likely to remain a key area of interest for the US government, judging by the questioning of Biden’s nominee for the position of US Ambassador to the United Nations (UN) received on the issue during her confirmation hearings.<sup>13</sup>

Africa has had very limited involvement in global value chains except as a supplier of raw materials. However the trends noted above, combined with increasing use of robots in manufacturing may result in a reduction in such offshoring as has happened from China to Africa into the future.<sup>14</sup> But, Africa also serves important geopolitical functions for China, as many countries have historically supported its positions at the UN and other international fora, even if somewhat paradoxically African countries that trade more with China are more likely to vote with the US at the UN, except on human rights issues, suggesting “balancing” tactics and behavior are at play.<sup>15</sup> However in bilateral settings support for China and its political positions is very evident. For example at the 2020 special Sino-African summit on COVID-19 a declaration was issued supporting China’s positions on Taiwan and Hong Kong, and its claim about the zoonotic origins of the virus, rather than the theory that it may have escaped from a lab in Wuhan.<sup>16</sup> In 2021, thirty-six African ambassadors to China also paid a visit to the repressed Xinjiang region of China where it is widely reported that up to two million people have been detained in “re-education centers” (concentration camps). Afterwards, the Namibian ambassador said he saw no evidence of repression.<sup>17</sup>

In terms of rhetoric at least, increasingly close alignment of positions reflects China’s growing material capabilities and relative geopolitical power as well as the increasing dependence of African economies on the Chinese market. It may also partly reflect the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, which dramatically reduced primary commodity prices in its initial phases, with the price of oil turning negative at one point in the United States as a result of lack of demand and shortage of storage space for supplies.<sup>18</sup> As a result of the coronavirus the rate of economic growth in China in 2020 slowed dramatically to 2.3 percent.<sup>19</sup> Previous reductions in primary commodity prices from 2014 had reduced “China-powered agency” for African resource exporters, even as the country remains the continent’s largest single export market (excluding the European Union, which is composed of twenty-seven different countries).<sup>20</sup> However as the only major economy which continued to record positive economic growth throughout the pandemic, China is now of greater importance in the international economic relations of African countries. This has deepened the asymmetrical bargaining power between them as China’s latent and actual power capabilities continue to rise.<sup>21</sup> According to some analysts, the COVID-19 pandemic is accelerating existing geopolitical trends.<sup>22</sup> For example, there are now more goods traded between China and Europe than Europe and the US. Largely as a result of COVID, trade between Africa and China fell approximately 14 percent from 2019-20, but the continent’s trade fell by 20 percent with the European Union, bespeaking a relative rise in the importance and power of China.<sup>23</sup>

Africa as a whole experienced its first recession in decades in 2020, although some countries' economies continued to grow in the face of the pandemic; in part perhaps because the continent was initially less affected than many other regions given its youthful demographics and the fact that the majority of the population continue to live in rural areas where transmission is more difficult.<sup>24</sup> For example, according to its President Yoweri Museveni, Uganda is currently the world's fifth fastest growing economy.<sup>25</sup> Others put Ethiopia (8.2 percent), Rwanda (8 percent), Cote d'Ivoire (7.3 percent), Djibouti (7.1 percent) and Senegal (6.9 percent) in the top ten fastest growing economies globally from 2018-2021.<sup>26</sup> Yet, for the most part, the continent has been very badly affected, indirectly and increasingly directly, by the pandemic. In order to assess changes in Sino-African relations it is necessary to identify and outline what the strategic imperatives of Chinese overseas engagements are and how they are likely to be reshaped or changed by the current conjuncture.

Some of the most important drivers of Chinese foreign economic and broader foreign policy are the need to address the continuing issue of domestic over-capacity and over-accumulation in the Chinese economy, particularly in heavy industries such as steel and cement and to maintain a conducive geopolitical environment for the country's continued ascent in the international system<sup>27</sup>. Let us now turn to examine specific areas or axes of Sino-African engagement and how they have been affected by the COVID pandemic.

### **The Belt and Road Initiative as an Axis of Engagement**

China is now heavily invested in Africa both economically and politically. According to the China Global Investment Tracker, Chinese investments and construction in Africa from 2005 to the present have been close to two trillion US dollars.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps the most high profile and in some ways, consequential, axis of engagement between China and Africa, or parts of it at least, has been the BRI. As noted earlier, one of the distinctive features of Chinese-inflected globalization has been the prominent role played by state-owned corporations and policy banks in the "go out" strategy from the late 1990s, subsequently reformed, elaborated and developed into the BRI.

The BRI is a massive program of infrastructure construction, among other elements. According to the Chinese President it is "the project of the century." The BRI was largely designed to address the issue of domestic over-capacity by creating overseas demand through the construction of infrastructure using Chinese-sourced materials, thereby also facilitating other trade flows. The BRI is then primarily a multi-vector "spatial fix" to problems of over-accumulation in the Chinese economy.<sup>29</sup>

Associated with the BRI is the Industrial Capacity Cooperation project which is aimed at exporting industrial overcapacity overseas through the construction of manufacturing plants.<sup>30</sup> To-date this has only happened to a very limited extent as the benefits of production, such as jobs, taxes, and exports, would be largely lost to the Chinese economy, outside perhaps of initial construction, input sourcing, and profit remittances. If this aspect of China's spatial fix is to be deepened and extended it would most likely require the shutting down of capacity domestically, with attendant negative social consequences, particularly job loss, with implications for regime legitimacy. Also given sunk costs and the immobility of some types of

capital it is difficult to simply relocate factories from one country to another, particularly for heavy industries. This is likely then to remain a less preferred option given the necessity to legitimate Communist Party rule in China through economic growth and development. Nonetheless some Chinese agency-funded manufacturing plants have been constructed in Africa, although their economic performance remains in doubt.<sup>31</sup> There are of course many other privately-owned Chinese manufacturing companies in China, which operate with “hard budget constraints” and are often consequently more efficient.<sup>32</sup> However, the generalized pressure towards the spatial retraction of global value chains noted earlier as a result of the conjunction of geopolitical/economic tensions between the US and China, robotization, and COVID-19 will likely reduce the prospects for offshoring of Chinese manufacturing investment to Africa through time.

The BRI itself has recently run into difficulty as a result of loose loan and investment appraisal, resulting in many failed or under-performing projects and back-lash against perceived “debt trap diplomacy” across much of the Global South.<sup>33</sup> Consequently, from 2017 onwards more stringent investment appraisals have been undertaken, with a consequent dramatic reduction in overseas lending through the Chinese Export-Import Bank (EXIM) and the China Development Bank (CD), previously responsible for much project lending. Lending by CD and EXIM collapsed from a peak of \$75bn in 2016 to just \$4bn last year.<sup>34</sup> African borrowing shrank by 30 percent in 2019, and became more concentrated in lower risk countries that hadn’t previously requested debt relief such as South Africa, Nigeria, and Ghana.<sup>35</sup> This was on foot of several high profile BRI projects in Africa, such as the multi-billion dollar Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) in Kenya running into severe difficulties.<sup>36</sup> The SGR project cost about 6 percent of the country’s gross domestic product.<sup>37</sup> The nature of increasing debt in Kenya is explored below, but a recent report found that there have been “no ‘asset seizures’ and despite contract clauses requiring arbitration, no evidence of the use of courts to enforce payments, or application of penalty interest rates.”<sup>38</sup>

Collectively, the underperformance or failure of many BRI projects presents a financing risk to the Chinese economy. In fact, limiting financing risk is one of China’s ‘three tough battles’ announced by President Xi in 2018.<sup>39</sup> The scaling back of the BRI, however, presents both economic and geopolitical problems for China. Economically, the Chinese economy still suffers from massive excess capacity, particularly in heavy industries which were promoted after the North Atlantic Financial Crisis. Given the difficulties faced by the BRI in recent years, this has resulted in the need for a new/reconfigured approach to China’s international relations which still has to address the imperatives of resolving or displacing China’s economic and geopolitical dilemmas.

According to Yunnan Chen, senior research officer in the development and public finance team at the Overseas Development Institute in London, as result of COVID-19 “on the supply side China is going to have to confront a growing economic recession at home. The war chest of foreign reserves it had over the previous few decades that it was able to slosh around in developing countries is going to be a lot more limited and prioritized for domestic needs.”<sup>40</sup> Consequently, the impact of COVID-19 is reinforcing an existing trend in terms of the down-sizing of the BRI but “fortunately for China’s propagandists the BRI is a shape-shifting concept that allows them to adapt it to changing circumstances” and was just one aspect of China’s

overseas investment strategy.<sup>41</sup> For example, US Treasury bonds provided a secure, but low return outlet for Chinese government capital, although this is being rethought given tensions with the US, while Africa and other developing areas provided more risky outlets. As Stephen Chan avers: “Liquidity cannot stay still and in the dynamics of modern capitalism, the flow of capital is more important than its mere accumulation. But this means that investment has got to have ‘secure’ as well as ‘risky’ [higher return] outlets.”<sup>42</sup> However, the business model of the BRI has compromised longer-term returns, as has the fact that it was partly geopolitical in motivation, which meant it was partly based on non-economic calculations/motivations which have generated blowback or backlash.<sup>43</sup>

Now the delayed/aborted rebalancing of the Chinese economy away from investment towards consumption has come back into vogue through President Xi’s “dual circulation” strategy, which places greater emphasis on domestic production and consumption.<sup>44</sup> China’s flows of foreign direct investment to Africa already fell by nearly 50 percent from 2018 to 2019, followed by further dramatic falls in 2020 with the number of new manufacturing investments declining by nearly two-thirds in the space of that year.<sup>45</sup> Services are much less energy and resource-intensive than manufacturing and if the rebalancing happens in China this will likely reduce demand growth for natural resources, although higher levels of domestic consumption may open up some opportunities for agro-processing and other sectors in Africa.<sup>46</sup>

As noted above however the BRI was and is not just an economic project, as it oftentimes requires a strategic coupling of interests between African and Chinese political elites for projects to eventuate. Furthermore, it has provided an opportunity to create and embed allies and alliances. Its scaling back necessarily implies a reconfiguration of relations in order to facilitate continued geopolitical support for China’s continued development and ascent in the international system. This might imply a greater role for aid or overseas development assistance in China’s engagement in Africa, which has “skyrocketed” in recent years, particularly in the COVID context noted above.<sup>47</sup> We may be witnessing a reorientation from primarily geoeconomic motivations in China’s engagement in Africa to more prominently geopolitical ones.

With project lending to Africa decreasing from 2016 onwards, China held an inaugural African Expo fair in Hunan in 2019 to enable or facilitate exports. This geoeconomic act served a geopolitical function of continuing to embed allies on the continent, in addition to a public relations function which may influence African populations’ attitudes towards China, which remains broadly positive.<sup>48</sup> This bespeaks the Chinese government’s “iterative adaptive” approach to its foreign economic policy – crossing the rivers and oceans by feeling for the stones, to paraphrase Deng Xiaoping.<sup>49</sup> In contrast to the argument presented by Walsh and Kinkoh that “from the evidence so far, it seems that the pandemic will likely strengthen China’s relations with African states and ruling elite on the one hand while deepening the fissures between African citizens and their leaders on the other,” this suggests an awareness that African political elite rule is dependent on at least popular acquiescence, if not support, as in China itself.<sup>50</sup>

The meta-risk for the Chinese Communist Party is that the international environment evolves in ways which are not favorable to China’s continued economic growth and rising

power, which serve as twin sources of legitimacy through the channels of social development and nationalism domestically. This risk perception requires that China's ruling elite constantly re-evaluate and reconfigure the geopolitical code through which they assess other territories as sources of threat and opportunity.<sup>51</sup> Whereas US planners perhaps have a more fragmented code through the operationalization of doctrines such as "full-spectrum dominance" in the military sphere, the Chinese strategic doctrine of "comprehensive national power" speaks to the perceived interdependence of different axes of security. The spatial extension, retraction, and reconfiguration of different vectors of Chinese engagement is an ongoing process responsive to both shifting economic imperatives, the calculations, and emotions of local or national gatekeepers, and perceptions of security and threat which arise from the nexus between these and other forces and actors. The key to an effective foreign policy for China then is having the hard and soft power capabilities to shape incentive and political opportunity structures overseas in ways favorable to the achievement of desired objectives. This is, in-turn, dependent on a congruence being achieved between perceived incentives, opportunities, and emotions. COVID-19 has arguably heightened the importance of emotional geopolitics, described in more detail below.<sup>52</sup> We now explore other axes of Chinese engagement with Africa to assess the extent to which they are likely to be affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **COVID Geopolitics and "Mask Diplomacy"**

"China always put the people first and prioritizes the protection of lives."<sup>53</sup> As noted earlier the COVID-19 pandemic has been a shock to countries around the world. This has resulted in some governments becoming more inward-looking and "vaccine nationalism" is now rampant globally with developing countries in weaker bargaining positions with transnational pharmaceutical companies, like South Africa, having to pay twice as much or more for vaccines as richer countries.<sup>54</sup> However, the fact that the virus originated in China and was brought under control there relatively effectively and quickly, after an initial denial and repression of information, allowed for more rapid economic recovery there and quicker international re-engagement.

As some have noted, as Europe and the United States were pre-occupied with their own challenges of pandemic control, this presented China with an opportunity to showcase its "all-weather friendship" with African countries, which is in turn partly based on conceptions of reciprocity based on "Confucian" geopolitics: "so that when Chinese officials begin their perorations on Africa with sermonesque reiterations of peace and friendship and assistance, they really mean it."<sup>55</sup> COVID then has been an opportunity to develop, strengthen, and deepen China's international engagements through certain axes, particularly so-called 'donation diplomacy' of PPE and other supplies, including vaccines, or what some have termed "mask diplomacy."<sup>56</sup> Indeed, it has been reported that China has shipped more vaccines overseas, primarily to countries in the Global South, than have been administered domestically.<sup>57</sup> China had less need of vaccines given its effective suppression of the virus and in many cases vaccines have been donated rather than sold, as in the case of the two hundred thousand doses sent to Zimbabwe.<sup>58</sup> Africa has received approximately six out of a total of 25 million vaccine doses donated worldwide by China.<sup>59</sup> These "gifts" however come with implicit reciprocal obligations.<sup>60</sup> They serve to deepen relations of dependence and obligation, even if they are of

relatively low economic, if not use, value. As such, this type of public diplomacy represents value for money. Furthermore, it is complemented by other initiatives. For example, “China is building a COVID-19 vaccine distribution pipeline in Africa including a cold-chain air bridge from Shenzhen, a distribution hub in Addis Ababa, and manufacturing capabilities in Cairo.”<sup>61</sup> This manufacturing plant is now operational and aims to produce 80 million vaccine doses by the end of 2021.<sup>62</sup>

Given the heightened global threat perception occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic, emotional geopolitics has arguably assumed greater importance in international relations. “According to Reddy, emotives are a distinctive set of utterances that seek to convey emotions and thereby change how one feels oneself and how others feel.”<sup>63</sup> The opening quote at the beginning of the article is a good example of this type of rhetoric by the Chinese President, even as the government there engages in harsh repression of populations in Hong Kong and Xinjiang, for example. The second opening quote from China’s newly released aid policy also bespeaks the growing emphasis given to this vector of engagement in foreign policy.

The meaning of “mask diplomacy” in Africa is that it disguises China’s underlying strategic motivations. However, this may not do justice to the type of (emotional) transaction it represents. Social action is often the result of “polymorphous crystallizations” where humanitarian and strategic motivations co-exist and reinforce each other, as in this instance for example.<sup>64</sup> The masking also takes place at an emotive level as aid donors are able to convince themselves of their altruism, occluding other relations of exploitation and dependence. Furthermore, recipient country political elites are also able to convince themselves of the benefits of their countries’ engagements with foreign powers. Thus while “masking” is not as simple as deliberately occluding strategic objectives, although there are undoubtedly elements of this to it, it operates in a more complex fashion—at an ideological level—like all aid relationships. This bespeaks a self-justificatory morality in this type of governmental action, necessary for both the donor and recipient in the case of donation diplomacy, for example. Thus the “mask” is not just that there is subterfuge to disguise underlying material motivations—the way in which this type of action discursively obscures or recodes more extractivist engagements. Rather, the mask may be partly of one’s own conscience and emotions in what are largely extractivist (state-capitalist) social relations. “Mask diplomacy” also offers the opportunity to repair China’s battered reputation in Africa, after a variety of recent scandals, including the banning of Africans from some housing, hotels, shops, and restaurants in China during the COVID pandemic, and the Chinese government being implicated in a number of hacking scandals at the African Union headquarters, which it built, for example, amongst others.<sup>65</sup> The Nigerian House of Representatives in 2020 even went so far as to pass a motion on the “Maltreatment and Institutional Racial Discrimination Against Nigerians Living in China by the Government of China.”

As noted earlier, lending through or under the BRI umbrella has dramatically decreased in recent years. Bendaballah argues that as Chinese lending to Africa has fallen in recent years, China has stepped up its soft power efforts through training and educational programs on the continent and that this represents a type of “productive-relational power” as it entails a reshaping of the co-production of certain types of actors in its international relations.<sup>66</sup> Donation



diplomacy fits well with this reorientation, as it is partly aimed at fostering goodwill, the development of shared values and world outlooks, and consequently the production of certain types of alliances which will be favorable to China's geoeconomic and geopolitical ambitions and the resolution or displacement of some of its politico-economic dilemmas. Consequently, a pre-existing trend is again being reinforced. We now move to a consideration of China's debt relations with Africa and how these have been affected by the COVID pandemic.

### **COVID and Africa's Chinese Debt**

Mask diplomacy works partly through incurring emotional debts. There has, however, also been substantial controversy in recent years about China's so-called "debt-trap diplomacy" in Africa and elsewhere in the Global South. According to the World Bank, China is Africa's largest bilateral creditor and accounts for about 19 percent of the continent's total debt.<sup>67</sup> However others have noted that up to half of all loans are not officially recorded and consequently it is difficult to make definitive statements about the actual debt levels, which may be substantially higher.<sup>68</sup>

As noted earlier, one of the impacts of COVID-19 has been to reduce economic growth globally, and across Africa, while also intensifying the need for increased public expenditure. This has increased debt pressures and problems across much of Africa, with Zambia being the first African country to effectively default on its debt in 2020. Some suggest that Kenya may be following close behind, with China owning more than 70 percent of the country's bilateral debt.<sup>69</sup> Kenya's debt to China was US \$756m in 2014 when President Uhuru Kenyatta took office, but already stood at US \$6.47bn in December 2019.<sup>70</sup> Debts to China's EXIM and CD account for 30 percent of Kenya's external debt, with debt service to the former institution projected to increase by 133 percent in the year starting in July 2021 as debt deferrals resulting from COVID come due. Partly as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, Kenya is now having difficulty servicing its foreign debts, with debt service now accounting for a shocking 57 percent of all tax revenue.<sup>71</sup>

Despite the high-flown rhetoric of limitless solidarity with Africa, China has been slow to engage African countries on the issue of debt relief. "Some African governments that are petitioning China for relief say that the country is warily demanding collateral" and in some previous debt renegotiations China has actually increased the value of its portfolio.<sup>72</sup> This bespeaks China's generally materialist or mercantilist orientation towards the continent, rhetoric around South-South solidarity notwithstanding. How have African political elites responded to the current conjuncture?

### **The Role of African Agency in the Context of COVID**

Much has been written in recent years about the role of African agency in shaping developmental outcomes and interactions with China-based actors.<sup>73</sup> There has also been a debate about the nature of agency and whether or not it exists, as the brain is a physical organ which responds to chemical and other stimuli and has learnt patterns of behavior, making the appearance of choice an illusion. Thus there is an important distinction between agency and power. For those who accept that agency exists in much of the literature it tends to have a positive connotation. However it may also take negative forms, such as corruption and crime.<sup>74</sup>

One of the more common set of actions amongst African political elites is the deployment of what Bayart and Ellis term “the strategy of extraversion” where they co-construct dependence with and on external actors for their own benefit.<sup>75</sup> Peiffer and Englebert have elaborated on this concept to develop the idea of what they term “extraversion portfolios.”<sup>76</sup> By this they mean what different states in Africa can offer in terms of different types of material and non-material resources or “benefits” to “donors” such as security or restriction of migration for example. One example of a type of “benefit” offered would be the restriction of migration to Europe through the Valetta process for example, with some countries in the Sahel setting up detention camps for migrants seeking to make their way across the Mediterranean.<sup>77</sup>

COVID-19 is interacting with other meta-trends to reconfigure the nature of African economies and the types of extraversion portfolios available to be deployed or on offer to many African political elites.<sup>78</sup> In relation to China, the primary “agency” or power which has been available to African elites is to leverage engagements for the benefit of regime survival and/or material benefits. In some cases regime survival is a pre-requisite for the unlocking of material benefits. In Zambia for example, it is often local, politically connected construction firms which receive sub-contracts from Chinese construction firms.<sup>79</sup> At the same time other studies have shown, for example, that African presidents’ home regions receive more Chinese aid than others.<sup>80</sup> Hence there is often a strategic coupling of interest which takes place between African and Chinese state elites—a transnational, social contract of extraversion.<sup>81</sup>

There are a variety of different types of resources which African governments can offer China, as noted above. These include: 1) access to critical or strategic natural resources such as oil and coltan; 2) access to markets, although this is largely regulated through the World Trade Organization, which China joined in 2001; 3) access to investment opportunities and government-sponsored procurement, of infrastructure for example, through contracted overseas projects (COPs) of which Africa accounts for about a third of China’s total, and related loans; 4) geopolitical support at fora such as the UN and other inter-governmental bodies both directly for China and for Chinese policy and foreign relations positions; and 5) opportunities to showcase Chinese development cooperation and great power projection which feed into its “soft” power globally.

COVID-19 is affecting, at least in the short to medium-term, the extraversion portfolios of African countries. The precise nature and composition of extraversion portfolios is dependent on both internal and external conditions, such as prices for the country in questions main exports. As has been documented in the literature, higher export prices may confer more bargaining power on African state elites, although this is circumscribed and constrained by China’s strategic interests. Countries with slower economic growth or those experiencing debt distress will offer fewer investment and perhaps COPs opportunities for Chinese firms than previously, despite the Group of 20 Debt Service Suspension Initiative, in which China participates on a “case-by-case basis.”<sup>82</sup> However they may offer new opportunities and avenues for cooperation in overseas development assistance through “mask diplomacy” noted above, for example.

COVID-19 would appear to be generally reducing the relative power of African political elites in relations with China. This power diminution is a result of a concatenation of effects

including: generally reduced primary commodity prices; higher debt and consequently need for external financing and aid, and shortages of PPE, therapeutics, vaccines, and medical equipment such as ventilators. According to some reports when China donated four ventilators to South Sudan it trebled the previous number in the country, although fifty-eight oxygen concentrators and thousands of ventilator components were also donated.<sup>83</sup>

While the decline in the relative power of African elites may have diminished their “agency” it has not diminished their ability to act, although this may be to heighten or deepen dependence. Rather, in most cases the strategy of extraversion towards China would appear to be being reconfigured, as dependence is deepened and action or policy space in relation to China and other major foreign powers reduced. A key question, noted earlier, is whether these shifts presage a broader shift in Sino-African relations, representing a “critical juncture” or whether once the COVID pandemic has been brought under control relations will revert to the *status quo ante*. There are a number of reasons to think this will not be the case even as some elements or structural underpinnings of the relationship remain constant, but more purely economic ties weaken. Rather, it would appear that aid will become a more important axis of Sino-African relations, tied to geopolitical support, as argued earlier. Thus the convergence towards the Western aid regime identified by Kragelund has received new emphasis as China transitions towards being a political as well as an economic superpower.<sup>84</sup> The spatial dialectics of globalization, and the consequent rise of protectionist nationalism in much of the world, the scaling back of the BRI, robotization and COVID-19, mean the current round of restructuring is characterized by pressures towards deglobalization. There are, nonetheless, continuing imperatives for engagement and consequently the need for reformation of policy engagements by China.

Of course, the way in which Sino-African relations evolve is dynamic and evolutionary and partly dependent on unpredictable events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, there are a number of imperatives which would appear to likely to remain constant. These include: a) the continued development of the Chinese economy and consequent demand for African natural resources and raw materials, even if demand growth rates are not at the same level as in recent decades; b) the continued need for market and investment access; and c) perhaps an enhanced need for geopolitical support in a “politically full” world. That is, as China’s international footprint continues to grow and it becomes more assertive in its geopolitical claims over Hong Kong, the South China Sea etc. it will require a more articulated alliance structure to make geopolitical space where the United States and the broader Western alliance already have embedded influence and advantage.

## Conclusion

According to Yizhou China’s new diplomatic philosophy is “acting quickly or more proactively” (*jiji zuowei*) rather than the previous one of keeping a low profile and hiding capabilities to prevent direct confrontation with Western powers.<sup>85</sup> For example, Chinese planes recently simulated a missile attack on American warships off the coast of Taiwan.<sup>86</sup> This changed posture bespeaks China’s enhanced economic, persuasional, and to some extent, military capabilities.<sup>87</sup> As China is now a great power, it is appropriate to talk of it having a grand strategy.<sup>88</sup> Its consistent grand strategy has been to facilitate its economic and political

ascent in the international system.<sup>89</sup> However, the particular tools and tactics to achieve this have varied through time. The previously most prominent tool of this grand strategy—the BRI—is now entering a period of restructuring and contraction as result of its economic and geopolitical contradictions, protestations on Chinese state media notwithstanding.<sup>90</sup> While the BRI is likely to continue to exist, it must now be complemented with other instruments of (soft) power, such as mask diplomacy.<sup>91</sup>

Such a conjuncture, where aid, educational exchanges, and technical training become more important tools of Chinese statecraft in Africa is however potentially problematic because it is difficult to see how they can fit into a discourse of “win-win” globalisation unless their geopolitical motivations are explicitly acknowledged. However, such unmasking is unlikely. More likely is that the discourse of “win-win” globalisation remains intact but that the “introversion portfolio” of China, where it “goes out” to seek particular types of resources, is reconfigured to match its own conditions and strategic requirements and, for geopolitical reasons, the changing needs of African political elites given their domestic economic conditions. The primary agency of African elites then, barring a further dramatic slowdown or meltdown of the Chinese economy is to reproduce, extend, and deepen existing dependencies on China, even if the precise vectors or axes of these assume a more variable shape or geometry.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Thomas 2020.

<sup>2</sup> State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Power 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Lee 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Flint & Zhu 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Reboredo 2020. Carmody et al. 2020a.

<sup>7</sup> Liang, 2021 calculated from National Bureau of Statistics (国家统计局) and General Administration of Customs of the People's Republic of China 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Olander 2021a; Moseley and Gray 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Ryder 2021, p. 32.

<sup>10</sup> Calculated from Eurostat 2021.

<sup>11</sup> French-German Initiative for the European Recovery from the Coronavirus Crisis 2020.

<sup>12</sup> Keyu Jin, 24th of January 2021 on CNN; Inkster 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Van Staden 2021. Although some have suggested that there will be more focus on South East Asia as an arena of strategic competition (Olander 2021b). However, as noted earlier superpowers are interested in all world regions.

<sup>14</sup> Kaplinsky 2016; Baldwin 2019. For a counter argument in relation to Africa see Altenburg et al. 2020.

<sup>15</sup> Carmody et al. 2020b.

<sup>16</sup> Bilal & Lidet 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Chinafrica Project 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Primary commodity prices did recover somewhat in the latter part of 2020 (IMF 2021).

<sup>19</sup> Bloomberg 2021.

<sup>20</sup> Malm 2020.

<sup>21</sup> Cheng 2021.

<sup>22</sup> Haass 2020.

<sup>23</sup> Calculated from Zefei 2021 and Eurostat 2021.

<sup>24</sup> Stein 2020. Although the emergence of the more transmissible "delta" variant seems to be changing this (Mendez 2021).

<sup>25</sup> On Amanpour, CNN, 10th January, 2021.

<sup>26</sup> Bajpai 2019.

<sup>27</sup> Carmody et al. 2021.

<sup>28</sup> Aidoo 2020.

<sup>29</sup> Carmody et al. 2021.

- <sup>30</sup> Kenderdine and Ling 2018.
- <sup>31</sup> Reboredo 2020.
- <sup>32</sup> Kornai 1992.
- <sup>33</sup> Patey 2020.
- <sup>34</sup> Wheatley & Kynge 2020.
- <sup>35</sup> Acker and Bräutigam 2021.
- <sup>36</sup> Taylor 2020.
- <sup>37</sup> Van Staden et al. 2020.
- <sup>38</sup> Acker et al. 2021, p. 3.
- <sup>39</sup> Gerstel 2018. When the Chinese billionaire founder of Alibaba, Jack Ma criticized the Chinese government for creating financial risk he was not seen in public for several months. He ultimately appeared at an event honoring rural teachers in January 2021.
- <sup>40</sup> Quoted in Thomas, 2020, p. 16.
- <sup>41</sup> *Economist* 2020.
- <sup>42</sup> Chan 2013, p. 38.
- <sup>43</sup> Flint and Zhu 2019; Patey 2020.
- <sup>44</sup> Economy 2019. Yao 2020. The problem with this strategy politically is that because of existing over-capacity in many state-owned enterprises it implicitly implies a greater role for the private sector and consequently a lessening of control by the Chinese Communist Party.
- <sup>45</sup> Johns Hopkins University SAIS China-Africa Research Initiative 2021; Myles 2021.
- <sup>46</sup> Dumas and Choyleva 2006.
- <sup>47</sup> Regilme and Hodzi 2021.
- <sup>48</sup> Sixty three per cent of respondents in the Afro-barometer survey view China as having a “somewhat” or “very” positive impact in their country (Afrobarometer 2021).
- <sup>49</sup> Andrews et al. 2013.
- <sup>50</sup> Walsh and Kinkoh 2020.
- <sup>51</sup> Kraxberger 2005.
- <sup>52</sup> Pain 2009.
- <sup>53</sup> State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China 2021.
- <sup>54</sup> Mlaba 2021. The 16% of the world’s population that lives in developed countries have cornered 70% of global vaccine supplies and of the four billion surplus-to-requirements doses to be produced in the US by the end of 2021 nearly half will go to the European Union for “booster shots” (Galbraith 2021), while less than 1% of Africa’s population is fully vaccinated (BBC 2021).
- <sup>55</sup> An et al. 2020; Chan 2013, p. 16.
- <sup>56</sup> Aidoo 2020.
- <sup>57</sup> Lew et al. 2021.
- <sup>58</sup> *Africanews* 2021.
- <sup>59</sup> Bridge 2021.
- <sup>60</sup> Mauss 1990 in Mawdsley 2012.

<sup>61</sup> Olander, 2021a. There have also been substantial donations of masks and other equipment to Africa from the Jack Ma and Alibaba Foundations (Alizila Staff 2020). In fact according to some estimates more than 50% of COVID-related donations from China are from private companies and only 17% from the government (RWR Advisory Group in Chimbelu 2020). However according to Goldpas (2020) the Chinese government mobilised its private sector to make these donations to try and repair relations with African countries after racist incidents against their citizens in China.

<sup>62</sup> *Egypt Today* 2021.

<sup>63</sup> Evert 2013, p. 88

<sup>64</sup> Mann 1986.

<sup>65</sup> Abegunrin & Manyeruke 2020. Gopaldas 2020.

<sup>66</sup> Benabdallah 2019. Although the Infrastructure Consortium for Africa (2018 cited in Lechini et al. 2020, p. 4) estimates that “China’s investment and construction in African infrastructure amounted to \$25.7 billion in 2018. This is the highest level of commitments recorded since ICA started collecting such data, which averaged \$13.1 billion per year in the 2011-2017 period.”

<sup>67</sup> Cited in Thomas 2020.

<sup>68</sup> Reinhart cited in Tan 2019.

<sup>69</sup> *Africa Confidential* 2020, pp. 5-6; Dahir 2018.

<sup>70</sup> Olander 2020.

<sup>71</sup> Anyanzwa 2020; Olander 2021c.

<sup>72</sup> Thomas 2020, p.12; Gardner et al. 2020.

<sup>73</sup> Corkin 2013; Mohan & Lampert 2013; Carmody & Kragelund 2016; Phillips 2019.

<sup>74</sup> Taylor 2015.

<sup>75</sup> Bayart & Ellis 2000.

<sup>76</sup> Peiffer & Englebert 2012.

<sup>77</sup> Korvensyrjä 2017.

<sup>78</sup> Carmody 2020.

<sup>79</sup> Zajontz 2020.

<sup>80</sup> Dahir 2019.

<sup>81</sup> Carmody 2010.

<sup>82</sup> Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin, quoted in *Chinafricaproject*, July 12<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

<sup>83</sup> Xinhua 2020.

<sup>84</sup> Kragelund 2015.

<sup>85</sup> 2014 cited in Lechini et al. 2020.

<sup>86</sup> Hille & Sevastopulo 2021.

<sup>87</sup> Mosher 2017.

<sup>88</sup> Lechini et al. 2020.

<sup>89</sup> Pillsbury 2014.

<sup>90</sup> Carmody and Wainwright 2021; Fowdy 2020.

<sup>91</sup> Wilson 2020.