



Testbed or Thoroughfare? Africa's Place in China's Evolving Grand Strategy

Benjamin Barton & Pádraig Carmody

To cite this article: Benjamin Barton & Pádraig Carmody (2026) Testbed or Thoroughfare? Africa's Place in China's Evolving Grand Strategy, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 35:157, 1170-1182, DOI: [10.1080/10670564.2025.2489488](https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2025.2489488)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2025.2489488>



© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 08 Apr 2025.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 2078




View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Testbed or Thoroughfare? Africa's Place in China's Evolving Grand Strategy

Benjamin Barton ^a and Pádraig Carmody^{b,c}

^aUniversity of Nottingham Malaysia, Malaysia; ^bGeography, Natural Sciences, Trinity College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland; ^cUniversity of Johannesburg, South Africa

ABSTRACT


What is Africa's place in China's global geo-strategy, or does it have one? China's engagements with the continent have increased markedly in recent decades but does it occupy a central or peripheral role in China's grand strategy? Recently, there have been debates about whether China has such a strategy, but we argue that part of the confusion around these issues arises from the distinctive nature of that state and the forms of loose coordination it operationalizes. Rather than a strictly defined 'grand strategy', China has a grand, strategic-relational approach to its foreign policy or operates a relational geopolitical code which nonetheless reflects core interests. We bring this perspective to bear on Africa's evolving positionality in China's global geostrategic engagements in order to evaluate its significance.

KEYWORDS

China; Africa; grand strategy; geopolitics; state power; relationality

Introduction

Grand strategy is generally understood as the coordinated use of the full range of government means to fulfill an interconnected set of national interests, over an extended time period¹ or 'the use of all instruments of national power to secure the state'.² However, a problem with such definitions is that they assume the state to be, or operate as, a unified actor rather than a set of, at times, contradictory social relations or 'organization of organizations'.³ Consequently, such definitions downplay the internal and external 'relationality of grand strategy'.⁴ Indeed, according to Flint and Noorali:

CONTACT Pádraig Carmody  carmodyp@tcd.ie  Geography, Natural Sciences, Trinity College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland

¹Feng Zhang, 'Rethinking China's Grand Strategy: Beijing's Evolving National Interests and Strategic Ideas in the Reform Era' [2012] *International Politics* 318 <<https://doi.org/10.1057/ip.2012>>; Chih-Yu Shih & Chiung-Chiu Huang, 'China's Quest for Grand Strategy: Power, National Interest, or Relational Security?' [2015] *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 1 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/pou047>>; Flynt Leverett & Bingbing Wu, 'The New Silk Road and China's Evolving Grand Strategy' [2017] *The China Journal* 110 <<https://doi.org/10.1086/689684>>; Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order* (Oxford University Press 2021); Cagla Demirduzen & Cameron G Thies, 'A Role Theory Approach to Grand Strategy: Horizontal Role Contestation and Consensus in the Case of China' [2022] *Journal of Global Security Studies* 1 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogab018>>.

²Richard D Hooker, *Charting a Course: Strategic Choices for a New Administration* (National Defense University Press 2016). The 'full range of government means' predominantly refers to vectors of hard power (economic, diplomatic, military), although scholars do consider soft power (culture) an essential element of it too. (Stig Stenslie, 'Questioning the Reality of China's Grand Strategy' [2014] *China* 161 <<https://doi.org/10.1353/chn.2014.0013>>; Chas W Freeman, 'China's National Experiences and the Evolution of PRC Grand Strategy' in David Shambaugh (ed) *China and the World* (Oxford University Press 2020)). Of course these explanations are not necessarily mutually exclusive (Andrew J Nathan & Andrew Scobell, *China's Search for Security* (Columbia University Press 2012)).

³Bob Jessop, *The Future of the Capitalist State* (Polity 2002).

⁴Feng Zhang, *Chinese Hegemony: Grand Strategy and International Institutions in East Asian History* (Stanford University Press 2015).

© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

strategy may be an inadequate notion when it is largely restricted to the actions of countries deemed to be 'great powers'. [...] Alternatively, geopolitical codes enable a recursive sense of geopolitics in which actions by all countries (regardless of their capabilities) interact at the local, regional and global scales.⁵

Nonetheless, it is still useful to think of grand strategy as the way in which enduring or 'core' interests are expressed through recurrent and adaptive actions in international relations.

Grand strategies in realist theory are devised to protect the state against the workings and dysfunctions of the world order.⁶ This is to be achieved either by revising the characteristics of the order to maximize power, promoting economic development to generate resources, or by striving to maintain the status quo as a substitute for national development and associated increases in military and other vectors of power.⁷ In recent years, the grand strategy literature has burgeoned to include studies of the foreign relations of all major powers, China included. To date, publications on this have been dominated by a polarization between authors who attribute a revisionist intent to it⁸—that China seeks to transform the existing order to place itself at the center—versus advocates who favor a reformist orientation to its ambitions⁹—that it seeks to position itself more favorably without overturning the existing order, as it has been a major beneficiary of it. To a degree, this debate may be overblown as 'China' may be attempting to reform the international system with an end goal of revision: that is promoting 'non-reformist reforms'.¹⁰

From a thematic and area studies perspective, the literature on Chinese grand strategy has been overwhelmingly focused on the intensifying rivalry between the United States (US) and the People's Republic of China (PRC), with a particular interest in how this is unfolding across the Indo-Pacific 'theatre'. Indeed, some go so far as to examine the emergence of a 'New Cold War';¹¹ although in contrast to its first iteration, this race for supremacy is characterized by complex inter- or co-dependence, where network dominance in key technologies is a central goal.¹² Much less has been said about how other parts of the world are affected, informed or are impacted by Chinese grand strategy. Bar a few exceptions,¹³ this is especially true of Africa and is particularly surprising in light of the general burgeoning of China-Africa literature. Notwithstanding the newfound density of this literature, it seldom intersects or engages with grand strategy debates. This may be a reflection of a somewhat orientalist gaze which examines Africa through the lens of developmentality rather than its role in global politics.¹⁴

When China-Africa scholars have ventured into the grand strategy realm, their findings have often left room for further elaboration. Indeed, the main takeaway from these studies is that China has gradually come around to perceiving Africa as strategically significant due to its utility as

⁵Colin Flint & Hassan Noorali, 'The Relationality of Geopolitical Codes: The Example of the Belt and Road Initiative' [2024] *Asian Geographer* 1 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/10225706.2023.2227618>>.

⁶Alexander Wendt, 'Anarchy is What States Make of It—The Social Construction of Power-Politics' [1992] *International Organization* 391 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2706858>>.

⁷Stenslie; Avery Goldstein, 'China's Grand Strategy under Xi Jinping: Reassurance, Reform and Resistance' [2020] *International Security* 164 <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00383>.

⁸Doshi; Luke Patey, *How China Loses: The Pushback against Chinese Global Ambitions* (Oxford University Press 2021).

⁹Steve Chan and others, *Contesting Revisionism: China, the United States, and the Transformation of International Order* (Oxford University Press 2021); Ian Taylor & Zhangxi Cheng, 'China as a "Rising Power": Why the Status Quo Matters' [2022] *Third World Quarterly* 244 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2021.2005462>>.

¹⁰André Gorz, 'Reform and Revolution' [1968] *Socialist Register* 111 <<https://socialistregister.com/index.php/srv/article/view/5272>>.

¹¹Zeno Leoni, *A New Cold War: US-China Relations in the 21st Century* (Bristol University Press 2024).

¹²Seth Schindler and others, 'The Second Cold War: US-China Competition for Centrality in Infrastructure, Digital, Production, and Finance Networks' [2023] *Geopolitics* 1083 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2023.2253432>>.

¹³David Shinn & Joshua Eisenman, *China's Relations with Africa: A New Era of Strategic Engagement* (Columbia University Press 2023).

¹⁴Kevin C Dunn & Timothy M Shaw, *Africa's Challenge to International Relations Theory* (Palgrave Macmillan 2001).

a diplomatic pivot, economically and/or in terms of Beijing's image considerations.¹⁵ Although useful, these findings remain underdeveloped and fail to tie back directly to grand strategy debates. Through this article, we ask: what can Africa tell us about China's grand strategy and its place in it? Despite its status as a 'third-level' foreign policy priority for China, Africa can reveal substantial insights about the nature of China's power practices.¹⁶ To this end, we argue that Africa is no longer a 'testbed' for China's grand strategy but neither is it a 'thoroughfare'. Instead, it is—and will most probably remain for the foreseeable future—a fringe recipient of impulses and trends shaping the overall orientation of Chinese grand strategy. Although we partly agree here with Alden and Large's assertion that Africa has in recent times provided China with a '[...] relatively benign setting for "foreign policy experimentation"',¹⁷ we question the continent's 'qualitative importance' to China's grand strategy 'beyond its regional expression'.¹⁸

We advance the following arguments. First, during the initial phases of China's post-Maoist grand strategy (crystallized by the Go-out policy), Africa held a position of relative importance because of its contribution to China's attempts at playing catch-up with industrialized economies and because of the foreign policy innovation possibilities its 'benign' geopolitical environment offered at the time (leading to the emergence of the testbed era). Second, with the 'hardening' or more assertive nature of China's grand strategy under President Xi Jinping, Africa continued to serve economic (access to natural resources; access to new markets), diplomatic (legitimizing China's vision for a multipolar world order; legitimizing the Belt-and-Road Initiative (BRI)) and strategic (boosting China's overseas power projection, notably in the realm of peace and security) purposes. However, this period marked a simultaneous decline in Africa's importance to China's grand strategy both sectorally (a retreat witnessed even in the oil and gas sector, until recently) and relationally, relative to other world regions (especially Asia). Finally, with the post-Covid era of Chinese grand strategy being marked by 'strategic overstretch'¹⁹ and the adoption of a more conservative approach toward 'regime perpetuation',²⁰ Africa's overarching significance may decline further. This being said, its 'added value' is instead measured on issue-specific matters (e.g. extractive industries) of conjunctural salience to 'regime perpetuation' rather than in relation to the big picture of Chinese grand strategy.

We begin by presenting our pragmatic two-level understanding of Chinese grand strategy; whereby the core pursuit—the survival of the (effectively) single-party-state and 'socialist' system—is tied to the growing development and coordinated instrumentalization of a host of foreign and security instruments. These instruments are designed to maximize the party-state's power capabilities at home and abroad with the aim of feeding back into the aforementioned core pursuit. The first half of the article will detail these two respective levels while elaborating upon their relationship. The second half will shift the focus to Africa's place in China's grand strategy. Here, we adopt a chronological overview, splitting our analysis into three successive phases designed to

¹⁵Jianwei Wang & Jing Zou, 'China Goes to Africa: A Strategic Move?' [2014] *The Journal of Contemporary China* 1113 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2014.898902>>; Abiodun Alao & Chris Alden, 'Africa's Security Challenges and China's Evolving Approach to Africa's Peace and Security Architecture' in Chris Alden, Abiodun Alao, Zhang Chun & Laura Barber (eds) *China and Africa: Building Peace and Security Cooperation on the Continent* (Palgrave Macmillan 2017); Zhixiong Shen, 'On China's Military Diplomacy in Africa' in Chris Alden, Abiodun Alao, Zhang Chun & Laura Barber (eds) *China and Africa: Building Peace and Security Cooperation on the Continent* (Palgrave Macmillan 2017); Lei Yu, 'China's Expanding Security Involvement in Africa: A Pillar for "China-Africa Community of Common Destiny"' [2018] *Global Policy* 489 <<https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.12585>>; Mamoudou Gazibo & Abdou R Lema, 'From Non-Interference to Adaptive Pragmatism: China's Security Policy in Africa' [2022] *African Studies Quarterly* 1 <<https://doi.org/10.32473/asq.21.3.135952>>.

¹⁶Lina Benabdallah, *Shaping the Future of Power: Knowledge Production and Network-Building in China-Africa Relations* (University of Michigan Press 2020).

¹⁷Chris Alden & Daniel Large, 'On Becoming a Norms Maker: Chinese Foreign Policy, Norms Evolution and the Challenges of Security in Africa' [2015] *The China Quarterly* 123 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741015000028>>.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Xiaoyu Pu & Chengli Wang, 'Rethinking China's Rise: Chinese Scholars Debate Strategic Overstretch' [2018] *International Affairs* 1019 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iyy140>>.

²⁰Andrew Scobell, 'China and Grand Strategy: Does the Empire Have a Plan? A Review Essay' [2022] *Political Science Quarterly* 155 <<https://doi.org/10.1002/polq.13314>>.

complement the ‘extended time period’ component of the definition afforded to grand strategy set out in our article’s opening sentence: from the Go-out policy years to the beginnings of the testbed era; the hardening of Chinese grand strategy under Xi’s stewardship; the end of the testbed era and post-Covid ‘strategic overstretch’. Each phase aims to situate Africa in China’s grand strategy. Ultimately, the purpose is to showcase that Africa’s place has ebbed and flowed from a more central role to the margins of the more contemporary editions of China’s grand strategy. In so doing, Africa has served varying functions largely in response to strategic relational and time-specific (de)emphasis of core interests—whether modernization, foreign policy innovation, expansion of power capabilities or regime perpetuation.

China’s Grand Strategy

The literature published on China’s grand strategy over the past decade has been dominated by binary debates around whether or not there is such a grand strategy and if so, wherein lies its ultimate ambition. This is where the major fault line lies between advocates²¹ who subscribe to a revisionist perspective and equate Chinese grand strategy with dislodging the existing international order to succeed US primacy²² and those who interpret it as a means to facilitate the PRC’s recognition as a great power, harboring reformist intent within the confines of the existing order.²³ In an excellent and provocative contribution, Jones and Zeng shift the focus from ‘grand strategy’²⁴ to state transformation characterized by decentralization, fragmentation and internationalization. On the other hand, there are also pronounced recentralization tendencies in China, characterized by Xi Jinping’s micromanagement of ‘everything’,²⁵ including the so-called Toilet Revolution. How can we reconcile these two seeming counter-tendencies and their implications for international relations? We argue that while China may not have a strictly defined grand strategy or plan, despite claims to the contrary,²⁶ it is still a useful lens through which to view Chinese foreign policy actions, embedded in the evolving nature of the state. While the Chinese state may not ‘command and control’, it is deeply imbricated in both society and the ‘private’ sector giving it a form of ‘webpower’.²⁷ By going further than Jones and Zeng, and not seeing grand strategy in tension or contradiction with state transformation but as part of it, we are able to reconcile the seemingly contradictory tendencies much noted in the literature.

Indeed, within the confines of this polarized debate, we take a less lofty and pragmatic view. We argue that Chinese grand strategy does exist, even if—as Goldstein²⁸ notes—its existence is difficult to prove with absolute certainty given the ‘extreme opacity of China’s elite politics’. We premise its existence around: the desire to ensure the ultimate purpose of ‘regime perpetuation’ of the single-party rule and of the socialist system, the state deploys an ever-increasing coordinated set of foreign policy instruments designed to expand power at home and abroad.²⁹ This therefore calls into play

²¹Aside from a minority of voices who argue instead for the non-existence or implausibility of Chinese grand strategy (Stenslie).

²²Doshi; Patey; Dawn C Murphy, *China’s Rise in the Global South: The Middle East, Africa, and Beijing’s Alternative World Order* (Stanford University Press 2022).

²³Giovanni B Andornino, ‘The Belt and Road Initiative in China’s Emerging Grand Strategy of Connective Leadership’ [2017] *China & World Economy* 4 <<https://doi.org/10.1111/cwe.12211>>; Pu & Wang; Chan and others.

²⁴Lee Jones & Jinghan Zeng, ‘Understanding China’s “Belt and Road Initiative”: Beyond Grand Strategy to a State Transformation Analysis’ [2019] *Third World Quarterly* 1415 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2018.1559046>>.

²⁵Suisheng Zhao, *The Dragon Roars Back: Transformational Leaders and Dynamics of Chinese Foreign Policy* (Stanford University Press 2022).

²⁶Michael Pillsbury, *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China’s Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower* (Henry Holt 2014).

²⁷Pádraig Carmody, ‘The Role of Belt and Road Reboot and China’s Elite Strategies in Global Geostrategic Competition’ (*Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy*, 4 March 2024) <<https://munkschool.utoronto.ca/belt-road/research/role-belt-and-road-reboot-and-chinas-elite-strategies-global-geostrategic-competition>> accessed 17 March 2025.

²⁸Goldstein.

²⁹Weihua Liu & Yufan Hao, ‘Australia in China’s Grand Strategy’ [2014] *Asian Survey* 367 <<https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2014.54.2.367>>; Mark Beeson, ‘Geoeconomics with Chinese Characteristics: The BRI and China’s Evolving Grand Strategy’ [2018] *Economic and Political Studies* 240 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/20954816.2018.1498988>>; Scobell.

a dual and intertwined reading of Chinese grand strategy.³⁰ The immediate reflex points to a defensive core, whereby grand strategy is conceived with the protection of national core interests in mind (whether national sovereignty, territorial integrity or physical and policy security).³¹ This defensive drive is triggered, according to Wang,³² by a sense of vulnerability primarily emanating from the internal and external imbalances between China's rapid modernization process and the relativity of its weaker position within the US-dominated regional/international regime. It is this looming 'threat perception of foreign involvement in its territory or domestic politics'³³ which brings into doubt the stability of the environment required by the party-state to pursue the nation's modernization process (economic development, social well-being and socioeconomic needs)—the advancement of which currently constitutes the main source of its own domestic political capital.³⁴

To better ensure the protection of these core interests, the party-state has employed a growing number of foreign policy and security instruments designed to expand its power at home and abroad, calling into play the second half of our interpretation on Chinese grand strategy. This has been particularly evident since Xi came to power, with the introduction of slogans such as 'Chinese Dream' and 'National Rejuvenation', where the aim is more crudely to 'make China great again'.³⁵ By purposively reinstating China's centrality in a shifting global order more attuned to its core interests and by boosting its power differentials to the detriment of friends and foes alike,³⁶ this inherently contributes to cementing the party-state's standing at home.³⁷

Such activism is also rationalized by timing and global circumstances. Upon acceding to power, the national and international environment characteristic of the initial years of Xi's reign favored the adoption of a more assertive attitude during a period of perceived 'strategic opportunity' as (some) Western powers reeled under the weight of the 'Global' Financial Crisis (GFC). According to Zhao,³⁸ frustration had been brewing internally due to the Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao leadership team's apparent unwillingness to seize the moment—which reportedly played into the hands of Xi's own political calculus. Many had become disenchanted with China's perceived submissive role in international affairs, sometimes sending foreign ministry officials calcium tablets in the post to 'strengthen their backbone'.³⁹ Xi was able to take advantage of this sentiment, along with China's growing economic and material capabilities, to usher in a new era of assertive so-called wolf warrior diplomacy, named after the eponymous 2017 blockbuster in which a Chinese former special operator defeats an English-speaking adversary.

The period stretching from the GFC in 2008 to the 2016 electoral fallouts in the United Kingdom over Brexit and in the US with the election of populist President Donald Trump significantly contributed to the perception in Beijing of the West's 'irreversible decay and decline'.⁴⁰ These

³⁰Lian Ma, 'Thinking of China's Grand Strategy: Chinese Perspectives' [2013] *International Relations of the Asia Pacific* 155 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/irap/lcs015>>; Leverett & Wu.

³¹Zhang [2012]; Shih & Huang.

³²Yong Wang, 'Offensive for Defensive: The Belt and Road Initiative and China's New Grand Strategy' [2016] *The Pacific Review* 455 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2016.1154690>>.

³³Demirduzen & Thies.

³⁴Zhang [2012].

³⁵Goldstein; Scobell. A reflection of regime self-confidence, which in Scobell's reading has afforded the party-state sufficient security to do away with fretting over short-term contingencies and instead allowed more scope for medium- to long-term planning.

³⁶Albeit crucially, as Clarke remarks, not to the extent of provoking overly costly counterreactions from the incumbent hegemon. This is reflected in 'salami slicing' and 'cabbage' strategies in the South China Sea where the Chinese state takes small actions to test the limits of what it can get away with (salami slicing) and having different layers of seemingly initially less militarised confrontation between fishermen (and behind them coast guards) and then navy ships (cabbage strategy). Taiwan has responded with a 'porcupine strategy' to try to make itself indigestible to China. Michael Clarke, 'The Belt and Road Initiative: China's New Grand Strategy?' [2017] *Asia Policy* 71 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26403204>>.

³⁷Clarke; Shaun Breslin, 'Still Rising or Risen (or Both)? Why and How China Matters' [2021] *The Pacific Review* 870 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2017.1302976>>.

³⁸Zhao.

³⁹Peter Martin, *China's Civilian Army: The Making of Wolf Warrior Diplomacy* (Oxford University Press 2021).

⁴⁰Aaron Friedberg, 'Globalisation and Chinese Grand Strategy' [2018] *Survival* 7 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2018.1427362>>; Doshi.

developments further exacerbated the sense of strategic urgency or opportunity and points to the necessity of factoring in the geopolitical environment as an essential dependent variable when ascertaining any grand strategy. Consequently, as per Goldstein, it is this series of events which: '[...] made it much more difficult, if not impossible, to convince others that China's intentions would remain benign as the country grew wealthier and more powerful'.⁴¹ This is what led revisionist grand strategy scholars such as Doshi and Patey to surmise that Beijing's intentions go beyond merely securing the Communist Party of China's (CPC) future, to harboring pretensions of superseding American global leadership and redesigning the structure of international society accordingly.⁴²

It is against this backdrop that a number of policy instruments have been deployed synchronously to expand the PRC's power at home and abroad. Upon reviewing the literature, three contiguous sets of instruments become apparent: material tools designed to boost the PRC's power differentials with other states, while simultaneously reducing its dependence on others; material initiatives of a suasive and/or coercive nature, designed to align the foreign policy preferences of other states with China's; and non-tangible tools promoted to tilt the international normative balance in the PRC's favor. The first of these refers to factors such as the People's Liberation Army (PLA)'s rapid military modernization, becoming a leader in crucial fields of science, innovation, research and technology (e.g. artificial intelligence, quantum computing) and lessening its economic dependence, on the US especially.⁴³ It is for these reasons, for example, that many Chinese State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) and private corporations have been encouraged by the state to become global leaders in high-tech manufacturing industries, as per the stipulations of the 'Made in China 2025' blueprint.⁴⁴ As a corollary, this explains the recent impetus for self-sufficiency and global leadership in the critical production of microchips on foot of the US and European sanctions.⁴⁵

The second refers to the instrumentalization of foreign policy and economic statecraft initiatives such as the BRI, for the purposes of getting other states to adopt stances favorable to China's interests which they otherwise may not adhere to⁴⁶—even if the motivations for the BRI are mostly economic, such as the need to vent surplus capacity from domestic industries.⁴⁷ Such instrumentalization can be applied persuasively or coercively (through the threat of withholding investments, for example), depending on the circumstances, and is seen as compelling for their ability to impress upon the need for a change of tack without having to resort to the use of violence.⁴⁸ On the one hand, with the BRI predominantly (albeit not exclusively) targeting states in the Global South, these instruments have been interpreted as allowing China to go beyond its immediate neighborhood to gain a stronger foothold in the geopolitics of regions (wider Middle East, South Asia) where it historically played a peripheral role.⁴⁹ On the other hand, this instrumentalization has reportedly facilitated the gradual socialization of 'secondary states' to the new informal global hierarchy reflective of China's rising status.⁵⁰

The third instance relates to the struggle over norms, which ties in to some degree with China's attempts to vie for influence in multilateral institutions and within the field of global governance. Here, the PRC has actively contested norms underwriting the liberal international order by conjointly undermining the former while promoting alternative autocratic norms.⁵¹ This is observable across

⁴¹Goldstein.

⁴²Doshi; Patey.

⁴³Doshi.

⁴⁴James McBride & Andrew Chatzky, 'Is "Made in China 2025" a Threat to Global Trade?' (*Council on Foreign Relations*, 13 May 2019) <<https://www.cfr.org/background/made-china-2025-threat-global-trade>> accessed 17 March 2025; Patey.

⁴⁵Yoko Kubota, 'The Goal for China's Chip Giant: Cut Out the U.S.' (*WSJ*, 3 June 2024) <<https://www.wsj.com/tech/chinese-semiconductor-industry-smic-self-sufficient-5210abf8>> accessed 17 March 2025.

⁴⁶Friedberg; Doshi.

⁴⁷Pádraig Carmody, Ian Taylor & Tim Zajontz, 'China's Spatial Fix and "Debt Diplomacy" in Africa: Constraining Belt or Road to Economic Transformation?' [2022] *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 57 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/00083968.2020.1868014>>.

⁴⁸Patey.

⁴⁹Clarke.

⁵⁰Adornino.

⁵¹Ibid.

various fields and themes from peace and security to development models, tied aid and financial sustainability.⁵² For authors, such as Wei and Eisenman,⁵³ it boils down more simply to promulgating Chinese values and narratives such as ‘guanxi’ (trust or social capital) and the ‘Community of common destiny for mankind’. They in turn implicitly challenge the status quo by offering an alternative and ostensibly ‘better, fairer and more inclusive way to organize international relations’.⁵⁴ In parallel, they confirm the tendency toward the formation of a China-centered international society, founded upon the PRC’s network of global bilateral partnerships and China-sponsored multilateral regimes, where Beijing is increasingly seen as playing the role of ‘resource distributor’.⁵⁵ Over time, this would explain both its increased participation in multilateral institutions and its willingness to devise new ones (i.e. the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank) to better influence global agendas while persevering with the push to devise a multipolar world order.⁵⁶

An important caveat to mention at this juncture is that many of the works consulted above were predominantly written and published prior to the impact of recent negative internalities and externalities impacting the PRC leadership’s standing. If the pre-Covid domestic and international environment was more accommodating to the roll-out of Chinese grand strategy via its expansion of power at home and abroad, the situation post-Covid has been anything but smooth-sailing.⁵⁷ For instance, the cumulations of events, such as the decision to break with the two-term limit tradition, the ongoing economic slowdown and the mishandling of the pandemic, have hurt Xi and the Party’s popularity domestically.⁵⁸ One direct ramification of the economic slowdown has been to tone down the expectations in the narrative spun around the BRI in response to a scaling down of its objectives, shifting from ‘project of the century’ to the mantra of ‘small and beautiful’.⁵⁹

Externally too, the post-Covid geopolitical environment would appear less benign than in the years leading up to 2020. In effect, the ultimate outcome of Russia’s decision to invade Ukraine carries implications for the Chinese leadership, especially if the conflict were to culminate in defeat for President Putin.⁶⁰ Not all of the foreign policy instruments listed above and coordinated under the guise of grand strategy have borne fruit. Instead, there is a sense among some scholars not only that the emphasis on expanding power has resulted in ‘strategic overstretch’,⁶¹ but in Goldstein’s view, Xi’s determination to pursue a grand strategy of national rejuvenation has made it: ‘[. . .] harder, not easier, to realize its self-proclaimed goal’⁶² by generating blowback. Either way, these shifting circumstances serve to remind students of grand strategy of its fluid, dynamic, recursive and reactive nature. If the emphasis over the past few years had been to expand Chinese power internationally as a means to reinforce the party-state’s hold on power, it may be that the shifting domestic and global circumstances will drive the CPC to rethink toward a contracting of its grand strategy, with a focus instead on events closer to home,⁶³ as evidenced perhaps in the development of the ‘dual

⁵²Patey.

⁵³Ling Wei, ‘Striving for Achievement in a New Era: China Debates its Global Role’ [2020] *The Pacific Review* 413 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2020.1728572>>; Joshua Eisenman, ‘Locating Africa in China’s Community of Shared Future for Mankind: A Relational Approach’ [2023] *Journal of International Development* 65 <<https://doi.org/10.1002/jid.3674>>.

⁵⁴Eisenman.

⁵⁵Wei.

⁵⁶Doshi.

⁵⁷Benjamin Barton, ‘The Belt and Road Initiative at Ten (2013–2023): A Crucial Juncture for China’s Infrastructure Geopolitics’ in Julian Henderson, Stephen L Morgan & Matteo Salonia (eds) *Reimagining The Silk Roads: Interactions and Perceptions Across Eurasia* (Routledge 2024).

⁵⁸The Economist, ‘China’s Leaders Are Less Popular Than They Might Think’ (16 January 2024) <<https://www.economist.com/china/2024/01/16/chinas-leaders-are-less-popular-than-they-might-think>> accessed 17 March 2025.

⁵⁹Chloe Yeung, ‘The Belt and Road Initiative 10 Years Later: China’s Transition to “Small and Beautiful”’ (*Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada*, 19 March 2024) <<https://www.asiapacific.ca/publication/china-belt-and-road-initiative-10-years-later>> accessed 17 March 2025.

⁶⁰Guoguang Wu, ‘Interpreting Xi Jinping’s Shifting Strategy on the Russia-Ukraine War’ (*Asia Society*, 11 October 2023) <<https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/interpreting-xi-jinpings-shifting-strategy-russia-ukraine-war>> accessed 17 March 2025.

⁶¹Pu & Wang.

⁶²Goldstein.

⁶³Yu Jie, ‘China’s Focus Remains Firmly Fixed on Domestic Problems’ (*Chatham House*, 21 September 2021) <<https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/06/chinas-focus-remains-firmly-fixed-domestic-problems>> accessed 17 March 2025.

circulation' and 'common prosperity' policies. In light of the above, this article now asks: what have these developments meant for China's relations with Africa?

Africa's Conjunctural Positionality at the Margins of China's Grand Strategy

Since the advent of the CPC, Africa has consistently featured in China's grand strategy, albeit its relevance has waxed and waned over time in accordance both with the shifting imperatives of the PRC's nation-building demands, combined with the varying 'benignness' of Africa's own geopolitical environment. From the post-Maoist years in particular, we identify three successive chronologies of Africa's place in China's grand strategy; each reflective in their own way of the evolution of the continent's place in this. These are as follows: the Go-out policy to the testbed era; the period of pre-Covid hardening of China's grand strategy; the concomitant ending of the testbed era and the post-Covid recalibration of China's grand strategy. When pieced together, these respective phases capture the conjunctural nature of Africa's place as a fringe recipient of impulses and trends shaping the overall orientation of China's grand strategy. We now turn to these respective phases.

While Africa continued to matter to China in terms of the latter's own self-perception as a bastion for the promotion of the interests of the Global South,⁶⁴ it took on greater significance from the 1980s until the turn of the twenty-first century in the context of the PRC's drive to reduce its economic development asymmetry with the industrialized world. In this context, when set against the backdrop of China's own modernization drive at the time, Africa primarily mattered for three main reasons: its appealing factor endowment and the ability for Chinese energy companies to access abundant supplies of competitive oil and gas reserves; as a large and relatively untapped market; and as a source of demand for infrastructure construction.⁶⁵ The above traits were made more appealing by the West's general commercial and geopolitical neglect, which reduced market competition and contributed to the perception of Africa in China as a land of opportunity. Chinese commercial and geopolitical interests benefited and took advantage of declining Western interest in African affairs, confirming our earlier point on the essence of conditioning environmental factors shaping the nature of Chinese grand strategy. Such neglect emerged, among others, from perceived 'economic irrelevance', 'democratic backsliding' and other good governance concerns. It was also the result of the West's general lack of popularity among African elites during this period—a situation unaided by the harsh prescriptions of the Washington Consensus—who in turn largely welcomed (although not unequivocally) China's reemergence in Africa, due to the hedging and development prospects associated with it.⁶⁶ China's cause was also aided by Western leaders not lavishing anything like the same attention on their African counterparts that Chinese leaders appeared to across this period, as best exemplified by glamorous Forum on China-Africa (FOCAC) summit meetings.⁶⁷ The GFC further compounded this general sense of Western inertia by curbing the enthusiasm for the disbursement of development assistance.⁶⁸ As evidenced research has shown, the increasingly distant political relations between the West and Africa directly translated at the time into increasing incentive levels for Chinese SOEs to invest in Africa.⁶⁹ However, the nature of Chinese grand strategy was to further evolve.

By the time that China's reemergence as a force to be reckoned with in Africa had been reaffirmed, the circumstances to drive a more elastic role for Africa in China's grand strategy were

⁶⁴Ilaria Carrozza, 'Legitimizing China's Growing Engagement in African Security: Change within Continuity of Official Discourse' [2021] *The China Quarterly* 1174 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741021000242>>.

⁶⁵Liu & Hao.

⁶⁶Alden & Large [2015].

⁶⁷Paul Nantulya, 'Grand Strategy and China's Soft Power Push in Africa' (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 30 August 2018) <<https://africacenter.org/spotlight/grand-strategy-and-chinas-soft-power-push-in-africa/>> accessed 17 March 2025; Chan and others.

⁶⁸Alden & Large [2015].

⁶⁹Jing L Duanmu & Francisco Urdinez, 'The Dissuasive Effect of U.S. Political Influence on Chinese FDI During the "Going Global" Policy Era' [2018] *Business and Politics* 38 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/bap.2017.5>>.

deemed favorable from the leadership in Beijing's vantage point. China had emerged within a fairly short window as a commercial powerhouse whose ability to invest, offer credit and even development assistance caught the eye, even if its terms of trade were lop-sided and it continued to trail conventional powers on key economic metrics (e.g. Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), Official Development Assistance). Although China's reemergence did not go unnoticed, it did not immediately translate into Western policy adjustments, as a result of the aforementioned inertia, on top of foreign policy distractions unfolding largely outside of Africa (e.g. the so-called War on Terror). It is this fortuitous set of circumstances which eventually encouraged the party-state to conceive of it as a testbed for aspects of its foreign and security policy. This situation was made easier by the low reputational cost involved in trialing policy innovations in part due to the growing appetite among African elites for China to consolidate its contributions to affairs on the continent.

These circumstances are what allowed China, for example, to experiment with modifications to its steadfast application of the noninterference principle, as witnessed in 2006 when it actively lobbied to get former Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir to change Sudan's stance on the United Nations Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) mission.⁷⁰ This testbed facet was taken up a notch when Xi came to power and China's grand strategy shifted to a less cautious foreign policy by reverting to growing assertiveness. Here, Africa's contribution shifted away from an emphasis on solely underpinning China's attempts to play catch-up with the West, to reflecting the hardening of its grand strategy. Africa would set the scene for ramping up the testbed mindset most visibly insofar as China's security policy was concerned. This was most noticeable in the subfields of conflict mediation, peacekeeping, military training, China's physical security presence and security initiatives encompassing the African continent. Various 'firsts' come to mind here: China's role (2013) in helping to strike a temporary ceasefire in South Sudan; the deployment of its first combat troops to the UN peacekeeping mission in South Sudan (2015); the construction of the military training center in Tanzania (2018); the opening of its first overseas military base (2017) in Djibouti; the hosting of the first China-Africa Peace and Security Forum (2019). All of these examples are reflective of China's desire throughout this period to burnish its reputation as a rising power while bolstering its ability to project power overseas.

But this period matters because it marks in parallel the decline of Africa's significance to China's grand strategy. This can be observed, for instance, in terms of Africa's receding importance as a source of oil and gas imports. Where African oil and gas imports once mattered significantly during the Go-out era, African primary commodity partners have been serially dislodged during this succinct phase by other suppliers to the PRC.⁷¹ This state of affairs tallied with findings from a study by Zhang and others⁷² highlighting how flows of Chinese FDI to Africa are now increasingly moved to manufacturing sectors and non-resource-rich countries. According to some, this diversification of oil and gas supplies was rationalized by the need to reduce perceived over-dependence of China's commercial dealings in Africa around natural commodities has to do with infrastructure issues within these extractive industries and also more generally with domestic political problems afflicting the African continent.⁷³ Also accessing supply was less of an issue, temporarily at least, after the commodity 'price bust' of 2014. This period has also come to epitomize the consecration of Asia's

⁷⁰Benjamin Barton, *Political Trust and the Politics of Security Engagement: China and the European Union in Africa* (Routledge 2017); Benjamin Barton, 'China's Security Policy in Africa: A New or False Dawn for the Evolution of the Application of China's Non-Interference Principle?' [2018] *South African Journal of International Affairs* 413 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/10220461.2018.1526707>>.

⁷¹In the shape of Russia and exporters in the wider Middle East region; only two of its top 13 suppliers of oil and gas in 2023 came from Africa (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 'China Imported Record Amounts of Crude Oil in 2023' (16 April 2024) <<https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=61843#:~:text=Russia%2C%20Saudi%20Arabia%2C%20and%20Iraq,in%202023%20was%20from%20Russia>> accessed on 17 March 2025).

⁷²Qiyue Zhang, Zheng Wang & Godwin Okafor, 'Understanding China's Economic Engagement in Africa: An Exploration of the FDI-Trade Nexus' [2022] *Sustainability* 1 <<https://doi.org/10.3390/su142315632>>.

⁷³Zainab Usman & Xiaoyang Tang, 'How is China's Economic Transition Affecting its Relations with Africa?' (*Carnegie Endowment for Peace*, May 2024) <https://carnegie-production-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/static/files/Usman%20Xiaoyang_Africa%20China.pdf> accessed 17 March 2025.

centrality to China's grand strategy, where the 'struggle for mastery of Asia'⁷⁴ began to take shape both in terms of the weight afforded to the region—as much diplomatically as economically (when factoring in data on trade, investments and development assistance).⁷⁵ This reality has only further relegated the importance attributed to Africa in the scheme of China's grand strategy.

If Africa's positionality in China's grand strategy began to shift over the course of Xi's first term in power, its place has again undergone change in the post-Covid era. This has mainly been caused by the recent sequence of negative internalities and externalities referred to earlier that have hurt the Chinese economy and impacted the popularity of the party-state's leadership. The domestic economic crunch and contraction in the flow of FDI into China is already affecting aspects of its economic diplomacy in Africa. For instance, volumes of Chinese lending to Africa—which had been on a downward curve since 2016—were almost entirely phased out in subsequent years.⁷⁶ The chances of this lull constituting a temporary 'blip' have not been helped by the BRI's own turn from an emphasis on expanse to a preference for projects and financing of a more conservative and minimalist outlook. In fact, Chinese infrastructure investments in Africa have been on a pronounced downward curve.⁷⁷ Even if most of these reactions and counter-reactions have been primarily economically motivated,⁷⁸ they do nonetheless lend themselves to the sense of 'strategic overstretch'⁷⁹ alluded to by segments of the China grand strategy scholarship. However, Africa serves, as an important totemic or symbolic role as 'representative' of the Global South in international relations for China, in addition to being the continent with the most votes at the UN, which is important in a context of heightened geopolitical competition. This may partly explain why new investments, loans and aid totaling US \$50bn were announced at the 2024 FOCAC,⁸⁰ with a delivery action plan; although some of this is central bank swap lines to allow debts to continue to be serviced.⁸¹

What has also changed in comparison to earlier phases of Chinese grand strategy is Africa's geopolitical environment, again bringing us back to the salience of environmental factors. Whereas at the turn of the century Africa was anything but the scene of great power rivalry, of late it has regained traction with traditional ('West', Russia, Japan) and emerging powers alike (Gulf states, India, Brazil, South Korea, etc.) seeking to stake their claims for greater influence, for better or worse. Some of these other external powers have been drawn (back) to Africa partly as a means of balancing China, with the launch of the EU's 'Global Gateway' coming to mind.⁸² In any case, the environment in which China operates in Africa would appear to be growing more competitive, affording the PRC less margin for error and less room for policy testing/innovation.

This is where we subsequently recognize that Africa's days as a testbed have run its course. This finding can be observed not only across the contracting economic trends referred to above but also in relation to the lack of significant breakthroughs in other policy endeavors tied to the testbed era. Security policy is one such case in point. In spite of Carrozza's⁸³ assessment that China's presence in

⁷⁴Doshi.

⁷⁵Beeson.

⁷⁶Joe Bavier & Rachel Savage, 'Chinese Loans to Africa Plummet to Near Two-Decade Low—Study' (Reuters, 19 September 2023) <<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/chinese-loans-africa-plummet-near-two-decade-low-study-2023-09-19/>> accessed on 17 March 2025.

⁷⁷Jim Pollard, 'China Investing in Africa Again, Focus on Key Energy Minerals' (*Asia Financial*, 28 May 2024) <<https://www.asiafinancial.com/china-investing-in-africa-again-focus-on-key-energy-minerals>> accessed 17 March 2025.

⁷⁸Pádraig Carmody & Joel Wainwright, 'Contradiction and Restructuring in the Belt and Road Initiative: Reflections on China's Pause in the "Go World"' [2022] *Third World Quarterly* 2830 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2022.2110058>>.

⁷⁹Pu & Wang.

⁸⁰Linda Calabrese, 'FOCAC 2024: A Revival of China-Africa Relations' (*ODI Global*, 25 September 2024) <<https://odi.org/en/insights/focac-2024-a-revival-of-china-africa-relations/>> accessed on 17 March 2025.

⁸¹Duncan Miriri & Laurie Chen, 'China Stops Short of Africa Debt Relief as it Pledges More Cash' (Reuters, 7 September 2024) <<https://www.reuters.com/world/china-stops-short-africa-debt-relief-pledges-more-cash-2024-09-07/>> accessed on 17 March 2025.

⁸²Benjamin Barton, 'Building Bridges to Asia? A Critical Appraisal of the Global Gateway's Place in Southeast Asia's Complex Infrastructure Politics' in Sameer Kumar (ed) *Bridging Asia-Europe Relations* (Springer Nature 2025) (forthcoming).

⁸³Carrozza.

Africa has gradually been securitized from 2011 onward, and in spite of attempts to utilize peace and security as a fulcrum to substantiate the notion of the China-Africa 'Community of Common Destiny',⁸⁴ several recent studies have pointed to Beijing's seeming inability to convert its economic might in geostrategic terms. Barton's take of China as a 'peripheral figure'⁸⁵ in relation to the geopolitics of port investments in the Horn of Africa and Benabdallah's⁸⁶ think tank report on China's cautious approach to conflict mediation in the Sahel attests to this state of affairs. While multiple mitigating circumstances can be advanced to justify China's continued cautious posture on peace and security in Africa, the output from its decade of experimentation remains meagre.

In light of the above, in the short term at least, Africa is unlikely to undergo any significant shift from its place as a fringe recipient of the central impulses of Chinese grand strategy. This being said, there are signs that Africa's importance to China's grand strategy will need to be measured instead by select conjunctural contributions to its ongoing modernization drive, rather than in terms of its overarching relevance. The current investment push by Chinese firms for key rare earth minerals in Africa constitutes one such indicator of Africa's added-value in this sense.⁸⁷ This phenomenon is somewhat reminiscent of the PRC's oil and gas drive in Africa from the time of the Go-out era of China's grand strategy. However, the main difference between these phases lies in the strained geopolitical circumstances under which these investments are being made, given how—as outlined in the introduction—'network dominance' in tech currently sits at the heart of the strategic competition pitting 'the West' against China. This is what Beeson has termed China's 'evolving resource diplomacy'.⁸⁸ These investments now relate more to a strategy of self-sufficiency, lessening China's dependence on Western capital, innovation and software as well as gaining first-mover advantage in key sectors of the future (e.g. electric vehicles) than they have to do with national modernization or playing catch-up.⁸⁹

Conclusion

This article has set out to demonstrate that Chinese grand strategy does exist—indeed, Africa's evolving place within it is testament to its very existence—albeit not in accordance with the rigid interpretations afforded to it by realist scholars. Much like the work of Jones and Zeng⁹⁰ referred to in the introduction, by virtue of confirming the existence of this grand strategy, our study has shown that as a notion it can cohabit with a looser, disaggregated and heterogenous interpretation of it. Indeed, this article does highlight the centrality of the party-state in formulating, reassessing and executing grand strategy (coined by Carmody as 'webpower'⁹¹), much in line with realist expectations of it. However, as our findings have extrapolated, the party-state is only one of a slew of actors and factors involved in molding, shaping and feeding back into this grand strategy. Hence, our postulate that grand strategy is reactive, recursive and reflexive in nature. As our example of Africa's place within it has shown the agency of local elites, the constraining or facilitating contributions of third parties, the shifting interests of non-state actors (in this case, Chinese SOEs, policy banks, investors, etc.) on top of the dynamics of the African geopolitical environment, all feature as essential moving parts of the broader machinery of Chinese grand strategy.

If this understanding of grand strategy emphasizes the essence of adopting a reading of it that is anything but static, then what our article has also set out to do is apply this line of reasoning to deciphering Africa's place within it. By doing so, we have in parallel gone against the grain of the

⁸⁴Eisenman.

⁸⁵Benjamin Barton, *The Doraleh Disputes: Infrastructure Politics in the Global South* (Palgrave Macmillan 2022).

⁸⁶Lina Benabdallah, 'China's Conflict Resolution and Mediation Approach in Mali' (*Stimson Center*, 26 January 2024) <<https://www.stimson.org/2024/china-conflict-resolution-and-mediation-in-mali/>> accessed 17 March 2025.

⁸⁷Pollard.

⁸⁸Beeson.

⁸⁹Wang & Zou; Nantulya.

⁹⁰Jones & Zeng.

⁹¹Carmody.

overtly developmentalist lens of China-Africa scholarship, which has largely overlooked global politics and grand strategy debates. Otherwise said, Africa's positionality has remained a constant feature of China's grand strategy, despite the continuous evolution of its significance over time, from a greater degree of centrality to a more pronounced peripherality in relation to Africa's importance to the modernization mission at the core of the party-state's *raison d'être*. This is best observed comparatively from the Go-out era of China's grand strategy—where supplies of primary commodities from Africa featured more prominently as part of China's drive to play catch-up with the rest of the industrialized world—than it does now (the exception of offering a viable alternative to Western supplies of critical minerals notwithstanding). With time, Africa's lessening degree of importance to the PRC's modernization drive has indeed become more acute but as this study has often acknowledged, Africa's place in China's grand strategy is very much reactive, recursive and reflexive.

Where Africa once mattered more economically, its strategic salience has shifted. It garnered eminence as a space for policy entrepreneurship away from the conventional expectations of Chinese foreign and security policy behavior toward policy innovations, which potentially suggested a new dawn of China's grand strategy in line with Beijing's desire to assume a more assertive posture in world affairs. This is what ushered in the advent of the testbed era, which was largely contingent on the existence of a permissive geopolitical environment (generated by local African elite receptiveness and enhanced by general Western disinterest in African affairs). This being said, the testbed era of Africa's place in China's grand strategy has come full circle. With the gradual hardening of the said grand strategy brought upon by the age of strategic competition between the West and the PRC, the negative post-Covid domestic outlook and the current austerity of international affairs conditioning China's rise, Africa's place is again undergoing change. Although the testbed era is no more, thus further consolidating Africa's peripheral role in China's grand strategy, the continent's value-added is likely to be measured more by its contributions against the backdrop of the West and China's attempts to vie for tech supremacy in the roll-out of economies of the future. Therefore, against these circumstances, a peripheral role should not necessarily be understood as an unimportant one.

For all of the sporadic, context-sensitive and evolutionary nature of Africa's place in China's grand strategy, the recurrent theme of the continent as an 'exploited space' remains and this regardless of the solidarity narrative opportunistically wheeled out by Beijing; designed to generate solidarity on the basis of the shared critique of the asymmetries and inequalities of the existing international order.⁹² Instead, Africa continued to play a subordinate role as a facilitator of China's modernization drive and accruing international power status across each of the three time-periods comprising our above assessment. This is reflected differently across each of the three phases (whether the emphasis is on natural resource accumulation or on peace and security policy innovation) but nevertheless remains a constant. This leads us on to our final observation that putting the rhetoric of solidarity aside, China's grand strategy concept serves to further ensconce Africa's place within a conventional power hierarchy between itself and the PRC,⁹³ where the growing asymmetry of power has clearly been favoring the latter to the relative detriment of the former, even as it has awakened renewed Western interest in the continent. Fittingly, it is this state of affairs which pre-emptively led to Alden & Lu to describe this as the 'new normal',⁹⁴ prior to the actual onset of post-Covid China-Africa relations.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to Tim Zajontz and Ricardo Reboredo for their comments.

⁹²Yu; Carrozza.

⁹³Chris Alden & Lu Jiang, 'Brave New World: Debt, Industrialization and Security in China-Africa Relations' [2019] *International Affairs* 641 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz083>>; Eisenman.

⁹⁴Alden & Lu.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Benjamin Barton  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8167-4872>

Data Availability Statement

Data used in this article is available from public domain resources (see references).

Research Ethics and Consent

No human participants were involved in this study.