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From the BRI to the Mattei Plan: Rethinking Africa's Development through Chinese and Italian Strategies

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AIIB	Asia Infrastructure and Investment Bank
AU	African Union
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CO_2	Carbon Dioxide
DFI	Direct Foreign Investment
DPCM	Decreto del Presidente del Consiglio dei Ministri
DTD	Debt Trap Diplomacy
EIB	European Investment Bank
ENI	Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi
EU	European Union
EUNAVFORMED	European Union Naval Force Mediterranean
EURIBOR	Euro Interbank Offered Rate
EUTM	European Union Training Mission
FC-G5S	Force Conjointe du G5 Sahel
FDI	Foreign Direct Investments
FOCAC	Forum on China–Africa Cooperation
G7	Group of Seven
G77	Group of 77
GCI	Global Civilization Initiative
GDI	Global Development Initiative
GSI	Global Security Initiative
LIBOR	London Interbank Offered Rate

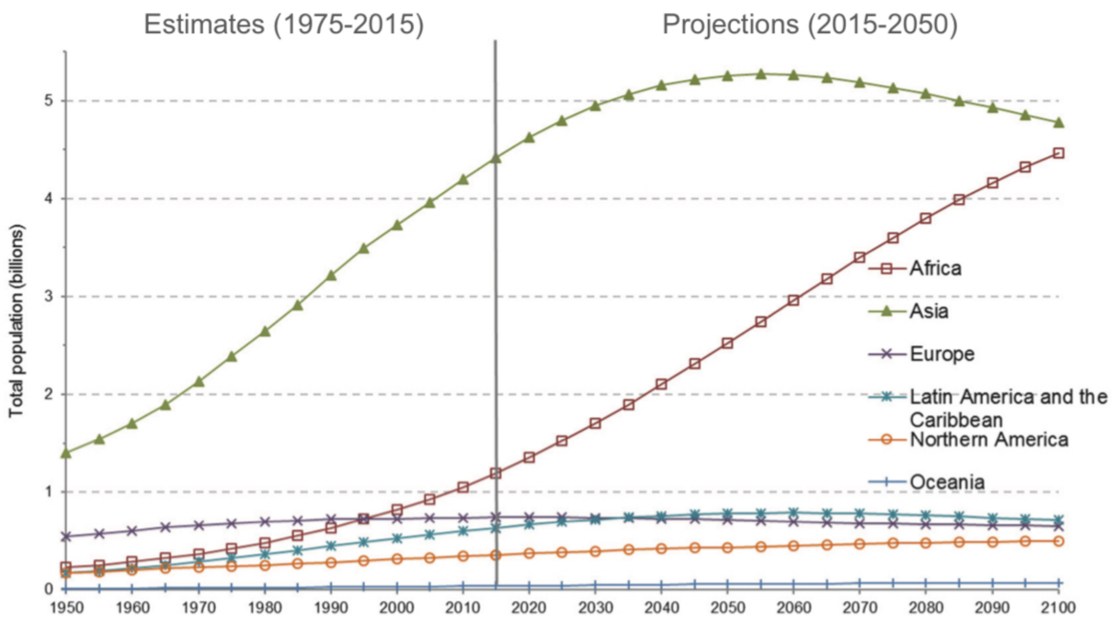
LNG	Liquefied Natural Gas
MAECI	Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale
MISIN	Missione Italiana di Supporto in Niger
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MINURSO	United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara
MONUSCO	United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OPEC	Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PMC	Private Military Company
PME	Professional Military Education
PRC	People's Republic of China
PSC	Private Security Company
R4I	Resources for Infrastructure
RCEP	Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership
RoC	Republic of Congo
SOE	State-Owned Enterprise
STEG	Société Tunisienne de l'Electricité et du Gaz
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNIFIL	United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon
UNIFSA	United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei

UNMISS	United Nations Mission in South Sudan
UNOSOM	United Nations Operation in Somalia
US	United States
USD	United States Dollar
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

INTRODUCTION

Africa is emerging as a continent with immense potential and is destined to play a strategic role in the coming years thanks to its abundance of natural resources, its constant demographic growth, and significant development perspectives. Africa registers one of the highest demographic growth rates amongst every continent; its population is expected to grow by over 2 billion individuals by 2050[1], and the majority of this population will be extremely young. Currently, about 70% of the African population is under 35, 60% is younger than 25, and the average age is 19[2]. The demographic potential is immense. According to statistics, by 2040 Africa will have more workforce than China (500 million people today, projected to reach 1.1 billion in 2040)[3]. These numbers are allowing Africa to become a crucial stock of human capital for the continent's economic development.

Levels and trends of the world's population by region



1 UN report 2015, "World population prospects: the 2017 revision, key findings and advance tables.
https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://desapublications.un.or

[1] UN report 2015, "World population prospects: the 2017
revision, key findings and advance tables.
https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://desapublications.un.org/file/624/download&ved=2ahUKEwibkJ_O-MONAxV66AIHHfDRMogQFnoECBgQAQ&usg=AOvVaw0IHq2P3SJjposn-Ae8SRmf

[2] Samuel K. Bonsu. "Talenti Made in Africa." *Bocconi University*, 2024.

[3] Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. "Il partenariato con l'Africa", 2020.

g/file/624/download&ved=2ahUKEwibkJ_O-MONAxV66AIHHfDRMogQFnoECBgQAQ&usg=AOvVaw0IHq2P3SJjposn-Ae8SRmf

The current geopolitical landscape has further highlighted Africa's strategic importance. Russia's invasion of Ukraine marked a turning point in the energy supply discourse in the Western bloc. Withdrawing from Russian oil and gas supply to support Ukraine has heightened the urgency of securing alternative energy suppliers to fuel the European Union's economy. Consequently, many European leaders turned to Africa as a key partner to ensure their energy security**.** In today's context, Europe, guided by Italian initiatives such as the Mattei Plan, seeks to reinforce its economic and strategic relations with Africa, especially in terms of energy, natural resources and boarders' externalization. Furthermore, nowadays there is an increasing demand for semiconductors to power every kind of technological device. The construction of these items is inevitably connected both to the supply of rare earths and the supply of microchips. Africa's vast natural resources, including minerals, oil and rare earths such as Lithium, Cobalt, Copper, Zinc, and Bauxite, are set to make up 9% of global supply by 2029. As of 2025, Taiwan is one of the world leading producers of microchips, while the United States and China rank second and third respectively[4]. China's aspirations include overcoming the United States to become the leading microchip producer worldwide, thereby enhancing its growth in the technological sector. However, to do so Beijing has an extreme need of raw materials, of which the continent with the largest supply is Africa. During the "*Chinese roaring twenties*" this need was fulfilled by Africa, that became a reliable partner for Chinese export, from consumer goods to heavy machinery.

During the last edition of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) held in 2024 in Beijing, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China clarified the objectives of the future steps of the Chinese strategy in Africa. "*Banding together to promote modernization and build a high-level Sino-Africa community for a shared future, countering the growing hegemonism and the "Cold War" mentality*"[5]. China is assuming a more and more assertive role in Africa, emerging as a key actor in the continent's

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[4] World Population Review, **"**Semiconductor Manufacturing by Country 2024**,"** *World Population Review*, 2024, https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/semiconductor-manufacturing-by-country.

[5] Xi, Jinping. 2024. "Toast by Chinese President Xi Jinping at Welcoming Banquet of 2024 FOCAC Summit." *People's Daily Online*. Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. September 5, 2024. Accessed [date you accessed the site]. https://2024focacsummit.mfa.gov.cn/eng/ttxx_3/202409/t20240905_11485532.htm

economy and politics as a more reliable alternative to Western superpowers[6]. On the other hand, even if with a different timing compared to Beijing, Italy has several factors that lead its foreign policy interests towards Africa. Whereas, during the last Italy-Africa Summit held on January 29th, 2024, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, in the presence of distinguished personalities such as the representatives of 46 African countries, the Presidents of the three European institutions, and of United Nations top officials, delivered a speech in which she stated:

"We have made this choice because the medium and long term objective we have set ourselves is to show that we are aware of how much the fate of our two continents, Europe and Africa, is interconnected. And we think it is possible to imagine and write a new page in the history of our relationships. An equal cooperation, far from any predatory temptation, but also from that "charitable" approach in the relations with Africa that is poorly reconciled with its extraordinary development potential.[7]"

This speech perfectly summarizes the declared nature of Italy's approach towards Africa, relying on the improved reputation of Italy in the eyes of many African countries, accountable to the legacy of Enrico Mattei[8]. It is then essential to consider the Italian approach within the wide framework of European foreign policy towards Africa, in which the European Union seeks to build a unique front able to tackle modern challenges of security, energy supply and migration, promoting at the same time a model of cooperation that goes beyond traditional logics and exploits the development potential of the continent. Africa's appealing factors for Italy are its geographical position, just on the opposite side of the Mediterranean Sea, and its historical ties with the continent, linked to its colonial past, especially in the Horn of Africa region. With respect to that, many have speculated that the renewed Italian interests in Africa are driven by a sort of *"revanchism"* of the right-wing government, and are aimed at gaining political influence over the continent, ideologically bearing in mind the bygone Italian Empire. However,

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6 Calabrese, Linda. 2024. "Quali sono gli interessi della Cina nell'Africa del Mediterraneo allargato?", *ISPI.*

7 Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, "Vertice Italia-Africa: l'interventi di apertura del Presidente Meloni," *Governo Italiano*, January 29, 2024, https://www.governo.it/it/articolo/vertice-italia-africa-linterventi-di-apertura-del-presidente-meloni/24857

8 Enrico Mattei was ENI's founder, an Italian energy company, he played a crucial role in the construction of a positive vision of its country in the eyes of African states and population compared to France and United Kingdom, by challenging the oligopoly of the "Seven Sisters" and proposing an innovative and more equitable model of cooperation between foreign industries and oil states.

this hypothesis has scarce recognition in academic literature. Furthermore, undoubtedly Italy's action is driven by national security and boarders' protection reasons, recently prioritized by the Italian government, whose one foreign policy priority is limiting the flow of illegal migrants coming from Africa. Lastly, following the Russia-Ukraine War, and the rise of energy and food prices, many European countries, with Italy at the forefront, have replaced Russian natural gas from other sources, particularly in North Africa, with Libya and Algeria becoming the first Italy's gas suppliers[9]. Due to these crucial challenges, Italian foreign policy focused the search for energy supply towards the Enlarged Mediterranean and Africa. The current government has relaunched its foreign policy towards Africa, through the "Mattei Plan". Rather than talking about a "new interest", it is more appropriate to define it as a "renewed" interest, especially during the Fascist Regime, Italy showed a strong interest in the continent, leading to the establishment of the Italian Empire in 1936, which included the colonies of Eritrea, Italian Somalia, Libya and Ethiopia, as well as other territories outside of Africa. The Mattei Plan, is symbol of an attempt to building ties laying on mutual respect and cooperation, detaching from neocolonial exploitation practices. The new importance given to the project symbolizes the Italian attempt to place itself as a reliable mediator and peer interlocutor in a competing multipolar era. What do Xi's and Meloni's speeches to African leaders have in common? They both carry with them a rhetoric of "shared future" and equitable and mutual development, distancing themselves from the colonial dynamics of exploitation Africa has been used to.

Research Questions

Having considered the driving interests of those countries towards Africa, understanding why China and Italy have considerably shifted their foreign policy towards the continent turns out to be essential. Throughout this dissertation I will try to answer several questions by adopting a Foreign Policy Analysis framework, specifically focusing on economic hard power variables such as trade, investments, and access to strategic resources. The scenario can be contextualized under the lens of the Rational Actor

[9] Carola Cerami, *"Could the 'Mattei Plan' Be Reinvented for Africa? A Historical Perspective," Il Politico* 89, no. 2 (2024): 100–119. https://www.jstor.org/stable/e48518060

Model[10] of Foreign Policy Analysis, which considers the foreign policy decisions of a state the outcome of a rational choice aimed at maximizing its national interests. Within this framework, China and Italy operate to expand their presence in Africa, using hard power economic strategies.

Most of the literature about China-Africa relations in particular, mainly focus on the economic and trade relations, however, my analysis will start from that perspective, which is the most immediate when it comes to China's and Italy's partnerships with African states, but will cover a wider range of fields, combining energy, security challenges, with economic agreements. This approach reflects the evolution of more complex relations that are not[11] just economic related anymore. Among the others, I will try to understand and analyze what are the long-term goals of those countries in the *black continent*, which resources are they deploying to reach their goal, the already existing projects, the challenges China and Italy will have to tackle trying to impose their presence, and ultimately, I will endeavor to go through the question: are they really seeking an equitable partnership, or is it just the umpteenth attempt of exploitation in Africa? Finally, I will conduct an analysis in perspective between the two approaches, while keeping in mind the differences of power, resources, and ambitions.

Theoretical Framework

When we think of China in 2025, we immediately envision a one-party authoritarian state, operating under an authoritarian government, characterized by a strict political and social control over its citizens and media, and with political, cultural and social values that significantly diverge from the western vision of the world. Furthermore, China is willing to compete and aspires to overcome American economic and political supremacy in the context of great power competition. In addition, as highlighted by Daniel Large in "*China and Africa – The new era*", Xi Jinping's leadership of the country, has allowed China to move from being a developing country to become a major power, with clear long-term strategic goals[12] . On the contrary, when we figure Italy, we imagine a middle power with limited foreign aspirations, a parliamentary democratic state,

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[10] Alex Mintz and Karl DeRouen Jr., *The Rational Actor Model*, in *Understanding Foreign Policy Decision Making*(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 57–67.

[12] Large, Daniel. 2021. China and Africa. 1st ed. Polity. https://www.perlego.com/book/2859111 (February 8, 2025).

characterized by high political plurality and by a multi-party trim, liberal values and where political freedoms are guaranteed.

Since the research will mainly analyze financial investments, it is appropriate to highlight the state's economic structure of both countries. China has adopted a state-capitalist system, where the state maintains control over some *key-industries,* and where economic policies are driven by the state. Whereas Italy follows a free-market capitalist economic model with enhanced trade with its economic partners, and an extremely developed market within the European Union, and where the state moderately intervenes in the markets, but rather let them regulate automatically. Having illustrated the due differences between the two actors, the comparison of two such different strategies can be considered both academically intriguing and innovative at the same time. China and Italy have adopted two peculiar and innovative approaches with the continent: they both leverage the fact that they use a different and more balanced approach compared to former colonial countries, allowing themselves to become more convenient and credible partner for many African leaders. Theoretically, China's massive presence in Africa is justified by its national interests, centered on economic and geo-strategic claims, and the quest for natural resources to maintain economic growth and sustain energy security[13]. Additionally, Corkin[14] has observed that the long-term project of the Chinese government allows State Owned Enterprises to invest in strategic acquisitions that may not provide short term results, but may render returns in the long run, especially considering the growing commodity prices. Investing in Africa is particularly convenient as it is led by a convergence of interests and needs. Firstly, in recent years Africa has registered an exponential need for infrastructure, in order to stimulate economic growth and attracting foreign investments. On the other side, Africa's GDP growth projections have attracted investors from developed countries, with a high availability of money to loan. In addition, H. Bo et al. have found that Chinese investments in Africa are positively correlated to a the GDP growth rate and the levels of present infrastructures in a country[15]. The average

[13] Otele, "Introduction: China-Africa Relations" 269.
[14] Lucy Corkin, "Competition or Collaboration? Chinese & South African Transnational Companies in Africa," *Review of African Political Economy* 35, no. 115 (2008): 130, https://doi.org/10.1080/03056240802021443.
[15] Hong Bo et al., *China's Infrastructure Investments in Africa: An Imperative for Attaining Sustainable Development Goals or a Debt-Trap?*, *The British Accounting Review*, published online August 26, 2024, 8, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bar.2024.101472.

returns from African investments stand at 6%, against the 4% of Asia-Pacific emerging countries, leading the Chinese government to consider Africa a more rewarding choice for the allocation of China's and Chinese industries' investment budget[16], reinforcing the theory of the rational choice. Moreover, China has gained a more credible reputation as a creditor among African countries seeking investments in fact, if the traditional credit institutions, such as the World Bank, or other Western powers that attach strict conditionalities to their loans aimed at financing public works and development projects in Africa, asking for compliance with human rights standards, the rule of law, and the improvement of democracy, on the contrary, China is not concerned about the advancement of human rights or which form of government African countries have; its primary interest lies in carrying on business and securing economic gains. This results in a mutually beneficial situation. Whether this approach is ethically questionable is not for us to judge, it is simply a way of doing business.

As highlighted during the last African-Italian summit and in the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' *Partnership with Africa*[17] report, Italy has chosen an innovative approach in Africa, decoupled from the traditional perspectives of exploitation associated with the former colonial powers, notably the United Kingdom and France. Italy's strategy is instead based on an equal partnership, where Italy can provide know-how, funding, and infrastructures while benefiting from Africa's immense human capital, natural resources, and vast growth potential. This fosters a mutually profitable partnership for both sides. Additionally, both approaches present immense potential for the African Continent; this new equitable way of dealing with Africa could pave the way for a period of sustained prosperity and economic growth in the continent, possibly leading to its economic emancipation and freeing it from its perpetual status as a developing region, never able to detach from the yoke of mere exploitation. Nonetheless, from a more critical perspective, rooted in the dependency theory, it is appropriate to question on whether these new forms of cooperation represent an actual break from the previous patterns of domination. According to the Metropolis-Satellite theory of André Frank[18], the global economic system is structured in a way that the prosperity of the core countries, the

[16] Were, Anzetetse. Debt Trap? 2018. Chinese loans and Africa's development options. South African Institute of International Affairs, 2018. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep25988.
[17] MAECI. 2022. Il Partenariato con l'Africa. Rome: MAECI.
[18] Luton, Harry. "The Satellite/Metropolis Model: A Critique." *Theory and Society* 3, no. 4 (1976): 573–81. http://www.jstor.org/stable/656815.

metropolis, is systematically linked to the underdevelopment of the peripheries, the satellites. Based on this logic, foreign investments and development cooperation often end up perpetuating dependency relations, rather than promoting an effective emancipation of the receivers. For instance, Andrews-Speed and Dannreuther[19], Lee[20], Taylor[21], and Hodzi[22] found that African political elites have merely replaced their dependency on aid from Western countries with dependency on concessionary loans and assistance from China, and because of seek for natural resources, trade imbalance, and debate on debt sustainability, characteristics of Western colonialism, China-Africa relations are likely to reproduce North-South dependency, in a way that the development of African countries will reflect China's growth[23]. Despite Italy and China present themselves as peer partners, their economic involvement can lead to asymmetric power dynamics, notably when African states' economies excessively rely on external fundings, and projects that keep prioritizing external needs rather than local ones. This research aims to analyze whether this dynamic occurs.

When analyzing Italian and Chinese foreign policy, it is fundamental to take into consideration that due to their power differences, they will adopt a different type of foreign policy. I will conduct my analysis by considering four different aspects: the foreign policy of authoritarian regimes and those of democratic regimes, and the foreign policy of superpowers and those of middle powers. The foreign policy of a country is influenced by external and domestic determinants[24], among the latter, the internal political system, and the influence of domestic actors can shape foreign policy decisions. The main priority of authoritarian regimes, is preserving their power, ensuring their political survival. In order to do so, the ruler must deal with four categories of actors:

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[19] Philip Andrews-Speed and Roland Dannreuther, *China, Oil and Global Politics* (London: Routledge, 2011). https://www.routledge.com/China-Oil-and-Global-Politics/Andrews-Speed-Dannreuther/p/book/9780415838313?srsltid=AfmBOoqDbKZ7beKnmvrx5iPTP5sGiOy4lCTG_s8pq-W5pfqbbrfefOJF

[20] Margaret Lee, "The 21st Century Scramble for Africa," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 24, no. 3 (2006): 303–330. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02589000600976570

[21] Ian Taylor, *China's New Role in Africa* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2009). https://www.rienner.com/title/China_s_New_Role_in_Africa

[22] Obert Hodzi, "China and Africa: Economic Growth and a Non-Transformative Political Elite," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 36, no. 2 (2018): 191–206. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/321184334_China_and_Africa_economic_growth_and_a_non-transformative_political_elite

[23] Oscar M. Otele, "Introduction. China-Africa Relations: Interdisciplinary Question and Theoretical Perspectives," *The African Review* 47 (2020): 272. https://www.jstor.org/stable/48659814

[24] Marchetti and Diodato, *Manuale di politica estera italiana*, 21.

political elites, the mass public, coercive organizations, and bureaucracy[25]. In the Chinese context, a non-personalistic authoritarian regime, political elites play a pivotal role[26]. In those types of regimes, the state power is shared among the political elites that hold a considerable amount of power in their hands. They can remove a leader who does not align with their preferences, or that they simply consider hostile. This can be considered a constraint, as foreign policy choices must align with the Party's (CCP) expectations. In particular, Chinese foreign policy is highly influenced by the industrial sector, pushing to expand its access to African resources. Consequently, the CCP keeps centralized control of policies in Africa but needs to maintain a certain balance with its elite's needs. Turning then to the role of public opinion, Chinese mass perception is highly shaped by strong nationalist propaganda, and in authoritarian regimes in general, the relationship between state and society is mediated by information-checking tools[27]. In China, the government shapes the information to shape public opinion on foreign policy. Regarding Africa, Chinese public opinion is not a pivotal factor, however, Beijing invests in soft power strategies to legitimize its presence on the continent, seeking to portray its operations as beneficial in the eyes of Africans. Finally, Chinese foreign policy is also affected by state bureaucracy[28]. The bureaucracy in authoritarian states has a sort of power for two main reasons. In the first stand, the information decision-makers receive to make foreign policy decisions comes from bureaucrats. In the second analysis, governments are dependent upon bureaucracy to implement their policies. Consequently, while mass public and political elites gain their power through coercive means, bureaucracy's influence depends on the tasks the government assigns them. One of the ways how bureaucracy in authoritarian states influences foreign policy it is though the quality of information they provide the government[29].

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[25] Kaarbo, Juliet, and Cameron G. Thies (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Foreign Policy Analysis*, Oxford Handbooks. 2024

[26] Svolik, Milan W. 2012. *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Meng, Anne. 2020. *Constraining Dictatorship: From Personalized Rule to Institutionalized Regimes.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[27] King, Gary, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts. 2013. "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression." *American Political Science Review* 107(2): 326–343.

[28] Tyler Jost, "Autocratic Institutions and Foreign Policy," in *The Oxford Handbook of Foreign Policy Analysis*, ed. Juliet Kaarbo and Cameron G. Thies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 290, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198843061.013.16.

[29] Kaarbo, Juliet, and Cameron G. Thies (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Foreign Policy Analysis*

Unlikely autocratic states, where the decision process is often centralized, democratic systems must deal with a more consistent institutional pluralism, leading to a fragmented decision-making process. In a Parliamentary system such as Italy, the government is accountable to the Parliament, and consequently to the pluralism of the country, which in Italy is particularly present, leading to a fragmented and less smooth decision process. An additional difficulty factor is the precariousness of governments in the Italian system. Each government has its own foreign policy priorities, often leading to inconsistency depending on the ruling political party. A clear example of this dynamic is the Italian approach in Libya, where Italian involvement was influenced by government changes, and the need to conciliate the economic interests of companies with ethics and normative constraints of democratic foreign policy. An additional difficulty that Italy has in carrying out an effective foreign policy in Africa is explained by the *two-levels* theory, by Robert Putnam (1988)[30]. Putnam argues that democratic leaders must negotiate at two levels: domestic and international. Consequently, Italy is constantly under pressure from internal parties and lobbies on the one hand, and on the other hand by the European Union and international organizations such as the UN, that requires high standards of human rights, especially for workers, while China does not have this kind of dual accountability. This foreign policy analysis approach shows how the "politicization" of foreign policy in democratic regimes may ultimately make unpopular decisions hard to make and ease the political exploitation of determined themes like migration and terrorism, in order to gain political consensus[31]. This phenomenon is particularly evident in Italy, where the public debate on Africa is often dominated by intolerance and racist dynamics, rather than effective solutions to emancipate the continent.

Turning now our attention to the foreign policy analysis of Middle Powers, according to the three categories of Middle Powers[32], in its approach to Africa, Italy can

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[30] Putnam, Robert D. 1988. "Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games." *International Organization* 42 (3): 427–60. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2706785.
[31] Oppermann, Kai. 2024. "Democratic Institutions and Foreign Policy." In *The Oxford Handbook of Foreign Policy Analysis*, eds. Juliet Kaarbo and Cameron G. Thies, 267–84. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[32] Giacomello, Giampiero, e Bertjan Verbeek. 2024. "Foreign Policy of Middle Powers." In *The Oxford Handbook of Foreign Policy Analysis*, eds. Juliet Kaarbo e Cameron G. Thies, 519–537. Oxford: Oxford University Press

be included in the cluster of "niche powers"[33], for its outlook focused on specific areas in which it seeks to exercise leadership and influence. Italy's sought to tailor a leading role is witnessed by its large commitment in boarders' externalization and lately, energetic cooperation, claiming to become "*Europe's energy hub*" thanks to its cooperation in Africa, Meloni said[34]. On top of that, Marchetti and Diodato point out that Italy's increased participation to international peace missions from the 90s has contributed to promote the country's profile internationally, having the objective of boosting the country's international prestige[35]. In fact, Italy played a key role in the management of the migration crisis in the Mediterranean, in the cooperation for development in Africa, and providing troops to UN peacekeeping missions in African critical regions, proving its willingness to become a pivotal actor in these specific areas. In this context, the objective of Italian diplomacy is operating in Africa maintaining the third Mediterranean circle as much as possible within the scope of UN-led intervention[36]. On the other hand, though, as Italy has been trying to assert its prominent role in the enlarged Mediterranean, it could also be categorized as a "regional power". Marchetti and Diodato[37] noted that the problem of Italy's foreign outlook is the discrepancy between the status seemingly accorder to Italy and the role if effectively assumes given its capacities. The issue is that Italy claims to be a big power but often acts as a small power. This gap is attributable to the fact that, in theory, Italy has always been the last among big European powers, while it was *de facto* the first among small powers[38].

Moving to China, since it became clear that the latter started emerging as a prominent economic power, an international debate about what role it was destined to play ignited. China's behavior in the global arena can be considered similar to those of emerging powers. According to this logic, China's foreign policy is predetermined by its position within the international system. Given that the US also has interests in Africa

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[33] "Niche power" refers to a country that, despite the lack of economic or military sharpness, exercise a remarkable influence on specific sectors or global issues. These states adopt a targeted approach so as to emerge as leading in *niche* areas, in order to promote their interests in the global arena (Giacomello and Verbeek 2024, p. 533)
[34] Euractiv, "Italy Can Become Europe's Energy Hub, Says Meloni," *Euractiv*, January 23, 2023, https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/italy-can-become-europes-energy-hub-says-meloni/.
[35] Emidio Diodato and Raffaele Marchetti, *Manuale di politica estera italiana* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2023), 129.
[36] *Ibidem*
[37] *Ivi*, 130.
[38] *Ibidem*

and considering that both superpowers have respectively enlarged their presence and investment in the continent[39], China's aspiration to expand its influence will almost inevitably fall into conflict with Washington[40]. Consequently, as China gains power and money, it will want to subvert the current world power, namely the United States, and at the same time the latter will act to prevent the challenger's rise, this dynamic is known as the "Thucydides trap"[41]. Yet, in the context of the great power competition, China endeavors to gain more and more influence globally, finding in African partners strategic allies to counter US dominance. According to the hegemonic cycles theory[42], the US, after almost a century of world dominance, is destined to face a phase of decline, having asserted their unchallenged power after the definitive USSR decline. Following this theory, China represents the emerging power that challenges the dominant power and gradually overcomes it, settling as the new global hegemon. In order to pursue this objective, China is leading the Global South to a new world hegemonic model.

The main goal of China's policies in general, is maintaining the CCP in power. The deliberate way in which the CCP uses propaganda and shapes mass perceptions serves to inculcate political messages in every citizen's daily life, to legitimate the CCP's foreign policy decisions. The foreign policy of China can also be analyzed through the lens of the "Century of humiliation" narrative. This expression is used to describe how China's central role in international affairs was weakened by Western powers, dating back to the Opium Wars. Chinese often rely on humiliation narratives when deciding how to deal with other states. The international humiliation suffered by China is aimed at strengthening the common sense of a strong and unified China against foreign powers. A good understanding of these narratives is helpful in comprehending why China makes determined choices in its foreign policy. This is demonstrated by the extent to which these narratives are reflected in its recent actions, especially in pursuing the One Belt, One

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[39] Bates Gill, J. Stephen Morrison, e Chin-Hao Huang, *China's Expanding Role in Africa: Implications for the United States. A Report of the CSIS Delegation to China on China-Africa-US Relations* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2007): https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinas-expanding-role-africa-and-implications-united-states.
[40] Richard Bernstein e Ross H. Munro, "The Coming Conflict with America," *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 2 (1997): https://www.jstor.org/stable/i20047930.
[41] Allison, Graham. *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017.
[42] Kennedy, Paul. 1987. *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000.*New York: Random House. Modelski, George. 1987. *Long Cycles in World Politics.* Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Road strategy, aimed at increasing its influence and presence overseas. These initiatives within China are presented as the overcome an era of weakness and limited international importance and a way for China to resume its wealthy and strong power position: the *rejuvenation*. As one Chinese academic noted, these projects represent "*a great shift from the idea of just taking care of ourselves*"[43].

Methodology

In order to analyze the Italian and Chinese approach to Africa, I will use a comparative, qualitative approach, seeking to analyze the pushing and pulling factors that drove these powers to turn their interests to Africa, and through which means they are carrying out their strategies. I will also serve of data sets to highlight trends in terms of demography, number of investments, presence of troops, to have a better and clearer perspective of shifting dynamics throughout the years. In particular, a correlation matrix elaborated by H. Bo et al.[44] will be useful to assess China's inclination to invest in a country. Chapter 1 provides background to historical dynamics in China's and Italy's engagement with Africa, and the evolution occurred as time and global dynamics and actors changed. For what concerns China, the research in the first place will introduce the first contacts between the PRC and African countries, starting from the Bandung Conference and Mao's vision on the South-South cooperation, ending up to the implementation of the Beld and Road Initiative by Xi Jinping and his assertive policies in Africa. Subsequently, this dissertation will provide a historical overview of the Italian colonial past in Africa, its heritage, and the consequences of its presence. Secondly, it will examine the process of decolonization, Mattei's and ENI's innovative approach to energy investments, and renewed cooperation after the 90's process of democratization in the continent. Finally, it will examine the latest interaction between Italian governments and African countries following the waves of migration that started in 2013, analyzing the policies Italy implemented to address the issue, reaching the most recent initiatives aimed at relaunching Italy's role in Africa, namely the Mattei plan. The second chapter is centered around the concrete modalities of cooperation put in place by Beijing and Rome. The

[43] Varrall, Merriden. *Chinese Worldviews and China's Foreign Policy*. Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2015. Available at: http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep10139.

[44] Bo et al., *China's Infrastructure Investments in Africa: An Imperative for Attaining Sustainable Development Goals or a Debt-Trap?*, *The British Accounting Review*, published online August 26, 2024, 9.

section dedicated to China examines the expansion of the Chinese model through the BRI, the consistent public investments and the dynamics of low-taxes loans, and the growing presence of Beijing in strategic sectors such as logistic infrastructures, raw materials and security. In detail, the research examines how China has been able to present an alternative model to the western one, with less governance constraints and more attractive to most African states, and how it was able to build up its influence thanks on a multi-level diplomacy, soft power strategies, within the framework of the "*Community of shared future"*[45]. Whilst for Italy, the chapter illustrates the recent relaunch through the Mattei Plan, that aspires to conjugate development cooperation with a variety of domains, having the declared objective of installing an "equalitarian" partnership with African countries. The analysis deepens into the instruments Italy has used, from the energy diplomacy with countries such as Algeria and Libya, to the borders' security cooperation and management of migration flows, and finally the attempt of promoting a more integrated European action for the continent. In conclusion, in the last chapter the analysis will assess the potential of the Chinese and Italian models as viable approaches to foster development in Africa.

[45] The Third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation**.** *A Global Community of Shared Future: China's Proposals and Actions*. September 2023. http://www.beltandroadforum.org/english/n101/2023/1010/c127-916.html.

CHAPTER I: CHINA-AFRICA AND ITALY-AFRICA RELATIONS

1.1 History of China-Africa relations

1.1.1 The early stages of China-Africa relations

The first interactions between modern China and African countries date back to 1949 when the birth of the PRC led to a new foreign policy approach under the leadership of Mao Zedong. Its rhetoric of Third World solidarity and anti-colonialism perfectly matched the instances and needs of African leaders and people of that time. As a matter of fact, during the 50s China started providing support for communist-driven revolutions and liberation movements in several African countries. One fundamental step for China-Africa relations was in 1955, in Bandung, Indonesia, where the Asian-African Conference took place. The conference was attended by 29 Asian and African delegations and was aimed at enhancing solidarity and cooperation among them, promoting the anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist vision. At first, China and communism in general were accused by African governments of being "dictatorial and "neo-colonialist", however, Zhou Enlai, the then PRC's premier, took a convincing speech, advocating for unity and cooperation, expressing PRC's willingness to help newly-independent countries, with the result of a successful conference that paved the way for future of Sino-African relations. In fact, as stated in a report of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs: "the Chinese Delegation entered into extensive contact with delegates of many countries, conducted frequent consultations and close cooperation with them, and contributed positively to smooth progress and success of the Conference"[46].

Between 1963 and 1964 Zhou Enlai and his Vice-Premier Chen Yi embraced an important diplomatic tour in Africa to strengthen ties and promote solidarity between the communist state and African countries. Their visits covered the United Arab Republic (currently Egypt), Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Ghana, Mali, Guinea, Sudan, Ethiopia and Somalia. His visits were particularly significant because they represented the first important commitment of Mao's PRC in the continent. Simultaneously, he developed the "Five Principles Governing the Development of Relations with Arab and African Countries" and "Eight Principles for Economic Aid and Technical Assistance to Other Countries".

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[46] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. 2024. "The Asian-African Conference." https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/wjls/3604_665547/202405/t20240531_11367588.html

These two doctrines will characterize China-Africa relations from then onward. During the tour, Zhou exported China's vision to Africa, reaching agreements with the leaders concerned on mainly ideological matters, namely, the opposition to colonialism, the spirit of solidarity, safeguarding world peace and strengthening unity and promoting friendship. Chinese premier, following the *Three Worlds Theory*[47], pointed out how global issues should not be decided by a restricted cluster of states, on the contrary he stressed the growing importance of newly emerging Asian and African countries, in contrast with the Western US-led developed world. In his idea, every country is equal and should be treated equally. The "Five Principles Governing the Development of Relations with Arab and African Countries" represented the guidelines for China's future approach with those countries. According to these principles China committed to: supporting Arab and African peoples in their fight in opposing imperialism and colonialism, empowering national independence, peace, neutrality and non-alignment[48] by African and Arab governments, supporting unity and solidarity, and their efforts to settle their disputes through peaceful means, and finally, stating that the sovereignty of those countries should be respected by all the others, and interferences should be opposed. These five principles represented the concrete application of the Bandung spirit. Zhou justified Chinese economic assistance by saying that the PRC was providing aids to "poor friends who were in the same boat pulling oars together".[49] Whereas in Ghana and Mali, the Premier listed the following eight principles according to which China's assistance was based:

1. The Chinese Government always bases itself on the principle of equality and mutual benefit in providing aid to other countries. It never regards such aid as a kind of unilateral alms but as something mutual.
2. In providing aid to other countries, the Chinese Government strictly respects the sovereignty of the recipient countries and never attaches any conditions or asks for any privileges.

[47] Mao Tse-Tung

[48] The Sino-Soviet split had its peak in 1963 consequently, after that date the PRC national interests in the Cold War was maintaining neutrality and non-alignment of its allies to oppose both the United States and its former ally, the Soviet Union.

[49] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. 2024. "Premier Zhou Enlai's Three Tours of Asian and African Countries."
https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/wjls/3604_665547/202405/t20240531_11367543.html

3. China provides economic aid in the form of interest-free or low-interest loans and extends the time limit for repayment when necessary, so as to lighten the burden of the recipient countries as far as possible.
4. In providing aid to other countries, the purpose of the Chinese Government is not to make the recipient countries dependent on China but to help them embark step by step on the road of self-reliance and independent economic development.
5. The Chinese Government tries its best to help the recipient countries build projects which require less investment while yielding quicker results, so that the recipient governments may increase their income and accumulate capital.
6. The Chinese Government provides the best-quality equipment and materials of its own manufacture at international market prices. If the equipment and materials provided by the Chinese Government are not up to the agreed specifications and quality, the Chinese Government undertakes to replace them.
7. In providing any technical assistance, the Chinese Government will see to it that the personnel of the recipient country fully master such technique.
8. The experts dispatched by China to help in construction in the recipient countries will have the same standard of living as the experts of the recipient country. The Chinese experts are not allowed to make any special demands or enjoy any special amenities.[50]

All these principles set the basic norms for PRC relations with other "Third World" countries. China also started financing projects that were considered uneconomic by Western powers but that mattered to African states. The most iconic is the Tanzania–Zambia (TAZARA) or Freedom Railway, which was built to connect Dar es Salaam on the Tanzanian coast with Zambia's Copperbelt region, thus bypassing the land route through Rhodesia (currently Zimbabwe) and apartheid's South Africa. One of Mao's main policies was "exporting" revolution to those as a geopolitical tool to extend Chinese influence, his model inspired several countries to subvert the colonial power and claim their independence. Spreading influence turned out to be particularly important after the Sino-Soviet split, when China started seeking influence not only among Taiwan and

[50] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. 2024. "Premier Zhou Enlai's Three Tours of Asian and African Countries." https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/wjls/3604_665547/202405/t20240531_11367543.html

Western countries but also among other communist powers, aspiring to make its model, the most effective communist model[51]**.** To achieve this goal Africa became pivotal in Chinese foreign policy, led by a mix of exporting revolution, geopolitical strategy and solidarity among developing countries. Finally, China's enhanced ties with Africa ended up being fundamental for Beijing when in 1971, African votes supported China to replace Taiwan's seat in the United Nations Security Council, representing an unprecedented political and ideological success for the PRC. This success though, preceded by a few years a generational tragedy for the PRC: Mao's death.

1.1.2 The shift after Mao's death

After Mao's death, occurred in 1976, his successor, Hua-Guofeng showed little interest in enhancing relations with Africa. Two years later, in 1978, Deng Xiaoping took power. His policies were significantly recalibrated from Mao's vision, opening to modernization and focusing mainly on domestic economic growth and pragmatism. Moreover, Africa's failure to open to international markets further distanced from China's priorities. While Deng kept decent relations with African countries, trade, and aid that was promised during the 60's stagnated. As China started focusing on internal modernization, foreign aids consequently lost its importance[52]. In 1982, during the twelfth Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, China made clear its policy shift, announcing that from then onwards, they would have reduced the number of resources destined to foreign aids. However, after Tiananmen Square Crisis in 1989, the PRC felt the need to reassure its African allies to avoid Taiwan's and Western recognition by those countries. Consequently, Premier Zhou Ziyang visited eleven African countries to reaffirm China's interests in the continent. Ziyang's visit resembled Enlai's 1963-64 visit and served to clarify Beijing's interests in the continent. In his visit, Ziyang revised the founding principles of Chinese aids to Africa, originally formulated by Enlai. The new four principles were:

- "Equality, mutual benefit, and non-interference in internal affairs.

[51] Large, Daniel. *China and Africa: The New Era*. London: Zed Books, 2021. https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/2859111/13?page_number=18

[52] Taylor, Ian. 1998. "China's Foreign Policy towards Africa in the 1990s." *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 36(3): 443–60.

- Good economic results with less investment, shorter construction cycles, and quicker results.
- Greater variety of projects that take into account specific local conditions, high quality of work, and a stress on friendship.
- Enhancement of the self-reliant capabilities of both sides and promotion of growth of respective national economies."

Nevertheless, during that period the rampant economic growth sought by Deng, China was left with few capital to invest in foreign aids and consequently had to reseize the amount of money destined to Africa. In this context, China started to rethink the way of investing in Africa, starting to rely on commercial contracts, joint ventures and providing technical services. Therefore, during the late Deng leadership the Sino-African paradigm shifted from political cooperation to a commercial partnership[53]. As Shinn and Eisenman highlighted: "The Jiang Zemin period established the base for the phenomenal expansion of China-African relations in the XXI century".[54] If Deng Xiaoping chose a *low-profile* foreign policy in order to focus on domestic economic development, his successor Jiang Zemin (1989-2002) changed the paradigm again, increasing investments and trade, taking advantage of the vacuum left by the West after the end of the Cold War. Under Zemin's administration, Premier Li Peng clearly and officially stated how the Chinese approach towards Africa was not mere aid donation, but became a mutually beneficial relationship, aimed at the growth of both. Furthermore, in 1999 the CCP pursued a new foreign policy doctrine, the so-called "going global", that encouraged Chinese companies to expand overseas, hence, Chinese state-owned companies (SOEs) started implementing their activities in African countries[55]. In 2000 then the most important arena for discussions between China and African countries, which is still fundamental today, was established: the FOCAC. The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation is a cooperation mechanism wanted by China and African states to strengthen their political, economic and development ties. The forum takes place every three years and with time has become one

[53] He, Wenping. 2006. "Moving Forward with the Time: The Evolution of China's African Policy." Paper presented at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. http://www.cctr.ust.hk/materials/conference/china-africa/papers/He,Wengping.pdf.
[54] Shinn, David H., and Joshua Eisenman. 2012. *China and Africa: A Century of Engagement.* Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
[55] Large, Daniel. *China and Africa: The New Era*. London: Zed Books, 2021.
[55] *Ibidem*

of the main Chinese foreign policy tools in the continent. The FOCAC is based on three-year plans for several key sectors, namely economy and trade, infrastructures, security, health and development, and environment. The Zemin era was a significant change from Deng's approach, revitalizing and exponentially improving trade. China's aids to Africa in 1988 were set to be around 60 million USD, radically reaching 224 million USD one year later, until the peak of 375 million USD in 1990. During that decade, more than half of the countries receiving aid from China were African countries[56]. The cooperation was not just limited to trade but started permeating cultural aspects. In the 90s China started offering scholarships to African students, and encouraging exchange between African and Chinese universities, the number of African students in China at the beginning of the Zemin era exceeded 1000 units. Beijing also increased its support on security issues, providing to its African partners ships, anti-ship missiles, tanks, supersonic combat aircraft, surface-to-air missiles, artillery, armored personnel, and self-propelled guns[57]. Furthermore, in 1989 China took part in a United Nations peacekeeping operation in Africa, deploying its military personnel to the continent for the first time. China's military commitment included participation in the UN mission in Western Sahara in 1991, Mozambique in 1993-1994, Liberia in 1993-1997, Siera Leone in 1998-1999, and deployment along the Eritrea-Ethiopia border in 2000[58]**.** In addition, in the 90s, Beijing started being interested in African natural resources and raw materials, seeking iron, titanium, cobalt, copper, uranium, bauxite, manganese, and timber. Overall, trade between China and Africa increased from one billion USD under Deng in 1989, to over ten billion USD in 2002, the last year of Zemin's leadership. However, by implementing initiatives that extended beyond purely economic-driven relations, China was conveying a clear message to the rest of the world: Africa was no more a mere recipient of aid or a faithful trading partner, but a region where Beijing wanted to deepen strategic cooperation across multiple sectors, diplomacy, security and culture among the others. The graph below clearly puts in evidence how much trade developed from the different

[56] Taylor, Ian. "China's Foreign Policy towards Africa in the 1990s."
[57] Large, Daniel. *China and Africa: The New Era*. London: Zed Books, 2021. https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/2859111/13?page_number=18
[58] *Ibidem*

administrations, and how Zemin marked a new era in China-Africa trade compared to previous leaderships.

[59] See Broadman, Harry G. 2007. Africa's Silk Road: China and India's New Economic Frontier. Washington, DC: World Bank; Wang, Jian-Ye, and Abdoulaye Bio-Tchané. 2008. "Africa's Burgeoning Ties with China." Finance & Development, March.

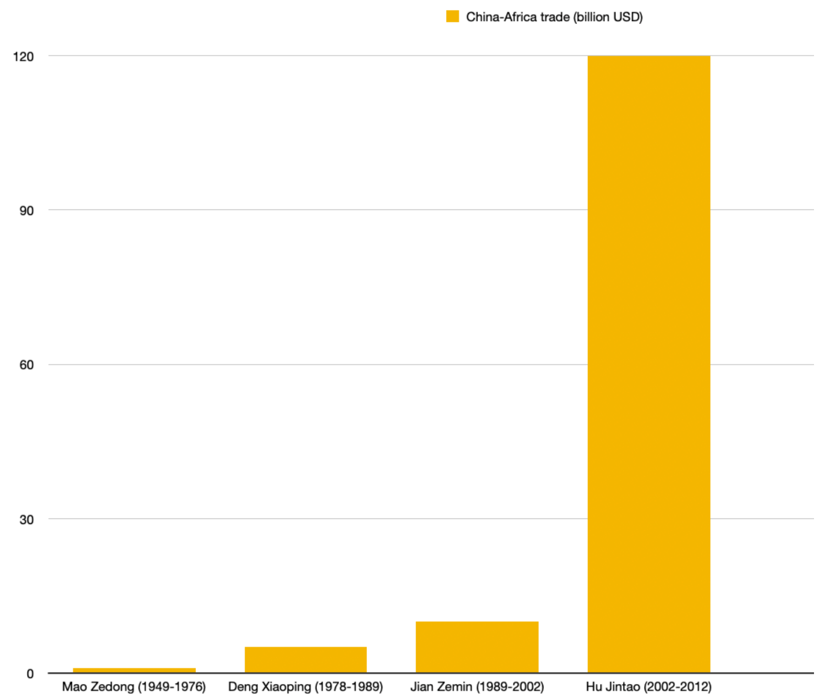
As Jiang Zemin's era came to an end in 2002, the transition to Hu Jintao's leadership saw a deepening of interactions, marked by a sharp emphasis on mutual development and infrastructural projects. The first FOCAC under Hu Jintao, held in 2003 in Addis Ababa, became a crucial forum not only for institutional engagements among ministries and leaders, in fact, side sessions were established to facilitate Chinese business representatives in meeting with their African partners. After the 2006 Beijing FOCAC, China issued the Africa policy paper, which incorporated additional principles. Unprecedented aspects included a strengthened cooperation with Africa in the United Nations and other international organizations, through mutual support, and learning from and drawing upon each other's experience in governance and development, and included new areas of cooperation: science, culture, and health. The 2009 FOCAC, held in Egypt came right after the breakout of the global financial crisis which questioned the Western economic model, and raised interest in the Chinese model, as an alternative to the Western

[59] See Broadman, Harry G. 2007. Africa's Silk Road: China and India's New Economic Frontier. Washington, DC: World Bank; Wang, Jian-Ye, and Abdoulaye Bio-Tchané. 2008. "Africa's Burgeoning Ties with China." Finance & Development, March.

system. During the summit, China announced new initiatives to further intensify bilateral trade with Africa. Those measures consisted of a one billion USD loan for small and medium-sized African businesses, and a zero-tariff to 95% of the exports from the continent's least developed countries that entertained diplomatic relations with Beijing[60]. These measures contributed to further incentivizing the development of small-medium local industries and to perceive China as a reliable commercial partner in the eyes of African countries. Hu also increased the military commitment in the region, through the establishment of the initiative for the Sino-African partnership that included support to the African Union for conflict-resolution operations and countering illicit weapons trafficking. Overall Hu's era was characterized by a consistent increase of Chinese presence in the continent, especially in military operations, trade between African countries and China grew from 10 billion USD in the first year of Hu Jintao in office, to the extraordinary amount of 180 billion USD in 2012, making China the main African trade partner in 2009[61]. Another important accomplishment of Hu Jintao's administration was the expansion of Chinese soft power, thanks to more than 19000 scholarships for African students between 2010 and 2012, and the creation of 31 Confucius Institutes[62] in 26 African countries. This phase laid the foundation for the additional consolidation of the relations under Xi Jinping. The chart below clearly provides us with an idea of how much Sino-African trade increased under Hu Jintao, compared to the previous Jiang Zemin era and previous Chinese leaders.

[60] Shinn, David H. 2023. "China in Africa." In *Africa in World Politics*, edited by John W. Harbeson and Donald Rothschild, 217-236. Routledge
[61] *Ibidem*
[62] Confucius Institutes are cultural and linguistic centers funded by the Chinese government to promote Chinese language, culture and public diplomacy in the world. They represent an important soft power tool.

Evolution of China-Africa Trade (1949-2012)



[63]

China Africa Research Initiative, *Data: China-Africa Trade*, Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies. Available at: https://www.sais-cari.org/data; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, *China and Africa in the New Era: A Partnership of Equals*. http://www.fmprc.gov.cn.

1.1.3 The Xi Jinping assertiveness

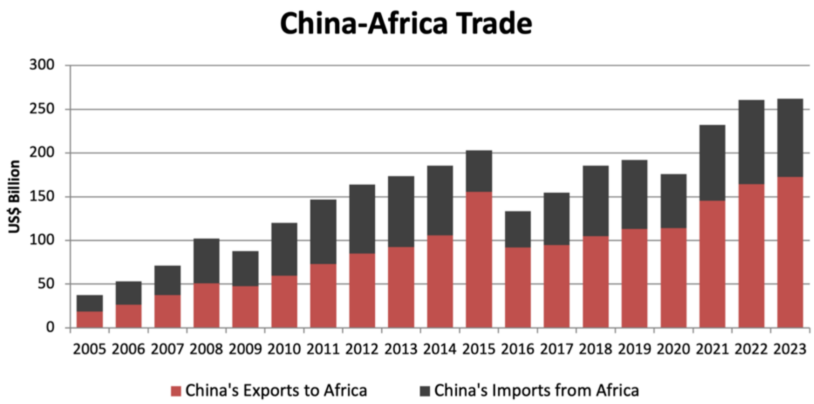
In 2012 Xi Jinping came to power and revolutionized again the Chinese foreign policy model. He concentrated a consistent amount of power in his hands, by abolishing term limits for the General Secretary of the CCP and becoming the central figure within the CCP politburo, the main institution responsible for foreign policy decisions in the Chinese political system. Xi's vision previews a new role for China in the international arena. After decades of marginalization, it was time for rejuvenation and to challenge the monopoly of the American model's ruler in the global arena. Xi gave a new face to Chinese foreign policy in Africa, shaping it with its own image. The Chinese leader saw in the African continent an unmissable opportunity to improve China's international

[63] China Africa Research Initiative, *Data: China-Africa Trade*, Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies. Available at: https://www.sais-cari.org/data; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, *China and Africa in the New Era: A Partnership of Equals*. http://www.fmprc.gov.cn.

reputation, and bring African countries to the side of the new-born “Global South”[64], that was finally driving off the Western model. In this context, Xi made his presence in Africa without precedents: as of 2025, Xi embarked on five African tours as president, and ten tours overall, significantly more than any other Western leader, showing his aspiration to become the international landmark for African countries. Xi is considered the most assertive and nationalist Chinese leader since Mao, and the policies he implemented in the African continent notably differed from his predecessors, resulting in remarkable changes. Since coming to office, he has proven willingness to deepen its country’s relations with Africa, reaching unprecedent accomplishments[65]. The goal of integrating a new global economic order led to the promotion of some of the most relevant initiatives of Xi Jinping’s era: the Asia Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)[66]. However, the main tool through which Xi is pursuing his assertive policies in Africa is the renowned Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI is an ambitious project launched by Xi Jinping himself in 2013, and it is considered his signature foreign policy tool. BRI’s objective is to connect China to a series of strategic hubs in Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and ultimately, Europe, through the construction of massive and strategic infrastructures, in response to the United States’ containment strategy, promoting China’s model internationally, in an attempt of reshaping current global dynamics in the name of Chinese values. The establishment of BRI has laid the foundations for projects across Africa shaping up industries, infrastructures, health, education, agriculture and education[67]. The importance of the BRI in Africa dates back to the 2018 FOCAC when the latter was integrated into the BRI strategy[68]. China seeks to propose the concept of an alternative model for new global governance in several areas, mainly politics, security, economy, and development, through an international net of partnerships and agreements. Although many infrastructural projects had already been completed before Xi took office, they were

[64] The Global South refers to those countries in Latin America, Africa, Asia and Oceania, often characterized by little development, more vulnerability to global crisis and often marked by colonialist aftermaths.
[65] Devecioglu, Kaan, and Duygu Akçomak. 2024. "China’s Africa Policy during the Xi Jinping Era (2012-2022)." *ChronAfrica* 1(1): 15. DOI: 10.62841/ChronAfrica.2024.196.
[66] Dian, Matteo, and Silvia Menegazzi. 2018. 8. *New Regional Initiatives in China’s Foreign Policy*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-75505-2.
[67] Shinn, David H. "China in Africa." In *Africa in World Politics*
[68] Large, Daniel. *China and Africa: The New Era*. London: Zed Books, 2021. https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/2859111/13?page_number=18

formally integrated into the BRI framework to increase the project's legitimacy and importance. BRI-financed projects included the construction of bridges, railways, streets, and energy facilities as part of Xi's sought-after development project for the continent. Under Xi, the FOCAC evolved as the party sought to institutionalize the forum, making it a pivotal showcase for connections to promote business initiatives, partnerships and intercultural dialogue in a wider cluster of sectors. In fact under Xi, the FOCAC became fully incorporated into the new Chinese Global Agenda, gaining a more legitimated and institutionalized reputation. The 2015 FOCAC saw the release of the second Africa policy paper. In this case, China emphasized themes like mutual political trust, the expansion of people-to-people exchanges, the promotion of peace and security, which had become increasingly important for Beijing, and finally, strengthened cooperation in consular, judicial, and police areas. Nevertheless, regardless of the increase of Chinese investments in Africa, surprisingly trade experienced a slowdown starting from 2014, mainly due to lower prices of raw materials, and the growing concerns over the debts of many African countries, unable to pay back the significant sums of money borrowed from China. As a matter of fact, in 2014 the volume of trade reached 203 billion USD, while the following year dropped to 146 billion USD and gradually increased in the following years[69].



[70] China Africa Research Initiative, "Data: China-Africa Trade," *SAIS-CARI*, 2024, http://www.sais-cari.org/data-china-africa-trade.

[69] International Monetary Fund (IMF), *Zambia: 2017 Article IV Consultation*, Country Report No. 17/327, October 25, 2017, https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/CR/Issues/2017/10/25/Zambia-2017-Article-IV-Consultation-Press-Release-Staff-Report-and-Statement-by-the-45358

[70] China Africa Research Initiative, "Data: China-Africa Trade," *SAIS-CARI*, 2024, http://www.sais-cari.org/data-china-africa-trade.

However, compared to previous administrations, Xi has started being cautious about borrowing money from some African countries. The credit flow significantly decreased from 2016 to 2020, that was mainly due to more strict regulations on credit provision by the authorities and struggles faced by African countries to pay back loans, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, when they had to face massive public expenditure net of limited fiscal maneuver[71]. As China loaned money to African countries, some of them ended up being insolvent, and at least five countries entered the status of "debt distress"[72], and the other eleven are considered at risk. The issue spread concerns among the party, with the consequence of partial cancellation of debt and slight reluctance in granting loans.

Xi is aware of Africa's military instability, the continent has experienced several civil wars throughout the years, other than perennial internal conflicts. The continuous instability in the Sahel, Sudan, Mozambique and the activities of terrorist groups such as Boko Haram and Jihadist fringes are all threats to China's interests in the continent. In order to preserve China's economic interests in such a risky region, Xi has carried on an unprecedented military involvement in the continent. Previous leaders had increased Chinese military presence as well, but Xi Jinping made a step further with the establishment of the first Chinese military base in Africa, opened in 2017 in Djibouti, which is a fundamental country thanks to its strategic position, also in the BRI context. Furthermore, aligned with the previous administrations, China further increased its participation in UN peacekeeping operations, providing outnumbering contingents more than any other member of the UN Security Council. At the same time, Beijing kept providing weapons, armaments, and training to the regime is supporting. During the first three years of Xi's leadership, China has provided 1.9 billion USD in military aid to Sub-Saharan Africa, which made it the main armaments provider in the region[73]. One of the most important aspects of Xi's foreign policy is how China appears to other countries. For this reason, he significantly invested resources in soft power strategies. Besides the

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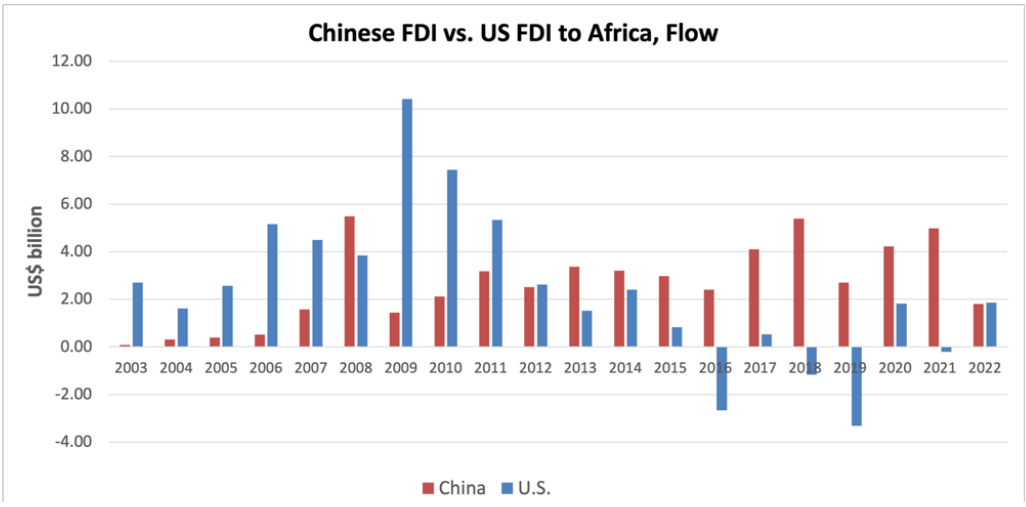
[71] Procopio, Maddalena. 2015. "Il nuovo valore strategico dell'Africa per la Cina: risorse, mercati, voti e ordine globale." *Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale*, April 10. https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/il-nuovo-valore-strategico-dellafrica-per-la-cina-risorse-mercati-voti-e-ordine-globale-132643.

[72] Debt distress is a condition occurring when a country is unable to compel to its debt obligations without asking for financial aids or prorogations.

[73] Theohary, Christina A. 2016. *Conventional Arms Transfers to Developing Nations, 2008–2015.* https://fas.org/sgp/crs/weapons/R44716.pdf.

already mentioned tours, he kept driving on, granting scholarships for African students, overcoming the number of African students both in the US and the UK. Additionally, he ensured a sharp presence in Chinese media, spreading Chinese values and ideas, through tools such as the China Global Television Network. Overall, Xi made a decisive push for the assertiveness of policies in Africa, making the latter a crucial crossroad for his ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, even if his era experienced a rollercoaster with regard to the trade flows, which in 2015 slightly decreased after 25 years of inexorable growth. The graphs below provide us with an overview of Xi's impact on Chinese foreign direct investments (FDI), especially compared to the US.



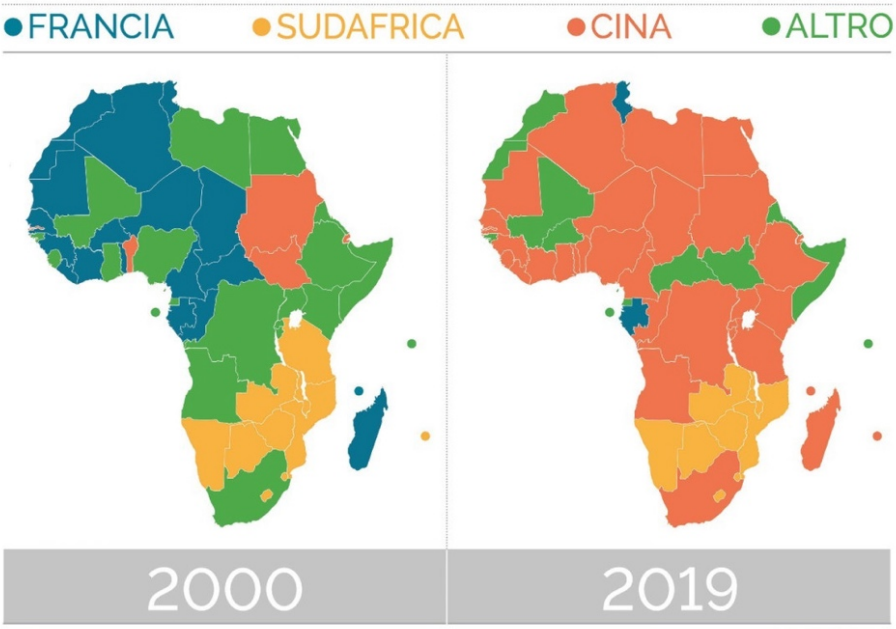
[74]

Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, "2023 Statistical Bulletin of China's Outward Foreign Direct Investment" (Beijing: MOFCOM, March 14, 2024), https://fdi.mofcom.gov.cn/resource/pdf/2024/03/14/564085296c88430c98e426696f3751e1.pdf.

Finally, the following map provided by ISPI perfectly synthetizes how, under Xi Jinping, Africa became a fundamental export market for Chinese goods, especially following a dangerous production surplus after the 2008 crisis, basically replacing the historical African trade partners, namely France and other Western powers.

[74] Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, "2023 Statistical Bulletin of China's Outward Foreign Direct Investment" (Beijing: MOFCOM, March 14, 2024), https://fdi.mofcom.gov.cn/resource/pdf/2024/03/14/564085296c88430c98e426696f3751e1.pdf.

Main country of origin for African imports



[75]

ISPI. 2022. "La Cina si prende il mercato africano." *Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale*, February 28. https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/la-cina-si-prende-il-mercato-africano-33848. Data for the included map sourced from OEC (Observatory of Economic Complexity) (2022), *Trade Data & Visualizations.* World Bank (2022), *World Development Indicators* ; and Statista (2022), *Statistics and Market Data on Africa-China Trade*

1.2 History of Italy-Africa Relations

1.2.1 The Italian Colonialism and its legacy

Unlike China, Italy started its contact with Africa in the modern era in the context of colonization. During the second half of the 19th century, the newborn Kingdom of Italy aspired to reduce the gap with other European powers, namely France and the United Kingdom, regarding colonial territories overseas. France and the UK controlled several territories in Africa, and Italy wanted to keep up with them, not just for the natural resources present in Africa, but for ideological reasons and to gain credibility in the eyes of the other European countries. Italy was left with the only countries not already colonized by other powers, and in 1885, the Italian Army occupied the Eritrean harbor of Massawah in the Red Sea. Through this move, Italy was finally joining the so-called

[75] ISPI. 2022. "La Cina si prende il mercato africano." *Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale*, February 28. https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/la-cina-si-prende-il-mercato-africano-33848. Data for the included map sourced from OEC (Observatory of Economic Complexity) (2022), *Trade Data & Visualizations.* World Bank (2022), *World Development Indicators* ; and Statista (2022), *Statistics and Market Data on Africa-China Trade*

"Scramble for Africa". In the same year (1885), the European colonial countries reunited in Berlin for a Conference that marked the regulation of colonial practices. The Conference's objective was the regulation of the scramble for Africa, by establishing a legal framework for the acquisition of territories in the continent. An Italian delegation, led by Pasquale Stanislao Mancini attended the Conference but played a marginal role compared to other powers such as the already-mentioned United Kingdom, France, other than Germany and Belgium, which were the main protagonists of the scramble for Africa. Italy was a neophyte in the colonial game, and for this reason, it gained no territories from the 1885 partition. Despite that, after the defeats inflicted by the Menelik II army in Dogali and Adowa, the Kingdom of Italy acquired the Eritrean city of Assab in 1869. Whereas, in 1889, Italy signed an agreement with Menelik II, the so-called Treaty of Uccialli (1889), thanks to which the Eritrean king agreed that Eritrea became an Italian "colony". In the same year, Italy seized control over the Sultanates of Obbia and Mijjertein in Somalia, and declared those territories Italian Protectorates, in compliance with the agreements signed with the Sultans. Years later, in 1908, the above-mentioned territories were declared Italian colonial territories, with the same of "Italian Somaliland".[76] In 1911, the Italian army occupied Libya, and following the Italian Turkish War which ended in 1912, took over the regions of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica and included it in the scarce Italian colonial "patrimony". Whereas, during WWI Libya was the most problematic colony for Italy, having a strong resistance to the colonial power, since its annexation. The region experienced several revolts backed by the Ottoman Empire, which lost control of those territories in 1912, and later by Germany, throughout the WWI. By 1917, Italy reasserted some kind of control but were unable to completely appease the internal insurgencies, this goal was only reached during across the 20s through brutal repression. The delusion following WWI, led Italy to aspire to expand its empire at the end of the war. In the Treaty of Saint-Germain (1919) Dalmatian territories were denied to Italy, this blow further fueled peoples' malcontent towards the international community and Italian colonial aspirations, leading to an authoritarian drift. The Fascist Regime took power in 1922, its leader, Benito Mussolini, sought a peak role for Italy in the international arena. In his vision, Italy needed to expand its borders through

[76] Gasbarri, Luigi. 1982. *Italy and Africa: From Pre-Colonial and Colonial Times to Development Cooperation*. *Africa: Rivista trimestrale di studi e documentazione dell'Istituto italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente* 37 (3): 211-223. https://www.jstor.org/stable/40759561.

military means and carve out a more significant role for Italy[77]. The renewed interest in colonial expansion in Africa after 1911 conquest of Libya is due to the raise of fascism, which considered imperialism as a tool to express its nationalism and establish the "superiority" of the Italian people. Colonialism indeed, was a strong propaganda tool that the regime justified as a "civilizing mission", of the "superior" Italians that were bringing their civilization to the "backward" African peoples[78].

Mussolini was not content with the current territories part of the Italian colonies, and for this reason, the 3rd of October 1935 seized a military operation to conquer the only African country, besides Liberia, not colonized yet: Ethiopia. The Italian occupation was followed by international indignation and economic sanctions from the League of Nations, which refused the use of coercion to conquer territories and the use of chemical weapons in conventional warfare, that General Emilio De Bono and Marshall Pietro Badoglio used[79]. The capital city, Addis Abeba, was occupied on May the 5th 1936 and on that day the Italian Empire was proclaimed[80]. However, the Ethiopian army strenuously resisted, and in 1941, the intervention of the Allies during World War II ended the Italian occupation[81]. The regular Italian Army failed to overcome the apparently weaker Ethiopian Army, representing a shameful failure for fascism.

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[77] Angelo Del Boca, *Gli italiani in Africa Orientale - 2. La conquista dell'Impero* (Milano: Mondadori, 2014), [102-104].
[78] *Ibidem*
[79] Angelo Del Boca, *Gli italiani in Africa Orientale - 2. La conquista dell'Impero*, 546-550.
[80] *Ivi*, 768.
[81] Luce Archieve. n.d. *La guerra fascista contro l'Etiopia (1935-1936)*. Fare gli Italiani. Accessed February 22, 2025. https://faregliitaliani.archivioluce.com/FareItaliani/1922-1/temi/la-guerra-fascista-contro-etiopia-1935-1936.html.

Italian African Colonies (CIA Map), in "Nei rapporti segreti della CIA: la verità sulle colonie italiane," *Italia Coloniale*, March 13, 2025, https://italiacoloniale.com/2025/03/13/nei-rapporti-segreti-della-cia-la-verita-sulle-colonie-italiane/italian-african-colonies_cia-map/.

The Italian colonial past inevitably marked the country's vision within its relationship with its former colonies. Despite Italy's relatively brief colonial experience, its effects are still visible today, in those countries' lifestyles, and affected their politics and economy for several decades. One of the most evident effects of Italian colonization are migration flows. Huge amounts of migrants coming from ex-colonies choose Italy as their destination seeking for a better life, not only because Italy is the closest European country to the African continent, but also for linguistic and cultural reasons. This phenomenon has wider implications for France, which is chosen as a destination for hundreds of thousands of migrants coming from francophone countries, once colonized by Paris, as they hope to find a favorable environment, given that they will not have to learn a new language. Even if in countries like Libya and Somalia the Italian language is not taught at all, some citizens conserve scarce knowledge thanks to their elder relatives. As we will see in the following chapters, the increase of migration flows represents a priority for the Italian foreign policy in Africa.

1.2.2 From decolonization to cooperation: Italy's role in post-independence Africa

The loss of Italian colonies after the defeat of WWII is commonly thought of as the end of the Italian colonial rule. However, the process of Italian decolonization was transactional and progressive and did not end in 1945, but at least fifteen years later, in 1960. Italy lost most of its African territories in 1943, after the British forces took over Italian possessions in the Horn of Africa (1941) and subsequently (1943), in North Africa. In 1947 the Treaty of Paris definitively deprived Italy of its colonial territories. The newborn United Nations entrusted to Italy the trusteeship of the former Italian Somaliland, until 1960, to guide the country towards a pacific and smooth independence progress[82]. The new republican Italy, sought to regain control over the loss territories throughout the whole post-war period, until 1949, through the Ministry of Italian Africa which was abandoned in 1953. The Somali trusteeship (AFIS) experiment started on April 1st, 1950, and ended up resembling more like a colonial administration, rather than a United Nations trusteeship, especially since the former colonial power and the new trustee overlapped[83]. Even if the new Italian administration tried to detach from the fascist regime, so it was not. Regardless, some scholars tend to enhance the AFIS experience. Gasbarri argues that Italy successfully complied with all the tasks it was assigned, politically, socially and economically, and even proposed to end the AFIS before 1960, but the Somali government refused the offer. Whereas Morrone claims that some administrative and political choices led the AFIS executive to entertain clientelist relations with the former colonial administration, rather than trying to establish a renewed bond with the young Somali national movement. This kind of relationship made a smooth transition complicated from the beginning. Still, history has shown that the Italian trustee in Somalia did not succeed in providing the latter with an effective and durable state apparatus, abandoning the country with an inexperienced and corrupted ruling class, other than a country torn apart by internal clashes. What was the outcome? Similar to other countries subjected to post-colonial administrations, namely failed states at the lowest positions in the Human Development Index. The active Italian presence in the continent

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[82] Paolo Borruso, *L'Italia e l'Africa: Strategie e visioni dell'età postcoloniale (1945-1989)* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2024), [144].
[83] Antonio M. Morrone, *La fine del colonialismo italiano tra storia e memoria*, "Storicamente", 12 (2016), no. 7. DOI: 10.12977/stor623

until 1960 witnessed a long and difficult transition known as decolonization. The only Italian decolonization served all the contradictions and limitations of a "Democratic colonialism"[84] starting from the continuity with the previous colonial experience combined with a sort of paternalistic view of the administrated territories by Western countries. After the AFIS experiment, Italy had no longer any political presence in Africa and had to rethink its interests in the continent. The foreign policy of republican Italy then, started to attribute more importance to the Mediterranean, and sought to improve its geopolitical and commercial role in the region, with an eye to the African coasts, and started to cultivate good diplomatic relations with a series of African countries such as Lebanon, Egypt or Syria[85]. Moreover, European countries like Great Britain and France which had always had a great presence in the Mediterranean and the Middle East, started to come across some difficulties, under the form of anticolonial revolutionary movements of Third World states. In this scenario a pivotal figure for the Italian foreign policy in the region emerged. Enrico Mattei, the owner of the state energy company of Italy (ENI) played a strategic role in Italy's relations with its Southern neighbors. ENI first recorded a modest archievement in Egypt, where anti-Western and anti-colonial sentiments were particularly significant. ENI's president and Egypt's president Nasser first met in 1954. The meeting contributed to install an anti-colonial and solidarity mentality in Mattei, who later proposed a more favorable model of oil exploitation compared to the British and French oligopoly. As Cerami underscores, Mattei believed that the decolonization ferments of the Third World could provide Italy with an invaluable opportunity to gain a more relevant role in International politics, and the Western powers' « decline » in the Mediterranean opened an economic opportunity for ENI and a space of political influence for Italy[86]. The Italian foreign policy during the 50s endorsed by Mattei, reflected the nature of Italy's FP, which often tries to bridge. In that case, Rome tried to balance between backing anti-colonial sentiments of the Arab world, the need for economic expansion in the Southern Mediterranean and Middle East, and maintaining good relations with the US and the Western world[87]. Undoubtedly, Mattei was a vectorial figure of foreign policy for Italy. The Suez crisis marked a key moment : when Nasser

[84] *Ibidem*
[85] Carola Cerami, "Could the 'Mattei Plan' Be Reinvented for Africa? A Historical Perspective," *Il Politico* 89, no. 2 (2024): 104.
[86] *Ivi*, 106.
[87] *Ibidem*.

expropriated Anglo-French companies from the canal, ENI constructed an oil pipeline and refinery, inagurated in the presence of the Egyptian leader, who celebrated Italian-Egyptian cooperation, humiliating France and the Grear Britain. The downsizing of the latter could seem as an occasion to claim Italy's leading role as a bridge between the Atlantic Alliance and the Arab World. Still, disappointingly, the void was filled by a more assertive presence of the US in the region[88]. The years between 1959 and 1962 marked the failure of Mattei's ambitions and considerably scaled down the Italian political space in Africa. With the creation of the OPEC, the oil exporting countries that only a few years earlier appeared as natural allies of Rome in the oil policy, formed a cartel and « abandoned »Italy and Mattei's legacy.

After the "Year of independences"[89], Italian foreign policy became a policy of cooperation and aid, reflecting the same wave of foreign policy adopted by China and other countries towards developing countries. In particular, at least in theory, Chinese and Italian foreign policy were aimed at contributing to African efforts to reach a complete emancipation, after decades of political decolonization, by the year 2000. Italy provided developing countries with technical and scientific training, experts, and civil volunteers for assistance in rural areas in health and education sector. Moreover, alarmed by the tragic conditions in which Africa was left after decolonization, especially regarding world hunger, Italy massively contributed to the international community's efforts for the development of Africa, through a comprehensive law entitled "Italy's Cooperation with Developing Countries" (1987)[90] which provided a new Italian approach to the Italian policy towards the underdeveloped countries, defining new guidelines both for long-term intervention and for extraordinary interventions. This law defined cooperation as "integrated in Italian foreign policy", differentiating it from the promotion of Italian economy in the international market. For the first time Italy granted soft loans for developing projects, in collaboration with international organizations such as UN agencies and world developing banks and introduced cultural exchanges. In Italy's new approach, the latter could take advantage of its experience in the development of Southern Italy, for years been strongly arretrate, and never able to fill the gap with the more

[88] *Ivi*, 107.
[89] Year of independences is referred to 1960, when 17 African countries gained their independence from European colonial powers.
[90] Camera dei Deputati, *La cooperazione internazionale dell'Italia*, XVI Legislatura, https://leg16.camera.it/561?appro=161&La+cooperazione+internazionale+dell%27Italia.

industrialized North[91]. The 1982 Financial Law then, committed the government to a progressive implementation of structural projects aimed at providing Africa with the tools to finally achieve alimentary self-sufficiency, with the hope of fast development of local farms. Italy's declared goal was reducing the unbalanced gap between the global North and South, setting up a renewed economic order based on cooperation and equal economic conditions. Although, this strategy was not homogenous in all African regions. Foreign policy in MENA countries mainly focused on energy cooperation, infrastructures and industries, responding to the needs of economies often laying on natural resources but with a relatively advanced industry[92]. Sub-Saharan Africa instead, was interested by agriculture, health and rural development due to the major dependency of these countries from the primary sector and the necessity to enhance essential services[93]. Secondly, Italy's acted only upon request of the needy country, respecting its will and according to the sectorial framework that indicates the areas where Italy is prone to cooperate, namely: agriculture, energy, industry, handicraft, infrastructures, health, tourism and scientific research. The ideal goal was enhancing integrated projects, involving different sectors in one single operation, e.g. an infrastructure for farming developed thanks to an innovative technology. However, these kinds of projects ended up being a one in a million. Italy's aid operated not just through state-funded projects, but also through private partnerships called "joint-ventures"[94] which proved being the most effective. The amount of Italy's bilateral aid to Africa compared to other continents between 1979 and 1981, gives an idea of the importance given to the continent by the Italian government. 76% was allocated to Africa, while the second most aid continent was Latin America, which received only 16% of the budget[95]. Finally, throughout the 70s the Italian civil society commitment resulted useful for the resolution of crisis and fights for freedom within African countries, especially Mozambique, Angola and Guinea Bissau. As a matter of fact, Italian diplomacy was decisive to end Mozambique's Civil War, which was put to and end with a treaty

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[91] Gasbarri, Luigi. *Italy and Africa: From Pre-Colonial and Colonial Times to Development Cooperation*.
[92] CeSPI (Centro Studi di Politica Internazionale). 2023. "La Cooperazione Italiana nella Regione Mediterranea: Priorità, Sfide e Prospettive." *CeSPI*, November 24. https://www.cespi.it/it/eventi-attualita/dibattiti/il-mediterraneo-allargato-una-regione-transizione-conflitti-sfide/la-4.
[93] ISPI. 2016. "La Cooperazione allo Sviluppo nei Partenariati tra Italia e Africa Subsahariana." *ISPI Online*, February 16. https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/la-cooperazione-allo-sviluppo-nei-partenariati-tra-italia-e-africa-subsahariana-135219.
[94] It is an agreement between two or more industries collaborating on a project or a commercial activity, sharing resources and risks, but remaining juridically autonomous.
[95] Gasbarri, Luigi. *Italy and Africa: From Pre-Colonial and Colonial Times to Development Cooperation*.

signed in Rome in 1992, with the active participation of civil society and in particular the commitment of Sant 'Egidio Community[96]. In general, during the decolonization era, Italy adopted a similar approach to the Chinese one, but with a different rhetoric behind it. While China posed itself on the same ground as African countries, Italy showed as the superior savior for the poor and underdeveloped Africa.

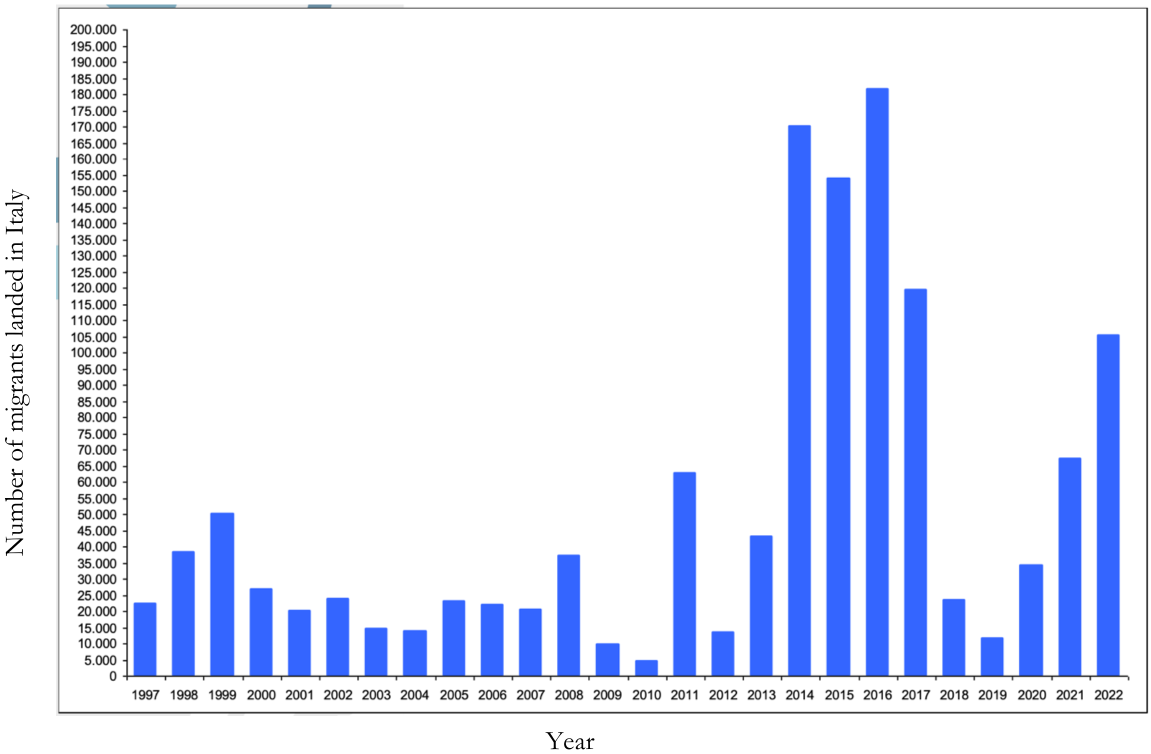
1.2.3. Italy-Africa in the mass migration era

From the 80s to the first decade of XXI Century, relations between Italy and African countries were characterized by the pattern described above: Italy funded aids to African country hoping for development and provided its contribution to multilateral organizations and UN special agencies' operations. Italian commitment in Africa after decolonization followed the same principles adopted in other humanitarian operations: crave for a just resolution of the conflict, respect for the civil population and cooperation with other western countries and multilateral organizations. The only significant Italian operation in Africa in that period was the participation in *Restore Hope* in Somalia (1992-1995) aimed at stabilizing the humanitarian situation and granting the delivery of basic necessities after the breakout of a gory civil war between warlords[97]. After the precious Italian contribution, Rome followed European and UN diplomacy with regards to African operations, not being able to impose its own vision on the continent. Yet, between the 90s and the 2010s, Italian foreign policy in Africa was marginalized, as demonstrated by the fact that, between 1985 and 2014, no Italian leader visited Sub-Saharan Africa[98]. Yet, the new American campaign in the Middle East and North Africa, pushed Rome to re-orient its foreign policy towards the other side of the Mediterranean. This shift was also justified under the light of the numerous security crises in Sub-Saharan Africa, namely terrorism

[96] Vatican News. 2022. "Mozambico: 30 Anni di Pace, il Ruolo degli Accordi di Roma e di Sant'Egidio." *Vatican News*, October 4, 2022. https://www.vaticannews.va/it/mondo/news/2022-10/mozambico-anniversari-accordi-roma-pace-sant-egidio.html.
[97] Italian Army. 2025. "Somalia - UNOSOM and Ibis Operations." *Italian Army - Overseas Operations*. Accessed March 7, 2025. https://www.esercito.difesa.it/operazioni/operazioni_oltremare/Pagine/Somalia-UNOSOM-Ibis.aspx.
[98] Claudio Casola e Edoardo Baldaro, *Italy and the Sahel: A New National Projection Towards a Greater Mediterranean*, ISPI Policy Brief, 31 maggio, pag. 9.
2021, https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/ispi-pb_italy_africa_sahel_casola_2021.pdf.

and golpe, and their impact on migratory flows to Europe[99]. The theater where Italy was committed the most, both for historical and geographical proximity reasons, was Libya. Silvio Berlusconi, Italian Prime Minister in 2008, sought to strengthen his country's ties with Libyan government of General Muhammad Gaddafi through the "Treaty of friendship, partnership and cooperation". In this document, Italy admitted colonialism's faults in Cyrenaica and Tripolitania and committed with Libya to "operate for strengthening peace, security and stability in the Mediterranean region"[100]. Moreover, Rome granted 5 billion USD to fund infrastructures in Libya within 20 years. This treaty paved the way for a strategic alliance between the two countries in the following years, but more importantly, Italy could leverage on the denial of its colonial past, while in the same period France was trying to build a new "Mediterranean hegemony" and emphasizing the role of colonial France in Africa as necessary and salvific [101]. This operation further improved Italy's vision in the eyes of African leaders, granting a privileged treatment on future energetic and trade agreements. During the 2000s, a new pivotal element in Italian African relations stepped in: migration. African migration towards Italy's coasts was evidently present also before, but after the breakout of Arab Springs the phenomenon saw a sudden surge. The number of African migrants landed in Italy in 1997 turned out to be 22 343, while in 2014, the number reached the peak of 170 100, with an increase of 296% compared to the previous year.

[99] Matilde Rosina and Iole Fontana, *The External Dimension of Italian Migration Policy in the Wider Mediterranean*, *Mediterranean Politics*, published online May 20, 2024, 6, https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2024.2355033.
[100] Italian Chamber of Deputies. "Ratification and Implementation of the Treaty of Friendship, Partnership, and Cooperation between the Italian Republic and the Great Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya." *Chamber of Deputies, 16th Legislature*. Accessed March 7, 2025. https://documenti.camera.it/_dati/leg16/lavori/schedela/apritelecomando_wai.asp?codice=16pdl0017390.
[101] Scalea, Daniele. 2009. *L'Africa nella politica estera italiana*. https://www.academia.edu/3024017/L_Africa_nella_politica_estera_italiana.



[102]

ISMU Foundation. 2023. *Report sbarchi e accoglienza 1997-2022*. Accessed March 7, 2025. https://www.ismu.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Report-sbarchiI-e-accoglienza-1997-2022.pdf.

The drop of 2009 and 2010 was due to the Treaty mentioned above between Berlusconi's administration and the Gaddafi regime. Between 2013 and 2014, with the exacerbation of the Syrian war and other conflicts, spread-over political instability and economic crisis and poverty, the European Union, and Italy in particular for its closeness to the continent, had to face a refugee crisis, which within three years saw half of a million people landing on the Italian coasts. Throughout the years, limiting landings of illegal refugees became a priority for Italian governments in office, and if we look at the data it is evident how the four-year period from 2014 to 2017 was marked by immense masses of immigrants arriving to Italy, much more than any precedent year. Consequently, since 2015, Italian governments increasingly addressed migration as a primary matter for national security[103].

[102] ISMU Foundation. 2023. *Report sbarchi e accoglienza 1997-2022*. Accessed March 7, 2025. https://www.ismu.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Report-sbarchiI-e-accoglienza-1997-2022.pdf.
[103] Rosina and Fontana, *The External Dimension of Italian Migration Policy in the Wider Mediterranean*, *Mediterranean Politics,* 6.

To counter this uncontrollable phenomenon, Gentiloni’s government signed in 2017 an historic agreement with Fayez al-Sarraj, the Libyan prime minister, the “Italy-Libya memorandum”. The main role in the negotiations was played by the then minister of the interior, Marco Minniti who proposed a revolutionary approach to the issue of illegal migration, and that would be used as a basis for other future agreements. The memorandum implied Italy’s economic aid and technical support to Libyan coastal authorities in the attempt of reducing the huge migrants flows through the Mediterranean. On the other hand, Libya committed to implement human rights and conditions in its reception hubs. Minniti himself commented as it follows: “*Flows cannot be eliminated. What a civil country can do is to govern them*”[104]. The Italian government was essentially attempting to strike deals with key countries to manage migrations, providing them with resources and money, asking for a return a mitigation of flows and improvement of migrants’ living conditions. Regardless of the critics advanced by some American newspapers regarding the misuse of Italian financial resources by the Libyan authorities, considered affiliated with human traffickers[105], the memorandum was automatically extended for six more years in 2020 and in 2023. Gentiloni’s was a left-wing government but had to deal anyways with the issue of migrations. When Giorgia Meloni, right wing leader, take up office in 2022, one of her main priorities of her political program was eradicating illegal immigration in her country. To achieve her goal, the Italian Prime Minister Meloni strengthened cooperation with Libya and Tunisia to regulate illegal flows. In 2023 Italy actively participated in the European Union’s negotiations with Tunisia. The agreement reached in July implied a financial aid package to fuel Tunisia’s economy and improve the management of boarders. The main goal was the same: limiting the arrival of irregular in-coming immigrants from Tunisia to Europe[106]. The main reason behind the European attention to Tunisia is due to the huge increase of irregular landings coming from Tunisia, as a matter of fact, in 2023 more than 50% of illegal immigrants landed in Italy came from Tunisia, reversing a trend that for years saw Libya as the first

[104] Ministry of the Interior. 2017. "Minniti: 'Immigration, a Better Future for Countries That Know How to Integrate'." *Ministry of the Interior*. December 5. https://www.interno.gov.it/it/notizie/minniti-immigrazione-futuro-migliore-i-paesi-sapranno-integrare.
[105] Veglio, Maurizio**.** 2018. *L'attualità del male. La Libia dei Lager è verità processuale.* Edizioni Seb 27
[106] European Parliament**.** 2023. *EU-Tunisia Memorandum of Understanding on Migration and Economic Support.*European Parliamentary Research Service. Accessed March 8, 2025. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2023/751467/EPRS_ATA(2023)751467_EN.pdf.

country for number of departures[107]. The EU-Tunisia memorandum highlights Italian commitment in regulating illegal flows of migrants not only by itself, as in 2017, but also collaborating with the European Union, meaning the acknowledgement that Italian boarders mean at the same time European boarders, and the illegal landings are not a phenomenon exclusive to Italy; but they affect Europe as a whole. From 2008, Italy reinforced its relations with Africa through bilateral agreements, especially with North African countries, and European initiatives, focusing on energy, economic development, but mostly on boarders' security and migrations. In the last 20 years, Italy's foreign policy in Africa was necessarily marked by the necessity of limiting illegal landings. In this sense, Minniti paved the way for a new pattern of deals consisting in granting money and resources to African governments and relying on their ability to limit illegal departures from the roots. The long-term strategy by the way, is the definitive development of the countries from where migrants leave, however, this is clearly not going to happen soon.

[107] Barana, Luca. 2023. "Che cosa prevede l'accordo tra Unione europea e Tunisia." Affari Internazionali, July 19. https://www.affarinternazionali.it/memorandum-ue-tunisia-accordo-migranti/.

CHAPTER II: CHINA-AFRICA AND ITALY-AFRICA COOPERATION

2.1 How Beijing is buying Africa

2.1.1 The Chinese model of expansion in Africa

Since economic reforms, extremely high levels of savings and investments in Chinese economy favored the capital's stock seeking for productive uses. However, financing infrastructures as we saw above is not a recent phenomenon: since 1949, support to foreign infrastructural development was a key element of PRC's foreign policy. Despite this pattern experienced a slow-down in the first years of Deng Xiaoping (late 70s-early 80s), it regained strength in the 90s. For these reasons Calabrese, Jenkins and Lombardozzi consider the BRI the natural continuation of a wider project in foreign and economic policies of China, including pre-existing initiatives yet from the early XXI century[108] such as the Great Western Development Campaign, an initiative of the early 2000s aimed at reinforcing cultural exchange, development of cultural partnerships and the use of information technology[109], and the "Going Out" strategy (zouchuqu zhanlue, 走出去战略) aimed at supporting the expansion of Chinese companies overseas, allowing China to shift from the biggest receiver of DFI to one of the main investors. The impetus for the implementation of a new program found fertile ground in the economic conditions emerged in China at the end of the 10s of 2000. As a response to the 2008 global financial crisis, the Chinese government injected about the equivalent of 14% of their GDP[110]. This measure further enhanced the economic model driven by investments, leading to a surplus of productive capacity in the real estate industry. The BRI consequently emerged as a strategy aimed at countering these domestic challenges.

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[108] Calabrese, Linda, Rhys Jenkins, and Lorena Lombardozzi. 2024. "The Belt and Road Initiative and Dynamics of Structural Transformation." *The European Journal of Development Research* 36: 518. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41287-024-00644-x.

[109] Li, Lanqing. 2000. "Speech by H.E. Mr. Li Lanqing Vice Premier of the State Council of the People's Republic of China." *Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China*. https://english.mee.gov.cn/Events/Special_Topics/AGM_1/2000agm/leaderspeech2000/201605/t20160524_345016.shtml.

[110] Yu, Y. 2009. *China's Reaction to the Global Economic Crisis*. Tokyo: RIETI. Available at: https://www. rieti.go.jp/en/rieti_report/112.html.

Nevertheless, besides the economic driving factors, security and global influence also contributed to the BRI's development[111]. BRI also "hides" strategic motivations: thanks to these projects China gains allies and influence in the region, endeavoring to find alternative routes to convey natural resources than the traditional ones controlled by the US and its allies[112]**.** As highlighted by Chinese President Xi in a 2017 speech, infrastructure connectivity is the basis of development through cooperation. Then, he emphasized how facilities such as passageways, ports, railways, airports are fundamental for interconnectivity and mutual development[113]. These declarations demonstrate that the Chinese investment strategy in Africa is primary intended to develop the continent in terms of mobility infrastructures, in order to enhance transnational connectivity. The project though is mostly in transport and power but are nevertheless diverse: transnational rails, expressways, seaports, hydropower, carbon-based power, pipelines, water supply sanitation[114] and agriculture facilities are only the most common. An additional element in the Chinese investments in Africa is due to the shift in the financial paradigm. As Procopio brings to light, loans to African governments represented the main characteristic of Chinese approach to Africa in the last 20 years, and despite the critics they contributed to fill a financial and infrastructural gap when private and western creditors were not willing to do it.

Despite that the Chinese government reported 37 African countries having signed deals within BRI, The China Africa Research Initiative (CARI) collected data on Chinese loans to more than 50 African countries, with an annual average expenditure around 15 billion USD. Moreover, while East Africa is supposed to be the most interested in the BRI for its geographical overlook, Chinese lending affects every region of the continent, with a major part in the west and south[115]. Among the biggest receivers of Chinese funds figure: Angola, Kenya, Nigeria, Ethiopia and Zambia.

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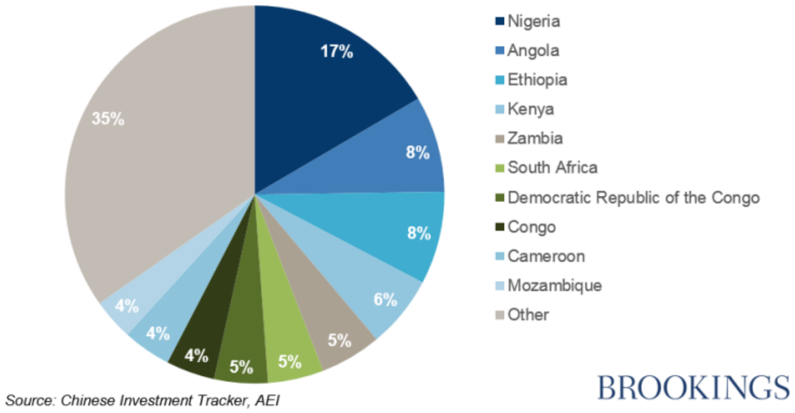
[111] Calabrese, Linda, Rhys Jenkins, and Lorena Lombardozzi. 2024. "The Belt and Road Initiative and Dynamics of Structural Transformation." *The European Journal of Development Research* 36: 519. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41287-024-00644-x.
[112] Dollar, David. *Understanding China's Belt and Road Infrastructure Projects in Africa*. September 2019. https://www.brookings.edu/research/understanding-chinas-belt-and-road-infrastructure-projects-in-africa/.
[113] Xi Jinping, "Work Together to Build the Silk Road Economic Belt and The 21st Century Maritime Silk Road," (speech, Beijing, May 14, 2017), http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-05/14/c_136282982.htm.
[114] Dollar, *Understanding China's Belt and Road Infrastructure Projects*
[115] *Ibidem*



[116]

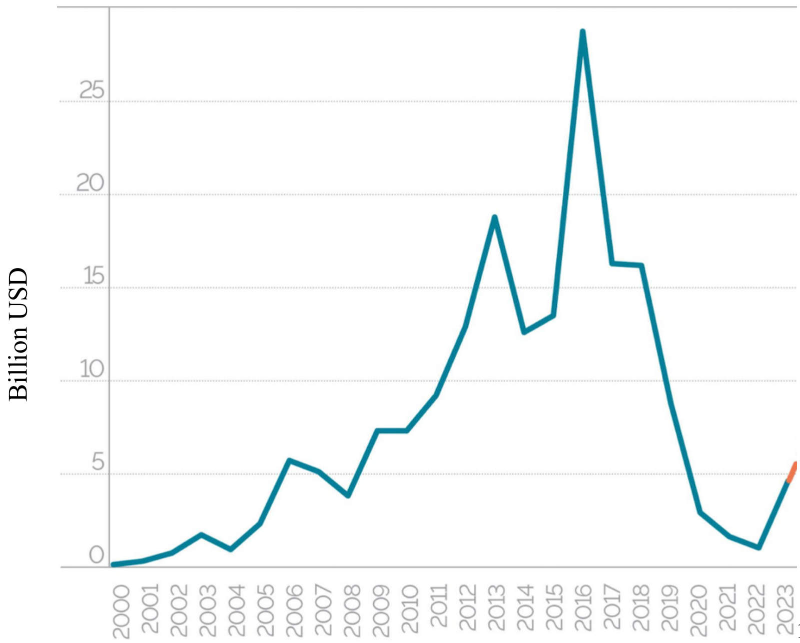
Brookings Institution. 2024. "Figures of the Week: Chinese Investment in Africa." *Brookings*, February 7, 2024. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/figures-of-the-week-chinese-investment-in-africa/. Graph source: *Chinese Investment Tracker,* AEI

The main tool through which China invests in Africa, as previously remarked, are low-tax loans. Despite their conditions being not as profitable as those of the World Bank, the big asset that makes China a favorable lender is that Beijing does not subjects political or social reforms to its loans. For decades Western lenders attached to their loans the condition of implementing civil rights and democratic reforms, whereas China is not interested in domestic politics of its partners, leading African governments to prefer Beijing when it comes to take loans. The typical kind of Chinese condition is a 2% tax, whereas the Euro Interbank Offered Rate (Euribor) or LIBOR[117] plus a spread around 3% are categorized as trade financing as they allow Chinese banks to get a surplus, as long as they are repaid. However, generally speaking, other commercial lenders would not grant with such rates to developing countries[118], it is considered too risky, but China, at least before 2020 could bear the risk. Besides the possibility of receiving ease loans from the West is limited, an additional obstacle for African borrowers is the bureaucratic complexity and the length process leading to the realization of big projects financed by institutions like the World Bank, due to strict environmental and social conditionalities.

[116] Brookings Institution. 2024. "Figures of the Week: Chinese Investment in Africa." *Brookings*, February 7, 2024. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/figures-of-the-week-chinese-investment-in-africa/. Graph source: *Chinese Investment Tracker,* AEI
[117] London Interbank Offered Rate
[118] Dollar, *Understanding China's Belt and Road Infrastructure Projects*

For this reason, many developing countries rather allocate Western aids to sectors like budget support, health and education, while relying on Chinese loans to realize massive projects in energy and transportation.

Chinese loans to African countries (2000-2023)



[119]

Arduino, Alessandro. "Come procede la strategia africana della Cina." *ISPI*, last modified September 2024. https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/come-procede-la-strategia-africana-della-cina-183645#:~:text=Tra%20il%202000%20e%20il,africani%20e%20sette%20prestatari%20regionali.

One of the most impressive projects financed by Beijing in Africa is the Mombasa-Nairobi Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) part of the 2 billion USD loan by China Eximbank[120] financing rail lines in Kenya, at a 3,6% LIBOR rate in 15 years. It consists of Kenya's first modern railway after independence, carrying 7.5 million passengers and 19 million tons of cargo, sharply contributed to local economic and social development, creating 46 000 jobs for local people since its opening in 2017[121], contributing to tackle one of the country's main struggles: unemployment. Ethiopia is

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[119] Arduino, Alessandro. "Come procede la strategia africana della Cina." *ISPI*, last modified September 2024. https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/come-procede-la-strategia-africana-della-cina-183645#:~:text=Tra%20il%202000%20e%20il,africani%20e%20sette%20prestatari%20regionali.

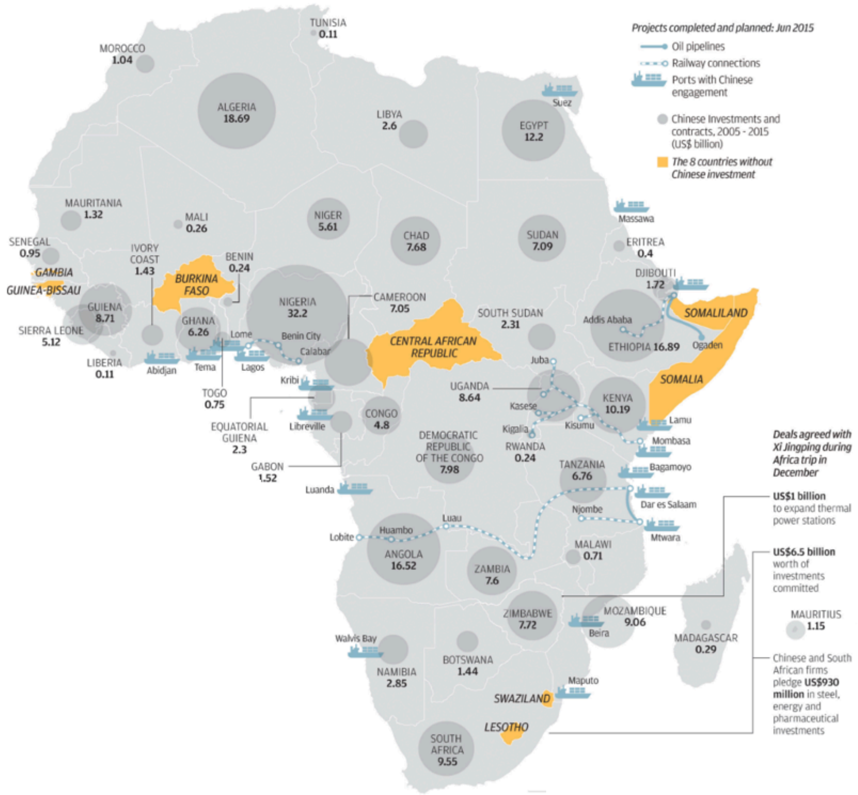
[120] Export-Import Bank of China. http://english.eximbank.gov.cn

[121] China Export-Import Bank. 2022. "China Eximbank-funded Nairobi Expressway Officially Open to Traffic." *Export-Import Bank of China*, September 8. http://english.eximbank.gov.cn/News/NewsR/202209/t20220908_43088.html.

another great receiver of Chinese investments, with around 1.3 billion USD borrowed for the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway. Sautman and Hairong defined Ethiopia as the "BRI model"[122]. They argue that there is no African country that Chinese officials have been more positive about than Ethiopia. With a 5.3% GDP growth versus 3.6% for all sub-Saharan Africa, Ethiopia is one of most auspicious countries in the continent, leading Beijing to lend 14.8 billion USD from 2006 to 2018 for more than 70 mega projects, split as it follows: 22 transport and communication projects, 35 in power, 13 for food and water supply[123]. The strong bond between China and Ethiopia is further confirmed by the 2023 BRICS meeting, when Ethiopia was asked to join the group, the adhesion actually took place in 2024. Finally, within the BRI Ethiopia is undeniably pivotal for its position in the horn of Africa, serving as a strategic outpost facing the Indian Ocean, interconnecting Africa, the Indian sub-continent and South-East Asia, and perfectly aligning with the BRI's objective. The map below provided by Visual Capitalist [124] impeccably shows the scale of Chinese investments in Africa, highlighting which countries received more funds and for which end they were used.

[122] Sautman, Barry, and Yan Hairong. 2024. "Ethiopia as a Belt and Road Initiative Model." *Review of African Political Economy*, July 24. https://roape.net/2024/07/24/ethiopia-as-a-belt-and-road-initiative-model/.
[123] Ethiopian-China Economic Relations.
[124] Desjardins, Jeff. 2015. "Visualizing Chinese Investment in Africa." *Visual Capitalist*, December 9. https://www.visualcapitalist.com/visualizing-chinese-investment-in-africa/.

Infrastructural projects in Africa funded by China



[125]

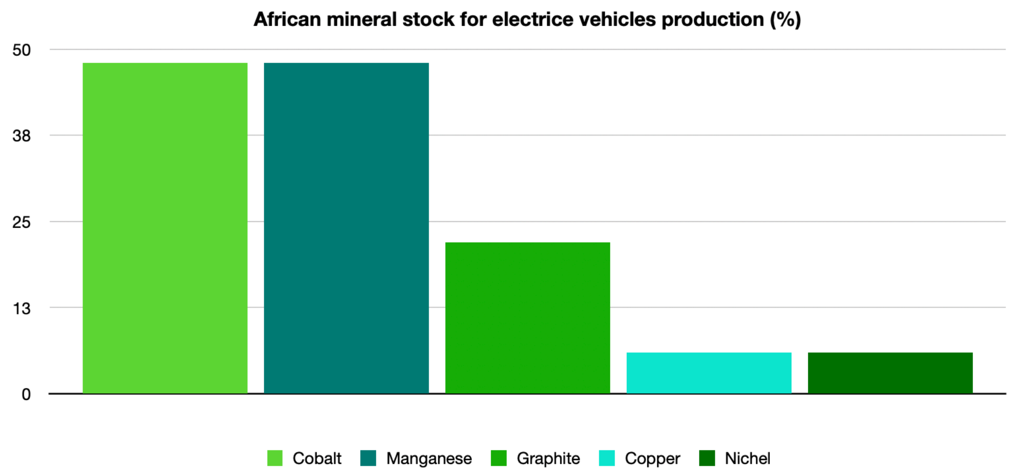
China's Investment in Africa Projects Completed and Planned, June 2015, in "China in Africa: Win-Win Development, or a New Colonialism?" *Financial Times*, 2015, https://www.ft.com/content/70caaab2-18e4-11e5-a130-2e7db721f996.

2.1.2 African raw materials and strategic resources

"In the face of climate change, which is a major challenge to all humanity, we need to advocate green and low carbon development, actively promote solar, wind and other sources of renewable energy…and keep strengthening our capacity for sustainable development…China will undertake 10 green development, environmental protection and climate action projects for Africa, support the development of the 'Great Green Wall', and build in Africa centers of excellence on low-carbon development and climate change adaptation."[126]. With these words Xi Jinping intervened in the 8th edition of FOCAC, emphasizing Sino-African cooperation on natural resources, and more surprisingly, on green transition. The public opinion is used to think of China as a major polluter with a

[125] *China's Investment in Africa Projects Completed and Planned, June 2015*, in "China in Africa: Win-Win Development, or a New Colonialism?" *Financial Times*, 2015, https://www.ft.com/content/70caaab2-18e4-11e5-a130-2e7db721f996.
[126] http://www.focac.org/focacdakar/eng/zxyw_1/202112/t20211202_10461076.htm

carbon-based economy, however, in the recent years the paradigm has changed. Beijing has increased the importance given to a green transition towards renewable energy sources, exporting this idea to its cooperation with Africa, although its narrative and policymaking on the issue in recent years have been erratic since it set its own climate targets. The interest for African oil, at its peak across the 90s and 2000s, diminished, whereas gas demand increased, representing a growing part of Chinese import from the continent. Regardless, Africa represents about 30% of world minerals stock (Overseas World Institute 2024)[127], fundamental in the production of technology needed for green transition, namely electric cars batteries, solar panels, wind turbines, other than microchips, inevitable for every kind of electronic device, especially for defense aims, and the difficulties to replace them, make raw materials' role even more strategic. Africa has the potential to play a pivotal role in the global energy transition thanks to it wide stock of critical minerals (Benabdallah, 2024)[128], and China has acknowledged it. The graph below provides us the dimension of Africa's critical materials' stock, with almost 50% of the world's reserves of cobalt and manganese.



[129]

[127] Overseas Development Institute (ODI). 2024. "The Strategic Mirage of Africa's Green Minerals Wealth." *ODI Insights*. Accessed March 14, 2025. https://odi.org/en/insights/the-strategic-mirage-of-africas-green-minerals-wealth/.
[128] Benabdallah, L. (2024). *China's Role in Africa's Critical Minerals Landscape: Challenges and Key Opportunities*. Africa Policy Research Institute. 3-5. https://afripoli.org/chinas-role-in-africas-critical-minerals-landscape-challenges-and-key-opportunities.
[129] United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), "How Africa Can Harness Critical Mineral Wealth to Revamp Economies," *UNCTAD*, March 28, 2024, https://unctad.org/news/how-africa-can-harness-critical-mineral-wealth-revamp-economies.

United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), "How Africa Can Harness Critical Mineral Wealth to Revamp Economies," *UNCTAD*, March 28, 2024, https://unctad.org/news/how-africa-can-harness-critical-mineral-wealth-revamp-economies.

For two decades at this point, Africa is the most significant mineral supplier for China. The latter took over the largest part of mines of critical materials in the continent and carries on several projects for their extraction. According to Ericsson and Löf bothers, Chinese interests are mainly driven by: the growing demand for metals necessary for the rampant Chinese economic boom, the rising prices of metals which drive Chinese investors for pure economic reasons, and finally, government's supports for outward FDI that makes investing more convenient.

What kind of resources is China interested in though? For what concerns minerals and rare earths, cobalt, lithium and coltan, the DRC, and the Katanga region in particular, hosts around 70% of cobalt's world reserves, mainly used for electric vehicles' batteries. In 2022, CNMC, a Chinese state-owned company closed a 800 million USD deal on copper mines, with the DRC national company Gécamines, for the implementation of five mega-projects and the license covering huge reserves[130]. In addition, Chinese investments in 15 cobalt mining operations in the DRC, most of them linked to the BRI reflects Beijing's growing dominance in the sector[131]. Other strategic countries for minerals supply are South Africa for manganese, and Zimbabwe for lithium, Zambia for copper, Namibia for uranium and finally, Guinea and Ghana for bauxite[132]. Then, despite recent Chinese interest in abandoning traditional fuels, oil and natural gas are still fundamental for the country's performance. Egypt has become one of the most reliable partners for Beijing, joining the BRICS group in 2024[133] and increasing its oil supply to China.

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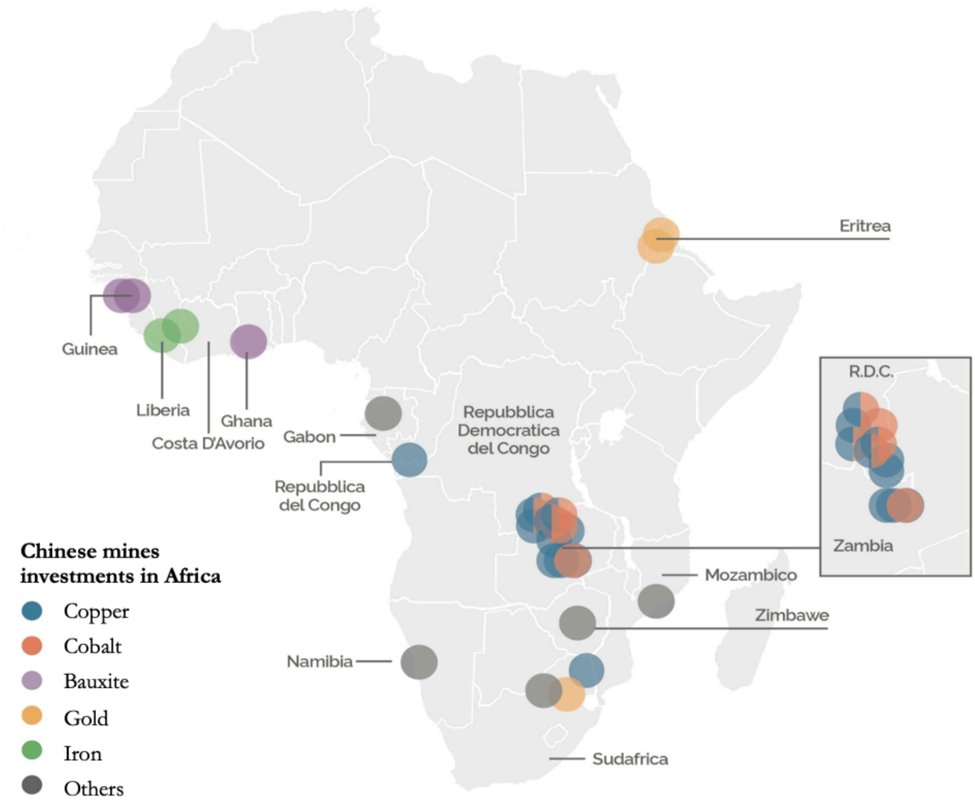
[130] Global Witness. 2024. "Mega Deal between Gécamines and Chinese State-Owned Company CNMC for One of DRC's Flagship Copper Mines Could Be Leaving the Country Short-Changed." Global Witness, March 14. https://globalwitness.org/en/press-releases/mega-deal-between-g%C3%A9camines-and-chinese-state-owned-company-cnmc-for-one-of-drcs-flagship-copper-mines-could-be-leaving-the-country-short-changed/

[131] Benabdallah, L. (2024). *China's Role in Africa's Critical Minerals Landscape: Challenges and Key Opportunities*. Africa Policy Research Institute. 3. https://afripoli.org/chinas-role-in-africas-critical-minerals-landscape-challenges-and-key-opportunities.

[132] Procopio, Maddalena. 2015. "Il nuovo valore strategico dell'Africa per la Cina: risorse, mercati, voti e ordine globale." *Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale*, April 10. https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/il-nuovo-valore-strategico-dellafrica-per-la-cina-risorse-mercati-voti-e-ordine-globale-132643.

[133] Mansour, Amr. 2024. "Egypt's BRICS Membership Officially Activated." The New Arab, March 14. https://www.newarab.com/news/egypts-brics-membership-officially-activated.

Conversely, according to the Financial Times, Mauritania is emerging as new energetic hub in Africa, thanks to its abundant natural gas reserves and initiatives to attract investments in the energy sector[134].



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ISPI. 2023. *Il nuovo valore strategico dell'Africa per la Cina: risorse, mercati, voti e ordine globale*. Figure 4. Milan: Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale. https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/il-nuovo-valore-strategico-dellafrica-per-la-cina-risorse-mercati-voti-e-ordine-globale-132643.

Over the past 20 years, China has operated through state-owned enterprises, getting to dominate the African mining market. As a matter of fact, China is by far the largest buyer of African minerals, importing around one third of the African exports, which is worth 16.6 billion USD. This experienced an increase of 28% since 2018, meaning both Chinese increasing reliance on Africa's minerals and Africa's countries

[134] 2025 "Mauritania's bid to become an African energy hub". The Financial Times, January 28. https://www.ft.com/content/3023e44a-ed57-4efb-91c6-cb202e5a72e2

[135] ISPI. 2023. *Il nuovo valore strategico dell'Africa per la Cina: risorse, mercati, voti e ordine globale*. Figure 4. Milan: Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale. https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/il-nuovo-valore-strategico-dellafrica-per-la-cina-risorse-mercati-voti-e-ordine-globale-132643.

leveraging these resources in exchange of advantages[136]. We are now going to analyze how China concretely operates in the African mining sector. One of the most common and direct ways to exercise control over these resources is ownership, meaning the control and ownership of resources and relative infrastructures. The main type of ownership are the State-Owned enterprises (SOEs). Most of mines Chinese investments are handled by SOEs, the bigger ones are the China Minmetals Corporation, the China National Offshore Oil Corporation and the China Nonferrous Metal Mining Group (Scungio, 2021)[137]. These SOEs obtain mines concessions through bilateral agreements between Chinese and African governments, mainly within the *resource-for-infrastructure deals.* In this model, Chinese enterprises own and entirely control mines operations, reinvesting the profits in infrastructures, namely pipelines, aimed at transporting the extracted materials. This model is particularly virtuous because it allows Chinese enterprises to gain revenues and at the same time the African government to develop local strategic facilities. Other ways of controlling companies are administrative and technical management, interlocking directorates, long-term contracts, market knowledge, proprietary technology, infrastructure, financing and vertical integration[138]. These models have allowed China to seize around 60% of worldwide critical materials production and 85% of processing capacity (Benabdallah, 2024). Chinese enterprises can benefit from a series of competitive advantages in this industry. First of all, the Chinese government provides significant incentives to its enterprises, facilitating their bidding processes for mines contracts[139]. These benefits include ease financings through low-rates loans, fiscal benefits and diplomatic support *in loco.* In addition, China exploits the BRI influence to strengthen bilateral relations and cooperation, making its enterprises favored in bidding mines granting. Secondly, Chinese success relies not only on mining operations, but

[136] Benabdallah, L. (2024). *China's Role in Africa's Critical Minerals Landscape: Challenges and Key Opportunities*. Africa Policy Research Institute. 3. https://afripoli.org/chinas-role-in-africas-critical-minerals-landscape-challenges-and-key-opportunities.

[137] SOMO**.** 2021. *China's Global Mineral Rush: Mining Investment and Supply Chains.* Amsterdam: Centre for Research on Multinational Corporations (SOMO). https://www.somo.nl/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Chinas-global-mineral-rush.pdf

[138] Ericsson, Magnus, Olof Löf, and Anton Löf. 2020. "Chinese Control over African and Global Mining—Past, Present and Future." *Mineral Economics* 33(1): 154. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13563-020-00233-4

[139] Garver, R. (2022, May 24). Report: China Spends Billions of Dollars to Subsidize Favored Companies. VOA News. https://www.voanews.com/a/report-china-spends-billions-of-dollars-to-subsidize-favored-companies-/6587314.html

mostly on the implementation of essential infrastructures in mines territories. The above-mentioned *resource-for-infrastructure deals,* includes the integration of infrastructural projects, such as railways, seaports and transport routes, with investments in mining. Additionally, Chinese investments banks grant low-tax loans to African countries in exchange of rights of mining. This model makes Chinese bids extremely competitive, especially in rural areas withs scarce pre-existing facilities. These operations increase Chinese credibility and attractivity in the eyes of African governments, that rather grant their mines to them rather than any other bidder. Finally, throughout the years, China has developed a high experience in dealing with diverse African political contexts. Beijing has learnt how to successfully operate either in regulated environments or weak governance, politically instable contexts. This flexibility allows to access opportunities that other enterprises, with stricter policies or political system concerns cannot exploit.[140]

The number of mines controlled by Chinese companies significantly increased since 2007. In five years, from 2005 to 2010, 15 mines started their production, and 24 projects were in development. 2010 was a particularly flourishing year: in that year alone, eight new mines started their operations, and as of 2013 Chinese companies were controlling around 60 mines.[141] Nevertheless, after 2015 Chinese investments in mining decreased according to a more cautious policy on FDI and the slow-down of Chinese economic growth and demand of metal. The future developments of China-Africa cooperation in the mining sector will depend on numerous factors, such as the future Chinese demand of metals, whether the global importance of raw materials will increase or not, and whether an alternative to replace those materials in their use will be found. The chinese global demand is likely continue to grow in the next years, but at a lower pace than today[142]. Although China setted as a privileged partner for many African governments, in the growing global competition for the access to critical materials, the true African allies will be those who will prioritize its development, promoting local labor. China has only partially archieved that, often bringing labor force from mainland

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[140] Benabdallah, L. (2024). *China's Role in Africa's Critical Minerals Landscape: Challenges and Key Opportunities*. Africa Policy Research Institute. 4. https://afripoli.org/chinas-role-in-africas-critical-minerals-landscape-challenges-and-key-opportunities.

[141] Ericsson, Magnus, Olof Löf, and Anton Löf. 2020. "Chinese Control over African and Global Mining—Past, Present and Future." *Mineral Economics* 33(1): 156. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13563-020-00233-4

[142] *Ivi*, 173

and creating dynamics of corruption and exploitation within African workers. In order to set a profitable cooperation for both parties, it is necessary to face a series of problematics. One of those is the scarce trasparency and lacking accountability in the extractive sector, these conditions sharply contributed to environmental degradation and worsened living conditions for local communities. An additional obstacle is represented by the marginalization of the Africa Mining Vision, a concept developed by the African Union, aimed at maximizing the befenits of mines communities with a view to an common African vision on the mineral sector. The latter is often disregarded in favor of bilateral agreements that split regional endeavors and limit joint development. This squilibrium led to a series of negative consequences, namely severe pollution, human rights violations and illegal extraction practices. The lack of political will in fixing these issues is often linked to the priority attributed to companies' interests, rather than local populations' safeguard.

2.1.3 Chinese security commitment in Africa

The Chinese "Going Out" strategy, aimed at relocating Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) abroad, requires, as all economic activities, a certain degree of political stability. The deteriorated security landscape, with several areas of conflict or tensions, endangered Chinese geopolitical and economic interests in Africa, and pushed Beijing to step up its game to preserve its strategic investments. For instance, the Tigray conflict in Ethiopia, which ignited in 2020, affects one of the most targeted countries by Chinese SOEs, particularly in infrastructures construction, and due to its key role in the BRI. Secondly, as discussed above the DRC is a fundamental hub for raw materials and strategic energy sources. The region is affected by chronical instability, armed conflicts tied to the control of strategic mineral resources. On top of that, the situation has lately deteriorated after the M23 rebel group has intensified its offensive in eastern DRC, with the objective of seizing over the mineral-rich North Kivu province[143]. Another region facing perennial instability is the Sahel. The recent intensification of Jihadist terrorist groups' activities and perpetuated golpes, especially after France militarily abandoned the territory, further

[143] Ali, Marium. 2025. "Mapping the Human Toll of the Conflict in DR Congo." *Al Jazeera*, March 24. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/3/24/mapping-the-human-toll-of-the-conflict-in-dr-congo.

deteriorated the landscape and paved the way for regional instability[144]. In addition to that, Russian private paramilitary company "Africa Corps" are trying to establish Moscow's rule for what concerns security in Sub-Saharan Africa, but at the same time China has increasingly grown its military presence to challenge Russian assertiveness, adding complexity to an already intricate landscape[145]. Chinese interests in the Sahel include gold mines, uranium extractions to fuel Chinese nuclear program, other than the evergreen facilities financing. Additional unstable regions include Nigeria Delta, where Boko Haram and militants' rages across[146] , and where Beijing keeps interest on oil sites and bilateral strategic agreements with the Nigerian government. Finally, Somalia, covering a strategic position for the BRI routes through the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea, but where piracy and Al-Shabab terrorism compromise Chinese naval expansion plans, although Beijing has contributed to the international efforts to counter Somali piracy. Given this complex landscape, China must face several challenges to protect its economic assets and its citizens in endangered regions. In fact, as reported by Judd Devermont before the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, in the past ten years there have been more than 150 violent incidents involving Chinese citizens in Sub-Saharan Africa[147]. For these reasons the PRC has started to deepen its military involvement across the continent to ensure its interests' security.

Recently, China has emphasized the growing importance of securitizing Africa by increasing its military capabilities. This was both stated during the 2024 FOCAC in agreement with African leaders, and by the China's Ministry of Defense, who stressed the necessity to improve PRC-Africa military relations and "further enhance the quality and effectiveness of defense cooperation" between the Peoples' Liberation Army (PLA) and African militaries[148]. Arduino highlighted how Beijing's security strategy follows a

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[144] Council on Foreign Relations. n.d. "Violent Extremism in the Sahel." *Global Conflict Tracker*. Accessed April 1, 2025. https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/violent-extremism-sahel.
[145] Moody, Jessica. 2025. "Are China and Russia on a Collision Course in Africa?" *Foreign Policy*, March 31. https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/03/31/china-russia-wagner-security-stability-africa/.
[146] Hendrix, Cullen S. 2021. *Climate Change and U.S. National Security: Problems and Prospects*. SSRN Scholarly Paper No. 3849530. Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3849530.
[147] Ditter, Tim, Kaia Haney, Tsun-Kai Tsai, and Carita Reid. 2024. *The Military and Security Dimensions of the PRC's Africa Presence: Changes in a Time of Global Shocks.* Arlington, VA: CNA Corporation. https://www.cna.org/reports/2024/10/the-military-and-security-dimensions-of-the-prcs-africa-presence.
[148] China Military Online. 2024. "China-Africa Defense Cooperation to Further Improve Quality, Effectiveness: Defense Spokesperson." *China Military Online*, February 29. http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/TopStories_209189/16289872.html.

three-steps framework, based on military personnel training and forums of cooperation with African countries, increasing arms export and strengthening its private security sector[149]. For what concerns the professional military education (PME), PRC's goal is deepening ties with African armies to export Chinese military model and vision in the continent. In fact, as Paul Nantulya found, PME institutions are used as an instrument of diplomacy, since African military personnel trained according to the Chinese model will be more incline to protect Chinese interests and personnel [150]. Training programs offered by the PLA educate on the Chinese military system and its governance model, other than military theory and battlefield tactics. More than fifty African countries participate in PME programs, with African officers representing about 60% of foreign personnel admitted to top level institutions[151]. An additional tool China has used to increase its military leadership in Africa are cooperation forums, among which the most notable is the "China-Africa Peace and Security Forum", established in 2018 to outreach African countries and promote dialogue and cooperation. In the 2023 edition, more than 100 delegates from 50 African countries were present. In that occasion, the security issues faced by the continent were highlighted, particularly noting that traditional threats, such as coup d'état and civil wars, have not yet been eradicated, while new threats, especially non-state terrorism, are on the rise[152]. Secondly, Benjamin Rogers observes that most African countries with a powerful armies, notably Egypt, Algeria and Ethiopia, have developed their defense industries thanks to the sharp Chinese contribution since the 2000s[153]. In addition, in 2023 China surpassed Russia in arms exports for the first time, with around 400 millions of export value[154]. Russia considerably resized the number of arms exports to Africa after Covid-19 and Ukraine's invasion, leaving a market gap empty, that the PRC is eager to fill. As a matter of fact, according to the Stockholm

[149] Arduino, Alessandro. "China's Expanding Security Footprint in Africa: From Arms Transfers to Military Cooperation." *ISPI*, September 30, 2024. https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/chinas-expanding-security-footprint-in-africa-from-arms-transfers-to-military-cooperation-184841.
[150] Nantulya, Paul. "Chinese Professional Military Education for Africa: Key Influence and Strategy." United States Institute of Peace, July 2023.
[151] Ditter, Tim, Kaia Haney, Tsun-Kai Tsai, and Carita Reid. *The Military and Security Dimensions of the PRC's Africa Presence: Changes in a Time of Global Shocks*. DRM-2024-U-038088-3Rev. CNA Corporation, October 2024. https://www.cna.org.
[152] *Ibidem*
[153] Benjamin Roger, "Au Sahel, la Chine affiche ses ambitions militaires," *Le Monde*, March 19, 2025, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2025/03/19/au-sahel-la-chine-affiche-ses-ambitions-militaires_6583457_3212.html.
[154] CNA, based on Stockholm International Peace Research Institute database.

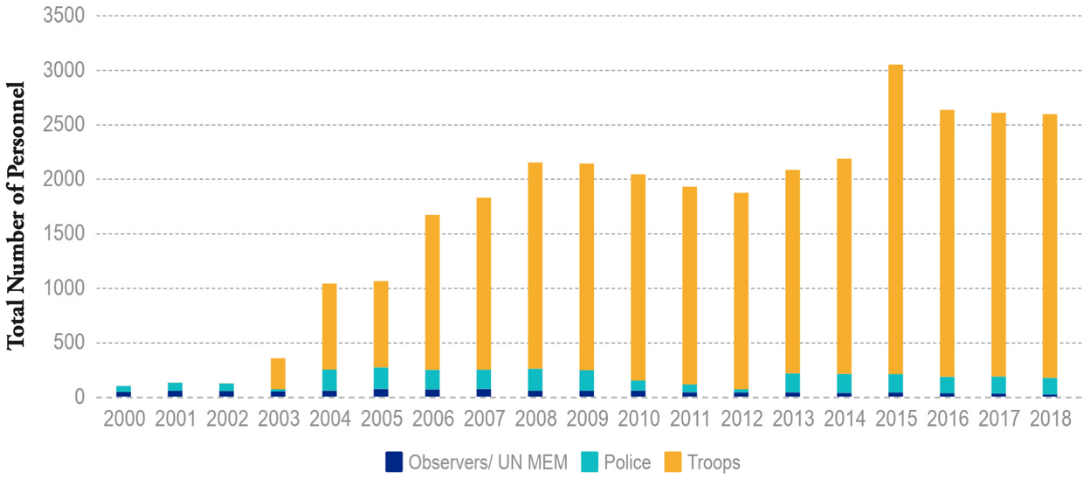
International Peace Research Institute, in 2023, the volume of Russia's arms export decreased by 52% compared to the previous year, when the invasion started. Lastly, China's security strategy involves strengthening private security companies (PSC). In a context in which Chinese infrastructures overseas are at stake and the government is unwilling to deploy PLA forces, PSCs emerge as an effective and more and more used tool to protect Chinese assets abroad. Private military companies (PMCs) and PSCs appear as attractive ways to maintain power, representing low-profile alternatives to traditional armies and significant cost savings. PSCs are mainly used for non-combat missions, such as national personnel security, so they do not engage in direct support to partner force operations. China made PSCs legal in 2009, and since then they have rapidly proliferated, blurring the distinction between security and military services[155]. The interconnection between PSCs deployment and protection of BRI's infrastructures is illustrated by the map below.

BRI Infrastructural Projects

[156] Source: "Mapping the Belt and Road initiative: this is where we stand," MERICS Mercator Institute for China Studies, June 7, 2018.

[155] Markusen, Max. "The Quiet Expansion of Chinese Private Security Companies." *CSIS Briefs*. January 2022. https://www.csis.org/publications/quiet-expansion-chinese-private-security-companies.
[156] Source: "Mapping the Belt and Road initiative: this is where we stand," MERICS Mercator Institute for China Studies, June 7, 2018, https://merics.org/en/tracker/mapping-belt-and-road-initiative-where-we-stand; Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, "China Island Tracker," CSIS, https://amti.csis.org/island-tracker/china/; Jeremy Page, Gordon Lubold, and Rob Taylor, "Deal for Naval Outpost in Cambodia Furthers China's Quest for Military Network," Wall Street Journal, July 22, 2019, https://www.wsj.com/articles/secret-deal-for-chinese-

On top of that, over the last two decades China has sharply expanded its participation in United Nations' peacekeeping missions, passing from providing 98 contributors in 2000 to 2273 contributors in 2023[157]. Moreover, China now provides more peacekeeping forces than all the other UN Security Council members combined[158].



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International Peace Institute, *The People's Republic of China and UN Peacekeeping: Backgrounder*, ISDP Backgrounder (Stockholm: Institute for Security and Development Policy, March 2018), fig. 2, https://www.isdp.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/PRC-Peacekeeping-Backgrounder.pdf

Deploying peacekeepers in Africa is another way Beijing has to carry on its self-interests and pursue its foreign policy objectives. It is an ideal way to gain experience on the ground, build up cooperation with local governments and advance a positive image of itself. China has progressively connected its peacekeeping deployments to the protection of its strategic interests and citizens in the continent, surprisingly though, the highest

naval-outpost-in-cambodia-raises-u-s-fears-of-beijings-ambitions-11563732482; The International Institute for Strategic Studies, The Military Balance (London, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2021), https://www.iiss.org/publications/the-military-balance; and Helena Legarda and Meia Nouwens, Guardians of the Belt and Road: The Internationalization of China's private security companies (Berlin: MERICS Mercator Institute for China Studies, August 2018), https://merics.org/sites/default/files/2020-05/Guardians%20of%20the%20Belt%20 and%20Road.pdf.

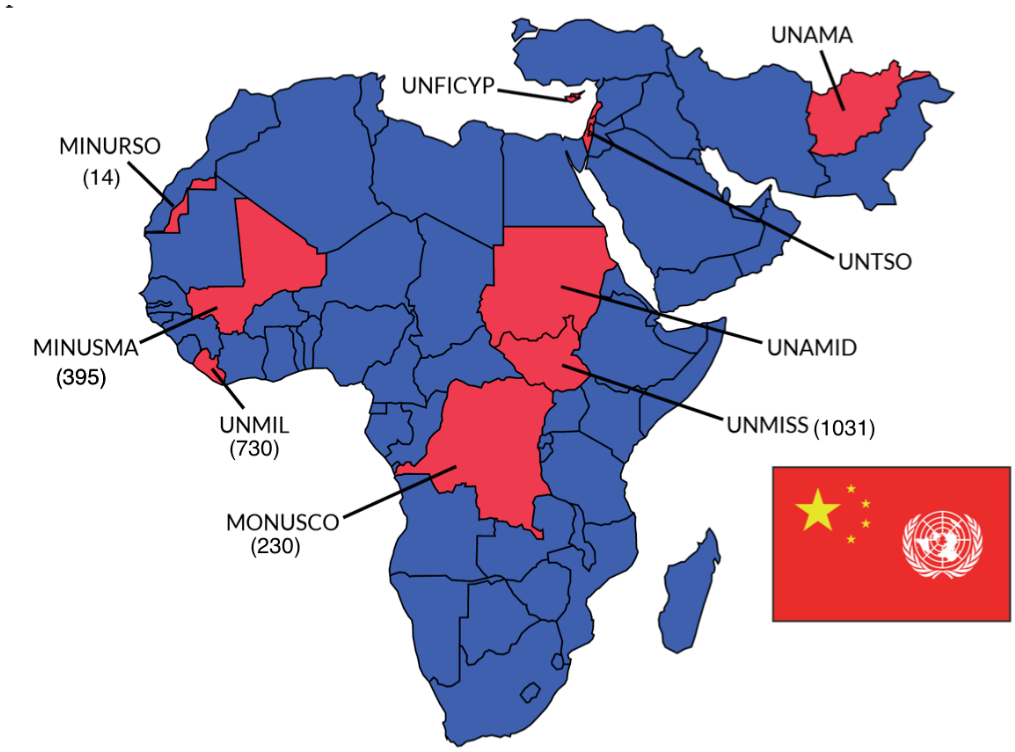
[157] Katharin H.S. Lau, "Small Eagle, Big Dragon: China's Expanding Role in UN Peacekeeping," *Royal United Services Institute (RUSI)*, March 12, 2024, fig.1, https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/small-eagle-big-dragon-chinas-expanding-role-un-peacekeeping

[158] *Ibidem*

[159] International Peace Institute, *The People's Republic of China and UN Peacekeeping: Backgrounder*, ISDP Backgrounder (Stockholm: Institute for Security and Development Policy, March 2018), fig. 2, https://www.isdp.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/PRC-Peacekeeping-Backgrounder.pdf.

number of Chinese troops are not operating in key-areas for Chinese investments. As a matter of fact, according to United Nations Peacekeeping, most Chinese forces (1031 troops) are involved in the UNMISS mission, aimed at restoring peace in South Sudan after its independence, where Chinese investments though are fable. The third mission with most Chinese peacekeepers (UNIFSA, 270 troops) operates at the boarder across Sudan and South Sudan, while the second one is involved in Lebanon (UNIFIL, 410 troops). Whereas, in the remaining missions in strategic areas such as MONUSCO and MINURSO, respectively in the DRC and Western Sahara, China provides experts and top officials[160].

Number of Chinese peacekeeping troops deployed in UN missions in Africa



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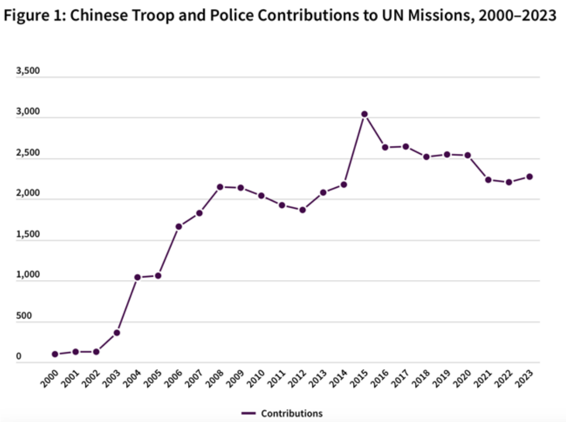
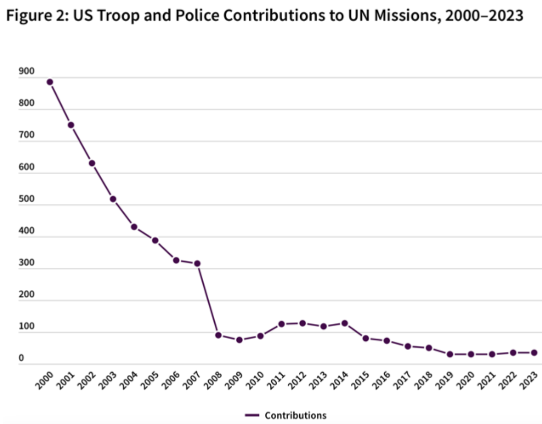
IPI, *China and UN Peacekeeping*, fig. 4. With Peacekeepers data taken from: https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/troop-and-police-contributors

[160] United Nations Peacekeeping, "Troop and Police Contributors," interactive chart, accessed April 3, 2025, https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/troop-and-police-contributors.
[161] IPI, *China and UN Peacekeeping*, fig. 4. With Peacekeepers data taken from: https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/troop-and-police-contributors

These data show that China exploits peacekeeping operations to transmit a good idea of itself rather than protecting its strategic concerns, that are better preserved through PSCs and PMCs. The Chinese peacekeeping involvement is also framed within the great power competition with the US. Actually, while Beijing rapidly increased its participation in those operations, Washington progressively abandoned the continent. This phenomenon reflects China's expanding prominence within the UN and its willingness to challenge the US's influence and its leadership role of the rules-based international order[162].

[163]





Lambert, Claude A. 2024. *Lambert Commentary Figure 1 and 2. Chinese Troop and Police Contributions to UN Missions, 2000–2023*. Infogram. https://infogram.com/lambert-commentary-figure-1-chinese-troop-and-police-contributions-to-un-missions-20002023-1h0n25okvkk9z4p.

In addition to this, at a certain point China felt the necessity to establish its own military basis in the African territory, like the US and other Western powers had been doing for years. Although the CCP criticized the US military bases for being a tool to grow its hegemony[164], due to China's overseas interests' growth, soon Beijing deemed appropriate the construction of its own military infrastructure in a key position. Beijing in 2014 was already participating in a counterpiracy mission in a highly strategic area: the Gulf of Aden. Eradicating the piracy plague in the region was essential due to the strategic significance of the Gulf, which serves both as a gateway to the Red Sea, and consequently to the Mediterranean Sea, and as a point of projection towards the East, relevant within

[162] Katharin H.S. Lau, *Small Eagle, Big Dragon*.
[163] https://infogram.com/lambert-commentary-figure-1-chinese-troop-and-police-contributions-to-un-missions-20002023-1h0n25okvkk9z4p
[164] Xinhua Institute, *Origins, Facts and Perils of U.S. Military Hegemony*, (Beijing: Xinhua News Agency, 2023), 50, https://english.news.cn/20230906/117fcc979a6642e592ac00c1fd971e4b/db6f88b21a4e48c695719b44d716ab3d_junshibaquanyingwendinggao.pdf.

the BRI framework. Therefore, PRC started to deepen its ties with Djibouti, that covers a geopolitically significant position within the Gulf, leading to a base agreement in 2014 and the actual construction in 2017[165]. China started to intensify economic relations with Djibouti, financing crucial construction projects within the BRI, expanding the frequency of PLA Navy port visits, and strengthening military trade[166], as part of a strategy aimed at obtaining the assent for the construction of its first overseas military basis. Whereas the US, France, and Japan already had their military basis in Djibouti, China did not want to be left behind. According to Michaël Tanchum, "the consolidation of Chinese military power on the continent…combined with the expansion of Beijing's already considerable economic influence, would shift global power dynamics, eroding US dominance, and relegating Europe to the sidelines of international affairs"[167]. Besides the strategic position, China decided to build a basis in Djibouti also for its closeness to regions that are rich of gas and hydrocarbon, fundamental to fuel Chinese industry and economic growth. Namely, Somalia, which is said to have discovered huge amounts of hydrocarbon resources in the Indian Ocean, and Ethiopia in the Ogaden region.[168] This indicates that Chinese military interests in the Horn are strictly tied with commercial aims, intended to secure ports, logistic hubs and maritime lines of communications. In addition, the establishment of Doraleh basis is a response to the numerous security challenges in the Horn of Africa, a region as crucial as it is vulnerable. The basis supports PLA's power projections in the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea by providing resupply services for Chinese army. A basis in such a position allows China to deploy its military forces and improve its intelligence operations, and finally, it facilitates arms trade with African partners, that as was mentioned above is crucial in PRC's African security strategy.[169]

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[165] Ditter et al., *The Military and Security Dimensions of the PRC's Africa Presence,* 11.
[166] *Ibidem*
[167] Michaël Tanchum, "China's New Military Base in Africa: What It Means for Europe and America," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 14 dicembre 2021, https://ecfr.eu/article/chinas-new-military-base-in-africa-what-it-means-for-europe-and-america/.
[168] Abebe Alemu Melese, "The Chinese and American Military Installations in Djibouti: National and Regional Security Implications," *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies* 8, no. 3 & 4 (2022): 249, https://doi.org/10.1142/S2377740022500130.
[169] *Ibidem*

2.1.4 China's diplomacy and the cooperation with the African Union

Compared to other foreign policy tools China uses in Africa, the FOCAC represents an emblematic paradigm of multilateral diplomacy tailored for the African continent. In September 2024, the ninth edition of the Forum took place, with fifty-three African delegations, thirty-six of which were led by heads of states or prime ministers, witnessing the importance given by African governments to this dialogue forum. According to Christian Géraud Neema, few countries can boast of having such power and influence, especially with regards to Africa[170]. Throughout the years FOCAC overcame other Africa plus one summits[171], becoming the prominent forum in this category. During the last edition, China remarked a new era in the Africa-China relationship, within the framework of a shared future for the new era. At FOCAC 2024, Xi entertained bilateral dialogues with each African delegation, reaffirming Beijing's support for each country's development, with a specific focus on increasing tourism, digitalization and green transition, in turn, most African leaders reaffirmed their commitment to the "One China" principle[172]. This type of diplomacy is part of the Chinese strategy aimed at reshaping the institutions of global governance, in the attempt of progressively abandoning the US-led model, and the FOCAC 2024 proved Chinese efforts to strengthen ties with its African partners to achieve this goal. In recent times China has implemented several initiatives with the intention to set new norms in global affairs[173]. Besides the well-known BRI, equal importance should be attributed to the more recent: Global Development Initiative (GDI), launched in 2021 faced at supporting the implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda for sustainable development[174], the Global Security Initiative (GSI), proposed by Xi Jinping in 2022 during the Bao Forum for Asia, with the aim of promoting a global vision of security respecting territorial integrity of all the countries and particularly focusing on

[170] Neema Christian-Géraud, « What FOCAC 2024 Reveals About the Future of China-Africa Relations », *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (2024)

[171] Africa plus one refers to bilateral gatherings between Africa and some other country, the first being established was the France-Afrique summits that started in 1973.
[172] Recognizing Taiwan as an integral part of mainland China
[173] Neema, « What FOCAC 2024 Reveals About the Future of China-Africa Relations »
[174] China International Development Cooperation Agency, *Global Development Initiative (GDI)*. http://en.cidca.gov.cn

non-conventional threats[175]. Lastly, the Global Civilization initiative (GCI), launched in 2023, it aspires to promote mutual respect and understanding among diverse peoples, advocating for a new multipolar world order, where mutual learning and respect overcome clashes[176]. In addition, Xi announced that he would elevate China's bilateral relations with all those African countries that recognize the PRC to at least the "strategic level"[177]. The call for a "new era" is the outcome of a diffuse perception in different regions of the world, namely those who once were called the "Third world", of an incoherent global order. This framework is seen as more favorable to the interests of big powers, rather than compelling to the international law, in the last FOCAC China used the Gaza conflict to illustrate the incongruities of the ruling order. This rhetoric is helpful to carry on the Chinese diplomatic discourse in Africa, based on the values of ancient friendship, shared past of subordination and fight for freedom, always recalling the negative impact of the West. To fully understand the strategic importance of FOCAC, should be analyzed how China built its diplomatic influence in the continent. Chinese diplomacy operates to project the image of a pacific growing power in the international arena. At the same time Chinese economic actors, mostly entrepreneurs, are actively involved in seeking crucial natural resources and new export markets in Africa. As was said above, FOCAC is the main institutional tool through which China engages with Africa. During the 2006 FOCAC, Hu Jintao presented a eight-points program, which included 5 billions for a China-Africa development fund to support SOEs in Africa, the construction of a conference center for the African Union, erasing the debt contracted until 2005 for less developed countries with diplomatic relations with China, and encouraged bilateral trade through 0% tariffs over 440 African products[178]. China also sharply invested on education and soft power, aspiring to export the Chinese model, training over 15000 African professionals, building 30 hospitals and 100 rural schools,

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[175] Erik Green, Meia Nouwens e Veerle Nouwens, *The Global Security Initiative: China's International Policing Activities*, International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), October 2024, https://www.iiss.org/research-paper/2024/10/the-global-security-initiative-chinas-international-policing-activities/?utm_source

[176] International Department of the CPC Central Committee, *Results of the High-Level Dialogue between the CPC and World Political Parties*, https://www.idcpc.org.cn/ztwy/hytl/gdheng/results/.

[177] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, *Wang Yi Attends the Opening Ceremony of the China-Africa Peace and Security Forum*, September 5, 2024, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/zyxw/202409/t20240905_11485719.html?utm_source=

[178] Linda Jakobson, *China's Diplomacy Toward Africa: Drivers and Constraints*, *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*9, no. 3 (2009): 408–409, https://doi.org/10.1093/irap/lcp008.

and doubling scholarships for African students in China[179]. In exchange of these investments Beijing asks for the adherence to the "One China" principle, and support within International Organizations such as the UN, where African states represent more than one quarter of the votes. As a result, Beijing not only exports overseas its vision and influence, but is sets the stage for a new international order, where the Global South gains importance and power. In this perspective the FOCAC is crucial because it is a privileged forum where China consolidates bilateral relations, promotes a vision of responsible and caring power, and expands economic, political and cultural influence in Africa. This influence, alongside soft power, contributed to build a positive image of China, however, geopolitical ambitions materialized within the institutional framework of cooperation with the African Union. The relations between China and African Union have their roots in the 60s, when relationships between the Group of 77 and China were formalized under the UN. Since then, relations evolved from a simple ideological friendship to a more practical and strategic partnership. The growing support to the African Union though, is not a mere act of benevolence, whereas an effective integration among African states that would be useful for Chinese activities in the continent. In fact, China shows a growing support to African Union's peace operations, both economically and militarily. The last FOCAC further highlighted the overlap of China's global initiatives and the African Union 2063 Agenda, including its 10-years implementation plan and initiatives for sustainable development. However, the AU failed to create its own common strategy and consequently is subject to its partners' one: the crucial challenge is being able to break the donor-receiver relationship that has created contentment among African states[180], but can be harmful in the long run. According to Gareth le Pere, the PRC prefers to engage singularly with each African leader, rather than entertaining a dialogue with the Union as a whole [181]. This approach is justified by the incapacity of most African leaders to conduct negotiations from a position of strength, allowing China to impose more favorable

[179] *Ibidem*
[180] *PSC Report*, *Leveraging FOCAC for Regional Connectivity in Africa*, Institute for Security Studies, 22 January 2025, https://issafrica.org/pscreport/psc-insights/leveraging-focac-for-regional-connectivity-in-africa.

[181] Garth le Pere, "China", in Chris Saunders, Gwinyayi A. Dzinesa and Dawn Nagar (eds.) Region-Building in Southern Africa: Progress, Problems and Prospects (London: Zed, 2012), pp. 281–296. See also Ian Taylor, "China's Environmental Footprint in Africa", China Dialogue, 2 February 2007.

conditions for itself[182], while this operation would be more complicated if negotiations were conducted by a delegation representing the AU as a whole. Nonetheless, in the recent years the AU managed to enhance the dialogue with Beijing, increasing its role in the FOCACs, passing from observer to fully participant member in 2011[183]. This decision marks a heightened awareness of the importance of African Union among the leaders of member states, potentially leading to a more powerful bargaining power. This conveys the idea that a more united Africa could become a stronger continent, less dependent on great powers. The ISS[184] notes that the AU could leverage its bargaining power to secure more equitable outcomes, rather than laying on partial victories brought from outside the continent. The key to break free from this logic is enhancing regional cohesion to set a common and unified vision and get rid of personal interests of states that only lead to internal divisions and advantages for overseas powers.

2.2 The renewed Italian strategic interest in Africa

2.2.1 Mattei Plan: energy diplomacy and development cooperation

Following the Russia-Ukraine War, the consequent rise of energy prices, and the increase of instability in certain areas of Africa, the Italian government prioritized its foreign policy on commercial, energy, security, and migration aspects. 2022 Draghi's first and the following Giorgia Meloni's governments moved as center of their foreign policy the Mediterranean and Africa, through the implementation of the Mattei Plan, a comprehensive plan to relaunch Italian interests in the African continent. It has three declared aims:

1. Making Italy a logistical energy hub for Europe,
2. Monitoring the migratory phenomena,
3. Relaunching Italy's strategic and geopolitical role in the Mediterranean Africa[185].

The "Mattei Plan" takes its name after Enrico Mattei, an Italian entrepreneur who founded the *Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi,* ENI, the principal Italian state-owned energetic company. During the 50s, Mattei tried to support the development of African

[182] *Ibidem*
[183] Africa Union, "China-Africa Cooperation Formum", 14 Agosto 2012
[184] Institute for Security Studies
[185] Carola Cerami, *Could the "Mattei Plan" Be Reinvented for Africa? A Historical Perspective*, *Il Politico* 89, no. 2 (2024): 100.

countries' natural resources, mainly oil and gas, to: on the one hand optimize African economic potential, and on the other hand facilitate Italy's energy independence. Mattei's economic model was defined "75-25", in contrast with the more widespread "fifty-fifty" system[186]. According the 75-25 system, the oil producing state was no more excluded from the management of the oil affairs that took place within its borders, whereas it would become an actual partner while remaining external to financial risks and the initial research, and in the meantime significantly benefitting from the revenues[187]. Over the last ten years, especially after the breakout of the migration crisis in 2013, Italy has been trying to promote is global perception by becoming a pivotal actor in the Mediterranean, in accord with the aspiration of a niche power, for what concerns commerce and culture, acting as its strategic position would suggest: a bridge between Europe and Africa. One of its priorities since then has been the definition of a long-term strategy of collaboration with African governments to not only intensify its presence in the continent, but mostly to manage illegal migration flows that in 2016 became almost impossible to control. In 2023, the recently elected far-right government of Giorgia Meloni, who based its campaign on the fight against illegal migration, jumped at the opportunity. During the *International Conference on Development and Migration* the Premier announced the beginning of an action plan called the "Rome Process", of which the "Mattei Plan" is part. Meloni inaugurated the initiative in the occasion of the "*Italia-Africa. A bridge for common growth* "Summit held in January 2024, with the participation of 46 African representatives and multilateral organizations such as the EU and UN[188]. In her speech, Meloni repeatedly stressed her goal of considering Africa as one of the main political priorities of Italian foreign policy and explained the choice of naming such an crucial initiative after Enrico Mattei:

"*We believe it is possible to imagine and write a new page in the history of our relations. Cooperation as equals, far from any predatory temptations, but also from that 'charity-like' approach to Africa which is so ill-suited to its extraordinary development*

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[186] Andrea Tonini, *Il sogno proibito. Mattei, il petrolio arabo e le 'sette sorelle'* (Firenze: Edizioni Polistampa, 2003).
[187] Cerami, *Could the "Mattei Plan" Be Reivented for Africa)*, 105.
[188] President Meloni's opening address at the Italia-Africa Summit, 29 January 2024 https://www.governo.it/en/articolo/president-meloni-s-opening-address-italia-africa-summit/24861

potential…This is Italy's natural vocation: a bridge between Africa and Europe. As Italians we have the advantage of being able to build that bridge not starting from scratch, but rather based on the solid foundations that the great Italian Enrico Mattei…had the foresight to envisage all those years ago…Mattei taught us that it was possible to combine Italy's need to make its growth sustainable with the need of partner nations to experience a time of freedom, development and progress[189]."

The plan has a duration of four years, and for the first phase, Italy has identified a series of countries that will host the firs pilot projects in six critical areas of intervention:

- Health
- Education and training
- Agriculture
- Water
- Energy
- Infrastructure, with the latter being transversal to the other fives[190].

Countries affected by the *Pilot Projects* of the Mattei Plan

[189] Giorgia Meloni, *President Meloni's Opening Address at the Italia-Africa Summit*, Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, January 29, 2024, https://www.governo.it/en/articolo/president-meloni-s-opening-address-italia-africa-summit/24861.
[190] Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, *Piano Strategico Italia-Africa: Piano Mattei* (Roma, 2024), https://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/Piano_strategico_Italia-Africa_Piano_Mattei.pdf

191

Camera dei deputati. 2024. *Schema di DPCM di adozione del Piano strategico Italia-Africa: Piano Mattei*. Dossier ES0217. Rome: Servizio Studi – Dipartimento Affari Esteri. https://documenti.camera.it/leg19/dossier/pdf/ES0217.pdf.

According to the Italian government, the "Mattei Plan" develops new projects or actively supports already existing initiatives, sharing with African countries the phases of elaboration, definition and implementation of the projects in order to ensure social and economic revenues and to build a stable ground for future expansions[192]. The plan is financed by 5.5 billion euro, three of which will be provided by the National Climate Fund while 2.5 by the Development Cooperation budget. The finance will take the form of loans, investments, loans guarantees, and grants. For what concerns the objectives, the art. 1 of the n.2/2024 Law identify them in: "*promoting development in African states…with the aim of strengthening collaboration between Italy and African states"*[193]. Therefore, from the African perspective the reason for adhering to the project is supporting development, whereas Italy would gain several potential benefits and the Rome's will relaunch the dialogue with the region, and the increasement and diversification of energy supply. The Italian governments emphasizes the non-charitable approach as a way to detach from the traditional European presence in Africa, and at the same time it proves the Plan's nature as an instrument of promotion of an economic and industrial development strategy for Italy, that sees Africa as a potential outlet market, and a source of resources[194]. In conclusion, given the "incremental" nature of the plan, meaning that it is destined to expand based on the protagonists' eagerness, the plan is not definitive and will probably involve new countries and other sectors in the coming years. As ISPI in its policy report for the government highlighted: "*The Piano Mattei aspires to represent a moment of deep innovation and mentality shift, especially in terms of an*

[191] Camera dei deputati. 2024. *Schema di DPCM di adozione del Piano strategico Italia-Africa: Piano Mattei*. Dossier ES0217. Rome: Servizio Studi – Dipartimento Affari Esteri. https://documenti.camera.it/leg19/dossier/pdf/ES0217.pdf.

[192] Camera dei Deputati – Servizio Studi, *Il Piano Mattei per lo sviluppo in Africa: profili normativi e attuativi*, Dossier n. 217/2 (Roma, 2024), https://documenti.camera.it/leg19/dossier/pdf/ES0217.pdf?_1729420807520.

[193] Italy, *Law No. 2 of 11 January 2024, Conversion into Law, with Amendments, of Decree-Law No. 161 of 15 November 2023, on Urgent Measures for the Mattei Plan for the Development of African States*, *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, General Series, No. 10, January 13, 2024, https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2024/01/13/24G00006/sg.

[194] ISPI – Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale, *Il Piano Mattei: Rilanciare l'Africa Policy dell'Italia*, Position Paper del Progetto Comunità Italiana di Politica Estera (Milano: ISPI, 2024), 8.

unprecedent wide and firm opening towards the African continent. The definition of the plan is still in the making, but for its intrinsic incremental nature it can build an opportunity to fully give it substance and concrete implementation.[195]"

2.2.2 Africa as a new energetic hub after Russia's invasion

Among the various lines of action outlined in the "Mattei Plan", a prominent role is attributed to energy-related projects, such as infrastructures for the production and transportation of gas and renewable sources. Within this framework, Africa is gaining a new dimension as an alternative energetic hub after the supply crisis that broke out in Europe after the Russia-Ukraine War. As a matter of fact, Italy was at the forefront of this hunt for new energy partners just a few months after the invasion. The Italian government, that in 2021 was dependent for a 40% from Russian gas, in May 2022 signed an agreement, in partnership with ENI and the Algeri state-owned company Sonatrach, to boost gas exploration and the development of green hydrogens in North Africa, and increase volumes of Algerian export capacity to Italy, in the attempt of reducing reliance on Russian hydrocarbons[196]. This shift towards Africa also points to the broader significance of the African continent in the global energy landscape, and the Italian government has targeted energy and access to it as a critical priority in its interventions. Despite that the African population represents around 20% of world's population, it only affects 3% of global energy consumptions. This tendency though is destined to be inverted in the next decades: the growing energy demand indeed will be a crucial challenge and at the same time an opportunity for development. In fact, the continent hosts 60% of world's solar potential, 7% of global hydrocarbons stock, other than 40% of global minerals[197]. Within this context, access to energy is a primary pillar of the "Piano Mattei". Italy seeks to collaborate with African states to make the most of local resources, in order to guarantee a socio-economic development to local populations and promoting a new model of inclusive and durable growth. The initiatives for energetic

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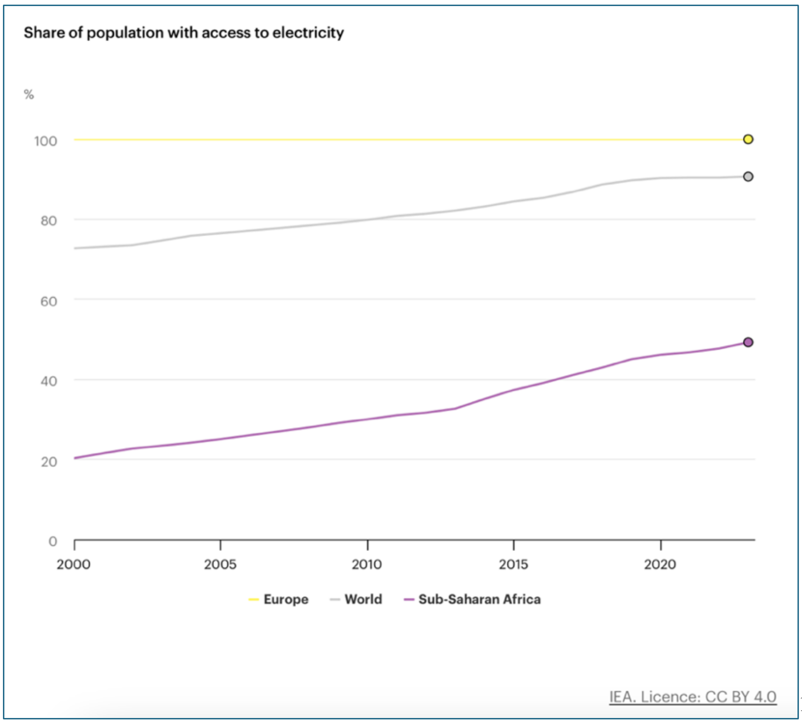
195 ISPI, *Il Piano Mattei: Rilanciare l'Africa Policy dell'Italia*, 16.
196 "Italian Energy Giant Eni Signs Deal to Boost Algerian Gas Supply," *Al Jazeera*, May 26, 2022, https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2022/5/26/italys-power-giant-eni-inks-deal-to-boost-algerian-gas-imports.
197 IEA (2022), Africa Energy Outlook 2022, IEA, Paris https://www.iea.org/reports/africa-energy-outlook-2022, Licence: CC BY 4.0, https://www.iea.org/reports/africa-energy-outlook-2022

cooperation of the Italian government in Africa focus on some strategic priorities, namely, increasing access to electricity for the population. In fact, as the graph below shows a considerable gap: in 2023 only around 50% of African population had access to electricity, compared to 100% of Europe.



[198]

IEA (2024), SDG7: Data and Projections, IEA, Paris https://www.iea.org/reports/sdg7-data-and-projections, Licence: CC BY 4.0 https://www.iea.org/reports/sdg7-data-and-projections/access-to-electricity

The “Mattei Plan” identifies expanding access to electricity for African populations as a key priority, recognizing it as an essential prerequisite for enabling the continent’s digital transition. In addition to that, the plan focuses on developing sustainable energy supply chains, incentivizing the use of renewable sources and enhancing new digital technologies in key sectors as agriculture[199]. In this context, the involvement of the main Italian industries in the energy sector already active in Africa will allow to integrate these

[198] IEA (2024), SDG7: Data and Projections, IEA, Paris https://www.iea.org/reports/sdg7-data-and-projections, Licence: CC BY 4.0 https://www.iea.org/reports/sdg7-data-and-projections/access-to-electricity
[199] Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, *Piano Strategico Italia-Africa: Piano Mattei*, Roma, gennaio 2024, p. 30.

initiatives in wider partnerships that could attract supplementary investments, leading to positive outcomes on employment and local populations' well-being. The possible success of the operation is supported by the complementary energetic needs of Europe and Africa: Europe has fundings to invest, know-how and a developed market, but it lacks its own energy sources. Whereas Africa is rich is raw materials, but it requires investments, competences, and adequate regulations to fully exploit its immense potential. In this scenario, Italy is in the ideal geopolitical position to act as a "bridge" between the two sides of the Mediterranean. Therefore, energy is not just a necessity, but an instrument of cooperation and shared development. This approach is based on an equal long-term partnership. Italy, thanks to its diplomatic tradition, the ability to establish valuable economic relations, and to technologic excellences in green energy, can now be seen as a reliable partner for African countries. Consequently, several infrastructural projects, aimed at strengthening energetic interconnection between Europe and Africa, have already came to life. Among those, the most remarkable is the ELMED transmission line, which will connect Tunisia and Sicily through a 220km under-sea pipeline[200]. The project is defined as a "true energy bridge" that will connect two big electric systems: Europe's and North Africa's[201]. It will be realized jointly by Terna and Steg, with the first one being the enterprise that manages Italian electricity transmission and the biggest in the sector in Europe, while STEG is the Tunisia's company of gas and electricity, responsible for the production, transportation and distribution in the country[202]. Therefore, the initiative will be able to provide bidirectional energy flows for the first time between the two continents. ELMED's declared objectives are more security, sustainability, resilience in energy supply and increasing electricity exchanges from renewable sources[203], and playing an active role in the promotion of sustainable development and clean energy. The project entails several benefits, including the diversification of energy supply sources and increasing investments in renewable sources. Moreover, the expansion of industrial trade will positively affect both economies and the

[200] Studies Service, Chamber of Deputies, *Draft DPCM for the Adoption of the Italy-Africa Strategic Plan: Mattei Plan*, A.G. 179 (Rome: 2024), 54, https://www.senato.it/leg/19/BGT/Schede/Ddliter/comm/57695_comm.htm.

[201] ELMED Project – The Connection to the Future of Energy," ELMED, accessed April 15, 2025, https://elmedproject.com/it/

[202] *Ibidem*

[203] *Ibidem*

energetic transition, with an estimated reduction of over 200 tons of CO2 per year. The project has a total estimated cost of around 850 million euros, most of which will be funded by the Connecting Europe Facility[204] and the World Bank that will lend money to Tunisia, through the Tunisia-World Bank partnership (2023-2027)[205]. Most of the fundings though, do come from the European Union, including the European Investments Bank (EIB), as evidence of Europe's determination to reduce its dependence on Russia and diversify its energy supply sources, targeting primary North Africa. Rome does not solely focus on energy infrastructures, among the pilot projects in Morocco indeed features the strengthening of abilities for production and management of renewable energies. The Italian government is building a training center in the renewable energy sector and energy transition, aimed at building management and professional know-how of Moroccan professionals. The initiative will train experts, managers and technicals in the field, up to 100 students per year, financing start-ups and innovative initiatives from young African entrepreneurs[206]. Finally, ENI's massive presence in the continent is further proven by other energy development projects in the Republic of Congo (RoC), one of the Mattei Plan's pilot countries. The Italian state-owned company in 2022 signed an agreement with the RoC to grow gas supply to the peninsula. Thanks to this accord, the African country would have exported around 4.5 billion cube meters per year of liquefied natural gas (LNG) per year by 2023, helping to capitalize on the exceeding Congolese gas production[207]. In addition, in this initiative as well the Italian company stressed on sustainability, as both the parties agreed to promote reduction of CO2 emissions and a sustainable energy transition in the country, in particular ENI will collaborate to create an agricultural supply chain system to produce feedstock for biorefining[208] without competing with the food chain, enhance clean cooking systems that

[204] The EU fund for projects aimed at enhancing European energy infrasteuctures
[205] World Bank, *Tunisia - Country Partnership Framework for the Period FY23–FY27*, February 27, 2023, https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/099154502272311325.
[206] Studies Service, Chamber of Deputies, *Draft DPCM for the Adoption of the Italy-Africa Strategic Plan: Mattei Plan*, A.G. 179 (Rome: 2024), 59, https://www.senato.it/leg/19/BGT/Schede/Ddliter/comm/57695_comm.htm.
[207] Eni, "The Republic of Congo and Eni Agree to Increase Gas Production and Supply," *Eni*, 21 aprile 2022, https://www.eni.com/en-IT/media/press-release/2022/04/republic-congo-and-eni-agree-increase-gas-production-supply.html.
[208] Biorefining refers to the process of converting biomass, namely organic materials, into valuable products.

still represent an issue for many African countries, and capture, use, and stock of CO_2[209]. On top of that, ENI is the only company committed to develop Congo's vast gas resources, even ahead of China, presenting an unmissable opportunity for Rome to tap into an unexplored energy reserve from a position of advantage. Ultimately, the African continent is shaping up as one of the most promising areas for energy cooperation worldwide, where Italy can play a leading role, promoting a durable, inclusive and reciprocally beneficial model of development.

2.2.3 *Border security: cooperation for migration security*

If on the one hand, Africa is becoming a new energetic hub after the Russia-Ukraine war, on the other hand the growing geopolitical relevance of the continent attracts attention to borders' security and the management of migrations flows, especially after Meloni's right government was elected, making the limitation of illegal landings from the other side of the Mediterranean a political priority. According to the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' document "Partnership with Africa", Italy was constantly committed to ensuring a better and balanced management of migration flows, in collaboration with its European partners. *Facing such a complex and structural phenomenon* – the Ministry says – *we need to go beyond emergency management and embrace durable solutions*[210].

The importance of migration as a foreign policy matter for Italy further grew after the Arab Springs in North Africa, until the so-called "migration crisis" (2014) when migration flows became almost unmanageable. To tackle the issue, Italy implemented a multilevel strategy, based on partnerships with African countries of origin and transit, in collaboration with UN agencies. The strategy is structured around interventions that aspire to address the root causes of migration flows in the countries of origin, providing support to migrants in transit countries, and capacity-building activities – especially in countering human traffickers and criminal webs. It also includes assisted voluntary returns and awareness campaigns on the risks of illegal migration. Italy finances these initiatives through the "Africa fund", "*Fondo Africa",* established in 2017, and that

[209] Eni, "*The Republic of Congo and ENI Agree to Increase Gas Production and Supply*".
[210] Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, « Il partenariato con l'Africa"*

provided 226 million euros destined to projects aimed at: "*relauncing dialogue and cooperation with African countries of priority importance for migration routes.*"[211]

Therefore, at a certain point, Italy changed its approach and started acting beyond traditional areas such as North Africa, in order to include sub-Saharan countries in the attempt to reduce the structural conditions that push migrants to leave their countries. In this paragraph, we will mainly focus on the agreements with countries of departure. The first important step to address illegal migration was taken in 1998, with the Turco-Napolitano Law, which named international cooperation as a key instrument to manage migration flows and attributed to the Interior and Foreign Affairs Ministries the competence to conclude agreements with countries of origin[212]. From then on, this will be the paradigm of the Italian foreign policy concerning tackling migration. Following the Arab springs, Italy got back dialogue with Tunisia, and signed a Memorandum of understanding with the Tunisian transition government, in 2011 which provided cooperation to limit leavings from Tunisia, strengthening borders controls, including Italian technical support, and finally, Italy provided education and equipment to support Tunisian authorities in controlling its borders, and asked in exchange to accept that Tunisia repatriate its citizens irregularly present in Italy[213]. Subsequently, government Gentiloni, and its Interior Ministry Marco Minniti intensified such foreign immigration policy and reached in 2017 a new agreement with the Libyan Government of National Accord: "Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in the field of development, combating illegal immigration, human trafficking, and smuggling, and on strengthening border security between the State of Lybia and the Italian Republic". This agreement pursued similar goals to the 2011 memorandum and provided for Italy to offer technical and technological support to Libyan border patrol to combat human trafficking and illegal leavings, nonetheless equipment and training of Libyan coast guard to improve surveillance and ability to intervene in territorial seas, and finally, promotion of

[211] Italy, *Law No. 232 of December 11, 2016*, Article 1, paragraph 621, *State Budget for the Financial Year 2017 and Multi-Year Budget for the Three-Year Period 2017–2019*, Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana, Serie Generale, no. 297 (December 21, 2016), https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2016/12/21/16G00242/sg.
[212] Matilde Rosina and Iole Fontana, *The External Dimension of Italian Migration Policy in the Wider Mediterranean*, *Mediterranean Politics*, published online May 20, 12. 2024, https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2024.2355033.
[213] Reuters, "Immigrazione, siglato accordo con la Tunisia: sì ai rimpatri," *Reuters*, April 6, 2011, https://www.reuters.com/article/oittp-italia-tunisia-immigrazione-idITMIE73500Y20110406/.

development programs in Libyan regions concerned by migratory flows[214]. The accord was meant to last three years, with the automatic extension unless one of the parties withdraws. However, the Memorandum was not exempt from criticism: Human Rights Watch indeed reports that: *"The Italian government should suspend all support to the Libyan Coast Guard until Libya commits to a clear plan to fully respect migrants' safety and rights"*[215]. Rome is accused of being complicit in a system that, instead of assisting migrants and countering human trafficking, contributes to human rights violations, arbitrary detentions, and inhuman treatment. In particular, the issues are said to be related to the management by the Libyan Coast Guard, which, despite receiving resources from the Italian government and the EU, continues to subject migrants departing from their coasts to degrading treatments, while Rome's initiative was also aimed at improving migrants' conditions. In any case, this initiative appears to fulfill the goal of reducing the number of landings, albeit at the expense of respecting human rights. Gentiloni's government also started to dialogue with Niger and Chad, and introduced the "three Ps' approach", based on partnership with countries of origin and transit to enhance prosperity through investments in Africa, financed by the "Africa fund". The government started supporting development cooperation projects, but also voluntary returns, information campaigns, training, and equipment transfers[216]. The strategy was clear, acting only on departure countries was not going to solve such a structural issue, consequently, they changed their foreign policy to address the root insecurities that cause migrations. Subsequently, border protection became a pivotal pillar for Giorgia Meloni's foreign policy after 2022. Meloni did not sign bilateral agreements between Italy and African countries, nevertheless, she carried out two significant initiatives with regard to Africa: the implementation of the "Piano Mattei", which we have discussed earlier in the chapter, and the negotiations on behalf of the EU for the Memorandum of Understanding with Tunisia. Italy played a leading role in the negotiations and reached an agreement on five main areas of cooperation: migration, macro-economic stability, trade and investment,

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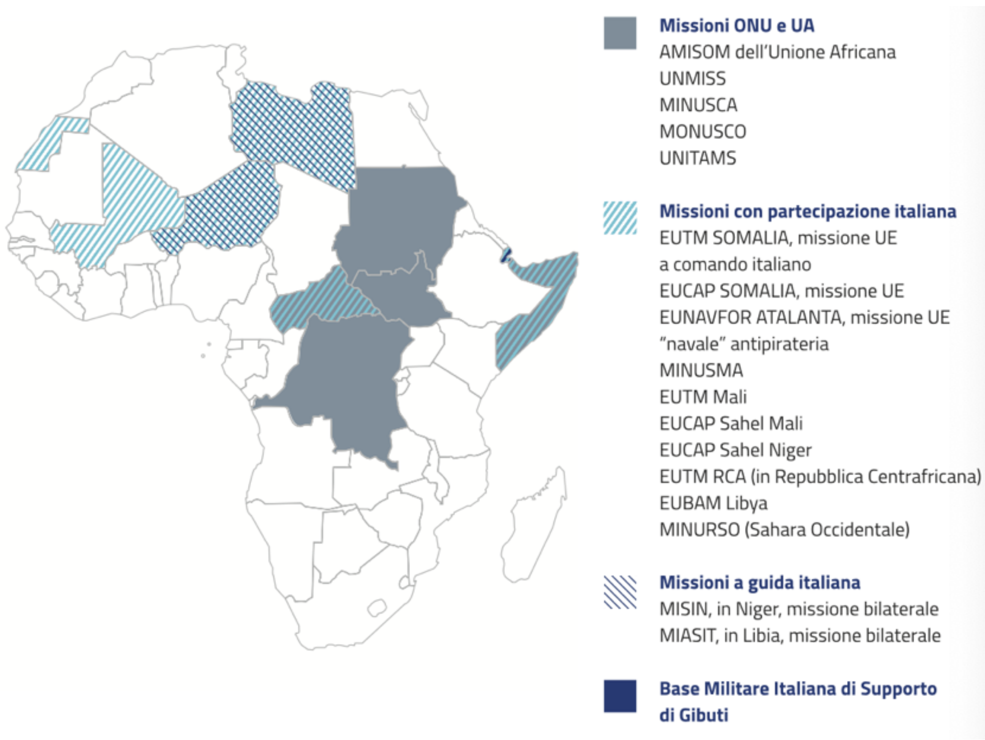
[214]Presidency of the Council of Ministers, *Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in the Field of Development, Countering Illegal Immigration, Human Trafficking, and Smuggling, and on Reinforcing Border Security between the State of Libya and the Italian Republic*, signed February 2, 2017, https://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/Libia.pdf.
[215] Human Rights Watch, *Italy: Halt Abusive Migration Cooperation with Libya*, February 12, 2020, https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/02/12/italy-halt-abusive-migration-cooperation-libya.
[216] Rosina & Fontana, "*The external dimension of Italian migration policy in the wider Mediterrenean", 13.*

green energy transition, and people-to-people contacts[217]. Mark Rutte, who also took part in the negotiations, highlighted the importance of the migrations sphere in the agreement: "*Migration is a significant element of the agreement we have signed today…It is essential to gain more control of irregular migration"[218],* while Ursula Von der Leyen, president of the European Commission, declared that the EU will provide Tunisia with resources to improve its border's management, search and rescue operations, anti-smuggling measures to address the issue of migrations[219]. In addition, the MoU includes a "Talent Partnership" to ease the legal mobility of Tunisian citizens to Europe. It is undeniable that the EU's and Italy's projects substantially contributed to improving the conditions of the receivers in Africa, of refugees, transiting migrants, and local communities. The results show that the external dimension of migration policies can be effective. Therefore, Italy should move its focus especially on Western Africa, the Sahel and the Horn. This strategy can be complementary to the traditional policy of cooperation for development. Leveraging sectoral financial resources, they can effectively contribute to addressing the root causes of migration and improve employment opportunities in local communities. The external dimension of Italian migratory policies has progressively integrated hard security instruments, namely the deployment of Italian military units, often within the framework of international peacekeeping missions, with the goal of stabilizing regions of departure and countering transnational criminal networks of human trafficking. In fact, Italy maintains a strategic presence on the continent through several missions which are either led by Italy or involve Italian participation within the EU external action or UN operations. Marchetti and Diodato have underscored the growing Italian commitment in peacekeeping operation, being, as of 2022, the first provider of highly trained personnel among EU countries, and the seventh contributor of the UN budget for peacekeeping[220]. The Italian adherence to these kinds of operation addresses the need of safeguarding

[217] European Commission. *"European Union and Tunisia Step up Cooperation: Commission President von der Leyen and Prime Ministers Meloni and Rutte Visit Tunis."* European Commission, July 16, 2023. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_3887.
[218] Jacopo Barigazzi and Barbara Moens, "EU Seals Migration Deal with Tunisia as Model for North Africa," *Politico*, July 16, 2023, https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-migration-deal-tunisia-migrants-africa-european-commission/.
[219] *Ibidem*
[220] Emidio Diodato and Raffaele Marchetti, *Manuale di politica estera italiana* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2023), 129.

national security in response to external threats, and supporting the stabilization of several areas of crisis, namely in Africa[221].



[222]

Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *« Il partenariato con l'Africa", 22. https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://www.esteri.it/it/politica-estera-e-cooperazione-allo-sviluppo/aree_geografiche/africa/il-partenariato-con-l-africa/&ved=2ahUKEwjCNas98CNAxUGzwIHHdZuHVoQFnoECAkQAQ&usg=AOvVaw3J38h7WydxDJdO3KY6U7WF*

One of the most involved regions is evidently Sahel, for its relevance, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs notes that Italy intends to increase cooperation to stabilize the region, enhancing collaboration with regional organizations, one above all the G5 Sahel, that puts together the five Saheli countries, and the relative military force, the FC-G5S[223].

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[221] *Ibidem.*
[222] Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *« Il partenariato con l'Africa", 22. https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://www.esteri.it/it/politica-estera-e-cooperazione-allo-sviluppo/aree_geografiche/africa/il-partenariato-con-l-africa/&ved=2ahUKEwjC-Nas98CNAxUGzwIHHdZuHVoQFnoECAkQAQ&usg=AOvVaw3J38h7WydxDJdO3KY6U7WF*
[223] *Ivi*, 23.

As Bernardo Venuri highlights, the region is a "*transmission belt"* between the Mediterranean basin and sub-Saharan Africa, and plays a central role in geographical terms, and where the security-migration-development nexus is most tangible[224]. The crucial priorities for Italy in the Sahel are addressing terrorism, weapons and human traffics, and security threats, to avoid that instability leads thousands of individuals to emigrate to Europe, to pursue this goal the Italian Defense Ministry established in 2018 the MISIN (Bilateral Mission of support to the Republic of Niger). The main aim is supporting the local government to stabilize the region and reinforce control abilities of Niger's authorities to address illegal traffics and securitize the region. To pursue these goals, Italian officers conduct training, education and consulting activities in favor of Niger militaries and institutions[225]. Besides this Italy-led mission, training activities continue in other missions in which Italy takes part under the aegis of the European Union and UN, notably the UN stabilizing mission in Mali (MINUSMA)[226]. In total, Italy takes part to 10 missions in the continent and holds a support base in Djibouti, this contribution is part of an integrated vision, shared with the EU and multilateral organizations, based on the nexus between security, good governance, and economic and social development in the region. This vision characterizes Italy's commitment in the new international coalition for the Sahel and the main initiatives implemented in recent years for the coordination with G5 partners along security, social development, and cooperation for development. Besides the priorities described for Sahel, Italy also pursues support for institutional reconstruction in Somalia and the fight against Al Shabaab and Daesh, also considering the historical ties between the two countries, by way of EUTM, the Italy-led mission in Somalia deliberated by the EU, which intends to build up the Somali security forces accountable to the government and provide strategic support to Somali authorities in training and mentoring[227], aiming at stabilizing the whole Horn of Africa region. As mentioned above, Italy's approach to Africa is often interconnected with the EU's action,

[224] Venturi, Bernardo. *The EU and the Sahel: A Laboratory of Experimentation for the Security–Migration–Development Nexus*. IAI Working Papers 17|38. Rome: Istituto Affari Internazionali, December 2017. 2. https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaiwp1738.pdf
[225] Italian Ministry of Defence, "Niger - Bilateral Support Mission (MISIN)," *Ministry of Defence*, last accessed April 24, 2025, https://www.difesa.it/operazionimilitari/op-intern-corso/niger-missione-bilaterale-supporto/missione/28255.html.
[226] *Ibidem*
[227] European Union Training Mission in Somalia. *EUTM Somalia*. Accessed April 24, 2025. https://www.eutmsomalia.eu.

and many projects of the latter are carried out thanks to a primary role played by Italy. In the following paragraph, we will delve into Europe's and Italy's integrated strategies for Africa.

2.2.4 Italy and European Union: a common strategy for Africa?

In March 2025, Italy and the European Union hosted a joint event to discuss and reinforce collaboration with Africa. The event served to outline and coordinate Italy's and the EU's efforts. In particular, the parties have discussed the involvement of the private sector, sustainable investments and leveraging cutting-edge expertise, aligning Italy's and the EU's shared priorities[228] for a durable development of the continent. Rome and Brussels share indeed the same priorities in Africa: addressing illegal migration, energy supply, and respect of human rights and the rule of law. Therefore, through the "Mattei Plan", Italy could pave the way for a new European model of partnership with African countries, aligning with Giorgia Meloni's emphasis on the rhetoric of abandoning a paternalistic approach, by replacing it with a more concrete and far-sighted one. As a consequence, Italy's plan gains more importance from the perspective of a broader European commitment, and the participation of prominent EU representatives at the Italy-EU summit for Africa suggests Brussels' willingness to go in that direction[229]. Although the European strategy for Africa is highly fragmented and does not follow a linear pattern, the EU has highlighted its willingness to pursue a tight cooperation with its southern neighbor which has always considered a "sister continent". The latest EU-Africa common strategy was adopted in 2022 in collaboration with the African Union and focuses on cooperation areas such as large-scale investments for a volume of about 150 billion Euros, regional economic integration, which Africa still lacks, cooperation to reinforce peace operations thanks to adequate training and equipment, women and young's empowerment, especially in conflict areas, prevention of irregular migration by strengthening joint efforts against human trafficking and a more effective management of borders and deportations, reinforcing asylum systems in order to ensure appropriate

[228] Presidency of the Council of Ministers, *Mattei Plan: Italy and the EU host a high-level technical joint event to strengthen cooperation with Africa*, Governo.it, last updated April 19, 2024, https://www.governo.it/it/node/28063.
[229] Alessandro Marrone, *Italy, Europe and Africa: What Prospects?*, ISPI, July 7, 2023, https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/italy-europe-and-africa-what-prospects-179611.

protection, and finally, the respect of the Paris accords, acknowledging Africa's pivotal role in energy transition[230]. Yet, the most intense cooperation area between the EU and the AU is peace and security: the EU provides remarkable funds to the African organization, and in particular to the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), which involves the African Peace Facility (APF)[231]. The latter is a central element in the EU-AU cooperation framework, and is built up by three components: the African Peace Support Operations, operationalization of the APSA and initiatives under the Early Response Mechanism. The APF has responded to a crucial problem that affects African governments: regional integration. As a matter of fact, the APF has helped to increase AU's role as the continent's leading organization responsible for peace[232]. Furthermore, the EU is carrying out nine Common Security and Defense Policy missions in Africa, that however have a limited impact on the conflicts, and are often conducted in cooperation with UN's, or EU member states' missions, including Italy[233].

Besides peace and security operations, the EU has signed several accords with some North African countries in key areas such as energy and migration, in which Italy took part as a primary actor. Building on this framework of cooperation, the EU's main initiative in Africa is the *Global Gateway.* The latter is intended to increase links between the EU and its main strategic partners to develop an alternative to China's BRI. The strategy revolves around five main domains: climate, energy, transport, health and education, and is funded by the European Commission that allocated up to 300 billion Euros between 2021 and 2027. Ursula von der Leyen, the current European Commission's president, commented as it follows: "*We will fund smart investments in quality infrastructures, respecting social and environmental norms, aligning with EU values. The Global Gateway strategy will serve as an inspiration source in building more resilient links around the world"[234]*. Regarding Africa, the Global Gateway aspires to drive the continent towards an inclusive, green, and digital transition. Firstly, the EU

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230 *Draft Decree of the President of the Council of Ministers for the Adoption of the Strategic Plan Italy–Africa: Mattei Plan*. Rome: Chamber of Deputies and Senate of the Republic, Research Services, July 23, 2024, 81.

231 Venturi, *The EU and the Sahel*, 4.

232 *Ibidem*

233 *Ibidem*

234 European Commission, "Global Gateway", accessed April 27, 2025, https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/stronger-europe-world/global-gateway_it.

wants to ensure compliance with the Paris accords; the investments should promote the increase of the use of renewable energy sources by 300 GW by 2030, enhance hydrogen production as an energy source, and increase water and electricity security[235]. The project also provides the reduction of the digital gap, with investments in submarine and terrestrial fiber cables, to guarantee a safe and widespread internet connection for the continent. In addition, Italy has often played a leading role in the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), in striking agreements on migration and energy with North African countries. The EU has adopted bilateral action plans with all these countries: Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia, meant to build democratic societies, socially equal and inclusive, promote education, and the flourishing of small and medium enterprises. Namely, Italy actively supported the aforementioned 2023 EU-Tunisia strategic partnership, the 2024 EU-Egypt plan of investments, and renewed in 2023 the MoU with Libya. On top of that, currently the European Union is also negotiating trade agreements with Morocco and Tunisia, whereas has already signed mobility partnerships with Morocco and Tunisia[236]. It is evident that the EU's and Italy's interests in the continent are convergent, but despite some negotiations conducted by Italy on behalf of the EU, it seems that there is not a common clear strategy to address the most pressing matters. This divergence is attributable to the complexity of the EU's bureaucratic machine, which has to take into account the interests of 27 states and struggles to back Italy in pursuing its development and cooperation goals in Africa. Regardless, Italy has taken its own steps and acted outside of the European framework, however, while consistently upholding European values and vision, and without ruling out cooperation with the organization. In short, given the similarity of interests, Italy and the EU could make meaningful progress by adopting a more effective integrated strategy for Africa, capable of achieving more concrete and efficient results by pooling their resources, rather than limiting to a fragmented and sporadic cooperation.

[235] European Commission, *World Bank–EU Africa: A Partnership for People, Planet, and Prosperity* (factsheet), accessed April 27, 2025, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/api/files/attachment/880627/STR_WorldBankEU-Africa_Factsheet.pdf.
[236] *Draft Decree of the President of the Council of Ministers for the Adoption of the Strategic Plan Italy–Africa: Mattei Plan,* 83.

CHAPTER III: ANALYSIS IN PERSPECTIVE OF CHINESE AND ITALIAN FOREIGN POLICIES IN AFRICA

3.1 Convergences and divergences in the political and economic strategies

In this chapter, I will examine the strategies of the two actors, highlighting both the areas of overlap and the discrepancies in their respective approaches to investments and security on the continent. Italy and China share a similar rhetoric, evident in their official speeches, emphasizing their contribution to the stability of a continent often regarded as the epitome of instability, support for development, and the consolidation of long-term agreements. However, the analysis of their strategic priorities, operational methods, and the underlying values, reveals two deeply different approaches, attributable to the respective models of governance and political-institutional systems. Having said that, this chapter aims to explore the aforementioned differences, under two lenses: security policies and investments in infrastructure in Africa. Both spheres are significant because they represent the main channels through which the intensified presence of Italy and China in the continent takes shape. Evidently, the two actors have significantly different capabilities and ambitions. Italy operates predominantly within multilateral structures, participating to several European and NATO military operations. On the contrary, China pursues a bilateral approach, and given its military capabilities, it could play a leading role for security in critical areas, such as the Sahel and the Horn of Africa, and may potentially replace Russia and the US in terms of military presence in the continent. Similarly, since Xi Jinping took power, China has been investing in massive infrastructural projects, often linked to the wider BRI framework, mainly through low-tax loans by Chinese development banks, or investments by SOEs. On the other side, as of 2025, Italy participation to African infrastructures is weak, and principally carried out by energy companies. Nonetheless, the Mattei Plan provides several pilot projects to be implemented in the next years in a more local scale, compared to the transnational infrastructures funded by Beijing. These initiatives are often linked to humanitarian aims, education and enhance of energetic capabilities. In conclusion, I will try to understand whether the two models can represent an opportunity for Africa, or if the critics moved by the civil society and academia are well-funded. In particular, China is accused of pursuing an aggressive and cynic foreign policy, granting loans to countries that are likely not to repay the debt on purpose, and consequently asking for strategic assets like ports or natural recourses to relieve the debt. Whereas Italy was blamed for offering a deficient plan, that does not target adequately renewable energies, eccessively focusing on short-term energetic needs, without caring local communities, thus not representing the equalitarian model it claims to be. The following analysis does not solely aim to juxtapose the two models, but seeks to understand in what measure they overlap, and are able to offer new perspectives for development. Points of contact will be remarked, such as counterpiracy operations, or the promotion of renewable energies, as well as deep asymmetries due to normative constraints, financial tools, logics of political conditionalities, and overall decent relations with local governments. In conclusion, this analysis provides the insights for the long-term strategies and the impact they can have on the development of the continent.

3.1.1 Security policies

The security policies of China and Italy in Africa present significant convergencies in terms of general goals, but they consistently differ for what concerns operational modalities, the strategic vision and the relations with local stakeholders. These discrepancies reflect the respective geopolitical priorities and governance models, other than ideological principles that drive the foreign policy of both actors. This paragraph aims to analyze those policies, spotting the light over shared features and structural differences by mean of concrete examples and policy analysis. In the first place, both Italy and China share the same strategic declared goal of contributing to Africa's regional stability, which they consider crucial for the security of their economic, political and humanitarian interests. However, as was previously analyzed, while for Italy this stability is substantially instrumental to the limitation of migration flows and to prevent jihadist terrorism, specifically in the Sahel and in the Horn of Africa, for China it represents a necessary condition for the protection of infrastructural investments and the expansion of the BRI[237]. For this reason, both powers developed forms of cooperation to securitize their interests, but with different intensities and different tools. Italy primarily operates

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[237] David H. Shinn and Joshua Eisenman, *China and Africa: A Century of Engagement* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012)

within a multilateral framework, in light of the "Italy's triple anchorage". Its security policy is strongly integrated in the EU, the UN and NATO missions. A significant example is the Italian participation to the EUTM mission in Mali and the EUNAVFORMED naval mission to counter piracy in the Gulf of Aden. These operations mainly have training, logistic and intelligence purposes, and emphasize partnerships and local forces' training. The guiding principles is a "shared stabilization", based on human rights and the promotion of democratic governance. On the other hand, China adopted a bilateral and more assertive approach. Despite being one of the major contributors of troops for UN missions, Beijing has built its own security architecture in Africa, based on direct dialogues with local governments, military supply, the construction of strategic infrastructures[238], and lately, the use of PSCs that could soon become the principal Chinese military tool overseas, challenging the current Russian monopoly. The Center for Strategic & International Studies reports the presence of 20 to 40 Chinese PSCs across 40 countries,[239], and the phenomenon is expanding. In addition, the case of the Chinese military bases in Djibouti is emblematic: it is the first Chinese permanent military base abroad, and allows Beijing to conduct counter-piracy operations, emergency evacuations, and missions in the Horn of Africa, other than representing a warning to the US predominance in the region[240]. On top of that, Chinese SOEs like Norinco provide armaments and military technology to several African countries, notably to military regimes such as Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, especially after the expulsion of French contingencies from many Saheli countries[241]. A central difference between the two approaches is political conditionality. Italy, aligned with the EU's positions, tends to condition aid to the respect of the rule of law, human rights and democratic transition[242]. This led for instance, to the suspension of cooperation with Niger after the 2023 coup, with Borrell, the former EU's foreign policy chief, who described the incident "*an unacceptable attack on the integrity of Niger's republican institutions that will not remain*

[238] Georg Lammich, "China's Evolving Security Engagement in Africa: Policies, Strategies, and Implications," *European Journal of International Security* (2025), https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.3.
[239] Max Markusen, *The Quiet Expansion of Chinese Private Security Companies*, CSIS Briefs (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 2022), 1, https://www.csis.org/analysis/quiet-expansion-chinese-private-security-companies.
[240] Yvan Guichaoua, "China's Security Presence in Africa: The Long-Term Symbolism of a (Cautious) Military Approach," *East Asian Policy* 14, no. 1 (2022), https://doi.org/10.1142/S2377740022500130.
[241] Roger, "Au Sahel, la Chine affiche ses ambitions militaires."
[242] Shinn, David. "China in Africa: Savior or Self-Interest?" *Great Decisions*, 2013, 95. http://www.jstor.org/stable/43682516.

without consequences" [243]. On the contrary, China operates according to the principle of non-intervention in the internal matters of other states. This allows Beijing to maintain solid relations also with authoritarian or unstable regimes. This policy reflects the authoritarian nature of the Chinese state, that has no qualms on keeping relations with countries that do not uphold core principles of democracy. Consequently, as long as the EU and Italy will pursue this policy, China will have an advantage in working with most African governments. This reflects a pragmatic approach to foreign policy, where strategic interests take precedence over ideological alignment. Such flexibility is a remarkable competitive advantage for Beijing, that positions itself as an alternative to Western powers but raises ethical questions. A further distinctive element regards the nature of economic engagement connected to security. Italy tends to connect security and development through cooperation projects with national and European funds, centered on enhancing governance, public services and capacity building of the states[244]. By contrast, China intertwines security policies with economic operations linked to the extractive, infrastructural and technological sectors, thus fostering a strategic and long-term presence, that necessarily leads to geoeconomic benefits. Despite the discrepancies, Italy and China find some common grounds on matters as counter-piracy or peacekeeping. Yet, their presence in the continent is shaped by two different geopolitical narratives: Italy is rooted in a multilateral system that entails some constraints, while China has been acting nimbly to securitize its interests in critical areas, and its model is possibly destined to grow, notably with regards to the expansion of the Chinese PSCs.

3.1.2 Investments in infrastructures

Among all continents, Africa has a particularly strong need for infrastructures, In recent years, China has taken significant steps to address this gap, and more recently, Italy has launched a series of initiatives with the same goal. The current infrastructure lack is proven by a few data that provide a clear indication of the extent of the matter. According

[243] Charlie Cooper, "EU Suspends Niger Financial Support, Security Cooperation After Coup," *Politico*, July 29, 2023, https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-suspends-cooperation-with-niger-following-coup/.
[244] Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS), *Annual Report 2021* (Rome: AICS, 2022), https://www.aics.gov.it/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/AICS_AR_2021_WEB.pdf.

to the African Development Bank, road rate access in Africa is only 43%[245], less than 50 of Sub-Saharan Africa's population has access to electriciy, while internet penetration rate is less than 30%[246]. In this context, Italy and China embraced two different but complementary approaches. If China allocates more resources to building massive logistic infrastructures serving its strategic geopolitical interests, Italy directs its attention on local-scale projects with humanitarian, energetic and sustainable development ends, trying to carve out a role of "niche power" in the continent. The African continent, as we have analyzed several times, is central for China's global strategy, being a crossroad for maritime and terrestrial trade routes. Consequently, Chinese investments are directed to the construction of functional infrastructures, those which, for instance, connect a Chinese-owned mine to a Chinese-owned port, in order to export raw materials to the mainland. Heckman has built a statistic model that identifies correlation between certain factors and the likelihood that African countries will receive infrastructure investments, and they have found that GDP growth rate and natural resources are positively related to that probability, meaning that if a country has wide natural resources, China will likely invest in infrastructures there[247]. Moreover, the assumption that China tends to invest in infrastructures in countries that embrace the BRI, is corroborated by the positivity of the BRI coefficient, that statistically shows that countries that incorporates BRI in their policies are more likely to receive infrastructure investments from the Chinese[248]. These investments reached about 50.3 trillion USD invested in 2024, 5.8% more compared to the previous year[249]. The most targeted infrastructures are ports, railways, and highways. These constructions address the needs of commerce and "exploitation" of African natural resources by easing the transportation of raw materials towards China, and the export of Chinese goods to Africa. The latter issue is likely to grow relevance in the next future in light of the tariffs established by the US president Trump, that make Chinese goods less

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[245] African Development Bank, Cross-Border Road Corridors - Expanding Market Access in Africa and Nurturing Continental Integration,
2023.
[246] International Energy Agency, data on access to electricity in 2021: https://www.iea.org/reports/sdg7-data-and-projections/access-to-
electricity
[247] Hong Bo, Rodiat Lawal, and Rilwan Sakariyahu, *"China's Infrastructure Investments in Africa: An Imperative for Attaining Sustainable Development Goals or a Debt-Trap?" The British Accounting Review*, published online August 26, 2024, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bar.2024.101472. 8
[248] *Ibidem*
[249] Huaxia, ed., *"China's Logistics Sector Records Steady Growth in 2024,"* Xinhua, February 12, 2025, https://english.news.cn/20250212/1101c090c22843318d051d8619e97f6c/c.html.

attractive, undermining 11% of Chinese exports[250] , in this context, the importance of the African market as an outlet for China's surplus, since, with lower tariffs, it has the potential to grow. Projects like the Addis Ababa-Djibouti railway, that connects a strategic country such as Ethiopia to the sea, also aims to expand Beijing's geopolitical influence and build the image of China as a service provider in the eyes of Africans. In fact, China's visibility and efficiency made it a preferred partner in many African capitals, in particular for governments seeking rapid development and tangible infrastructure. Beijing's funding modalities are usually loans with reduced interest rates, and direct implication of SOEs that often entail non-transparent contracts. Despite its efficiency, this model has drawn criticisms as China often accepts relinquishing strategic assets as an alternative form of payment when a country is unable to pay back its loans, a practice that Himmer and Rod have defined as "*Chinese debt trap diplomacy"*[251]. Whilst Italy's commitment in Africa followed an incremental evolution. Generally, Italy's business approach to Africa has gone from being prudent and mistrustful to being more curious, involving a growing number of companies and institutions that have begun to push their gaze beyond the close North Africa[252]. In the past, only a modest number of Italian companies worked in Africa, and were solely focused across certain sectors, namely energy. Alongside those, small and medium-sized companies stepped into a variety of sectors: agriculture, new technologies, pharmaceuticals, food, engineering and machinery[253]. Some of those, as agriculture, have received special attention among the initiatives of the "Mattei Plan", that for example support the project of "desertic agriculture" in Algeria, and provides to reserve 30% of corn production for exports to Italy[254]. An additional relevant project is the *Blue & Raman Submarine Cable System,* a system of submarine cables that will connect North Africa and Europe, and possibly in the future, Eastern and Western Africa. BlueMed aims at enhancing connectivity in the

[250] Qian Zhou, "Import-export cinese 2024–25: una rassegna completa dei primi 10 mesi," *China Briefing*, 9 dicembre 2024, https://www.china-briefing.com/news/import-export-cinese-2024-25-una-rassegna-completa-dei-primi-10-mesi/.
[251] Michal Himmer and Zdeněk Rod, *"Chinese Debt Trap Diplomacy: Reality or Myth?" Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*18, no. 3 (2022), https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2023.2195280.
[252] Zaurrini, Massimo. 2023. "Trade, Investment and Economic Presence: Italy's Evolving Role in Sub-Saharan Africa." *ISPI – Italian Institute for International Political Studies*, August 3, 2023. https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/trade-investment-and-economic-presence-italys-evolving-role-in-sub-saharan-africa-138286.:contentReference[oaicite:6]{index=6}
[253] *Ibidem*
[254] Schema di DPCM di adozione del Piano strategico Italia-Africa: Piano Mattei 2024, 48.

region and aligns with Mattei Plan's objective of proposing Italy as a hub for telecommunications[255]. As it was previously highlighted, Rome does not invest primarily on huge logistics infrastructure projects, while it focuses more on energetic, hydro-sanitary, educational and digital projects. The *Piano Mattei* has a wide range of areas of intervention, spacing from the construction of schools, hospitals, solar energy plants, electrification in rural areas, and the implementation of digital networks. Furthermore, in the recent G7 held in Italy, the 2024 joint action proposal for sustainable infrastructure investment in Africa was elaborated. This plan stresses on the need to build sustainable infrastructures in Africa, mainly focusing on green energy projects and digitalization. These projects will be funded with the involvement of the private sector, similarly to China's SOEs involvement. However, when it comes to single companies' investments, ENI remains the giant actor: in 2017, the Italian company invested considerable amounts in the natural gas development project in the site of Zohr in Egypt, which recently, in 2024, started to increase its gas production[256]. Then, even if Italy has registered a contraction in investments in Africa of approximately 40% compared to 2017, Zaurrini claims that: "*the recent drop is not enough to reverse a trend that has been constant for 7-8 years now"* and which is destined to grow thanks to the implementation of the Mattei Plan[257]. Finally, funding modalities are diverse: the Mattei Plan is funded, other than by the Italian financial Law, by the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS), by European funds, and by multilateral initiatives such as the G7. For instance, in 2024 Italy pledged a contribution of 320 million USD for the Lobito Corridor Project, which will improve the railway system between Angola, Zambia and the DRC, under the G7 infrastructure plan[258], stepping into a sector historically dominated by China. On the other hand, the main funding sources for Chinese projects are national political banks, namely China Exim Bank, the Export-Import Bank of China, and the China Development Bank. These institutions were established by the government with the declared aim of favoring overseas investments, simplifying the process and ensuring direct government support,

[255] *Ivi*, 41.
[256] Eni, "Zohr, il giacimento gigante nell'offshore dell'Egitto," last edited 2025, https://www.eni.com/it-IT/azioni/attivita-mondo/egitto/zohr.html.
[257] Zaurrini, *Trade, Investment and Economic Presence*
[258] Euan Sadden, "Italy Pledges $320 Million for Africa's Lobito Corridor under G7 Infrastructure Plan," *S&P Global Commodity Insights*, June 14, 2024, https://www.spglobal.com/commodity-insights/en/news-research/latest-news/metals/061424-italy-pledges-320-million-for-africas-lobito-corridor-under-g7-infrastructure-plan.

compared to the experience of Italian investors. In brief, both actors have showed a strong interest in the constructions in the continent, even with different ambitions and different modalities. A remarkable common ground is represented by the stress on renewable energies and green transition, that were stressed both by Xi Jinping in September 2024 FOCAC, and by Meloni during the Italy Africa Summit, where both actors aim to establish a leading role. Italy's and China's models show alternative but not necessarily competing frameworks. Beijing offers rapidity, a thinner bureaucracy and no political conditionalities, but it hides risks of financial and resources dependency. Whereas Italy offers a more discrete paradigm, oriented to foster institutional cooperation and human development. Finally, despite African countries have welcome positevely Mattei Plan's initiative, evidence shows that the Chinese model of loans is seen as much easier, cheaper interest rates, quicker, long repayment periods, and with fewer strings attached[259].

3.2 Sustainable development or new forms of exploitation ?

The analysis of the strategies carried out in Africa by Italy and China, leads us to a crucial question. Chinese and Italian speakers talk about their projects in the black continent with enthusiasm, stressing on an unprecedented type of partnership, often called *win-win,* that will possibly bring benefits to both parties, contrary to the former European colonial powers, most notably France, which are seen by many Africans as having exploited valuable natural resources without offering any real benefits in return. As a matter of fact, a study of 2020 conducted in 18 African countries shows that 23% of people consider China as the best model for development, conversely, only 11% of the interviewers think the same of their former colonial power,[260]. This data picture the latent resentment of African populations towards their former colonizers, who have failed to ensure effective development on the continent, preferring a more equal partnership such as the one offered by the dragon. The main factors contributing to the positive perception of China are investments in infrastructure, economic development, and the contained costs of Chinese

[259] Addis, Amsalu K., Simplice A. Asongu, Zhu Zuping, Hailu Kendie Addis, and Eshetu Shifaw. *Chinese and Indian Investment in Ethiopia: Infrastructure for 'Debt-Trap Diplomacy' Exchange and the Land Grabbing Approach*. EXCAS Working Paper WP/20/029. European Xtramile Centre of African Studies, January 2020. Forthcoming in *International Journal of Emerging Markets*. https://ssrn.com/abstract=3618613. 21

[260] Edem Selormey, *Africans' Perceptions About China: A Sneak Peek from 18 Countries*, Afrobarometer, 3 September 2020, 8, https://www.afrobarometer.org.

products. The question now is, will China and Italy be able to provide an innovative model capable of truly changing things in Africa, or are massive investments merely a new face of exploitation? Many accuse China of carrying out the Debt Trap Diplomacy, which implies expanding its influence in developing countries through funding massive infrastructural projects[261]. According to this dynamic, China agrees to provide consistent loans to economically fragile states, which are often not able to repay. This leads the African state to develop a sort of economic dependence on China, which can culminate in *debt-for-equity swap* operations, meaning that the African government agrees to give up control over certain goods, usually mines and raw materials, to China in exchange for partial debt relief[262]. This practice is commonly considered predatory, and according to Rana and Xianbai, China is intentionally exerting political influence through systematic indebtedness, in a deceptive manner, disguising it as development assistance[263]. However, although the issue is recent, making it difficult to assess accurately due to the lack of long-term effects, most scholars, Bo, Lawal, Sakariyahu, Himmer, and Rod, have concluded that there is no evidence that China is deliberately carrying out a rapacious policy in Africa such as the DTD. If we look at Kenya, one of the major borrowers from China, the government contracted Chinese loans for around 6.3 billion USD between 2010 and 2015, the majority was destined for the Mombasa-Nairobi Railway, a BRI project, managed by the China Road and Bridge Corporation[264]. Yet, the initiative proved to be fruitless, so that the Kenyan government built up a debt of 350 million USD[265]. China reacted with flexibility; it granted a debt moratorium during the COVID-19 pandemic and called for new studies of feasibility to evaluate the sustainability of the project. In addition, there have been allegations that China would have asked the ownership of the Mombasa port as warranty, however, these claims have been refuted, as China demanded the project's revenues as collateral, not the port, disproving the DTD dynamic, according which Beijing would take over strategic assets, as could be a port, to relieve countries of their

[261] Brahma Chellaney, "China's Creditor Imperialism," *Project Syndicate*, December 20, 2017, https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/china-sri-lanka-hambantota-port-debt-by-brahma-chellaney-2017-12.
[262] Michal Himmer and Zdeněk Rod, *"Chinese Debt Trap Diplomacy: Reality or Myth?" Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 18, no. 3 (2022): 252, https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2023.2195280.
[263] Pradumna B. Rana and Xianbai Ji, "CO20191 | BRI's 'Debt Trap Diplomacy': Reality or Myth?" *RSIS Commentaries*, November 4, 2020, https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/cms/bris-debt-trap-diplomacy-reality-or-myth/#.YEkO4C3ypQI.
[264] *Ivi*, 255.
[265] *Ibidem*

debts. On top of that, we could have talked about DTD if the borrower had been the Kenya Railway Corporation, but that was not the case. The borrower was the Kenyan National Treasury. Consequently, if the port's authority were the borrower, they could have issued the port itself to repay the debt, but they were not, so the Chinese counterpart was not able to take over the railway since the borrower is an institution that does not own the national railway[266]. In the late analysis. Regardless of Kenya having a high level of debt with China, this empirical case proves that China did not deliberately seek to "entrap" Kenya with the DTD; conversely, Beijing's attitude was collaborative and prudent. Moreover, countries seeking financial help are free to choose their creditors; China does not oblige them, but the latter rely on China's solution being the easiest and most convenient one. Thus, it may seem like the borrowing states are not "victims" of Chinese "predatory" behavior, but more of "co-perpetrators", Himmer and Rod claim[267]. Furthermore, in their statistical model, Bo, Lawal, and Sakariyahu[268] found that there is a negative correlation between debt levels and Chinese loans, meaning that the more a country has a high debt, the less likely China is to lend money to that country. Consequently, despite various allegations claiming that the Chinese model represents merely a new form of exploitation, specifically due to the DTD, empirical data, and several studies have found no evidence that Beijing's strategy in Africa is carried out with "predatory" intentions. On the contrary, data prove that loans based on natural resources contribute to relieving debt in African countries, and China often helped insolvent states, contradicting the *debt overhang*[269] and *dependence* theories. Finally, Bo et al. noted that Chinese infrastructural loans, especially if based on resources, exert downward pressure on public debt and provide tangible benefits in terms of sustainable development. This idea goes against the critical opinion asserting that Chinese investments serve only Beijing's interests and create a "resources' curse" situation where SOEs exploit a high level of debt to take over strategic assets[270]. Turning the attention to Italy, despite good intentions, the assumption that the Mattei Plan could truly constitute an innovative,

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[266] *Ivi, 256.*
[267] Himmer and Rod, *"Chinese Debt Trap Diplomacy: Reality or Myth?"*, 265.
[268] Bo et al., "China's Infrastructure Investments in Africa," 8.
[269] The « Debt overhang » theory, postulates that high level of debt can impede economic growth by discouraging new investments.
[270] Bo et al., ., "China's Infrastructure Investments in Africa," 16.

effective model for development remains problematic. Regardless of the declared aspiration to building an equitable partnership, based on mutual respect and shared growth, since its early stages the initiative has suffered from a top-down approach, that risks to recreate many of the structural asymmetries typical of neo-colonialist relations. This idea is fueled by the speech of the President of the Commission of the African Union, Moussa Faki, at the beginning of the Italy-Africa Summit in January 2024, where Mattei Plan was announced. He expressed strong reservations about the Plan, criticizing not being consulted during its formulation, and emphasizing that "*Africans are not beggars"*[271]. The fact that Italy did not even inform one of the major interlocutors in the African continent represents a consistent lack in the formulation of the plan and indirectly suggests the Italian negligence in involving all the counterparts in the project. Consequently, the risk is that the Plan would present again an unilateral and charitable logic, where Italy sets the priorities and proposes solutions without involving the receivers, perpetuating a model that is notoriously inefficient. A transformative partnership between Italy and African nations requires a radical paradigm shift from transactional engagement to genuine collaboration, where African stakeholders are not mere recipients but active architects of development strategies, with co-designed initiatives through deep, continuous dialogue that respects the continent's diverse complexities[272]. Furthermore, Italian strategic priorities, largely centered on energetic security and borders' control, reveal a reactive orientation, only functional to its domestic interests, rather than a long-term transformative vision for the relations with the African continent. According to Muliro[273], Italy is overlooking massive economic opportunities by maintaining a narrow, control-oriented perspective with its current focus on energy security and migration control. While assessing its immediate needs linked to traditional energy' companies, one above all : ENI, Italy risks to overlook the immense African potential on renewable sources. Cerami then also remarks the inadequacy of the association with Enrico Mattei, repeatedly stressed by the PM Meloni. The recall seems

[271] Moussa Faki, *Opening Speech at the Italy–Africa Summit*, January 29, 2024, https://finanza.lastampa.it/News/2024/01/29/vertice-italia-africa-faki-unione-africana-su-piano-mattei-avremmo-voluto-essere-consultati/MTQ1XzIwMjQtMDEtMjlfVExC.
[272] Arthur Muliro, *"Rethinking Piano Mattei: Can Italy Truly Forge a Genuine Partnership?"* SID (Society for International Development), 2024, https://www.sidint.org/sid-blogs/rethinking-piano-mattei-can-italy-truly-forge-genuine-partnership.
[273] *Ibidem*

more like a rhetorical operation of legitimation than an actual replicable model. She argues that the growth of the Italian economy in the decade 1953-1963 provided a significant impetus to the large state holdings, such as ENI, which became tools of economic expansion. Mattei began to exercise an autonomous political power, financing political groups, carrying out an independent policy both internally and internationally, and dealing directly with heads of state. With the creation of ENI, Mattei managed to exercise his own power, strongly rooted in the national political structure, and then projected into the international arena. His experience was in many ways isolated, which, once deprived of its protagonist, would not leave an easy legacy or could be recreated outside that historical scenario and without a comparable leadership[274]. Meaning that, today, without a comparable political landscape, and with the downside of companies like ENI, a similar model is irreplicable. For these reasons, the reference to Enrico Mattei in the relaunch of the current Italian foreign policy towards Africa is not based on a sound historical model but rather on an artificial revival of a significant label[275]. To conclude, Italy's credibility as an equal partner is further undermined by some severe internal contradictions. The same government that endorses the emancipation of Africa has paradoxically been accused of racism, leaving thousands of African workers living in slave-like conditions, picking fruit and vegetables in Italy for extremely low wages. Government after government has turned a blind eye to this situation, treating it as a natural state of affairs. On top of that, Meloni's government faced serious allegations for the management of the Cutro shipwreck in 2022, where the supposed late rescues led to 94 deaths, including 34 children. These elements prove a lack of coherence between foreign and internal policies of Meloni's government, which makes it difficult to assess if Italy will be able to develop a new paradigm for intercontinental cooperation. Rather, the strategy seems primarily aimed at reducing migration flows through the expansion of diplomatic and economic ties with countries of origin, without genuinely addressing the structural problems that drive migration in the first place. All in all, without a real bottom-up approach and meaningful involvement of the weak fringes of African civil society, the Mattei Plan risks becoming yet another face of exploitation, disguised by solemn and seemingly inclusive rhetoric.

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[274] Cerami, *Could the "Mattei Plan" Be Reinvented*, 118.
[275] *Ibidem*

CONCLUSION

This research aimed to analyze the recent developments of Sino-African and Italian-African relations. The relations between Beijing and African countries have a considerably longer history, rooted in the Bandung conference (1955), while Italy, despite its colonial ties with some African countries, namely Libya, Somalia, Eritrea, and to some extent Ethiopia, recently looks out with new interest toward the continent. Both countries have tried to offer their model to expand relations with strategic African countries in order to emancipate a continent that still faces the consequences of colonialism, and for many decades has been subjugated to the interests of foreign powers. In this context, this study sought to assess whether these "new", where new is intended as something that tries to diverge from the traditional dynamics of relations with Africa, where usually the foreign power tries to maximize its gains without actually contributing to the development of the continent, models of cooperation proposed by China and Italy may represent a viable paradigm for reaching enduring development across Africa, or whether it constitutes yet another attempt to exploit the continent's resources through practices as the Debt Trap Diplomacy, without providing the means to achieve flourishment in return. In particular, the analysis focused on direct investments, and the means through which both Italy and China carry out these practices, their strong interest on the energetic and mineral African potential, to then shift the attention to the ways China and Italy approach the securitization of their assets and interests, underscoring that is in their own best interest to ensure that the areas where their investments are at stake are securitized, and through which means. Subsequently, we delved into the multilateral actors China and Italy engage with when dealing with African partners, namely the role of the European Union and its interconnectedness with Italy's action, and the relations with the African Union, finding that the latter should play a more active role in the regional cohesion of the continent. And finally, this research tries to understand if the models proposed by the two actors can be presented as effective paradigms for a durable development of Africa, aspiring to enable the continent to overcome its reliance on foreign resources to sustain its economies, or Italy and China are solely pursuing policies that aim to increase their power and influence, disguised as equal partnerships.

Main Takeaways

The analysis of Sino-African relations shows a coherent and long-term strategy that seems to emerge as an alternative and possibly successful development model. The Chinese framework is pragmatic, multilevel, and integrated; it combines massive infrastructure investments, diplomacy and dialogue, military cooperation, and control over strategic resources, which sets up to be a successful attempt of economic and political penetration. The South-South cooperation has been a cornerstone of Beijing's foreign policy since Mao, and lived its most mature version with the BRI, which pursues global objectives such as the expansion of Chinese soft-power, presenting the dragon as an alternative to realities like the US and France, and preferential access to strategic routes and resources. Chinese investments are primarily concentrated in branches like strategic transportation, renewable energies, and logistics, and are carried out by state-owned enterprises and concessional loans with reduced conditionalities, an element that draws a clear distinction with the Western approach, and that often leads borrowers to prefer Chinese money. One of the most remarkable examples is the Mombasa-Nairobi Standard Gauge Railway between Kenya and Ethiopia, that received over 14 billion USD in loans for more than 70 projects, representing an emblematic example of the role China has played in sustaining local economic development. In fact, the key factor that makes the Chinese model efficient is the involvement of African workers in its projects, generating employment in a market characterized by stagnant public investment. Nonetheless, Chinese interest is not limited to infrastructure: Beijing's wider strategy is aimed at taking control over the largest share of the global raw materials market, driven by the ambition to become the world leader in the sector, competing with the United States, and by the needs of the energy transition. Using SOEs, throughout the years, Beijing has seized control over several mines and extraction facilities, often mediated by bilateral accords and resource for infrastructure (R4I) mechanisms[276] that strengthen its bargaining power. In addition, given the extensive amount of assets and strategic interests China has cultivated across Africa, Beijing has felt the need to expand its military presence, especially in fragile areas, to preserve its interests. The increased supply of peacekeepers,

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[276] Hong Bo et al., *"China's Infrastructure Investments in Africa: An Imperative for Attaining Sustainable Development Goals or a Debt-Trap?" The British Accounting Review*, published online August 26, 2024, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bar.2024.101472, 10.

the growing resort to private military companies, and the construction of the first Chinese military base overseas in a strategic crossroad such as Djibouti, all indicate the expansion of Chinese soft power towards a more assertive direction. Alongside the creation in 2000 of a privileged dialogue forum between African leaders and the Chinese government, the FOCAC has made China a credible and reliable partner for most African governments, preferred over other powers such as the US or former colonial powers. In the late analysis, despite the diffuse allegations of an neocolonial and predatory foreign policy at the expense of Africans, multiple studies have shown that there is no evidence proving that Beijing is deliberately carrying out unfair practices or any sort of Debt Trap Diplomacy to seize resources in Africa, as proven by the case of Kenya, where conversely, China deferred the repayment terms of the loan[277], thus easing the conditions of the indebted country. On the other hand, Italy's most important instrument of foreign policy in Africa is the Mattei Plan, which is still in its first stages, thus lacking tangible outcomes. It proposes to revive the geopolitical role of Italy in the Mediterranean and in Africa, through a comprehensive strategy of cooperation built around energy, digital transition, and fostering education. Although the declared objectives, making Italy an energetic hub for Europe, enhancing African development, and addressing the root causes of mass migration, the elaboration and implementation have sparked perplexities. The Society for International Development[278] and Carola Cerami[279] pointed out the top-down approach of Italy, which, despite the rhetoric of equality, once again presents itself more like a "benefactor" rather than a peer partner. This aspect is further proven by the words of the President of the African Union Commission, on the eve of the presentation of the Plan during the Italy-Africa Summit in 2024:" *You will understand that we cannot be satisfied with simple promises that are then not kept. We know that Italy is the main hub of arrival of migrants, and this is an issue on which we must find common solutions. The emigration of young people is a tragedy for Africa itself, the partnership between us will always be*

[277] Pradumna B. Rana and Xianbai Ji, "CO20191 | BRI's 'Debt Trap Diplomacy': Reality or Myth?" *RSIS Commentaries*, November 4, 2020, https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/cms/bris-debt-trap-diplomacy-reality-or-myth/#.YEkO4C3ypQI.
[278] Arthur Muliro, *"Rethinking Piano Mattei: Can Italy Truly Forge a Genuine Partnership?"* Society for International Development (SID), 2024, https://www.sidint.org/sid-blogs.
[279] Carola Cerami, *"Could the 'Mattei Plan' Be Reinvented for Africa? A Historical Perspective," Il Politico* 89, no. 2 (2024): 117.

limited until Africa's development model is structurally changed"[280]. His speech highlights the skepticism around the initiative, and the fact that he was not even informed about the Plan before its presentation further proves its critical issues. Moreover, some of the Italian initiatives clearly demonstrate the pursue of self-interests: The Italian missions in the Sahel, and the bilateral agreements with Tunisia, Libya, and Niger, have mostly proven ineffective, and are intended to increase control on borders and the reduction of illegal departures often at the expense of human rights, as some NGOs remarked. This raises concerns about the coherence between the Italian narrative of "alternative to neocolonialism" and the actual implementation. To present an effective model of cooperation for Africa, Italy should prioritize infrastructure development, such as cross-border railway networks, digital connectivity projects, and renewable energy installations, all domains in which China invested massively. Italy could play a role in bridging the economic disparities that currently hinder intra-African trade and help to make the most out of the continent's entrepreneurial potential. The partnership model should focus on creating mutually beneficial economic frameworks that support local value chains, such as agricultural processing facilities, textile manufacturing clusters, and technology innovation hubs. Increase young professionals' training, now limited to Morocco. Targeted support for small and medium enterprises could further reinforce and demonstrate the potential for practical collaboration. This approach might represent a promising pathway to overcoming structural barriers, offering a more respectful and collaborative model of economic engagement that goes beyond traditional aid paradigms. These systemic changes extend beyond technical implementation, requiring a comprehensive reconfiguration of power dynamics that have historically marginalized African economic potential, by involving civil society and Universities. The ultimate goal is to create an economic cooperation model that recognizes Africa's complexity, respects its diverse economic landscapes, and enables genuine, equitable partnerships to drive sustainable, contextually rooted economic transformation. On the contrary, China seems to have done a solid job, and this effort has yielded tangible results. In fact, according to the Afrobarometer, out of 16 countries, in 2020, in 10 African countries out of 16, the percentage of people thinking of China as the best model for development, increased

[280] Moussa Faki, *Opening Speech at the Italy–Africa Summit*, January 29, 2024, https://finanza.lastampa.it/News/2024/01/29/vertice-italia-africa-faki-unione-africana-su-piano-mattei-avremmo-voluto-essere-consultati/MTQ1XzIwMjQtMDEtMjlfVExC

compared to 2014[281], with Saheli countries representing the highest peaks, and 60% of the population in 18 countries considering Chinese influence positive, while 15% against the motion[282]. These data speak clearly: from 2014 to 2020, China considerably ameliorated its opinion in the eyes of the Africans, with more and more people considering it the most effective and most suitable development approach. Invariably, Chinese infrastructure investment generates positive outcomes, which is an engine towards achieving sustainable economic development in Africa. It is proven that Chinese investments in Africa produce positive outcomes on human development and environmental sustainability,[283], upholding the validity of the *modernization theory*[284]. Chinese infrastructural loans are used for projects that include the production of clean energy, the construction of educational facilities, and other activities that stimulate economic growth, thus generating employment and improving human development. Ultimately, if Italy did not even consult all the involved parties in formulating its strategy, China, on the other hand, has consistently maintained open channels for dialogue through the FOCAC, reinforcing its image as an efficient and reliable partner. In comparison, Italy's approach appears less like a genuine partnership and more like a sophisticated mechanism to deal with migration and securing access to primary resources, in other words, *a 21st-century version of colonial extraction dressed in diplomatic language*[285]. In conclusion, Africa stands as the future of 21st-century geopolitics and is likely to grow its role year after year, regardless of external actors present on its territory. What emerges is the need to reconcile operational efficiency with the development of a market with immense potential, avoiding both neocolonial dynamics and empty rhetoric, in order to break Africa's dependence on foreign aid. In a more and more fragile and rapidly evolving context, the real challenge is not who invests more, but who builds more fair, more stable, and truly shared relations.

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[281] Edem Selormey, *Africans' Perceptions About China: A Sneak Peek from 18 Countries*, Afrobarometer, 3 September 2020, 10, https://www.afrobarometer.org.
[282] *Ivi*, 13.
[283] Hong Bo, Rodiat Lawal, e Rilwan Sakariyahu, *"China's Infrastructure Investments in Africa: An Imperative for Attaining Sustainable Development Goals or a Debt-Trap?" The British Accounting Review*, published online August 26, 2024, 16, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bar.2024.101472.
[284] The Modernization Theory argues that global interactions generate positive outcomes.
[285] Arthur Muliro, *"Rethinking Piano Mattei,"* SID, 2024.

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