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## **The Rise of China in Africa: China's Influence on EU Foreign and Development Policy towards Africa**

Frost, Conor

### **Citation**

Frost, C. (2023). *The Rise of China in Africa: China's Influence on EU Foreign and Development Policy towards Africa*.

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [License to inclusion and publication of a Bachelor or Master Thesis, 2023](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3630503>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).



**Universiteit  
Leiden**

Social and Behavioural Sciences

**The Rise of China in Africa:**

China's Influence on EU Foreign and Development Policy towards Africa

Conor Frost

S3497755

[conor.frost@umail.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:conor.frost@umail.leidenuniv.nl)

Word count: 9999

**Supervisor:**

Hilde van Meegdenburg

**Second Reader:**

Katharina Natter

Abstract: The rise of China in Africa is well documented. However, little attention has been paid to how this has influenced the approach of traditional development actors in the region, such as the EU. This study examines the Chinese influence on recent developments in the EU's foreign and development policies towards Africa. More specifically, it focuses on the European Global Gateway Project, the restructuring of the EU's external financing instruments and the EU's rhetorical focus on developing 'a partnership of equals' with Africa. It argues that these developments were, at least partially, in response to China's increasing influence in the region. I contend that EU concerns over its strategic interests in Africa and normative concerns over issues such as human rights and democracy both led to this response.

Keywords: EU, China, Africa, Global Gateway, EU development policy, strategic interests, human rights

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## 1.) Introduction

“We are renewing our strategic partnership and making a positive proposal to Africa, as China and Russia compete with their own proposals and vision” –Charles Michel  
President of the Council of the EU 2022

The European Union (EU) has indeed renewed its partnership with Africa in recent years. The EU has increasingly prioritised infrastructure development which is evidenced by the launch of the European Global Gateway Project in 2021. It has restructured its external financing, increasing its use of blended finance -public and private funds- (Holden 2020, 111) which marks an end to an overreliance on grant-based forms of aid (Grimm and Hackenesch 2017, 599). Furthermore, the EU has reiterated its desire to foster a partnership of equals with Africa, which can be seen as an attempt to move away from accusations of having a colonial attitude towards Africa (Delputte and Orbie 2020, 244). All this marks a shift away from the traditional Western approach to development aid, which was primarily focused on poverty reduction and was accused of having paternalistic overtones.

These developments have unfolded against the backdrop of China’s growing influence on the African continent, as they compete with their own proposal and vision. The Chinese have provided an alternative form of development aid to what the West has traditionally offered (Wang, Ozanne, and Hao 2014). This is seen as preferable by some African leaders, primarily because the lack of conditions required gives African states more autonomy and flexibility (Tan-Mullins, Mohan, and Power 2010, 875). The Chinese focus on infrastructure also fosters tangible results which can directly impact the economy of the donee or partner state (Tan-Mullins, Mohan, and Power 2010, 860). Furthermore, due to the absence of conditionalities, the Chinese approach is open to all states, whereas the West’s approach is only available to those that agree to meet certain criteria.

This research project examines the role China’s growing prominence in Africa had on these developments within the EU-African relationship. Thus, this thesis seeks to answer the following research question: Did, and if so, how did the rise of China as a major actor in Africa influence the EU’s foreign and development policy towards Africa? To answer this research question, I trace the evolution of the EU’s development policy towards Africa by analysing relevant documents, such as speeches, minutes of meetings, press releases etc. This is complemented by conducting interviews with pertinent EU officials. The analysis of the

collected data is conducted through a constructivist lens. Using key constructivist concepts such as ideas, norms, values and identities, I hypothesise two causal mechanisms that led the EU to reform its approach towards Africa, these are; the EU's perception of China 1.) as a threat to its strategic interests and influence in the region and 2.) as a threat to human rights, democracy and the environment in Africa.

This thesis makes the important contribution of seeking to understand how international actors such as the EU respond and adapt to increased competition for influence from other countries. Given the rise of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China & South Africa), it seems we are headed towards a multiplex world order (Acharya 2018, 8), this challenge is one that foreign policy actors, particularly in the West, are increasingly going to have to confront. Furthermore, the EU; is increasingly becoming a major international actor, is Africa's geographical neighbour and remains Africa's largest trading partner (European Parliament 2020, 7). Therefore, it is crucial to understand how the EU responds and adapts its approach to the African continent in light of increasing Chinese presence.

The structure of this paper is as follows. I provide an overview of the literature on EU and Chinese development policy in Africa and compare and contrast both approaches. This is followed by an overview of constructivist theory and how it relates to this research project. The subsequent section details China's rise in Africa and explores recent EU developments in its foreign and development policy. I then employ process tracing, to discover the extent of Chinese influence on the evolution of EU development policy in Africa. I pay particular attention to the events, debates and ideas that led to recent developments such as the Global Gateway Project and the Joint Communication, 'Towards a Comprehensive Strategy with Africa'. This is followed by a discussion, in which, I contend that the recent changes in the EU's approach to Africa were, at least partially, influenced by China's activities on the continent.

## 2.) Literature Review

Overall, much of the literature on China and the EU in Africa focuses on Sino-African relations and EU-African relations separately. The former explores the characteristics of the Chinese approach to development while the latter is primarily concerned with the evolution of EU foreign and development policy in the wake of the Lisbon Treaty and its impact on relations with Africa. I also review articles that compare and contrast the two approaches before delving into the limited number of papers dealing with how the EU has responded to China's increased involvement in African development. I build on this literature by focusing on recent developments such as the EU Global Gateway Project and the EU's new comprehensive strategy with Africa. Filling the identified gaps by examining how China's increased involvement in Africa has influenced the EU's development strategy towards the continent.

Chinese aid in Africa dates back to the Cold War (Tan-Mullins, Mohan, and Power 2010, 859–60), however, this increased drastically in the 2000s. This led to an increase in scholarly attention to the topic (Manning 2006; Kragelund 2008; Brautigam 2009). Kragelund (2008, 571) highlights the most important principles of Chinese aid which date back to 1964, these being “equality and mutual benefit of aid, non-interference in other countries' internal affairs and no-or low-interest loans”, which still guide the Chinese approach to aid today. Kragelund (2008, 580) and Manning (2006, 382) both argued that traditional donors should attempt to cooperate with emerging donors. Whilst informative of the Chinese approach, this literature is now outdated. Given the rising tensions between China and the West in recent years, such cooperation is likely to prove difficult.

Research also focuses on EU foreign aid in Africa (Grimm and Hackenesch 2017; Bagoyoko and Gibert 2009; Forsysiński and Emmanuel 2020). But first, it is worth noting that the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009 drastically transformed EU foreign and development policy. This treaty established the European External Action Service (EEAS) and significantly expanded the scope of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. These developments have blurred the distinction between development policy and other aspects of the EU's foreign policy (Grimm and Hackenesch 2017, 549). Perhaps as a consequence of this, many scholars focused on the security and trade aspects of the EU policy towards Africa. Bagoyoko & Gibert (2009) stress the linkage between security, good governance and economic development in the West's approach to development aid. Similarly, Forsysiński & Emmanuel (2020) describe EU-African relations as a

multidimensional partnership. The aforementioned literature highlights a shift within the EU from a focus on poverty reduction to a more holistic approach to Africa, which in turn highlights the need to consider other aspects of foreign policy as the distinction between EU development policy and foreign policy has become less apparent. Instead of examining Chinese and EU foreign & development policy separately, this paper studies how the engagements of one shaped the policies of the other.

Building on the studies of Chinese aid in Africa, some authors have explicitly dealt with the contrasting approaches to development in Africa between China and 'The West' and their impact on Africa (Wang, Ozanne, and Hao 2014; Gehring, Kaplan, and Wong 2022). Wang et al. (2014) crucially highlight the Western aid dilemma, that is to say, that the West's focus on good governance fails to recognize that the quality of governance is often determined by the backwardness of the economy, thus the conditionality of good governance often overlooks states with the most need for aid. They outline how the Chinese approach bypasses this dilemma and point out that the West could not replicate this. While they may not be able to replicate the Chinese model, this paper will examine how the EU has adapted its approach to counter the influence of China.

Other scholars have specifically addressed the triangular relationship between the EU-China-Africa. Some have argued that the reorientation of the EU's policy towards Africa, in the mid to late 2000s, was in response to China's influence (Ampiah, Naidu, and Bach 2008; Brautigam 2009; Wissenbach 2009). However, Carbone (2011) traces the policy process of the Joint Africa-EU Strategy in 2007 and argues that this reorientation was driven more by a desire to affirm the EU as a major and coherent global actor. However, I would contend that Carbone does not consider that the rise of China may have provided "an external catalyst to step up collective action" (Grimm and Hackenesch 2017, 555). Grimm & Hackenesch (2017) conducted three case studies on African countries. They conclude that the rise of China only had a limited impact on EU collective action on development, noting that the EU's response to the increasing presence of China has been somewhat limited. They attribute this to the EEAS being preoccupied with other events such as the Arab Spring, the inward-looking process of development policy reforms preventing global shifts from entering Brussels' discussions and the fact that the rise of China only provided gradual rather than imminent pressure to adapt (Grimm and Hackenesch 2017, 562). Nonetheless, they do point out that the EU has sought to improve aid effectiveness and coherence amongst member states as well as increasing its use of blended finance in response to China's growing presence in the region (2017, 559). This



paper builds on these studies by examining the impact China has had on more recent developments in EU-African relations.

To summarise, much of the literature focuses on EU-African and Sino-African bilateral relations. Whilst these works contribute enormously to our understanding of these relationships in the realm of development in Africa, they do not adequately address the interactive effects of this triangular relationship. Some scholars have examined the differences between the Chinese and the EU's (or Western) development approach and what it means for Africa, yet these do not adequately address how the Chinese approach has influenced the EU's strategy in this field. There are articles that examine this potential effect on EU development policy, however, because of the constantly evolving political landscape, these seem to become outdated rather quickly. Therefore, this paper seeks to examine recent changes in the EU's development policy in Africa, through a constructivist lens, analysing China's influence on the ideas, norms, values and identities of the EU that shape their decision-making process.

### 3.) Theoretical Framework

To examine the influence of China on the EU's foreign and development policy towards Africa, this paper applies a constructivist theoretical framework when analyzing the data to explain and understand this phenomenon. This section first discusses the post-Cotonou negotiations, which helps to justify and set the time parameters of this study. I then provide a brief overview of constructivism before discussing relevant aspects of EU foreign policy-making. Next, I outline two hypothesized causal mechanisms that I expect to have operated simultaneously, leading to EU policy change towards Africa. These are the EU's perceptions of China as a threat to 1.) its influence and strategic interests in Africa and 2.) human rights, democracy promotion and the environment. This section will elaborate on how these mechanisms operate using key concepts from constructivist theory.

The Cotonou agreement, adopted in 2000 was the overarching framework for EU relations with African, Caribbean and Pacific countries. It was due to expire in early 2020, although it has since been extended until 30 June 2023, with the new agreement scheduled to come into force on this date. Negotiations for a post-Cotonou agreement began in September 2018 (European Commission 2020a), creating an impetus for EU policymakers to re-examine EU-African relations. Simultaneously, the commission and the High Representative sought to develop a new comprehensive strategy with Africa. This occurred against the backdrop of China's ever-increasing influence in the region. Therefore, these negotiations broadly set the time parameters of this paper, I expect to find deliberations within the EU around this period reflecting on how to reform the EU-African relationship, taking into account, China's growing presence in the region.

Data gathered from this period is analyzed through, a constructivist lens. Constructivism, first popularized by Onuf (1989), is an approach to studying international relations that emphasizes ideas, norms, values and identities as factors that influence political behavior. Building on Onuf's work, Wendt (2006, 1) outlines two widely accepted tenets of constructivism, "(1) that the structures of human association are determined primarily by shared ideas rather than material forces, and (2) that the identities and interests of purposive actors are constructed by these shared ideas rather than given by nature." Since the EU is comprised of 27 member states and multiple institutions, the shared ideas, norms and values as well as individual and collective identities, play a major part in reaching collective decisions. These concepts are crucial to the

existence of the hypothesized strategic mechanisms, which, are in turn, crucial to understanding the decision-making process of EU foreign policy.

EU foreign policy-making has often been accused of lacking coherence (Carbone 2011; Thomas and Tonra 2012). Whilst this can still be an issue given that individual member states possess a veto, there has been an improvement on this front (Tomat 2021, 149). Nonetheless, this thesis argues that the rise of China in Africa created an alignment of normative and strategic interests for the EU. The convergence of both these interests creates a window of opportunity for policy change in which different actors who have different concerns can reach a consensus.

Many authors have discussed the strategic v normative dichotomy of EU foreign policy (Cross 2016; Tereszkievicz 2020; Bering et al. 2019). The EU is certainly a normative international actor to some extent. The pursuit of norms such as democracy promotion, human rights and the rule of law, are enshrined in the Treaty of the European Union. Manners (2002, 241) notes that the EU's external relations are "informed by, and conditional on" these norms to a larger extent than most world actors. Nonetheless, others have commented on how the EU can sometimes place more importance on interests than values, especially in relation to trade and security (Tereszkiewicz 2020). Rozbicka and Szent-Iványi (2020) point out that some NGOs have accused the EU of prioritizing its interests over those of the global poor. Cross (2016) gives perhaps the fairest assessment of EU foreign policy, outlining how the EU is guided by the concept of principled pragmatism, that is to say, it strives to promote its idealistic norms but this is balanced by a realist assessment of the state of global affairs. The above literature demonstrates that both normative ideals and strategic interests are vital components of EU foreign policy.

The first causal mechanism I hypothesize is that the EU perceives China as a threat to its influence and strategic interests in Africa. Walt's (2019) Balance of Threat theory reveals how states are likely to act against perceived threats from another state. Carbone (2011, 213) notes that the EU can sometimes view China as a malevolent actor to be wary of. With this in mind, the application of Walt's theory to this research question implies that the EU holds a belief that China poses a threat to their strategic interests in Africa, including trade, access to raw materials, migration and security. Some member states are concerned that Europe would lose its 'legitimate' position as Africa's main partner (Carbone 2011, 217). The perception of China as a threat to the EU's influence and, strategic and economic interests, may provide them with an incentive to adopt a more assertive foreign policy to counter the influence of China in the

region. Indeed, China's increasing focus on Africa has "concentrated minds in Europe" on how the EU-Africa relationship could be transformed (Wissenbach 2009, 667). When conducting process tracing, I expect to find evidence of these concerns within the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission. The operation of this mechanism would be evidenced by calls to adopt measures to counter Chinese influence, in addition to cautious if not hostile rhetoric from some EU member states regarding China in Africa. This could be found in policy documents, minutes of meetings, speeches, reports etc. that express concerns over strategic interests in Africa in relation to China, I theorize that this in part led to the implementation of new/reformed policy.

The second hypothesized causal mechanism is that the EU perceives China as a threat to human rights, democracy promotion and the environment in Africa. The constructivist assumption that political actors are not only rational decision-makers but are influenced by ideas and social norms is crucial to understanding this mechanism. Norms refer to expected behaviour amongst political actors in a particular context (Zehfuss 2002, 8). The EU and China both follow certain norms in relation to the ideas that guide their foreign and development policy and we see a clash of norms in their contrasting approaches to development aid in Africa (Wang, Ozanne, and Hao 2014). Ideas can be thought of as the values and beliefs that shape actors' behaviour. The EU emphasizes values such as good governance, human rights, democracy and more recently, the environment which is espoused in the conditionalities required to qualify for development aid (Stahl 2011, 152). Furthermore, the EU has a self-perceived identity as a normative actor committed to being a force for good which promotes these values. There exists much concern within the EU, particularly in the European Parliament, over China's record on these issues and how this may affect Africa (Carbone 2011, 212–13). I theorize that the EU sought to improve and reform its strategic approach to Africa so that the EU does not get supplanted by China in terms of influence and, therefore, remains a preferred choice for African leaders, so that respect for human rights, democracy and the environment are not diminished. I expect to find deliberation on these issues between policymakers within EU institutions. Evidence of this mechanism would be policy documents, reports, minutes of meetings, speeches etc. that reference concerns over these issues and highlights the need to take action. I expect to find that these two mechanisms, operating in tandem, helped the EU reach a consensus and implement changes to its approach towards Africa.

Some limitations of this theoretical framework could include difficulty in operationalizing the key concepts of ideas, norms, values and identities. It is hoped that by conducting elite

interviews, I can better understand the role these concepts played in policymaking and how policymakers perceive these concepts. A second difficulty that often arises in constructivism is the fact that it can downplay the influence of material factors. However, the second causal mechanism is focused on the perceived threat to the EU's strategic and material interests, thus negating this difficulty.

## 4.) Methodology

To answer this research question, I conduct qualitative research on a single case; EU foreign and development aid policies towards Africa. First, I identify specifically what changes the EU made to its development and foreign policy strategy in Africa. I then employ process tracing to examine if the rising prominence of China in the region was a significant factor in these changes, and how the two hypothesized mechanisms operated to bring those changes to fruition. This case selection represents an example of foreign policy actors, responding to the rise of other global actors as they compete for influence in different regions of the world. As we move towards a multiplex world order (Acharya 2018, 8), it is important to understand how the West responds to the rise of the BRICS nations. This project focuses on three developments in the EU's approach to Africa; increased focus on infrastructure, restructuring of its external finance instruments and an increased focus on forging 'a partnership of equals'. Therefore, this analysis focuses on the process that led to these developments. Data was collected from a variety of sources as outlined below.

Process tracing has three variants, theory testing, theory building and explaining outcomes (Beach and Pedersen 2013, 3). In this instance, we know China has become an increasingly significant development actor in Africa (IV) and the EU has adapted its approach to development in Africa in recent years (DV), thus, this study will engage theory testing process-tracing, to determine if the hypothesized causal mechanisms link China's growing influence in Africa to the outcome of the EU's evolving approach to development in Africa. The hypothesized causal mechanisms are the EU's perception of China as a threat to their strategic interests in the region and secondly, as a threat to human rights, democracy and the environment in Africa.

This research method is particularly useful in analysing the decision-making process and the reasons behind decisions made by EU policymakers. This is conducted through an analysis of relevant official EU policy documents, such as press releases, minutes of meetings, speeches etc. This allows me to identify any references to China's growing influence in the region throughout the policy process, whether it be explicit or implicit, to determine if this was an influential factor that led to the EU's revised strategy towards Africa. This method of data collection is complemented by semi-structured interviews with EU officials to understand the motivations behind the EU's change in policy, which provides more clarification and more explicit answers on China's influence on EU policy in this area. Interviews also have the added

advantage of allowing me to isolate China's influence as the independent variable and therefore mitigate the impact of any potential confounding variables insofar as possible.

With regard to sampling methods, I reached out to various EU officials, particularly from such groups as the EEAS, the European Parliament Delegation for relations with the Pan-African Parliament and the European Parliament Committee on Development. It was hoped that this purposivist strategy would be combined with snowballing techniques, to build a larger sample network through personal referrals from the first interviewee (Bernard 2006, 150), however, due to time constraints this was not possible. See below the two anonymised interviewees.

#	Name/Title	Location	Date
Interview 1	Policy Advisor to MEP in the DEVE committee	Online	23/05/2023
Interview 2	Political officer in the EU delegation to the AU	Online	29/05/2023

Note: Interviews will henceforth be referenced as Interviewee 1 and Interviewee 2

A weakness of conducting theory testing in a single case study is weak generalizability. However, taking a holistic approach and conducting a more in-depth study, provides a comprehensive understanding of the posed research question, thus allowing for strong within-case causal inferences (Beach and Pedersen 2013, 2). Furthermore, it also allows for some more general aspects of my findings to be utilized to understand how international actors respond to competition for influence in different regions, such as Latin America or the South China Sea. The data gathered from examining policy documents and interviews are analysed to test the robustness of the hypothesized causal mechanisms linking changes to EU development strategy in Africa with China's increasing influence in the region. This analysis is conducted through a constructivist lens.

#### Limitations of the study

There are often many reasons why a political body will make changes to its policies, therefore it is difficult to establish causation and isolate, in this instance, the rise of China in Africa from other confounding variables. With fewer constraints on time and resources, more interviews could have been conducted, which would allow me to better isolate China as the cause for these reforms, which would enhance the credibility of this study. One potential confounding variable is that the EU may have sought to reform its relationship with Africa, to tackle the root causes

of the migration crisis, one interviewee stated that they did not believe this to be the case (Interview 1 May 2023).



## 5.) The EU and China in Africa

### 5.1 *The Rise of China*

China's ever-increasing presence in Africa since the establishment of the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation in 2000 is well documented. Various Chinese economic and diplomatic activities in Africa have reached unprecedented levels (Grimm and Hackenesch 2017, 553). For example, Chinese FDI to Africa has increased from US\$75 million in 2003 to US\$5 billion in 2021. Chinese total foreign aid expenditure was US\$3 billion in 2015, with Africa receiving 45% of this aid (China Africa Research Initiative 2023). Today, Africa trades more with China than any other single country, although the EU 27 bloc, together, constitutes Africa's largest trading partner (European Parliament 2020, 7). However, China is aiming to surpass the EU as Africa's largest trading partner by 2030 (The Economist Intelligence Unit 2022).

There are multiple incentives for China's increasing engagement with Africa. These include; access to Africa's rich supply of natural resources; the expansion of market opportunities for Chinese exports; and in terms of geopolitics, China hopes that by deepening Sino-African relations, they will be increasing their international influence, thereby strengthening their position in their ongoing power struggle with the US and the West (Hanauer and Morris 2014). Therefore, Chinese motivations for engaging with Africa are not so dissimilar to other geopolitical actors (European Parliament 2020, 7). That being said there is often a stark contrast between Chinese and Western approaches to development aid and between how African states perceive them.

It is important to recognise that African leaders are naturally going to be inclined to welcome any form of investment in their countries. Nonetheless, certain characteristics of the Chinese approach to development render it a viable and for some preferable alternative to Western aid. China has presented itself as the largest developing country assisting other developing countries in a form of south-south solidarity (Grimm and Hackenesch 2017, 550). This perception of China contrasts with that of many European nations that still carry the baggage of colonialism. This ties in with another key difference between the two approaches, the conditionality of aid. Western donors have traditionally utilized political and economic conditionalities as a means of allocating aid, which is often centred around the promotion of human rights, democracy and good governance practices (Dimier 2021). However, some African Union (AU) representatives and African leaders have made clear that they do not want or need to be lectured on European values (European Parliament 2020, 5). This again highlights accusations and perceptions of

European nations still holding a paternalistic or colonialist attitude towards Africa (Delputte and Orbie 2020). China on the other hand has a policy of non-interference and does not require political or economic conditionalities. This is seen as preferable by some African leaders, primarily because the absence of conditionalities gives African states more autonomy and flexibility (Tan-Mullins, Mohan, and Power 2010, 875). Furthermore, the lack of conditions required makes Chinese aid accessible to all, not just those countries that are capable of fulfilling the Western prerequisites.

Another key feature of the Chinese approach is its focus on infrastructure. The Chinese have carried out major infrastructure projects in Africa including railways, roads, ports, hospitals, schools etc. (Wang, Ozanne, and Hao 2014, 9). The direct provision of these projects produces quick, tangible results that can have a direct impact on the local economies, furthermore, this approach also cuts out the middleman, reducing the possibilities of corruption (Tan-Mullins, Mohan, and Power 2010, 860). However, this direct approach, which employs Chinese laborers to carry out the work, has been criticized for not creating employment for Africans. Nonetheless, McCauley et al. (2022) conducted a study on the effect Chinese FDI has on support for the Chinese model of development. Although the overall results were mixed, they found that respondents who live near infrastructure projects have a more positive perception of the Chinese model (McCauley, Pearson, and Wang 2022, 10). While the debate on the merits of the Chinese approach continues, it is now broadly accepted within the development community that priority infrastructure is essential for economic development, this fact is causing a policy shift from aid to investment (Ampwera 2019, 511).

The rise of China in Africa did not go unnoticed by other geopolitical actors. Some authors have argued that the reorientation of the EU's policy towards Africa, in the mid to late 2000s, was in response to China's influence (Wissenbach 2009; Brautigam 2009). However, others such as Carbone (2011) argued that this reorientation was driven more by the EU's desire to become a more coherent and effective global actor. The EU's response to the presence of China in Africa was initially somewhat limited (Grimm and Hackenesch 2017, 562). Nonetheless, China's increasing focus on Africa has – to some extent- “concentrated minds in Europe” on how the EU-Africa relationship could be transformed (Wissenbach 2009, 667). This thesis contends that some of the more recent developments in the EU's strategy towards Africa, outlined below, demonstrate signs of Chinese influence.

## 5.2 *Recent EU Developments*

This research project focuses on three recent developments in EU foreign and development policy towards Africa, that mark a shift in policy and strategy. These being; increased focus on infrastructure projects; restructuring of its external financing; and rhetoric from the EU highlighting its desire for ‘a partnership of equals’ with Africa. Before delving into the influence China may have had on these developments, it is first, important to understand exactly what the changes are, how they differ from past practices and what are the intentions and implications of these developments.

Amperwa (2019, 512) notes that the EU recognizes that priority infrastructure is crucial to sustainable economic growth in Africa. This recognition is clearly demonstrated in recent EU initiatives. The European Global Gateway Project is the best example of this, with €150 billion worth of investments earmarked for infrastructure projects in Africa (European Commission 2022a). A briefing for the European Parliament on the new EU-Africa strategy (European Parliament 2020), highlights that the priority level is high for industry, innovation and infrastructure. This marks a shift in focus from poverty reduction to infrastructure (European Parliament 2020). These moves take into account the needs of African states, recognize the importance of key infrastructure to development, provides record funding and also focuses on digital and green infrastructure. One of the aims of this shift of focus was outlined by the commission, which highlights “the advantage of focusing on tangible, lasting and visible results...which should contribute to strengthening the political loyalty of these countries” (European Commission 2022b).

To match these record levels of investment, the EU has restructured its external financing. One of these changes is the creation of the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) which entered into force on 14 June 2021. This new financial tool combines previous aid instruments into a single instrument. This marks the “single-most important legal-institutional reform ever made to EU/EC development funding” (Holden 2020, 112). This new financial instrument aims to improve efficiency and effectiveness, creating a more flexible financial tool (European Commission 2018). Another key development has been the EU’s increasing use of blended finance. Blending finance is a combination of loans and grants. “It entails a combination of market (or concessional) loans with grant (or grant equivalent) components” (Overseas Development Institute 2011). The EU did make some use of blended finance in the past; however, this was rather limited until the launch of the EIP in

2017 (European Parliament 2021a). Now incorporated under the NDICI, the EIP utilizes blended finance to mobilise investment from the private sector. An EU report on financing for Africa highlights that “guarantees and blending have increasingly complemented EU development aid, which mostly consisted of direct grants to partner countries in the past” (European Parliament 2021a). In the context of limited resources, blending instruments can be seen as a response to the increasing volume of development finance required (Overseas Development Institute 2011). In the Joint Communication Towards a Comprehensive Strategy with Africa and in the Joint Communication on the Global Gateway Project, the EU clearly outlines its intent to use guarantees and blended financing to mobilize private sector investment (European Commission 2021a). Indeed, the large sums of money earmarked for investment in Africa, would not be possible without utilizing blended financing.

Since becoming President of the Commission Ursula von der Leyen has focused on reinvigorating the EU’s relationship with Africa. Whilst addressing the AU, in her first visit outside of Europe, Von der Leyen stated “The African Union is a partner I count on and I look forward working within the spirit of a true partnership of equals” (Von Der Leyen 2019b). To emphasise the EU’s focus on forging partnerships, the Commissioner for International Cooperation and Development was changed to the Commissioner for International Partnerships in 2019. The new Commissioner for International Partnerships was instructed by Von der Leyen to ‘create a partnership of equals and mutual interests’ (Von Der Leyen 2019a). The EU’s desire to forge ‘partnerships’ is not a new phenomenon and has often been criticised as nothing more than empty rhetoric (Saltnes and Steingass 2021, 524). The extent to which the EU wants to achieve this and whether it can be achieved in practice is up for debate. It has been argued that the structural inequalities that exist between the EU and Africa prevent a true partnership of equals (Langan 2018). Furthermore, the EU’s requirement for conditionalities on issues such as human rights and democracy creates, perhaps irreconcilable tensions between the partnerships they state they want to forge and the perception of the EU lecturing African states (Saltnes and Steingass 2021, 523). Nonetheless, for the purpose of this article, it will suffice to say that since the election of Von der Leyen in 2019, the EU has revamped its emphasis on forging partnerships with African states, in an attempt to move away from the donor-recipient relationship of the past. The next section will analyse the policy process of the changes outlined above to determine whether and how the rise of China as an actor in Africa, influenced these EU developments.

### 5.3 China Shaping EU Policy

In this section, I briefly outline the EU's perspective of the perceived threat of China as a threat to 1.) its strategic interests in Africa and 2.) human rights, democracy and the environment on the continent. I then provide evidence of these concerns before delving into more specific evidence relating to the three changes identified in the previous section.

#### Strategic

The strategic hypothesised causal mechanism is that the EU perceives China as a threat to its influence and strategic interests on the continent of Africa. The rationale behind this mechanism can be seen in a briefing for the European parliament which notes that “the EU needs Africa both as a potential important emerging market and as a source of strategic natural resources. The EU and Africa also need each other in terms of security” (European Parliament 2020, 16). As China “attempts to increase its access to natural resources, market shares and political influence” (European Parliament 2020, 8), the EU may perceive this as a threat to the status quo which may destabilise their access to such things.

There is much evidence of this mechanism in play. Members of the European Parliament recommended countering the influence of China in the region as it threatens “the EU's role as a privileged partner” (European Parliament 2022a). Council President Charles Michel announced that the EU was renewing its relationship with Africa because “Africa's stability and prosperity is in Europe's strategic interest”. Whilst the commission outlined that the Global Gateway Project should strengthen the political loyalties of the partner countries (European Commission 2022b), which is of paramount importance for the EU's access to trade, raw materials and political influence in light of increasing competition from China. In a press release, the European Parliament called for closer ties with the AU “to ensure security and development and to achieve long-term peace and stability” in response to China advancing its geopolitical interests in the region (European Parliament 2022b). Furthermore, there is a perception that “the EU's role on the international stage [is] being threatened by China” and that it is “critical to the to the EU's own self-preservation to become the dominant actor in Africa” (Interview 1 May 2023).

#### Normative

The normative hypothesised causal mechanism is that the EU perceives China as a threat to human rights, democracy and the environment in Africa. A recent report for the European Parliament analyses this threat (European Parliament 2023). It describes how China has

adopted a more assertive foreign policy since President Xi Jinping came to office in 2013 in which they have promoted economic development over accountability for human rights. China's development policies under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have garnered goodwill from many developing countries, including several African states. China uses this newfound influence to "undermine the existing international human rights framework and system" (European Parliament 2023, 19). Many beneficiary states of Chinese development policies remain silent or are, at times, supportive of China's poor record on human rights whilst "also supporting China's pernicious and retractionist agendas on human rights" (European Parliament 2023, 29). Furthermore, "by ignoring human rights and environmental standards, BRI initiatives have the effect of bolstering authoritarianism, leading to considerable human rights violations" (European Parliament 2023, 29), in both democratic and authoritarian regimes.

Concern over these normative issues appears to be most prominent within the European parliament. In 2022 members recommended countering the influence of China in the region, as they "do not share the EU's values" (European Parliament 2022a). More specifically, in a 2021 resolution on a new EU-Africa strategy, the parliament notes that the EU's relationship with Africa "is motivated by advancing fundamental rights, providing support to democratic institutions and upholding democratic accountability" and believes that countries such as China "are pursuing other objectives that are, sometimes, of concern to us" (European Parliament 2021b). Moreover, an interviewee outlined that the EU likes to believe that 'Africa shares the same values and aspirations that we do, in terms of human rights and democracy' and that China's increasing presence on the continent has created concern that 'these values are threatened' (Interview 2 May 2023).

The above is evidence of the presence of both the normative and strategic mechanism, that is to say, evidence of concern within the EU over the threat China poses to its interests in Africa and concern over China's poor record on human rights, democracy and the environment. In the discussion section, I will analyse which mechanism appears to be more influential. Next, I will provide evidence of Chinese influence on the three changes identified.

### Infrastructure

The fingerprints of Chinese influence are most evident in the EU's increased focus on infrastructure. In 2013 the Chinese government launched the BRI, a strategy for global infrastructure development with 150 countries signing up including almost every African state.

China's focus on infrastructure has been praised for creating lasting and visible results. This is a concern for the EU as even though "we are the biggest partner to Africa; this is not visible" (Interview 2 May 2023). The launch of the Global Gateway Project in 2021 is clearly "an alternative to the Belt and Road Initiative (Interview 1 May 2023), which seeks to remedy the concern of visibility. Indeed, nine months before the announcement of the Global Gateway Project, the Parliament called "for the EU to develop a strategic and long-term response to the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, which should be guided by our shared values" (European Parliament 2021b). Deliberations on the Global Gateway, within the EU Commission highlight "the advantage of focusing on tangible, lasting and visible results" (European Commission 2022b). Communication from the commission also highlights that shifting global power balances underline "the necessity to strengthen Europe's influence in a fast-changing world, and to defend its values and interests", and views the Global Gateway as a vital tool to achieve this aim (European Commission 2021b).

Key speeches also demonstrate Chinese influence on EU policy. In her State of the Union address, Ursula Von der Leyen states that "it does not make sense for Europe to build a perfect road between a Chinese-owned copper mine and a Chinese-owned harbour. We have to get smarter when it comes to these kinds of investments. This is why we will soon present our new connectivity strategy called Global Gateway" (European Commission 2022c). She explicitly acknowledges the need for a smarter, more coherent approach in response to Chinese projects in the region. She continues "We will take a values-based approach, offering transparency and good governance to our partners. We want to create links and not dependencies!" (European Commission 2022c). Here she lays out the alternative to the Chinese approach which demonstrates a lack of transparency and good governance and has been accused of creating dependencies (Taylor 2014). During a speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2022, Council President Charles Michel, highlighted the EU's focus on key sectors such as infrastructure, green and energy technologies, digital and health before stating that "We are renewing our strategic partnership and making a positive proposal to Africa, as China and Russia compete with their own proposals and vision" (President Michel and Council of the European Union 2022). Furthermore, there is also concern over the questionable exploitation of Africa by China, causing the parliament to hold the view that the "EU-Africa strategy should also include measures to assist African countries in converting their mineral resource wealth into real development results" (European Parliament 2021b).

### Restructuring of external finance

As mentioned previously, the EU required new means of mobilizing funds to match the scale of the Global Gateway Project. Blending (using public and private funds) is particularly pertinent here as the majority of the Global Gateway will ultimately be financed by funds mobilized by the European Investment Bank (Interview 1 May 2023). The EU has for quite some time been aware of the advantages blending finance offers in terms of quantity and how this instrument relates to China. A report by ODI (Overseas Development Institute 2011, 12), notes that “blending frequently occurs in other countries, particularly in China. This may give China an unfair advantage over the EU.” In the same speech mentioned above, Charles Michel, in light of competition from China, stated that “we are changing how we work with Africa, to try to build together a new paradigm, and mobilising public and private investment to support Africa's development in key sectors” (President Michel and Council of the European Union 2022). The Joint Communication on the Global Gateway points to the need to utilize “Europe’s world-leading industry, private sector knowledge and investment capacity” to allow the EU “to be a viable and attractive alternative for partner countries” (European Commission 2021a). We can assume the concern here lies with being an attractive alternative to China. The increased available capital from the private sector and the flexibility of the NDICI should, in theory, make it easier for the EU to promote its strategic interests and better compete with China.

Furthermore, an interview with one EU official revealed that under the NDICI, the priorities for development programs are selected on a much more equal footing with the partner countries. Whilst the EU may still wish to pursue norm change, more autonomy is given to the partner countries, allowing them to select their own priorities. The Chinese no strings attached approach to aid had an impact on this development and this is manifested in how the NDICI is structured (Interview 1 May 2023).

### Forging a ‘partnership of equals’

As mentioned previously, the EU has, indeed, revamped its emphasis on forging ‘equal partnerships’ with African states. However, it is more difficult to establish causation between the rise of China and this change, as we would not expect the EU to explicitly acknowledge that they may have been paternalistic and/or neocolonial in their approach to Africa. Furthermore, we would certainly not expect the EU to admit this gives China an advantage in the battle of narratives. Therefore, it is necessary to read between the lines when identifying the reasons for this change.



That being said there is some, albeit limited documentary evidence of this. For instance, the Commissioner for International Partnerships stated that the Joint Communication Towards a Comprehensive Strategy with Africa “would help reaffirm the importance of the relationship between Europe and Africa and lay the groundwork for it to be reshaped from a ‘donor-beneficiary’ approach to peer-to-peer cooperation” (European Commission 2020b). Whilst this may not go so far as to admit to having a colonial attitude, the donor-beneficiary remark certainly acknowledges that sentiment. In another meeting the commission raised the importance of “the difference in the approach chosen by the EU compared to that of other global players, which illustrated the concept of ‘trusted connectivity’” (European Commission 2022b). This point highlights the EU’s desire to become the ‘trusted’ partner of African states, juxtaposed with presumably the untrustworthy China as the other global player. In an interview with one EU policy advisor, it was acknowledged that the EU’s position on the international stage is threatened by China, and it is therefore, necessary to engage in diplomatic efforts with African leaders to win the battle of narratives (Interview 1 May 2023). There may be other reasons for this change of rhetoric, not least changing attitudes in the EU and a desire to put distance between ourselves and our colonial past. Nonetheless, the shifting balance of geopolitical power, coupled with accusations from African leaders of being neo-colonial – an accusation China does not face – provided an increased impetus for this change of rhetoric.

Furthermore, the shift away from tied aid and applying conditionalities can also be seen as a move to counter accusations of post-colonialism and the growing popularity of the Chinese approach which does not couple its aid with conditionalities (Interview 1 May 2023). It is also noteworthy that the way in which development priorities are selected on a more equal basis under the NDICI goes beyond the empty rhetoric of ‘partnerships’ that we have seen in the past (Saltnes and Steingass 2021, 524).

This section provided evidence of the causal mechanisms and identified several indicators, both explicit and implicit, of Chinese influence on each of the three changes this project focuses on. The following chapter will discuss these findings in relation to the two hypothesised causal mechanisms.

## 6.) Discussion

As the EU sought to reinvigorate relations with Africa during negotiations for a post-Cotonou Agreement and the Joint EU-Africa Strategy, we can see that China featured heavily in the discussions. The previous section provided evidence of the presence of the two causal mechanisms and Chinese influence on the three identified changes. We see evidence of various EU officials across the EU's institutions corroborating the idea that China poses a threat to the EU's influence and strategic interests in Africa. The belief in this perceived threat, led, in part, to multiple calls for the EU to counter Chinese influence in the region. Similarly, there is ample evidence of the EU perceiving China as a threat to human rights, democracy and the environment in Africa, particularly in the European Parliament. Concern over China's poor record on these issues led to calls for the EU to counter the influence of rising powers who hold different values and norms than the EU.

The combination of these mechanisms and the different concerns they raise allowed the EU to reach an agreement that China is posing a problem for the EU (Interview 1 2023), which in turn has led to changes in the EU approach to Africa, which it can be argued are aimed at countering Chinese influence in the region. The Global Gateway Project is a direct response to the Chinese BRI. The NDICI can be seen as a mechanism to acquire increased capital to match Chinese investment. Finally, it can be argued that the focus on forging an equal partnership with Africa is a way for the EU to counter accusations of possessing a post-colonial attitude in its dealings with the continent, assisting the EU in the battle of narratives with China.

It is difficult to determine if the mechanisms carry equal weight or if one is stronger than the other. They both appear to carry approximately equal weight rhetorically, however, substantially this is less clear. An interview with an EU policy advisor outlined that the EU is placing less emphasis on human rights as a result of China. "The lack of normative basis of what China is doing, the lack of values has just brought us down towards them" (Interview 1 May 2023). It is assumed that the EU is going to beat China on this metric and therefore does not need to place as much emphasis on this issue, demonstrating a shift away from the idealism of the post-Cold War era to a more pragmatic approach as we enter a new era of geopolitical power struggles.

However, this does not imply the EU is not concerned with these issues at all, contrastingly, an interview with an EU officer in the AU stated that there is no appetite to let these issues slide, even with the concern of countries drifting towards China (Interview 2 May 2023). Despite this

many references to normative concerns are lumped together with more strategic concerns; ‘values and interests’, “values and objectives”, and often the strategic concerns take prominence in the discussions as we will see below.

Substantially it appears that strategic interests take primacy. This is perhaps best demonstrated by the untying of aid to economic and political conditionalities and is not wholly surprising given that we are operating within a contested geopolitical landscape. The EU still seeks to uphold values such as human rights, democracy and the environment but when these clash with strategic interests, it appears that strategic interests take priority. Regarding EU concern over China, there is ‘no doubt’ the EU is more concerned with their strategic interests than China’s poor record on human rights, democracy and the environment (Interview 1 May 2023). This seems to vindicate Cross’ (2016) assessment of EU foreign policy, in that it strives to achieve idealistic aspirations but remains rooted in realistic assessments.

## 7.) Conclusion

This thesis sought to answer the following research question; Did, and if so, how did the rise of China as a major actor in Africa influence the EU's foreign and development policy towards Africa? There is ample evidence to assert that China has indeed influenced the EU's strategy towards Africa to some extent. The Global Gateway Project is clearly the EU's response to the Belt and Road initiative, while the development of the NDICI and in particular the use of blended finance, grants the EU access to vastly larger sums of capital allowing them to compete with China. The emphasis the EU now places on equal partnerships is less definitively influenced by China, however, it does appear to be aimed at addressing concerns that the EU is often paternalistic and post-colonial towards Africa, an accusation not directed towards China which has given it an advantage in the battle of narratives. Thus, this study concludes that each of the three changes identified was influenced, in varying degrees, by the rise of China in Africa. Concerns over China as a threat to the EU's strategic interests and, perhaps to a lesser extent, concerns over China's poor record on human rights are what led the EU to implement these changes.

This project contributes to the literature by filling the gap on Chinese influence on recent developments within the EU-Africa relationship. More broadly, it contributes to the literature on Africa as a geopolitical battleground in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, as well as the debate about the EU as a normative actor. Further research could explore whether these recent EU developments are adequate to counter China's growing influence in Africa. Additionally, a similar study could be conducted on Chinese influence on EU foreign and development policy in different regions such as Latin America or the South Pacific.

It is noteworthy that a report for the EU outlined that the EU's renewed interest in Africa is either, in consequence of China's increasing influence or it could be the result of the EU's desire to become a more coherent and influential international actor. (European Parliament 2020, 15). This paper argues in favour of the first interpretation, while authors such as Carbone (2011) have argued in favour of the latter. I would raise the point that these two interpretations are interconnected. We are moving away from a unipolar world with the USA, a key ally of the EU, in relative decline, to a more contested multiplex world order. China represents the biggest driving force of this shifting geopolitical landscape; therefore, could the rise of China not provide an impetus for the EU to become an influential international actor? Perhaps further research could attempt to answer this question. Nonetheless, as the

debate over the African continent as a geopolitical battleground in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is sure to continue, it is vital that researchers and policymakers give primacy to the interests and agency of Africans themselves.

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