

## **Negotiated Dependencies: A Critical Political Economy of China's Expanding Influence in the Global South**

In a rapidly evolving global politics, the Global South remains a critical arena of geopolitical contestation and economic realignment.<sup>1</sup> China's assertive global presence, notably observed through development assistance,<sup>2</sup> maritime diplomacy,<sup>3</sup> and large-scale infrastructure financing, has unsettled long-standing power asymmetries and invited both optimism and anxiety about the nature of South-South cooperation.<sup>4,5</sup>

China's engagements in Africa and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) should be understood as dialectical processes. They reproduce global hierarchies while enabling new forms of contestation. Africa has become a laboratory for China's geo-economic and geopolitical ambitions. Through infrastructure investments and resource-backed loans, Chinese capital has positioned itself in key sectors with minimal terms and conditions, particularly in transport, energy, and telecommunications industries.<sup>6</sup> This has enabled many African governments to bypass Western donor constraints and pursue ambitious development projects. However, following the critical political economy's (CPE) viewpoints, such engagements also deepen fiscal vulnerabilities and reproduce primary-export dependence (Brautigam, 2020). ASEAN states present more differentiated pathways of negotiated dependency, shaped by their diverse developmental states and regional integration mechanisms. Countries like Cambodia and Laos display elevated levels of dependency on Chinese capital, particularly in infrastructure and hydropower, which reinforces elite-centered development models while externalizing environmental and social costs. In contrast, Indonesia and Vietnam have embraced strategic hedging: selectively welcoming Chinese investment while using regional institutions, such as the ASEAN+3 and the East Asia Summit, to shape governance frameworks and mitigate overdependence.

Amid these transformations, a key question arises: how do states and regional institutions in the Global South navigate external influence while asserting agency in development and diplomacy? A CPE perspective situates these debates within the broader context of global capitalism, uneven development, and evolving geopolitical alignments. By focusing on Africa and ASEAN, the

current *Contemporary Chinese Political Economy and Strategic Relations: An International Journal* (CCPS) issue examines how China's influence is or can be mediated, creating differentiated and contested forms of dependency. CCPS engages with these questions through the lens of CPE, foregrounding the structural constraints, institutional dynamics, and strategic choices that shape engagements between China and the Global South. Rather than accepting simplistic binaries of dominance and subservience, the CPE approach used here centers the uneven but negotiated nature of these relationships. It examines how global forces – such as capital flows, geopolitical realignments, and institutional path dependencies – interact with local conditions to produce variegated outcomes.

The first paper, *“Sino-Botswana Development Cooperation: Assessing the Opportunities and Risks in Chinese Economic Assistance,”* applies this perspective to Botswana's development trajectory under Chinese economic assistance, analyzing how aid flows, infrastructure projects, and economic cooperation are embedded in political, social, and environmental contexts. The study interrogates not only the material gains but also the hidden costs of dependency including labor exploitation, ecological degradation, and weakened accountability mechanisms. Through a CPE lens, Chinese assistance is understood not merely as a transfer of resources, but as a political project that reshapes institutional arrangements and constrains policy autonomy. The authors argue that local actors are not powerless but must strategically navigate and contest the conditionalities embedded in seemingly unconditional aid.

The second paper, *“From Declarations to Negotiations: ASEAN's Role in Managing the South China Sea Dispute,”* explores ASEAN's role in managing the South China Sea dispute, revealing the tensions between regional norms of consensus-building and the structural pressures exerted by China's economic and military influence. ASEAN's evolving declarations and diplomatic postures are read not only as expressions of normative commitment but also as adaptive strategies within an asymmetrical regional order. From a CPE standpoint, ASEAN's diplomacy represents a form of “soft balancing” that seeks to preserve regional autonomy amid deepening economic interdependence. The paper thus highlights how regional institutions, though constrained, can function as sites of contestation against hegemonic encroachment.

The third paper, *“Beyond the Debt Trap Narrative: Structural Risks and Strategic Choices in Africa–China Infrastructure Partnerships,”* delves into the widely debated phenomenon of “debt-trap diplomacy” in the context of China's

Belt and Road Initiative in Africa. Rejecting deterministic accounts that portray African states as passive victims of Chinese manipulation, the study uses a comparative framework to identify the domestic and institutional conditions under which debt vulnerabilities emerge. It reveals how fiscal risks and problematic lending outcomes are co-produced by both external financial strategies and internal governance failures. A CPE reading foregrounds the structural imperatives of capital accumulation and state rationalities that drive both borrowers and lenders, while also pointing to the potential for reform and resistance through improved institutional design and policy agency.

The three papers challenge prevailing orthodoxies about China's role in the Global South. They demonstrate that dependency is not a fixed condition, but a contested and negotiated process, shaped by power asymmetries, institutional capacities, and the strategic calculus of local actors. Through the CPE lens, Chinese influence is neither benevolent nor purely extractive. It is contingent, uneven, and always subject to mediation by political and economic structures at multiple levels.

The arguments presented by the three papers seek to reorient scholarly debates away from essentialist narratives and toward a more critical, relational, and empirically grounded understanding of Global South-China Relations. They underscore the importance of attending to both structure and agency in explaining the differentiated experiences of countries engaging with China. They cohesively advance critical understanding of China's global engagements – from bilateral aid relationships and infrastructure finance to high-stakes maritime diplomacy and collectively highlight the importance of balanced perspectives, rigorous analysis, and cooperative frameworks in navigating a rapidly shifting global order.

This collection serves as a vital resource for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners committed to equitable and sustainable international cooperation who want to understand the interplay between national interests, regional alliances, and global power dynamics. The three papers open new lines of inquiry into the forms of regional cooperation, institutional innovation, and policy adaptation that may emerge as responses to, and resistances against, the challenges and opportunities posed by Chinese power.

Grounded in CPE, CCPS Volume 10 (2024), Issue 2 draws on several interrelated concepts:

- **Uneven Development:** Exploring how China's engagement reinforces or disrupts spatial and sectoral inequalities across regions.

- **State Agency and Embedded Autonomy:** Analyzing how states mediate external pressures through policy innovation, institutional reform, or strategic resistance.
- **Structural Power:** Assessing how China's financial, diplomatic, and economic strategies exert influence beyond direct coercion.
- **South-South Relations:** Situating the engagements within broader efforts to reconfigure global hierarchies without replicating older forms of dependency.

This framework offers a coherent theoretical basis for understanding the contested dynamics of China's rise in the Global South and invites interdisciplinary dialogue across international relations, development studies, and regional studies.

As China's role continues to expand and as multilateralism enters a phase of profound stress and reconfiguration, academic inquiry must rise to meet the complexity of this moment. This publication aims to serve as both a reflection on current dynamics and a platform for future research on the evolving architecture of power, cooperation, and development in the 21st century. Through a critical political economy lens, this issue aims to provide a more nuanced, grounded, and ultimately empowering perspective on how the Global South can negotiate its place in a changing world.

This CCPS issue also features a review of Gregory O. Hall's book published in 2023 titled "[Examining US-China-Russia foreign relations: Great power politics in a post-Obama era](#)," by Jonald B. Dorado.

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## Notes

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1. Scholars also highlight amplified contestations driven by China and India's rise, alongside the West's relative decline, as the world's center shifts from the Trans-Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific. <<https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2024-45-southeast-asia-and-the-global-south-rhetoric-and-reality-by-hoang-thi-ha-and-cha-hae-won/>>.
2. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as China's massive infrastructure and financing effort now spans 165 countries, with over 20,000 projects valued around USD 1.3 trillion. <<https://orcasia.org/article/791/global-south-in-contending-global-linkages/>>.
3. Underpinned by its network of alliances and partnerships, the U.S.-led rules-based international order is under threat by an increasingly assertive China. A key to ensuring peace and stability in the SCS and beyond is a favorable balance of power. Without the U.S. as balancing force in the SCS, China would likely grow to become the region's hegemon and expand its gray zone coercion tactics as part of its maritime expansionist agenda. <<https://www.eurasiareview.com/12012023-the-us-and-south-china-sea-strategic-and-economic-imperatives-analysis/>>.
4. Experts point out that while China positions itself as a champion of South-South cooperation, critics caution against dependency, loss of strategic autonomy, and forms of neo-colonial dynamics. <<https://thediplomat.com/2024/12/chinas-g20-agenda-and-its-effect-on-multilateralism-the-emerging-global-south/>>.
5. On the flip side, many countries embrace China's investments as pragmatic paths to bridge development gaps—receiving infrastructure without Western-imposed conditions. <<https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202412/16/WS675f6507a310f1265a1d2f76.html>>.
6. The establishment of Forum On China-Africa Cooperation has further spurred China's involvement in African infrastructure across diverse sectors critical to economic development and regional integration. Key areas include transportation, energy, telecommunications, and industrial parks, each contributing to Africa's efforts to modernize and expand its economic base. <<https://thebftonline.com/2024/07/10/africa-china-2-0-with-philip-akrofi-atitiantiph-d-chinas-role-in-african-infrastructure-development-through-focac/>>.

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