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CHINA'S POLICY TOWARDS THE AFRICAN UNION: FORGING A STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

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Abstract. The People's Republic of China has been developing a strategic partnership with the African Union in order to strengthen its continental influence through expanded economic cooperation, security engagement, and diplomatic support. This article analyses Chinese white papers and other policy documents on its approach to Africa, examines how it formulates and implements its foreign policy strategy towards a continental regional organisation, and identifies the main areas of cooperation. Crucially, while deepening bilateral relations with African states, China increasingly promotes multilateral frameworks, positioning the African Union as central force to consolidating regionalism and advancing Chinese interests. Engagement with the African Union secures support for Chinese initiatives at regional and global levels. Aligning the Belt and road initiative with the African Union's Agenda 2063 ensures coordinated, complementary efforts towards socio-economic advancement and multi-level security provision.

Keywords: People's Republic of China; African Union; strategic partnership; African Union commission; Belt and road initiative; Agenda 2063; sustainable development; peacekeeping; security.

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ПОЛИТИКА КИТАЯ В ОТНОШЕНИИ АФРИКАНСКОГО СОЮЗА: ФОРМИРОВАНИЕ СТРАТЕГИЧЕСКОГО ПАРТНЕРСТВА

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Аннотация. Китай активно развивает стратегическое партнерство с Африканским союзом, стремясь укрепить свое влияние на континенте путем расширения экономического сотрудничества, укрепления мер безопасности и предоставления дипломатической поддержки. Анализируются белые книги и другие политические документы Китая, посвященные политике страны на Африканском континенте, отражаются особенности формирования и реализации внешнеполитической стратегии в отношении континентальной региональной организации, выявляются основные направления взаимодействия. Делается вывод о том, что Китай наравне с активным развитием двусторонних отношений с африканскими странами последовательно продвигает и поддерживает многосторонние форматы взаимодействия, выделяя Африканский союз как ключевую силу в укреплении регионализма, продвижении своих политических и экономических интересов. Взаимодействие с Африканским союзом позволяет Китаю обеспечить поддержку своих инициатив на региональном и глобальном уровнях. Сопряжение китайской инициативы «Один пояс, один путь» с документом Африканского союза «Повестка дня – 2063» обеспечивает взаимосвязанность и взаимодополняемость усилий сторон в целях социально-экономического развития и обеспечения безопасности на различных уровнях.

Ключевые слова: Китай; Африканский союз; стратегическое партнерство; Комиссия Африканского союза; инициатива «Один пояс, один путь»; Повестка дня – 2063; устойчивое развитие; миротворчество; безопасность.

China is expanding its presence in Africa, viewing the continent as a significant economic and political partner. Supporting the African Union (AU) constitutes a core element of Beijing's regional strategy. Beyond traditional bilateral relations, China has progressively emphasised regional cooperation and development in Africa since the early 2000s. The principal drivers of this shift are China's growing interest in ensuring stability to protect investments and stimulate economic growth in Africa. Including regional organisations such as the AU in the Sino-African dialogue offers China additional platforms to enhance cooperation and extend influence. Simultaneously, this multilateral approach strengthens Africa's position compared to purely bilateral formats.

This article characterises China's policy towards the African Union, focusing on establishing and developing their strategic partnership.

Researches D. H. Shinn and J. Eisenman [1] examine China's strategy towards Africa, including how it has approached building a strategic partnership with the African Union. Scholar Yin Qun argues that the China recognises the AU's leading role in promoting regional integration and maintaining peace and security in Africa. Yin Qun further contends that Chinese regionalism policy aims primarily to create a China-led regional order and secure partner support for its diplomatic initiatives and large-scale strategic programmes beyond economic interests alone [2].

Evolving China – AU relations as an instrument for advancing Beijing's geostrategic and political interests across Africa are viewed in D. Kapayata's dissertation [3]. This mutually beneficial cooperation accommodates both

parties' priorities and helps them achieve their objectives. Wang Jiangwei and Zou Jing maintain that China's political strategy, grounded in multilateralism, is evident in its active engagement with regional organisations and support for African regionalism [4]. G. Lammich points out that China aims to strengthen ties with the AU because it sees the institution as a key security actor on the continent; China sees the AU as a strategic partner for promoting alternative norms in peacekeeping, implicitly challenging the prevailing liberal paradigm [5]. Russian researcher A. A. Zaballa explores how multilateral cooperation between China and Africa develops within the Forum on China – Africa cooperation (FOCAC), in which the AU participates [6]. She considers these forums crucial in producing strategic documents that shape the future course of China – Africa relations. D. C. Murphy and S. van Hoeymissen address expanding Sino-AU security cooperation [7; 8]. The article also draws on the works of Ch. Olden, A. Alao, Zhang Chun, L. Barber [9], B. Wekesa [10], K. Anning [11], P. Mthembu [12], P. Mthembu, F. Mabera [13], E. I. Zelenev, M. A. Soloshcheva [14], Y. I. Malevich and Zhang Yulin [15], among others.

The study employs systemic and structural-functional approaches, alongside comparative methods and content analysis, to examine China's policy formation and implementation towards the AU.

China's foreign-policy strategy towards African states rests on three pillars [2, p. 191–192]. Firstly, it integrates diplomatic and financial instruments to enhance the country appeal to partners. Secondly, development investments facilitate the transfer of skills, knowledge, and technology. Thirdly, China is increasingly engaging with complex political challenges within Africa.

The Forum on China – Africa cooperation serves as the primary platform for developing China's relations with African states and the AU. China initiated FOCAC in 1999, inviting all 53 African nations and the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) commission. The inclusion of the OAU commission as an observer emphasised its institutional role in regional affairs. Summits of heads of state and ministerial conferences have since convened every three years.

The inaugural FOCAC meeting convened in Beijing during October 2000, aiming to establish a new strategic partnership. Its outcome, the Beijing declaration of the forum, outlined a regional strategy for China-African relations. China subsequently launched its active political-economic engagement with Africa under the formally announced strategy «Going out» in 2002 [14, p. 108].

It took China six years after establishing FOCAC to formulate a comprehensive foreign-policy strategy for Africa, though initial engagement principles were stated as early as the 1950s. This new direction in Chinese foreign policy took shape at the turn of the century, as Beijing steadily increased its aid and support for African development.

The AU succeeded the OAU in 2002. This continental body strengthens interstate cooperation in political, economic, social, and cultural affairs. The AU's involvement has been instrumental in coordinating and advancing projects agreed under FOCAC.

China positions itself as a proponent of multilateral cooperation, regarding FOCAC as an effective platform for dialogue and consultation between the PRC and Africa [6, p. 36]. Chinese foreign policy prioritises strengthening ties with the AU. China has expressed interest in the AU becoming a substantial stabilising force for regional security.

After the third FOCAC summit, China published its first white paper «China's Africa Policy» in 2006. This document proposed a «new type of strategic partnership» between China and African states, based on political equality, mutual trust, mutually beneficial economic cooperation, and cultural exchange¹. The white paper stresses that China highly values the AU's role in preserving peace, ensuring regional stability, and fostering African solidarity and development. The white paper signals strong Chinese backing for the AU's regional and international influence, coupled with an offer of comprehensive support².

Official recognition of African regionalism and China's pledge to support it marked the beginning of

China's efforts to promote regional integration and develop new cooperative frameworks with the AU and sub-regional bodies. Deepening China – AU collaboration reflected China's pursuit of a more sustainable, strategically coherent partnership through multilateral institutions. Beijing had already implemented this approach successfully with the EU and ASEAN, underscoring the value of multilateral cooperation.

China has expanded its engagement with Africa from bilateral to regional formats. This multi-level approach maximises efficiency and pragmatism in relations with African states. Despite ongoing doubts about the African Union's ability to advance continental integration, Beijing intensified dialogue and significantly increased financial support, believing the AU had the potential to become a key continental actor.

China's multilateral approach recognises that a regional strategy in Africa would advance economic development and extend its long-term continental objectives. In China's view, consolidating efforts against cross-border threats would advance socio-economic progress and safeguard Chinese investments in Africa. Consequently, Beijing regards the AU and sub-regional bodies as instruments for promoting its strategic interests [5, p. 50].

In 2005, China became the first country to appoint a permanent representative to the AU, strengthening cooperation between the two³. Subsequent coordination of China's initiatives with the AU through FOCAC contributed significantly to peace and stability in Africa. China's recognition of the AU as an important security actor and its active role in peacekeeping reflect a pragmatic stance on sovereignty and non-interference, allowing for greater Chinese involvement in African security matters. An AU expert meeting in September 2006 identified the lack of coherence among African states in their dealings with China as limiting the partnership's potential. They noted that the AU must form the basis for a strategic partnership, articulating the continent's interests more clearly [11, p. 151]. The November 2006 third FOCAC summit in Beijing enabled a formal PRC – AU strategic dialogue mechanism, established in 2007. Annual meetings, supplemented by consultations on pressing international and security issues, followed. The FOCAC action plan (2013–2015) also mandated subcommittees on various China – Africa relations aspects, operational in later years [5, p. 51].

Since 2009, China has been the principal trading partner for many African countries⁴, advancing trade,

¹Full Text: China's second Africa policy paper // China Daily : website. URL: https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/XiattendsParisclimateconference/2015-12/05/content_22632874.htm (date of access: 17.10.2025).

²China's African policy // China.org.cn : website. URL: <http://www.china.org.cn/english/features/focac/183721.htm> (date of access: 17.10.2025).

³China opens permanent mission to AU // Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of South Africa : website. URL: http://za.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/jbwzlm/zfgxss/zyjw/201505/t20150508_7684463.htm (date of access: 17.10.2025).

⁴China and Africa in the new era: a partnership of equals // Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China : website. URL: https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/gb/202405/t20240531_11367447.html (date of access: 12.10.2025).

economic, and infrastructure projects that have contributed significantly to economic growth. Beijing also ranks among the key financiers of sustainable development on the continent. In its bilateral relations, China benefits from a notable power advantage, enabling it to promote its interests effectively. Nonetheless, regional and sub-regional organisations allow China to engage simultaneously with multiple states and, in some cases, to coordinate programmes and positions more quickly and efficiently [1, p. 52].

China affirms its respect for the AU's core principles, particularly conflict resolution. At the same time, the PRC insists on non-interference in African states' internal affairs and presents itself as a neutral observer. In its African policy, China refrains from judging internal political matters and highlights the AU's superior competence in addressing regional issues. Beijing strongly advocates for regional organisations to lead efforts concerning internal matters, including early-warning systems and responses to conflicts or humanitarian crises. China remains deeply concerned that the UN might become an instrument for powerful states to intervene in the affairs of weaker ones [8, p. 95–96].

The elevation of the AU from observer to full FOCAC member in 2011 positioned it as an important intermediary in China – Africa dialogue. J. K. Shinkaiye, Chief of the AU delegation, conveyed the AU commission Chairperson's appreciation for China's recognition of this status. He noted that the AU heads of state and government mandated the commission to oversee cooperation between African states and China⁵.

While including regional organisations in the China – Africa dialogue strengthens Africa's bargaining position relative to purely bilateral relations, China expects several advantages from engaging with continental bodies. In particular, engaging the AU as a representative of African interests significantly reduces negotiation costs compared with maintaining bilateral dialogues with the 54 African states. This approach legitimises China's continental-level involvement [5, p. 51], acknowledges the AU's leading role as mediator and coordinator, and enables more effective implementation of joint projects and initiatives.

To strengthen political ties with the AU, China allocated a 200 mln US dollars grant for a modern headquarters in Addis Ababa, inaugurated in January 2012. Designed in China and built by Chinese specialists with Chinese materials on land provided by Ethiopia, the building remains under Chinese technical maintenance despite its official handover to the AU [2, p. 78; 3, p. 150].

Former Chinese President Jiang Zemin's «going out» strategy accelerated China – Africa relations. President

Xi Jinping amplified this trend through the Belt and road initiative. Though initially incorporating only select North and East African coastal states in the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road, China has since signed memoranda of understanding with fifty-two continental countries⁶.

In 2014, China dispatched a mission to the AU, opening a new phase in relations. In March 2015 the mission became permanent, based at the AU headquarters in Addis Ababa. This move served to deepen diplomatic links with African states and reflected Beijing's commitment to multilateral diplomacy [13, p. 9]. The commission viewed this as proof of China's dedication to Africa's prosperity. The mission's political, economic, cultural, and security sections facilitate comprehensive cooperation. Reflecting on high-level Chinese visits to the AU at the mission's opening, AU commission Chairperson Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma stated: «China has always regarded Africa as a strategic partner», adding that its extensive experience with AU member states «will help advance our relationship». The Chair affirmed AU readiness to collaborate with China and elevate bilateral relations. Vice-Foreign Minister Zhang Ming noted that the mission would enhance China's coordination of major projects across the continent and intensify its diplomatic efforts⁷.

Ahead of the 2015 FOCAC summit in Johannesburg, China released its second Africa policy paper. Substantially longer and more specific than its 2006 predecessor, the paper details concrete projects and commitments whilst incorporating the FOCAC declaration and action plan. It sets out broad parameters for FOCAC's future, ensuring alignment with China's stated Africa policy [12].

China's updated African policy and expanded cooperation with the AU reflect Beijing's goal to achieve strategic aims and optimise interaction within FOCAC and similar platforms. These moves also signal Africa's growing importance within China's foreign policy priorities [13, p. 9]. Official discourse holds core Chinese interests face mounting threats across various world regions, whilst economic development provides the necessary foundation for building a peaceful society [16, p. 20]. Consequently, China links security intrinsically with development, prompting a push to bolster its security posture on the continent. This perspective motivates its strengthened security presence on the continent, demonstrating an increased focus on balancing these interconnected priorities [17, p. 15]. Under President Xi Jinping, development initiatives and peacekeeping contributions form interlinked elements of China's Africa strategy in Beijing's view [16, p. 22].

The second FOCAC summit and sixth ministerial conference convened on 4–5 December 2015 in Johan-

⁵Report of the Chairperson on the activities of the commission covering the period July to December 2011 // Portal of African Union. URL: [https://portal.africa-union.org/DVD/Documents/DOC-AU-WD/EX%20CL%20688%20\(XX\)%2.pdf](https://portal.africa-union.org/DVD/Documents/DOC-AU-WD/EX%20CL%20688%20(XX)%2.pdf) (date of access: 18.10.2025).

⁶Hariz H. The GGI: an era for strengthening Africa's global presence // Beijing Review : website. URL: https://www.bjreview.com/Opinion/Governance/202510/t20251029_800420441.html (date of access: 17.10.2025).

⁷China opens permanent mission to AU // Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of South Africa : website. URL: http://za.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/jbwzlm/zfgxss/zyjw/201505/t20150508_7684463.htm (date of access: 27.05.2025).

nesburg, South Africa. During the summit, China and the AU signed a Memorandum of understanding on linking the 54 African states through transport and other communication networks, accelerating cooperation in this sector [2, p. 89]. Co-chairing the summit with South Africa's President Jacob Zuma, President Xi Jinping proposed upgrading the China – Africa «new type of strategic partnership» to a «comprehensive strategic and cooperative partnership». The AU welcomed closer partnership with China, anticipating enhanced poverty reduction and food security across the continent. The Belt and road initiative, now a cornerstone of Chinese foreign policy, turned regional multilateralism into a new paradigm. Institutionalising such cooperation offers Beijing an innovative means of advancing its regional and global interests [18, p. 4, 16].

According to E. I. Safronova, the deployment of Chinese peacekeeping troops in some African states serves a «dual-purpose» function. In 2015, President Xi Jinping pledged 100 mln US dollars in military aid to the AU over five years to support the creation and training of standing police and rapid-response military units [19, p. 308].

In 2018, the FOCAC linked the Belt and road initiative with the AU's Agenda 2063, national development plans of African states, and the UN's 2030 Agenda for sustainable development. In December 2020, China and the AU signed an agreement to promote the Belt and road initiative and implement Agenda 2063 effectively. Representing the first such document signed with a regional body under the Belt and road initiative framework, this agreement reflects the strategic alignment of both parties [2, p. 94]. Both initiatives target sustainable development, infrastructure improvement, and higher living standards. This accord constitutes the first China-regional organisation partnership under the Belt and road initiative framework. Nonetheless, the AU's Agenda 2063 remains largely aspirational, and its practical implementation is subject to legitimate doubts. China, however, believes that alignment with the Belt and road initiative can accelerate the agenda's execution [15, p. 41].

China and the AU actively support each other on the international stage. Their positions converge on issues ranging from national sovereignty and multilateralism to multipolarity and human rights. This convergence challenges Western influence whilst consolidating the

Global South. The AU has yet to formulate a unified strategy for its relations with China. The accelerating pace of inter-state relations in Africa and the adoption of the AU's Agenda 2063 provide a foundation for formulating this unified policy approach.

In 2022, China actively promoted the AU's accession to the G20 during the Bali summit. During a meeting between President Xi Jinping and the President of Senegal and AU Chair Macky Sall, the African leader thanked his Chinese counterpart for being the first to publicly endorse AU membership of the G20. A year later, the AU became the second regional organisation – after the EU – to join the G20 as a permanent member⁸.

In November 2021, the FOCAC in Dakar adopted the Dakar action plan (2022–2024) and a Declaration on China – Africa cooperation until 2035. Both parties committed to deepening cooperation, accelerating regional integration, and aligning the Belt and road initiative with Agenda 2063 and the UN 2030 Agenda for sustainable development⁹.

Subsequently, the ninth FOCAC ministerial meeting convened in Beijing on 4–5 September 2024. President Xi Jinping addressed the opening ceremony, where China and the AU reaffirmed their shared commitment to deepening their strategic partnership. Xi Jinping proposed elevating China – Africa relations to an «all-weather community of shared destiny for a new era» and stressed that joint efforts would drive modernisation across the Global South¹⁰.

Foreign Minister Wang Yi noted that the world faces its most profound changes in a century, entering a new phase of turbulence and transformation. The collective development of Global South nations, represented by China and Africa, significantly shapes global progress. Wang Yi asserted that FOCAC's collaborative endeavours would strengthen China-African solidarity, enhance cooperation, and propel modernisation throughout the Global South. China places special emphasis on promoting the five principles of peaceful co-existence, seeking equality and fairness in international relations. The Chinese side further offered early support for the African Union joining the G20¹¹. Following the Forum's ministerial meeting the Beijing declaration on creating an all-weather China – Africa community of shared destiny for a new era and the FOCAC Beijing action plan (2025–2027) were issued¹².

⁸«We are all in the same boat» – Xi Jinping calls for cooperation within the G20 amid global uncertainty // People's Daily Online. URL: <https://russian.people.com.cn/n3/2024/1116/c95181-20243076.html> (date of access: 27.05.2025) (in Russ.).

⁹Dakar declaration of the eighth Ministerial conference of the Forum on China – Africa cooperation // Forum on China – Africa cooperation : website. URL: http://www.focac.org/eng/zywx_1/zywj/202201/t20220124_10632443.htm (date of access: 22.07.2025).

¹⁰Xi Jinping attended the opening ceremony of the Beijing summit of the Forum on China – Africa cooperation and delivered a keynote address // Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Russian Federation : website. URL: http://ru.china-embassy.gov.cn/rus/zgxw/202409/t20240908_11487195.htm (date of access: 27.05.2025) (in Russ.).

¹¹The ninth ministerial meeting of the Forum on China – Africa cooperation was held in Beijing // Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. URL: https://www.mfa.gov.cn/rus/zxxx/202409/t20240905_11485332.html (date of access: 27.05.2025) (in Russ.).

¹²Xi Jinping attended the opening ceremony of the Beijing summit of the Forum on China – Africa cooperation and delivered a keynote address // Ibid. URL: https://www.mfa.gov.cn/rus/zxxx/202409/t20240908_11487195.html (date of access: 27.05.2025) (in Russ.).

Crucially, empowering regional institutions within China – Africa relations reflects a deliberate strategy by both sides. China views it as a way to conduct foreign policy with less pressure and reduced risk of external intervention. The African side sees it as a means to counter Western economic dominance, limit external interference in internal affairs, and advance integration across the continent.

Consequently, China followed a bilateral approach in its relations with African states for an extended period. In recent years, however, this approach has been systematically complemented by a multilateral strategy in which the AU assumes an increasingly important role as a strategic partner of China. The AU, with its

extensive peacekeeping experience and influence in resolving regional conflicts, is regarded by China as a key instrument for reinforcing its position on the continent. China's strategy toward this intergovernmental body rests on a strategic partnership that aligns the Belt and road initiative with the AU's Agenda 2063 to stimulate infrastructure development, trade and sustainable growth, and to build an all-weather China – Africa community with a shared future, coordinated with the development agenda of Global South nations. This expands China – Africa cooperation, creates more favourable conditions for Chinese investment, and lowers the transaction costs inherent in purely bilateral engagement.

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