

China's Emancipatory Policy towards Africa: A New Path for Development and Cooperation

Speech for the 26th World Korea Forum – University of Nairobi

Distinguished guests, colleagues, students, and members of the World Korea Forum,

Good afternoon. I am honored to stand before you at the University of Nairobi, one of Africa's most vibrant intellectual centers, to present this reflection on China's evolving partnership with Africa. Today, I speak on a topic that resonates deeply across both our continents development, cooperation, and mutual respect.

China's engagement with Africa is often described in pragmatic economic terms. But beyond the numbers, trade routes, and contracts lies something more meaningful—what we may call an emancipatory relationship—a policy that supports African agency, values sovereignty, and delivers development without domination.

Let me begin with a symbol that connects our histories: TAZARA, the Tanzania-Zambia Railway, built in the 1970s when the West refused to support it. China stepped in—not just to lay tracks, but to demonstrate solidarity. That legacy continues today through **the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)**, which has invested in transformative projects like Kenya's Standard Gauge Railway and Ethiopia's Addis Ababa–Djibouti Railway, connecting countries, reducing costs and boosting trade.

But why is this important today? Because Africa is charting its own course of modernization. Guided by the African Union's Agenda 2063 and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), the continent is focused on industrialization, integration, and youth empowerment. China's investments in Special Economic Zones—in Nigeria, Zambia, Egypt, Kenya and Ethiopia—are aligned with these goals. They transfer skills, stimulate industries, and reduce reliance on raw exports.

This approach is framed through the **Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC)**, established in 2000. Unlike traditional aid models that come with conditionalities, FOCAC empowers African states to co-design their own development plans. The “Eight Major Initiatives” from the 2018 Beijing Summit include trade, infrastructure, green development, and people-to-people exchanges.

Importantly, **China practices a policy of non-interference.** It does not impose governance models or demand political alignment. In crises like those in Sudan or Zimbabwe, China

advocated for African-led solutions. For many African leaders, this respectful posture builds trust.

Let's not forget **China's global initiatives**: the Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global Security Initiative (GSI), and Global Civilization Initiative (GCI). These initiatives aim to reshape the global order to be more inclusive, equitable, and representative of the interests of the Global South, especially Africa.

Under the **Global Development Initiative (GDI)**, China has prioritized key areas such as poverty reduction, food security, digital economy, and green development. For instance, through the GDI, China has supported agricultural modernization projects in Rwanda and Malawi, improved water infrastructure in Zimbabwe, and promoted vocational training in countries like Ethiopia and Senegal. These projects go beyond aid—they enhance Africa's capacity for self-sustaining development.

The **Global Security Initiative (GSI)**, which calls for a shared, cooperative approach to global security, has found resonance in Africa, especially in regions prone to instability. In the Horn of Africa, China has appointed a Special Envoy for Peace and Security, hosted peace forums, and supported regional dialogue mechanisms, particularly in South Sudan and the Ethiopia-Eritrea normalization process. These efforts underscore Beijing's commitment to non-military, diplomatic pathways to conflict resolution.

Meanwhile, the **Global Civilization Initiative (GCI)** emphasizes mutual respect for different civilizations and cultural systems. China has used this framework to deepen cultural diplomacy across Africa. Confucius Institutes in African universities, arts and language exchanges, and African cultural exhibitions in Beijing highlight a soft power dimension rooted in mutual learning. This initiative has helped shift the narrative from mere infrastructure investment to a genuine intercultural partnership.

During the **COVID-19 pandemic**, China delivered vaccines, built hospitals, and trained medical personnel under the Health Silk Road. Over 50 African countries received Chinese vaccines, and emergency medical teams were dispatched to several nations. These efforts reinforced China's role as a reliable partner in times of global crisis.

In the digital realm, the Digital Silk Road has connected millions across Africa through telecommunications infrastructure, enabling new opportunities in e-commerce, education, and governance. Projects in Kenya, Egypt, and Nigeria have transformed connectivity and introduced 5G networks, cloud computing, and AI applications, positioning Africa for a leap in the digital economy.

By integrating African economies into global supply chains and fostering continental

connectivity, China's Belt and Road Initiative helps situate Africa as a vital player in Eurasian-African trade routes. For example, the construction of key logistics corridors like the Mombasa-Nairobi-Addis Ababa Road Corridor and the Lagos-Calabar coastal railway is designed not just to boost bilateral trade but to knit African regions into global commercial flows.

In addition, China is **investing in digital infrastructure** through the Digital Silk Road, supporting e-commerce, fintech, and smart city development. Huawei's role in building national broadband networks across countries like Nigeria, Egypt, and South Africa is helping African governments modernize public services and improve digital access for millions. These digital highways are as vital as physical ones in the 21st-century economy.

China's **scholarship programs and training exchanges** are also equipping African professionals, bureaucrats, and students with the skills to lead their countries in technology, policy-making, and diplomacy. More than 80,000 African students are now studying in China, forming a new generation of leaders with global perspectives and transnational networks.

These steps collectively enable African countries to engage with international institutions, not as aid recipients, but as co-creators of the global order.

Now, a crucial question arises: **Can China's experience be a model for Africa?**

China's unique modernization journey—lifting over 850 million people out of extreme poverty—shows that development does not require adopting Western liberalism. Chinese modernization emphasizes stability, cultural continuity, and targeted reforms. Scholars like Chen Xujing argue that modernization is not equal to Westernization, a message many African intellectuals echo.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Contrast this with Western engagement. While China sends its foreign minister to Africa every year, U.S. presidential visits have dwindled. As some Western embassies close in Africa, China opens more. As Western rhetoric warns of Chinese influence, African leaders are choosing with their feet—and often, they are choosing Beijing.

But let us be clear: this is not a zero-sum game. Africa's dignity and progress should not be the battleground of geopolitical rivalry. Instead, let us recognize that China's policy represents a new model of South-South cooperation—not perfect, but evolving, inclusive, and based on shared aspirations.

As we reflect on this in the **26th World Korea Forum**, let us also envision how Korea, China, and Africa can cooperate in trilateral frameworks—combining Korea’s technology, China’s infrastructure power, and Africa’s demographic and economic momentum.

To conclude: The China-Africa partnership is not just about trade or infrastructure. Infrastructure alone is not enough. We must now deliver peace as a public good, ensure safety for our investment and anchor our friendship in stability. It is about reimagining development. It is about dignity, agency, and shared futures. And it offers a powerful message to the world: that **development with respect is not only possible—it is preferable.**

Thank you.

Xie Xie