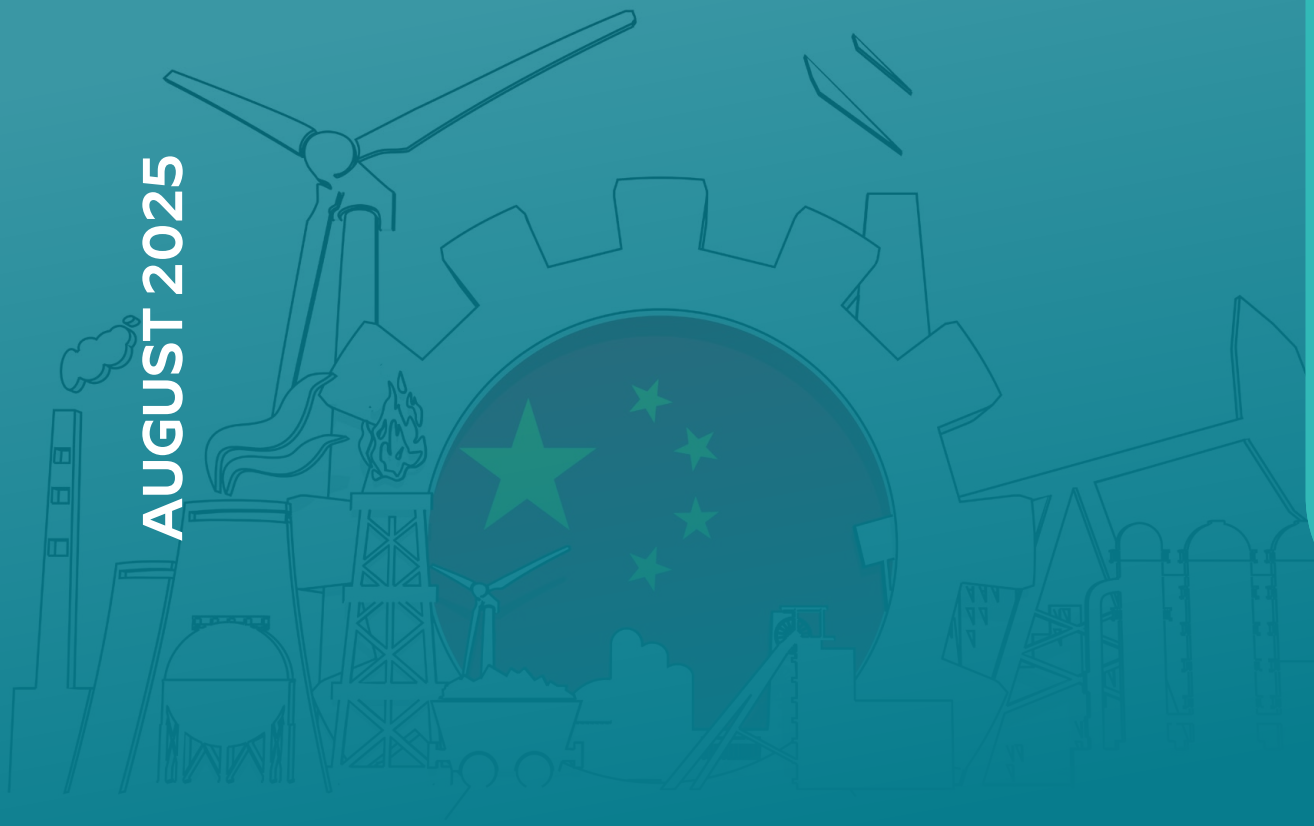

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POLICY PAPER

CHINESE ENERGY SECURITY: AFRICA'S OPPORTUNITY FOR A NEW DEVELOPMENT BOOST

MARCUS VINÍCIUS DE FREITAS

POLICY CENTER FOR THE NEW SOUTH

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China's ascent to the position of the world's most prominent energy consumer has altered global energy markets and fundamentally reshaped the geopolitics of energy security. As China navigates the complexities of sustaining its economic momentum, ensuring access to reliable, affordable, and diversified energy sources has become an existential imperative, intricately woven into its foreign policy strategy. In parallel, Africa's immense wealth of both conventional and renewable resources, coupled with its drive toward industrialization and sustainable development, presents a remarkable opportunity for a transformative partnership.

This Policy Paper explores the strategic intersection between China's energy imperatives and Africa's developmental aspirations. It argues for a relational cooperation model that transcends a narrow transactional approach, and champions an inclusive, sustainable, and future-oriented partnership.

Historically characterized by overseas investments in oilfields, critical infrastructure, and renewable energy projects, China's engagement is examined against Africa's chronic energy poverty and industrialization needs. China can enhance its energy security and gain access to Africa's abundant energy resources. At the same time, Africa can accelerate its progress towards the goals enshrined in Agenda 2063, improve its energy infrastructure, and boost its industrialization.

However, the partnership is not without significant risks. Issues of debt sustainability, environmental and social governance, and political instability threaten to undermine the transformational potential of China–Africa energy cooperation. Accordingly, this Policy Paper stresses the imperative for transparent, inclusive, and sustainable modes of engagement, advocating for stronger environmental stewardship, enhanced local capacity-building, and greater alignment with Africa's regional integration agendas. This emphasis on transparency and sustainability is crucial to building confidence in the partnership.

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INTRODUCTION

Energy security has long been recognized as a fundamental pillar that underpins national development, economic stability, and strategic autonomy. For China, a nation that has made the most rapid and expansive economic transformation in human history, ensuring secure, reliable, and diversified energy supplies has assumed an existential significance. The unprecedented economic ascent that has lifted over 800 million Chinese citizens out of poverty, and propelled the nation to the forefront of global economic leadership, is tied inextricably to sustained access to energy resources.

However, this success has brought with it heightened vulnerabilities. China's once-vaunted aspiration for energy self-sufficiency—a hallmark of Maoist autarkic policies[1]—has gradually given way to structural dependency as the scale of industrialization has outpaced domestic resource endowments. As early as 1993, China transitioned from a net exporter to a net importer of oil, a trend that has only deepened with time. By 2023, more than 70% of China's oil consumption and nearly half of its natural gas needs were met through imports, increasing exposure to global market fluctuations, supply chain disruptions, and geopolitical risks. The strategic anxiety that has followed on from this dependency was starkly captured by former President Hu Jintao's articulation of the "Malacca Dilemma"[2], underscoring the fragility of China's critical maritime supply lines.

Against this backdrop, Africa has assumed a strategic prominence in China's global energy calculus. Africa is rich in conventional and renewable energy resources, and offers a unique convergence of opportunity and necessity. Possessing approximately 7.3% of the world's proven oil reserves, and 7.6% of its natural gas reserves[3]—not to mention abundant solar, wind, hydroelectric, and geothermal potential—Africa promises to help China diversify its energy portfolio while advancing its industrial aspirations, infrastructure modernization, and socio-economic transformation.

Nevertheless, the opportunity is not without complexity. Africa's energy landscape is paradoxical: while endowed with vast resources, the continent remains afflicted by chronic energy poverty, with over 600 million people lacking access to electricity[4]. This energy deficit impedes economic development, exacerbates social inequalities, and undermines prospects for sustainable growth. Therefore, China's engagement must be framed in terms of securing its energy interests while contributing meaningfully to Africa's broader developmental objectives.

A new approach to the China-Africa relationship is thus imperative. President Xi Jinping, speaking at the opening ceremony of the 2018 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) Beijing Summit, emphasized that "*China follows a 'five-no' approach in its relations with Africa: no interference in African countries' pursuit of development paths that fit their national conditions; no interference in*

1. Maoist autarkic policies refer to the economic doctrine pursued by the People's Republic of China under Mao Zedong, particularly during the 1950s to 1970s, when the country sought to achieve comprehensive self-sufficiency and to minimize dependence on foreign powers. See, Naughton, Barry. The Chinese Economy: Transitions and Growth. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007.

2. The Malacca Dilemma refers to a critical Chinese geostrategic vulnerability, stemming from its heavy reliance on the Strait of Malacca—a narrow and congested maritime chokepoint situated between Malaysia and Indonesia, through which approximately 80% of China's crude oil imports and a substantial portion of its trade transit.

3.BP, Statistical Review of World Energy 2023 (London: BP, 2023), accessed September 2023, https://www.bp.com/statisticalreview. Africa's proven oil reserves are 125 billion barrels (7.3% of the global 1.7 trillion barrels), while natural gas reserves total 16 trillion cubic meters (7.6% of the global 210 trillion cubic meters).

4. See International Energy Agency, Africa Energy Outlook 2022 (Paris: IEA, 2022), https://www.iea.org/reports/africa-energy-outlook-2022.

African countries' internal affairs; no imposition of our will on African countries; no attachment of political strings to assistance to Africa; and no seeking of Iselfish political gains in investment and financing cooperation with Africa[5].I This declaration underscores a diplomatic ethos predicated on respect, mutual benefit, and partnership, rather than paternalism or domination.

African leaders have echoed similar sentiments. Such calls reflect a growing consciousness within Africa that its countries should assert agency, shape development narratives, and ensure that external engagements align with continental priorities, such as those articulated in the African Union's Agenda 2063[6].

The China–African energy partnership must be elevated beyond transactional exchanges to a holistic, sustainable, and inclusive cooperation framework. If grounded in genuine collaboration, environmental stewardship, and capacity-building, the China–Africa energy nexus can catalyze a profound transformation, not only securing energy supplies for China and industrial opportunities for Africa, but also redefining the contours of global energy governance towards greater equity, resilience, and sustainability.

I. CHINESE ENERGY SECURITY IMPERATIVE

1.1. From Autarky to Interdependence: A Historical Shift

The pursuit of energy self-sufficiency, a cornerstone of China's strategic thinking, has a rich historical significance. Under the leadership of Mao Zedong, the concept of autarky was synonymous with national strength. Energy policies were inward-looking, primarily exploiting domestic coal reserves and hydroelectric potential to fuel industrial development. The ideology of self-reliance, encapsulated in the slogan "自力更生" (zìlì gēngshēng)[7], was a testament to China's determination to never be vulnerable to foreign coercion through resource dependence.

However, the seismic shifts initiated by Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Opening-Up policies in 1978 fundamentally reshaped China's economic trajectory and energy paradigm. The rapid industrialization, urbanization, and economic expansion that followed created an insatiable energy demand that domestic resources could no longer satisfy. By 1993, China had become a net oil importer for the first time, marking a critical inflexion point in the country's energy history.

Since then there has been a staggering expansion in energy consumption. China's primary energy consumption quadrupled between 1990 and 2010, and by 2011, it had overtaken the United States

5. Xi Jinping. "Full Text of Chinese President Xi Jinping's Speech at Opening Ceremony of 2018 FOCAC Beijing Summit." Xinhua, 3 September, 2018. https://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-09/03/c_137441987.htm.

6. Agenda 2063 is the African Union's 50-year strategic framework for inclusive growth, sustainable development, and continental integration, formally adopted in January 2015 during the 24th Assembly of Heads of State and Government. It outlines a vision for "an integrated, prosperous, and peaceful Africa, driven by its citizens and representing a dynamic force in the global arena," structured around seven aspirations: (1) inclusive prosperity and sustainable development, (2) political unity through Pan-Africanism, (3) good governance and human rights, (4) peace and security, (5) cultural identity and heritage, (6) people-driven development, and (7) Africa as a global influencer. The First Ten-Year Implementation Plan (2014–2023) supported the framework, detailing specific goals and initiatives. See African Union Commission, Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want (Addis Ababa: African Union Commission, 2015), https://au.int/en/agenda2063/overview.

7. The concept of zìlì gēngshēng (自力更生), or 'self-reliance', has been central to China's development strategy since the Maoist era. In contemporary China, the principle has been revived under Xi Jinping, especially amid rising geopolitical tensions, as a call for technological self-sufficiency and strategic resilience. See Barry Naughton, The Chinese Economy: Adaptation and Growth, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018), 423–425.

as the world's largest energy consumer. This transformation entrenched a structural dependency on global energy markets and introduced new vulnerabilities, particularly in relation to supply routes and geopolitical stability.

President Hu Jintao's articulation of the "*Malacca Dilemma*" in the early 2000s underscored the strategic anxiety stemming from China's reliance on vulnerable maritime chokepoints. The situation was high-risk, with nearly 80% of China's oil imports passing through the Strait of Malacca, a narrow waterway susceptible to blockade or disruption. This realization catalyzed a profound recalibration of Chinese foreign and security policy, with energy security elevated to a central place in the nation's grand strategy.

1.2. The Evolution of China's Energy

Diversification Strategies

In response to mounting vulnerabilities, successive Chinese administrations have pursued a multifaceted energy diversification strategy, combining diplomacy, investment, technology development, and infrastructure expansion.

China's energy strategy increasingly prioritizes overland pipelines to reduce reliance on maritime chokepoints such as the Strait of Malacca. Central to this effort are initiatives such as the China-Central Asia Gas Pipeline (operational since 2009), which channels natural gas from Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan, and the Power of Siberia (launched in 2019), a landmark China-Russian pipeline that supplies northeastern China with Russian gas. These corridors strengthen China's natural gas security and serve broader geopolitical objectives: they embed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) deeper into Central Asia—a region historically influenced by Russia—and foster growing energy interdependence with Moscow, which has reoriented towards Asian markets in the wake of post-2014 Western sanctions.

Nevertheless, overland routes address only part of China's energy vulnerability. Most of its oil imports—sourced primarily from the Middle East and Africa—remain maritime, and pipelines also have risks: protracted price negotiations with Russia, political instability in transit countries (e.g. Kazakhstan's 2022 unrest), and entanglement in sanctions regimes affecting partners such as Russia. In pursuit of further diversification, China has also advanced alternatives such as the China-Myanmar pipelines and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). However, these face persistent security and logistical constraints. Ultimately, while overland infrastructure enhances China's strategic footprint across Eurasia and reduces direct exposure to maritime bottlenecks, it highlights a delicate balancing act: regional partnerships must be leveraged to strengthen autonomy, while China remains enmeshed in the uncertainties of global energy markets and shifting geopolitical currents.

An aggressive overseas investment strategy has complemented these efforts. Chinese national oil companies (NOCs), including Sinopec, CNOOC, and CNPC, have acquired stakes in oil and gas fields across Central Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. Sinopec's investments in Angola and Sudan, CNPC's ventures in Kazakhstan, and CNOOC's stakes in Nigeria exemplify Beijing's commitment to securing energy supplies through equity acquisitions.

The maritime domain has also witnessed significant Chinese activism under the BRI framework. China has financed and developed key ports and naval infrastructure projects across the Indian Ocean, from Gwadar in Pakistan to Hambantota in Sri Lanka, and Lamu in Kenya. Though often portrayed as trade facilitation and development, these projects also serve strategic energy-security objectives, providing alternative routes and refueling hubs that enhance the resilience of China's supply chains.

Simultaneously, China has embarked on a domestic renewable energy revolution. As part of its efforts to transition towards a cleaner and more sustainable energy mix, the country has become the world leader in solar, wind, hydroelectric, and nuclear power investment. According to the International Energy Agency, China accounted for nearly half of global renewable energy capacity additions in 2022. This domestic push mitigates external dependencies and also positions China as a worldwide leader in the technologies of the energy transition[8].

President Xi Jinping's 2020 announcement at the United Nations General Assembly that China aims to achieve carbon neutrality by 2060 illustrates the strategic intertwining of energy security and climate leadership. The dual imperatives of ensuring energy resilience while responding to the global climate challenge now sit at the heart of China's development model.

1.3. Africa's Emerging Role in China's Energy Calculus

Against this backdrop, Africa has become increasingly prominent in China's energy diversification strategy. Africa offers a source of hydrocarbons and an avenue for renewable energy collaboration, infrastructure development, and diplomatic engagement.

Several features characterize China's energy investments in Africa. First, they are often embedded within broader development cooperation frameworks, encompassing infrastructure, education, and healthcare, fostering goodwill and interdependence. Second, Chinese engagement typically does not impose governance reform conditions, distinguishing it from traditional Western donor models. Third, Chinese firms frequently adopt a 'package deal' approach, combining investment in energy extraction with commitments to develop ancillary infrastructure such as roads, ports, and power plants.

In Angola, for example, Chinese loans backed by oil revenues have financed post-war reconstruction efforts, rebuilding vital infrastructure devastated during decades of conflict. In Sudan and South Sudan, Chinese investments have been instrumental in developing the nascent oil industries, although these ventures are not without controversy, given the complex political environments. CNOOC and other Chinese companies in Nigeria have expanded their stakes in offshore oil blocks while participating in refinery construction and downstream activities.

The renewable energy sector is also emerging as a significant frontier. Projects such as the Garissa Solar Plant in Kenya—the largest grid-connected solar power plant in East Africa, built by China Jiangxi Corporation—and Chinese collaboration in Ethiopia's hydroelectric sector, illustrate a gradual diversification beyond hydrocarbons.

8. See International Energy Agency, Renewables 2022: Analysis and Forecast to 2027 (Paris: IEA, 2022), https://www.iea.org/reports/renewables-2022.

Thus, Africa's strategic value to China lies in its abundant resources and potential as a partner in shaping a new, more multipolar, and equitable global energy order.

II. AFRICA'S ENERGY POTENTIAL AND STRATEGIC RELEVANCE

2.1. The Continent of Untapped Promise

Africa's abundant natural resources have long been a subject of global fascination and strategic interest. The continent's energy endowments are formidable, accounting for approximately 7.1% of the world's proven oil reserves and 7.6% of its natural gas reserves. Africa also has extraordinary renewable energy potential, including some of the world's highest solar irradiation levels, substantial wind corridors, vast hydroelectric prospects, and promising geothermal fields, particularly within the East African Rift Valley system. This wealth of resources suggests a promising future for Africa's energy sector.

However, this immense wealth exists alongside a stark, persistent reality: energy poverty. According to the International Energy Agency, over 600 million Africans—roughly half the continent's population—still lack access to electricity. The paradox is profound: Africa is rich in resources but poor in access, a structural deficit that holds back industrialization, constrains economic growth, exacerbates social inequality, and undermines prospects for achieving the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. This urgent issue requires immediate attention and concerted efforts from all stakeholders.

The disparity is not merely a technical challenge but a developmental emergency. Energy access underpins every aspect of socio-economic progress, from healthcare and education to industry and innovation. Without reliable, affordable, and sustainable energy, African nations cannot fully unlock their demographic dividends, realize their industrial ambitions, or achieve the transformative vision articulated in the African Union's Agenda 2063.

The scale of Africa's untapped energy potential is staggering. It is estimated that Africa's theoretical solar energy resources are sufficient to meet the world's current energy demand, which has increased many times. The Inga Dam in the Democratic Republic of Congo alone, if fully developed, could generate nearly 40 gigawatts of electricity, equivalent to two-thirds of Africa's current total installed capacity. Realizing this potential could transform Africa's energy landscape and contribute significantly to meeting global energy needs. Unlocking this potential is essential for Africa's autonomy, resilience, and equitable integration into the global economy.

2.2. China's Role in Africa's Energy Landscape

Recognizing the strategic significance and developmental urgency of Africa's energy challenges, China has emerged as a major partner for the continent's energy sector. Its engagement has been characterized by pragmatism, ambition, and responsiveness to Africa's articulated needs.

Unlike traditional Western models, often associated with extractive practices and asymmetrical power dynamics, Chinese energy diplomacy in Africa has sought to embody the principles of South-South cooperation. This term describes the exchange of resources, technology, and

knowledge between developing countries, focusing on mutual benefit, respect for sovereignty, and a commitment to infrastructure-led development.

Several landmark projects exemplify China's growing energy footprint in Africa:

- In Angola, Chinese oil-backed loans—totaling more than $42 billion between 2004 and 2018—have financed energy-related infrastructure and post-conflict reconstruction efforts, including roads, railways, hospitals, and public buildings. Oil shipments typically repay these loans, forging a resource-for-infrastructure model emblematic of early China–Africa economic relations[9].
- Chinese enterprises have been instrumental in developing the Lekki Free Trade Zone, a joint venture between Chinese and Nigerian stakeholders in Nigeria. While the Dangote Refinery—Africa's largest—is primarily financed by the Dangote Group itself, Chinese construction firms (e.g. Civil Engineering Construction Corporation, CCECC) and banks have engaged in supporting infrastructure around the zone. The financing link is indirect rather than Chinese-led[10].
- In Kenya, the 55 MW Garissa Solar Power Plant, built by the China Jiangxi Corporation for International Economic and Technical Cooperation, and commissioned in 2019, remains the largest grid-connected solar plant in East and Central Africa. It supplies energy to tens of thousands of households and is a flagship of China-Kenya green energy cooperation[11].
- In Ethiopia, while the Gibe III Dam was principally constructed by Salini Impregilo (Italy) and primarily funded by the Ethiopian government and international lenders, Chinese firms (such as Sinohydro) were involved in associated transmission infrastructure and hydropower projects elsewhere, including the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, and Tekeze Hydropower Plant[12].

Beyond hydrocarbons, China's engagement in Africa's renewable energy sector has accelerated significantly. Chinese companies are key players in solar PV installations and hydropower development, and are increasingly active in geothermal and wind energy projects, particularly in countries such as Kenya, Ethiopia, and Morocco.

President Xi Jinping said at the 2015 Johannesburg Summit of the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation—a high-level meeting that brings together leaders from China and African countries to discuss and promote cooperation—that "China will work with Africa to implement 10 major cooperation plans, including plans for green development". This signaled a broadening of China's developmental vision beyond mere resource acquisition toward a more holistic, environmentally conscious partnership[13].

9. Lucy Corkin, China's Impact on Sub-Saharan Africa: Country Case Studies, African Development Bank, 2013.

10. Uche Igwe, "China's Growing Influence in Nigeria's Oil Sector," The Conversation, 2019.

11. Republic of Kenya, Ministry of Energy, "Garissa Solar Plant Commissioning Report," 2019.

12. David H. Shinn and Joshua Eisenman, China and Africa: A Century of Engagement (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

13. Xi, Jinping. "Open a New Era of China-Africa Win-Win Cooperation and Common Development." Speech, Johannesburg Summit of the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation, Johannesburg, South Africa, 4 December, 2015. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. See https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/jj/2015zt/xjpffgcxqhbhbldhdjbbwnfjxgsfwbfnfyhnsbzczfhzltfh/202406/t20240606_11381218.html.

2.3. Strategic Alignment with Africa's Development Aspirations

China's engagement in Africa's energy sector is taking place within a broader continental framework that is defined increasingly by African agencies and strategic vision. The Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa, launched by the African Union and the African Development Bank, prioritizes energy as a key pillar of continental integration and development. Similarly, the Africa Energy Market Place initiative seeks to accelerate energy investment and reform by fostering high-level dialogue between governments, investors, and development partners.

Africa's Agenda 2063—the continent's strategic blueprint for inclusive growth and sustainable development—identifies universal access to affordable, reliable, and modern energy services as essential to achieving its broader socio-economic goals. Pillar projects such as the Continental Power System Master Plan and the Africa Renewable Energy Initiative aim to catalyze the continent's energy transformation.

China's support for these efforts is not merely rhetorical. Through mechanisms such as the FOCAC Action Plans and the BRI, China has increasingly aligned its engagements with Africa's priorities. The emphasis on infrastructure connectivity, industrialization, and technology transfer, complements Africa's developmental frameworks.

Moreover, China's willingness to finance high-risk, capital-intensive projects—often deemed unattractive by Western financiers—has enabled progress in sectors and regions previously sidelined. By extending concessional loans, offering blended finance packages, and providing technical expertise, China has contributed to expanding Africa's energy infrastructure base, albeit with legitimate concerns about debt sustainability and environmental standards, which must be diligently addressed.

2.4. China-Africa Nuclear Energy Cooperation

In the quest for long-term energy security, African nations should also explore deeper cooperation with China on nuclear energy. China has established itself as a global leader in capacity and technological innovation.

As of mid-2024, China operates 58 nuclear reactors with a total installed capacity of approximately 60.8 gigawatts (GW), ranking third globally in operational capacity behind the United States (around 95 GW), and France (around 61.4 GW). The country also has 27 reactors under construction, adding 32.31 GW to its nuclear power infrastructure. This expansion solidifies China's position as the world's most active builder of atomic energy projects, with its operational capacity poised to overtake France's in the near term as new reactors come online[14].

Moreover, the recent approval of ten new nuclear power units on April 2025—involving an investment of approximately $27 billion—underscores Beijing's strategic commitment to nuclear energy as a central pillar of its domestic energy policy and international energy diplomacy.

14. Reuters, "China Approves Building of 10 New Nuclear Power Units for $27 Billion," 28 April, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/boards-policy-regulation/china-approves-building-10-new-nuclear-power-units-27-billion-2025-04-28/.

Particularly notable about China's approach is the emphasis on homegrown innovation, exemplified by its flagship third-generation reactor, the Hualong One[15], which has been successfully deployed domestically and abroad.

For African nations, many of which face structural energy deficits, erratic supply, and overreliance on weather-dependent renewables or volatile fossil-fuel imports, incorporating civil nuclear energy into their long-term strategies offers energy stability and the foundations for broader industrialization. Herein lies the promise of China-Africa collaboration: through technology transfer, infrastructure financing, and capacity building, African states can gradually acquire the institutional and technical expertise necessary to develop and manage peaceful nuclear energy programs aligned with international safety standards.

Furthermore, such cooperation fits within the broader context of Agenda 2063, particularly its vision of a modern, integrated, and sustainable African energy grid. Nuclear power, with its high-capacity factor and long operational lifespan, could serve as a stabilizing backbone for energy-hungry economies seeking to leapfrog to the next stage of development.

China's BRI—increasingly aligned with green and digital agendas—offers the logistical and financial architecture through which such ambitions might be realized.

Beyond generation, collaboration could also extend to fuel-cycle services, waste management, and the development of nuclear research centers and medical applications, thereby fostering a holistic ecosystem of atomic competence. In a multipolar world marked by shifting alliances and energy insecurity, an African embrace of civil nuclear development—supported by China—would not merely be a technical choice but a civilizational statement: a declaration of autonomy, modernity, and future orientation.

III. GEOPOLITICAL ASPECTS OF CHINA–AFRICA ENERGY COOPERATION

3.1. The Reconfiguration of Global Energy Geopolitics

The twenty-first century has witnessed an unmistakable reconfiguration of global energy geopolitics. No longer merely the domain of traditional Western actors, strategic competition over energy resources, markets, and influence, has spread to encompass emerging powers, with China at the forefront. Nowhere is this shift more palpable than in Africa, where energy cooperation has become entangled with broader geopolitical rivalries and the struggle for influence.

China's growing presence in Africa's energy sector—once mainly perceived through the lens of South-South solidarity—is increasingly scrutinized by established and emerging powers. The United States, through initiatives such as Power Africa and Prosper Africa, has sought to reassert its influence on the continent. The European Union, India, Turkey, and the Gulf states have also

15. The Hualong One (HPR1000) is a Generation III pressurized water reactor designed and developed jointly by China National Nuclear Corporation and China General Nuclear Power Group. Each Hualong One unit has an installed capacity of approximately 1,150–1,175 megawatts electric (MWe) and can generate nearly 10 billion kilowatt-hours of electricity annually. The reactor marks a milestone in China's transition to domestically developed nuclear technology. See China Atomic Energy Authority, "World's First Hualong One Reactor Put into Commercial Operation," 30 January 2021, https://www.caea.gov.cn/english/n6759361/n6759362/c6811183/content.html.

intensified their engagements, each advancing competing development partnership visions.

Africa, with its abundant yet underexploited energy resources, emerging middle class, and strategic maritime routes, represents both an opportunity and a theater of contestation. Consequently, China's energy cooperation with Africa cannot be analyzed in isolation; it is part of a broader recalibration of global power relationships, in which access to resources, markets, and influence are as critical as the traditional metrics of military or financial might.

3.2. China's Diplomatic Ethos: Non-interference and Long-Term Partnership

One of the hallmarks distinguishing China's approach to Africa has been its diplomatic ethos of non-interference. Reaffirmed by President Xi Jinping at multiple Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) summits, the principle is encapsulated in the *"five-no: no interference in African countries' pursuit of development paths that fit their national conditions; no interference in African countries' internal affairs; no imposition of our will on African countries; no attachment of political strings to assistance to Africa; and no seeking of selfish political gains in investment and financing cooperation with Africa".*

This diplomatic stance has resonated strongly with many African governments, which are wary of the conditions historically attached to Western aid and investment. As President Uhuru Kenyatta of Kenya said during the 2018 FOCAC Summit, Chinese policies toward Africa demonstrate equality, respect, and support for aspirations[16].

Beyond non-interference, China's engagement is marked by an emphasis on long-term partnership rather than short-term extraction. Energy projects are frequently bundled with infrastructure development—including roads, ports, and power transmission networks—fostering a perception of integrated, mutually reinforcing development.

Moreover, Chinese investment often targets sectors that external actors neglect because of perceived political risks or low profitability. By financing projects in fragile states or underdeveloped regions, China positions itself as a strategic partner and an enabler of development where others hesitate to tread.

3.3. Challenges and Criticisms: Between Opportunity and Vulnerability

Despite these strengths, the China–Africa energy partnership is not immune to significant challenges and criticism. The most pressing concerns can be categorized into three interrelated domains: debt sustainability, environmental and social governance, and fears of strategic overdependence.

Debt Sustainability: Chinese financing of energy infrastructure has, in some cases, exacerbated debt vulnerability. Countries such as Angola, Zambia, and Ethiopia have faced mounting debt-servicing pressures, prompting concerns about the long-term sustainability of Chinese-led financing

16. "Exclusive: A Conversation with President Uhuru Kenyatta." CGTN Africa, 15 June, 2023. https://africa.cgtn.com/exclusive-a-conversation-with-president-uhuru-kenyatta/.

models. Although China has increasingly participated in multilateral debt-relief initiatives, including the G20 Common Framework, criticisms persist about the opacity of loan agreements, and the potential for political leverage arising from debt distress.

Environmental and Social Governance: Some Chinese energy projects in Africa have been criticized for insufficient ecological impact assessments, displacement of local communities, and insufficient consultation with affected stakeholders. As African civil societies grow more assertive and environmentally conscious, the demand has intensified for higher governance standards in energy investments. The extent to which Chinese enterprises can adapt to these evolving expectations will significantly shape their future legitimacy in Africa.

Strategic Overdependence: This term refers to the risk of Africa becoming overly reliant on China for its energy infrastructure. While Chinese investment has filled critical infrastructure gaps, an overconcentration of projects funded, built, and operated by Chinese entities could undermine Africa's diversification strategies, technological autonomy, and bargaining power.

These challenges are not insurmountable, but they demand immediate and earnest attention. Failure to address them promptly risks eroding the goodwill painstakingly cultivated over decades, and could reinforce narratives that portray Chinese engagement as neo-colonial rather than emancipatory.

3.4. The Rise of African Agency

The rise of African agency is not a passive variable in this evolving geopolitical landscape but an increasingly assertive force. African leaders, institutions, and civil society are more determined than ever to shape the terms of engagement with external partners, including China. This shift in power dynamics is reshaping the China-Africa energy partnership.

The African Union's Agenda 2063, regional initiatives such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), and national development strategies increasingly articulate clear energy, industrialization, and sustainable development priorities. African negotiators also demonstrate greater sophistication in securing technology-transfer clauses, local content requirements, and environmental safeguards within major projects.

African development should follow strategic and not transactional objectives. This is where the Chinese presence in Africa can enjoy a plausible opportunity. By recalibrating from a model of project-driven engagement to one that is genuinely partnership-driven, Chinese investment will match more closely with African strategic visions.

3.5. Towards a Multipolar Energy Order

Ultimately, the China–Africa energy partnership must be understood in the context of the gradual emergence of a more multipolar, diverse, and contested global energy order. This term refers to a worldwide energy landscape in which traditional centers of energy demand and investment are shifting, new players are emerging, and the contours of influence are shaped increasingly by soft power, development finance, and technology leadership.

In this evolving landscape, China and Africa can craft a new template for international cooperation

that privileges mutual empowerment, sustainability, and resilience. If they succeed, their partnership could be a bilateral success story, and a foundational pillar of a more equitable global order, bringing about a future of shared prosperity and mutual respect.

The challenge lies not only in building energy infrastructure but in building trust, shared prosperity, and a vision of development that genuinely serves the peoples of both Africa and China—and the broader international community. These values are the bedrock of successful international relations and must be prioritized in the China-Africa energy partnership.

IV. CHALLENGES TO BE ADDRESSED

4.1. Debt Sustainability and Financial Governance

One of the most pressing challenges facing the China–Africa energy partnership is debt sustainability. While Chinese financing has undeniably facilitated critical infrastructure development across Africa, it has also contributed to growing debt burdens in several countries. According to the African Development Bank, Africa's total external debt reached approximately $1.152 trillion by the end of 2023, up from $1.1 trillion in 2022.

This increase is attributed to borrowing from multilateral institutions, private creditors, and bilateral lenders. While China remains the most significant bilateral creditor, accounting for about 12% of Africa's external debt, most is owed to multilateral organizations including the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and private bondholders[17].

Chinese loans, often tied to infrastructure projects and sometimes collateralized with natural resources, have raised concerns about debt sustainability, especially in the context of rising global interest rates and post-pandemic economic strains. The exact figures for Chinese debt remain uncertain because of opaque lending terms, and non-public reporting by some borrowers.

Countries such as Angola and Ethiopia have faced mounting debt-servicing pressures, with energy-related loans comprising a significant share of their obligations. Angola's debt service is projected to consume a substantial portion of its fiscal revenues, which are heavily tied to oil income. Ethiopia's debt has been deemed unsustainable by the IMF, primarily because of extensive borrowing for infrastructure projects, including energy. Zambia, the first African nation to default on sovereign debt during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, exemplifies the risks associated with opaque lending terms and overreliance on resource-backed borrowing, further strained by global economic shocks.

Critics argue that opaque terms characterize some Chinese loans, while project risk assessments are insufficient and do not align with national development strategies. While Beijing has demonstrated flexibility, through mechanisms such as debt restructuring and participation in the G20 Common Framework for Debt Treatments, concerns persist about the long-term fiscal implications of Chinese-financed projects.

For the China–Africa energy partnership to remain credible and sustainable, robust financial

17. African Development Bank Group. Annual Meetings 2024: Old Debt Resolution for African Countries a Cornerstone for Reforming Global Financial Architecture. May 2024. See https://www.afdb.org/en/news-and-events/annual-meetings-2024-old-debt-resolution-african-countries-cornerstone-reforming-global-financial-architecture-70791.

governance must be prioritized. This entails:

- Conducting comprehensive cost-benefit analyses for all energy projects.
- Ensuring that energy-related borrowing is closely aligned with national development plans and debt management frameworks.
- Promoting transparency by disclosing to the public and legislative bodies the terms and conditions of loan agreements.
- Strengthening domestic institutions responsible for debt management, oversight, and accountability.

Therefore, sound governance is essential to prevent energy investments in Africa from becoming significant liabilities, and not catalysts for growth, progress, and development.

By complying with such financial governance requirements, China can decisively counter the prevailing narratives advanced by Western actors that portray its engagement in Africa as opaque, extractive, or neo-imperialist. Crucially, this enhancement in governance standards need not come at the expense of the attributes that have distinguished the Chinese approach: speed, pragmatism, and the capacity to deliver complex infrastructure projects on time and at scale. Rather than diluting China's comparative advantage, integrating transparency and accountability can elevate it, offering a model of effective development partnership that combines Chinese efficiency with global norms of financial integrity. In doing so, China would reinforce its legitimacy as Africa's long-term partner of choice, and would neutralize the reputational risks posed by politicized criticism, positioning itself as both a responsive investor and a responsible stakeholder in Africa's energy future.

4.2. Political Instability and Security Risks

Energy investments are inherently long-term undertakings, often spanning decades. Their success depends on technical feasibility, financial viability, political stability, and security.

Unfortunately, parts of Africa remain afflicted by chronic political volatility, armed conflict, and governance fragility. Regions including the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, and parts of Central Africa continue to experience recurrent instability, posing material risks to energy-infrastructure projects and broader economic development.

Chinese energy ventures are not immune to these dynamics. The 2011 secession of South Sudan—and the subsequent conflict that engulfed the new state—disrupted Chinese oil investments that had been carefully cultivated over the years. Similarly, insurgencies in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado province have threatened liquefied natural gas (LNG) projects in which Chinese firms hold significant stakes.

While China's traditional policy of non-interference offers diplomatic flexibility, it also necessitates sophisticated risk-mitigation strategies in volatile environments. These strategies should include:

- Political risk insurance mechanisms to protect investments against conflict and expropriation.
- Deeper partnerships with regional organizations such as the African Union, ECOWAS, and IGAD, to support peacebuilding and conflict-resolution efforts.

- Embedding energy projects within broader community engagement frameworks, local development, and social cohesion.

One of the most frequently cited explanations for China's extraordinary trajectory since the advent of reform and opening up in 1978, lies in the unwavering political stability underpinning its economic transformation. Chinese policymakers and scholars consistently emphasize that the continuity of governance, the clarity of strategic direction, and the predictability of the policy environment create optimal conditions for long-term planning, infrastructural investment, and institutional experimentation.

While China does not seek to export or replicate its domestic political model abroad—a principle it has long enshrined in its foreign policy—it nevertheless views the stabilizing effects of effective governance as indispensable to sustained development. From Beijing's perspective, political fragmentation, abrupt policy reversals, and electoral volatility can pose considerable obstacles to infrastructure-led growth and investor confidence. In many democratic systems, increasing political polarization has made ensuring continuity and coherence in long-term strategy more difficult.

Against this backdrop, China is vested in encouraging and supporting African partners to cultivate more stable, rules-based political and economic systems—not through prescriptive models, but through capacity-building, institutional support, and developmental partnerships anchored in predictability and sovereign agency. Stability, in this sense, is not only a condition for prosperity—it is a strategic prerequisite for the kind of deep, long-horizon cooperation that defines the China–Africa energy relationship.

4.3. Environmental and Social Governance

African stakeholders, civil society organizations, and international observers increasingly scrutinize the environmental and social integrity of energy projects. Extractive industries, including oil and gas, have historically been associated with environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, water contamination, and social dislocation.

Several Chinese energy projects in Africa have been criticized for insufficient environmental impact assessments, limited community consultation, and inadequate mitigation of adverse effects. Although Chinese companies are progressively adopt international ecological standards, gaps remain between policy and practice.

For the China–Africa energy partnership to achieve long-term legitimacy and resilience, environmental and social governance must become central pillars rather than peripheral considerations. This requires:

- Rigorous and transparent environmental and social impact assessments before project approval.
- Comprehensive environmental management plans that incorporate local ecological knowledge and community priorities.
- Application of best practices for biodiversity conservation, pollution control, and ecosystem restoration.

Moreover, renewable energy projects must be designed to ensure inclusive benefits. For example,

large-scale solar farms or hydropower dams should not displace local communities or undermine traditional livelihoods without adequate compensation and alternatives.

The environmental imperative is not merely normative but strategic. In an era of escalating climate risks and ecological awareness, energy projects that fail to respect environmental standards will face growing opposition, reputational damage, and operational disruptions.

While fully cognizant of the immense challenges posed by climate change and environmental degradation, China maintains that the right to development is as fundamental as the right to environmental protection. Reconciling these two imperatives—often cast in opposition—is, from the Chinese perspective, not only possible but essential.

China's development trajectory reflects a pragmatic understanding: that initial phases of industrialization may entail environmental costs, yet these are not ends in themselves, but transitional stages on the way to a more prosperous, environmentally conscious society.

In recent decades, China has markedly improved its environmental standards, reduced pollution levels in key urban centers, and become a global leader in renewable energy investment and ecological innovation. This progression reflects a core belief that sustained improvements in living standards empower populations to become stewards of the environment.

Indeed, one of China's most precise conclusions from its own experience is that poverty remains among the most formidable enemies of environmental conservation. Only when people are no longer preoccupied with mere subsistence can they afford to prioritize sustainability. China's approach thus seeks to harmonize economic uplifting with ecological stewardship—a strategy it also encourages in its partnerships with African nations striving to escape energy poverty, while safeguarding their natural heritage.

4.4. Strategic Overdependence and Diversification Imperatives

A further challenge is the risk of strategic overdependence. While China has played a critical role in financing and building energy infrastructure across Africa, excessive reliance on a single external partner puts at risk the continent's autonomy and bargaining power. This overdependence could lead to potential geopolitical vulnerabilities, a lack of diversity in energy sources, and limited negotiation power in energy deals.

African states must proactively pursue diversification strategies and cultivate various international partnerships in the energy sector. This proactive approach, which includes engaging with European, American, Indian, Japanese, Brazilian, Russian, and Gulf actors and deepening intra-African cooperation, demonstrates their agency and responsibility in shaping the continent's energy landscape. By doing so, they can balance external influences and enhance strategic leverage, reducing the risk of overdependence on a single external partner.

Regional initiatives such as AfCFTA and cross-border energy projects—including power pools and interconnectors—are vital instruments for building an integrated and resilient African energy economy that is not dependent on any single external actor.

V. OPPORTUNITIES FOR STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

5.1. Convergence of the BRI and Agenda 2063

One of the most compelling opportunities for deepening China–Africa energy cooperation lies in the convergence between China's BRI and the African Union's Agenda 2063. While originating in different contexts, these two strategic frameworks share complementarities that, if properly leveraged, could unlock unprecedented synergies in the energy domain.

Launched in 2013 by President Xi Jinping, the BRI envisions creating a vast network of infrastructure, trade, and investment links connecting Asia, Africa, Europe, and beyond. Energy connectivity—including pipelines, transmission lines, renewable energy facilities, and port infrastructure—is a critical pillar of the initiative. The BRI aims not merely to facilitate the movement of goods but to enhance the flow of energy resources, technology, and capital across continents.

Similarly, Agenda 2063—the African Union's continental blueprint for inclusive growth and sustainable development—places energy at the core of its ambitions. It envisages universal access to affordable, reliable, and modern energy services, industrialization driven by value addition to Africa's vast resources, and the development of integrated regional energy markets. Flagship projects such as the Continental Power System Master Plan[18] and the Africa Renewable Energy Initiative[19] are central to this vision.

The alignment between the BRI and Agenda 2063 is not just a coincidence but a deliberate move that creates a robust framework for strategic cooperation. This 'strategic alignment' harmonizes the goals and activities of the two initiatives, allowing for the integration of Chinese expertise and financing with African development priorities. This alignment ensures that energy projects are designed to meet immediate supply needs and to catalyze long-term economic transformation, industrial diversification, and regional integration.

Such strategic alignment requires careful planning, transparent governance, and an unwavering commitment to developmental outcomes. It demands that energy investment move beyond bilateralism toward broader continental frameworks that respect African agency, enhance regional resilience, and contribute to the realization of Africa's collective aspirations.

5.2. Africa's Energy Transition: A Pivotal Moment

The International Energy Agency (IEA) projects that Africa's energy demand will double by 2040, driven by population growth, urbanization, and economic expansion. In this context, Africa faces a choice: to replicate the carbon-intensive development models of the past or to leapfrog directly into a cleaner, more sustainable future. Meeting the demand sustainably will require unprecedented investment in renewable energy, energy efficiency, grid modernization, and green industrialization.

18. The Continental Power System Master Plan aims to establish a well-interconnected and competitive continental electricity market. It seeks to harmonize energy policies, enhance infrastructure development, and facilitate the integration of renewable energy sources. By connecting Africa's five regional power pools, the Continental Power System Master Plan endeavors to ensure a balanced sharing of affordable, reliable, and clean energy resources across the continent.

19. The Africa Renewable Energy Initiative is an African-led scheme to accelerate the harnessing of the continent's vast renewable energy potential, access sufficient amounts of clean, appropriate, and affordable energy, and help African countries leapfrog to renewable energy systems that support their low-carbon development strategies.

China's comparative advantage in renewable energy technologies—including solar photovoltaic systems, wind turbines, hydropower infrastructure, and, increasingly, battery storage and electric mobility—positions it as a critical partner for Africa's energy transition. Chinese companies dominate global solar panel production, lead in hydropower engineering, and are rapidly expanding their offshore wind and green hydrogen technologies capabilities.

By leveraging Chinese technological leadership and financing, African nations can broaden renewable energy access, electrify transportation and industrial sectors, and pioneer new frontiers, such as green hydrogen production for domestic use and export. Initiatives such as the China–Africa Renewable Energy Cooperation Programme, announced at FOCAC, provide promising platforms for advancing these objectives.

Moreover, collaboration in the energy transition offers significant opportunities for Africa to develop local industries, create green jobs, enhance technology transfer, and build a competitive advantage in the emerging global green economy. This potential for local industry development paints an optimistic picture of Africa's energy future.

5.3. Building Regional Energy Markets and Cross-Border Infrastructure

Energy integration can bring multiple advantages, such as enhancing energy security through diversification, achieving economies of scale, stabilizing electricity grids, and fostering political and economic interdependence.

Regional initiatives, such as the Southern African Power Pool, the West African Power Pool, and the Eastern Africa Power Pool, provide embryonic frameworks for cross-border energy cooperation. However, these pools require substantial investment in transmission infrastructure, harmonization of regulatory frameworks, and modernization of grid-management systems.

China's extensive experience of building ultra-high-voltage (UHV) transmission lines, smart grids, and cross-border interconnectors, coupled with its robust financing capabilities, positions it as a reliable partner in order to advance regional energy integration in Africa. Strategic investments in cross-border energy infrastructure would enhance the resilience and reliability of African energy systems, promote regional trade, industrial clustering, and deeper political cohesion, and advance both BRI and Agenda 2063 objectives.

5.4. Promoting Local Content, Capacity-Building, and Technology Transfer

For the China–Africa energy partnership to be genuinely transformative, it must prioritize local content development, capacity-building, and technology transfer. This emphasis on building African capabilities across the energy value chain—from manufacturing and engineering to maintenance and innovation—is essential to achieve energy sovereignty and economic empowerment. It makes the audience feel integral to the partnership and its success.

Positive examples include Chinese firms in Ethiopia constructing hydroelectric projects that increasingly employ and train local engineers and technicians. In South Africa, Chinese solar

companies have established local manufacturing plants, creating jobs and building technological expertise.

It is crucial to scale up and institutionalize initiatives like those in Ethiopia and South Africa. In energy-cooperation agreements, African governments should negotiate clear local content clauses, skills development commitments, and joint venture arrangements.

Local capacity-building is not a concession but an investment in the sustainability and goodwill of African engagements. Programs such as the China–Africa Institute of Energy, vocational training initiatives, and scholarships for African students in energy-related disciplines provide promising foundations. These efforts must be expanded and diversified to meet the evolving needs of Africa's dynamic energy sectors. A true China-Africa partnership should invest in capabilities, not dependencies.

VI. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The analysis presented in this Policy Paper reveals that while the China–Africa energy partnership has extraordinary potential, realizing that promise demands deliberate, strategic, and sustained efforts on both sides.

Building an equitable, resilient, and sustainable energy relationship requires moving beyond traditional resource extraction or infrastructure provision models, toward a framework grounded in partnership, empowerment, and long-term vision.

Accordingly, this section offers a set of practical recommendations for Chinese stakeholders, African stakeholders, and cooperation platforms.

6.1. For Chinese Stakeholders

i) Embed Sustainability at the Core of Energy Investments

All energy cooperation projects must comply with internationally recognized environmental and social governance standards. Before project approval, rigorous ecological and social impact assessments must be conducted transparently. Embedding sustainability is not merely a matter of reputation, but is essential for the long-term viability and legitimacy of energy projects.

ii) Enhance Transparency and Accountability

China should commit to greater transparency in its financing practices by disclosing the terms and conditions of energy-related loans and investments. This enhanced transparency will build trust among the African public and international partners, and reassure the audience of the partnership's integrity and legitimacy, safeguarding against misperceptions of exploitative or opaque engagement.

iii) Prioritise Local Content and Capacity-Building

Local employment, technology transfer, skills development, and industrial participation should be

integral to all energy-cooperation agreements. Chinese enterprises should forge joint ventures with African partners, support vocational training initiatives, and invest in local supply chains.

In the context of the China-Africa energy partnership, a true partnership is built on capital flows, empowering local capabilities, creating sustainable ecosystems, and sharing risks and rewards equitably.

iv) Support Regional Energy Integration

Chinese financing and expertise should prioritize cross-border infrastructure projects that strengthen regional energy markets, and provide technical know-how and project management skills. By investing in transmission lines, interconnectors, and smart grids to link African countries, China can contribute meaningfully to Africa's energy-integration and economic-unity ambitions.

v) Strengthen Risk Management Frameworks

Energy investments in politically fragile regions require robust risk-mitigation strategies. China should expand political risk insurance, engage proactively with regional organizations such as the African Union and ECOWAS, and embed conflict-sensitive approaches into project design and implementation.

6.2. For African Stakeholders

i) Aligning Energy Cooperation With National and Continental Development Strategies: A Key Imperative for African Stakeholders

African states must ensure that all energy cooperation projects align closely with their national development plans, energy master plans, and the broader objectives of Agenda 2063. Project selection should prioritize developmental impact, sustainability, and strategic relevance, rather than short-term political expediency.

ii) Maximize Local Content and Technology Transfer

African governments must negotiate explicit local content provisions in all energy cooperation agreements. Skills development, technology transfer, and regional industrial participation should be non-negotiable pillars of partnerships. Building indigenous capabilities across the energy value chain is essential to achieve energy sovereignty and reduce external dependence.

iii) Foster Regional Cooperation and Market Integration

African states must deepen collaboration within existing frameworks such as the Southern African Power Pool, the West African Power Pool, and the Eastern African Power Pool. Regional energy integration offers opportunities to enhance security, efficiency, and resilience.

6.3. For Joint Platforms and Initiatives

i) Establish a China–Africa Energy Cooperation Forum

A permanent and dedicated China–Africa Energy Cooperation Forum should facilitate dialogue, share best practices, design collaborative projects, and address emerging challenges. Such a platform should include governments, the private sector, academic institutions, and civil society. Institutionalized dialogue is essential to build mutual understanding, manage expectations, and foster innovation.

ii) Create a China–Africa Green Energy Innovation Fund

A joint Green Energy Innovation Fund could finance research, development, and deployment of cutting-edge clean energy technologies adapted to African contexts. This fund could support pilot projects in solar, wind, geothermal, battery storage, and green hydrogen, positioning Africa at the forefront of the global energy transition.

iii) Launch an African Energy Scholarship and Exchange Program

A robust scholarship and exchange program should enable African students, engineers, and policymakers to study energy-related fields in Chinese universities and training institutions. Building a pipeline of African energy experts will ensure that the next generation is equipped to lead the continent's energy transformation.

iv) Promote Multilateral Collaboration

China and African states should collaborate within multilateral forums—including the United Nations, the G20, and regional bodies—to advocate in favor of reform that will support energy access, climate resilience, and sustainable development in the Global South.

Energy cooperation must be embedded within broader efforts to reshape global governance toward greater equity and inclusivity.

v) Seek to Include More African Countries in the BRICS

The expansion of BRICS to include more African countries would be a strategic realignment in global geopolitics and a compelling opportunity for the continent to strengthen its energy security, diversify its partnerships, and assert its voice in shaping a more equitable international order.

As the world transitions toward multipolarity, including African states in BRICS could enable them to move beyond the historical confines of donor-recipient dynamics, and instead engage in genuine partnerships—including in energy security—grounded in mutual respect and shared interests.

BRICS nations possess vast experience of developing energy infrastructure, and considerable technological capabilities and financial resources that could be leveraged to support Africa's ambitions for universal access to affordable, reliable, and sustainable energy.

Membership of BRICS would allow African countries to tap into new sources of concessional

financing for large-scale energy projects in fossil fuels and renewables, while facilitating knowledge transfer and cooperation on energy governance, regulatory reform, and regional integration. Moreover, as global energy markets become increasingly fragmented and geopolitical competition intensifies, collective bargaining within BRICS can offer African countries greater resilience against supply disruptions, commodity price volatility, and external pressure from traditional powers.

VII. CONCLUSION

The convergence of China's energy security imperatives with Africa's development aspirations presents an historic opportunity.

China's exponential economic growth has created an insatiable demand for diversified, secure, and affordable energy resources. Simultaneously, Africa's abundant endowments—in both conventional hydrocarbons and renewable energy potential—position it as a critical actor in the evolving global energy order. Nevertheless, this partnership must not be defined merely by the mechanics of supply and demand. It must be rooted in mutual respect, shared benefit, environmental stewardship, and a profound commitment to empowering Africa's developmental agency.

The challenges are considerable. Debt vulnerabilities, environmental risks, political instability, and the specter of strategic overdependence could, if unaddressed, undermine the transformational potential of the China–Africa energy nexus. Moreover, the global context—marked by climate imperatives, geopolitical contestation, and calls for more inclusive governance—demands that cooperation evolve beyond outdated models of extractive engagement.

By aligning the BRI with Africa's Agenda 2063, investing in renewable energy, promoting local capacity-building, and strengthening regional energy integration, China and Africa can co-create a new model of South-South cooperation that privileges empowerment over dependency, sustainability over expediency, and solidarity over subordination. Such a model could serve the immediate interests of both partners and contribute to making the global governance architecture more equitable, representative, and attuned to the aspirations of the Global South.

Promoting South-South cooperation within BRICS should also encourage African nations to articulate development agendas aligned with their unique contexts, such as Agenda 2063, rather than externally imposed blueprints. Ultimately, BRICS offers a platform for African states to assert agency, foster industrialization through value-added energy use, and contribute to the global discourse on climate justice and sustainable growth. A broader African presence within BRICS is desirable and essential for a balanced, inclusive, and secure energy future.

Therefore, the task ahead calls for a new ethos of international engagement that values dignity, agency, and sustainability. The China–Africa energy partnership should stand as a beacon of what the future of global cooperation could—and must—become.

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ABOUT
THE POLICY CENTER FOR THE NEW SOUTH

The Policy Center for the New South (PCNS) is a Moroccan think tank aiming to contribute to the improvement of economic and social public policies that challenge Morocco and the rest of Africa as integral parts of the global South.

The PCNS pleads for an open, accountable, and enterprising "new South" that defines its own narratives and mental maps around the Mediterranean and South Atlantic basins, as part of a forward-looking relationship with the rest of the world. Through its analytical endeavours, the think tank aims to support the development of public policies in Africa and to give the floor to experts from the South. This stance is focused on dialogue and partnership and aims to cultivate African expertise and excellence needed for the accurate analysis of African and global challenges and the suggestion of appropriate solutions.

As such, the PCNS brings together researchers, publishes their work and capitalizes on a network of renowned partners, representative of different regions of the world. The PCNS hosts a series of gatherings of different formats and scales throughout the year, the most important being the annual international conferences the "Atlantic Dialogues", the "African Peace and Security Annual Conference" (APSACO), and the "Africa Economic Symposium" (AES).

Finally, the think tank is developing a community of young leaders through the Atlantic Dialogues Emerging Leaders program (ADEL) a space for cooperation and networking between a new generation of decision-makers from the government, business, and civil society sectors. Through this initiative, which already counts more than 450 members, the Policy Center for the New South contributes to intergenerational dialogue and the emergence of tomorrow's leaders.

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