
Beyond Altruism: Analyzing China's Strategic Motivations Behind Development Aid to Africa

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Abstract

This study analyzes China's development assistance to Africa through economic, political, relational, and developmental dimensions. Moving beyond the binary of altruism versus self-interest, it proposes a strategic-relational framework to explain the layered nature of China-Africa cooperation. Using a qualitative comparative synthesis of empirical and theoretical studies, the research identifies sectoral and regional patterns across infrastructure, health, education, and ICT. Findings indicate a hybrid logic: health and education initiatives demonstrate strong developmental and relational orientation, while infrastructure and extractive sectors exhibit higher strategic density. ICT projects reflect dual objectives, combining modernization with technological standard-setting. Political alignment facilitates continuity but does not solely determine allocation intensity. The inclusion of philanthropic and non-state actors further reveals the role of soft moral power in strengthening legitimacy and local engagement. Overall, Chinese aid generates public goods while simultaneously cultivating strategic influence and relational capital, challenging mono-causal interpretations of donor motivation.

Keywords: China-Africa relations; Development aid; Strategic altruism; South-South cooperation; Soft power; Foreign aid motivations; Global development finance

1 Introduction

1.1 Background and Context

Over the past two decades, China has emerged as one of Africa's most significant development partners. This expansion has coincided with structural transformations in the global aid architecture, including the relative decline of the Western Development Assistance Committee (DAC), the rise of non-traditional donors, and the growing prominence of South-South cooperation frameworks (Kragelund, 2008; Mawdsley, 2010). China's engagement encompasses concessional loans, infrastructure financing, technical assistance, and humanitarian support, forming a complex and integrated system of development cooperation. Scholarly interpretations of this engagement remain divided. Some view Chinese assistance as a pragmatic response to Africa's infrastructure deficits and development constraints, while others interpret it as a vehicle for advancing China's geopolitical and economic interests. This debate often reduces donor motivations to a binary opposition between altruism and self-interest, neglecting the possibility of overlapping and simultaneous objectives. Moreover, existing analyses largely concentrate on state-led economic flows, overlooking the expanding

role of Chinese philanthropic foundations, corporate social responsibility initiatives, faith-based organizations, and individual giving. Understanding donor motivations extends beyond theoretical inquiry. It shapes assessments of development effectiveness, institutional autonomy, debt sustainability, and policy space in recipient states (Prizzon et al., 2017). In an increasingly pluralistic development finance environment, a nuanced examination of China's engagement is therefore essential.

1.2 Problem Statement

The study of China's development assistance to Africa remains constrained by conceptual oversimplification. Much of the literature relies on a binary framework that classifies aid as either altruistic or self-interested, implicitly assuming that these motivations are mutually exclusive (Welén, 2024). While such categorizations offer analytical clarity, they fail to capture the complexity of contemporary development cooperation. Empirical evidence across sectors and regions contradicts rigid interpretations. Infrastructure and extractive projects often align with strategic economic objectives, yet health, education, and capacity-building initiatives frequently

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demonstrate developmental impact with limited direct material return to China (Liu, 2024; Wang et al., 2020). Moreover, allocation patterns do not consistently conform to resource-deterministic expectations, as both resource-rich and resource-poor countries exhibit varied engagement levels. These inconsistencies reveal the limitations of mono-causal explanations. Existing approaches insufficiently account for the simultaneous interaction of economic strategy, diplomatic alignment, relational continuity, and moral narrative. Consequently, there is a need for an integrated analytical framework capable of accommodating overlapping and context-dependent motivations. The novelty of this study lies in proposing a strategic–relational model that systematically synthesizes sectoral, political, and philanthropic dimensions of Chinese engagement. By moving beyond dichotomous classifications, the research offers a more comprehensive framework for understanding the layered architecture of China–Africa development cooperation.

1.3 Aims and Objectives

This study aims to examine China’s development assistance to Africa through an integrated analytical lens that captures the intersection of economic, political, relational, and developmental dimensions. Rather than determining whether Chinese aid is altruistic or self-serving, the research seeks to transcend this dichotomy by investigating how multiple motivations coexist and interact within specific sectors and regional contexts. The primary objective is to develop a strategic–relational framework that synthesizes insights from political economy, relational exchange theory, and emerging scholarship on philanthropy and non-state engagement. The novelty of the study lies in its systematic integration of sectoral variation, recipient agency, and soft moral power into a unified explanatory model, moving beyond fragmented and mono-causal interpretations. To achieve this aim, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1 How do economic, political, and relational motivations intersect in shaping China’s aid allocation patterns across sectors?

RQ2 Why do sectoral variations, particularly in infrastructure, health, education, and ICT, display differentiated motivational intensity?

RQ3 How do relational continuity and recipient agency mediate the outcomes of Chinese development cooperation?

1.4 Study Significance & Contribution

China’s development financing carries substantial implications for African states confronting complex policy and investment choices. Chinese engagement offers rapid infrastructure delivery and relatively limited political conditionality, presenting an alternative to traditional DAC-based assistance models. Simultaneously, concerns persist regarding debt sustainability, environmental governance, domestic industry displacement, and potential long-term dependency (Dunford, 2020). These contrasting assessments highlight the necessity of a more sophisticated analytical approach capable of disentangling the strategic, developmental, political, and relational dimensions embedded within China–Africa cooperation. This study contributes to the literature by advancing an integrated strategic–relational framework that moves beyond narrow debates centered solely on conditionality or debt risk. Its key novelty lies in systematically incorporating philanthropic initiatives, corporate social responsibility, and non-state actors into the analysis of development cooperation, thereby broadening the scope beyond state-to-state financing (Dunford, 2020; Muhr, 2016). By conceptualizing Chinese engagement as a layered architecture in which economic diplomacy, relational continuity, and moral narratives intersect, the study refines existing theoretical models. For African policymakers, this framework enhances negotiation capacity and strategic planning. At the global level, it contributes a balanced and theoretically grounded interpretation of whether Chinese cooperation complements, reshapes, or challenges prevailing DAC-oriented development paradigms.

2 Literature review

2.1 Classical Theories of Foreign Aid Motivation

Classical theories of foreign aid motivation are generally divided between altruistic and self-interest explanations. The altruistic perspective frames development assistance as a moral response to humanitarian crises, poverty, and global inequality. Within this view, aid reflects ethical commitments grounded in humanitarianism, global justice, and normative responsibility. Proponents argue that donors are motivated by concern for human welfare and international solidarity. However, critics question the explanatory sufficiency of this approach. Smith contends that purely humanitarian models overlook the possibility that donors may derive political or strategic benefits from recipients’ welfare improvements (Smith, 2014). Similarly, Liu (2024) challenges interpretations that equate aid with

moral governance linked to global development agendas such as the SDGs, suggesting that normative discourse alone cannot account for allocation patterns. In contrast, realist and political economy perspectives interpret aid as an instrument of national interest. From this standpoint, development assistance advances economic, political, and security objectives, including export promotion, resource access, alliance formation, and diplomatic leverage. Pauselli situates this approach within broader theories of strategic state behavior, emphasizing trade and geopolitical considerations (Pauselli, 2021). While influential, self-interest models are also criticized for oversimplifying complex relational and historical dimensions of aid relationships.

2.2 China as a non-DAC Donor

China's rise as a major development partner challenges traditional DAC-oriented frameworks of official development assistance. Unlike OECD donors, China does not formally align with DAC reporting standards and instead frames its engagement as South-South cooperation grounded in principles of sovereignty, non-interference, and mutual benefit (Sautman & Hairong, 2007). This positioning distinguishes Chinese cooperation from Western conditionality-based models and reflects an alternative development philosophy. Kragelund (2008) characterizes China's approach as a hybrid system integrating diplomacy, commercial expansion, and development financing. Chinese assistance operates within a broader ecosystem that includes concessional loans, export credits, and state-backed investment, thereby blurring conventional distinctions between aid, trade, and foreign direct investment. This structural integration complicates attempts to isolate donor motivation within traditional altruism-versus-interest paradigms. Critics interpret this model as a strategic mechanism advancing

national economic objectives under the banner of partnership. However, its novelty lies in institutionalizing development cooperation within a state-market nexus shaped by China's own historical trajectory as both aid recipient and emerging power. This configuration underscores the need for analytical frameworks that move beyond DAC-centric norms to adequately capture the complexity of China's development engagement.

2.3 Economic and Resource-Driven Motivations

Chinese development assistance has frequently been interpreted through an economic lens, particularly in relation to market expansion and resource acquisition. Empirical studies indicate that concessional finance and infrastructure projects are disproportionately directed toward resource-rich states, suggesting a strategic linkage between aid allocation and commodity security (Gold & et al., 2021). This pattern supports arguments that development cooperation facilitates sustained access to minerals and energy essential for China's industrial growth. Moreover, aid often operates alongside investment strategies. Infrastructure financing creates enabling environments for Chinese contractors and state-backed firms, reinforcing outward foreign direct investment and cross-border acquisitions. Harchaoui et al. (2021) demonstrate a positive association between infrastructure aid and subsequent Chinese FDI flows, strengthening the commercialization hypothesis. Kolstad and Wiig (2011) similarly argue that aid allocation reflects strategic firm-level decisions shaped by comparative institutional advantage. The novelty of this perspective lies in recognizing aid not merely as economic opportunism, but as embedded within a coordinated state-market strategy where development finance, trade, and investment function as mutually reinforcing instruments of long-term global economic positioning.

Table 1 Sectoral Distribution of Chinese Aid and Associated Strategic Interests

Sector	Dominant Aid Activities	Associated Strategic Interests
Infrastructure	Roads, railways, ports, energy projects	Trade facilitation, FDI expansion, resource access
Extractives	Mining, oil-related infrastructure	Resource security, long-term supply agreements
Health	Hospitals, medical teams, equipment	Soft power, diplomatic goodwill
ICT	Telecommunications, digital infrastructure	Market expansion, technological standards
Education	Scholarships, training programs	Elite networks, long-term influence

Table 1 indicates that although these anomalies show strong reasoning in backing up economic motivations, some literature says to be careful of falling into the trap of over deterministic reasoning. It is true that not all aid-dependent, densely populated countries receive a lot of resources, and there is a lot of Chinese engagement in countries with a scarcity of resources, especially in the education and health sectors. These anomalies suggest that economic interests are not sufficient to explain the observed patterns in foreign aid.

2.4 Political and Geopolitical Motivations

Political and geopolitical interpretations constitute a central strand in the literature on China's aid to Africa. Development assistance is frequently understood as a mechanism for strengthening diplomatic relations, enhancing international legitimacy, and consolidating soft power. Kolev and Kardar (2025) argue that aid shapes recipient perceptions of China as a reliable and supportive partner, thereby reinforcing its influence in multilateral institutions. Empirical studies linking aid allocation to voting alignment in the United Nations provide partial support for this claim. Security considerations further inform this perspective. China's expanding engagement in peacekeeping, conflict mediation, and institutional capacity building reflects broader global responsibilities and strategic interests (Hodzi, 2020). Aid may contribute to stabilizing regions hosting Chinese investments and

diaspora communities (Li & Dottin, 2011), while also supporting conflict avoidance strategies (De Soysa & Midford, 2012). However, political alignment does not consistently predict aid intensity, suggesting that geopolitical logic alone is insufficient. The novelty of this interpretation lies in viewing political motivations as embedded within a broader strategic-relational configuration, where diplomatic continuity, economic positioning, and developmental engagement interact rather than operate as isolated determinants.

2.5 Relational and Reciprocity-Based Explanations

Recent scholarship advances relational and reciprocity-based models that move beyond viewing aid as a purely instrumental policy tool. Drawing on anthropological and sociological perspectives, these approaches conceptualize development assistance as a form of gift exchange embedded within networks of trust, historical interaction, and mutual expectation (Figure 1). Rudyak (2023) argues that Chinese aid reflects a relational logic in which economic support forms part of a broader political and morally framed exchange. Similarly, Benabdallah (2022) highlights the role of historical narratives, elite networks, and repeated diplomatic engagement in structuring China-Africa cooperation. The legitimacy of this framework is reinforced through South-South cooperation narratives that emphasize solidarity and shared developmental experience. Such narratives

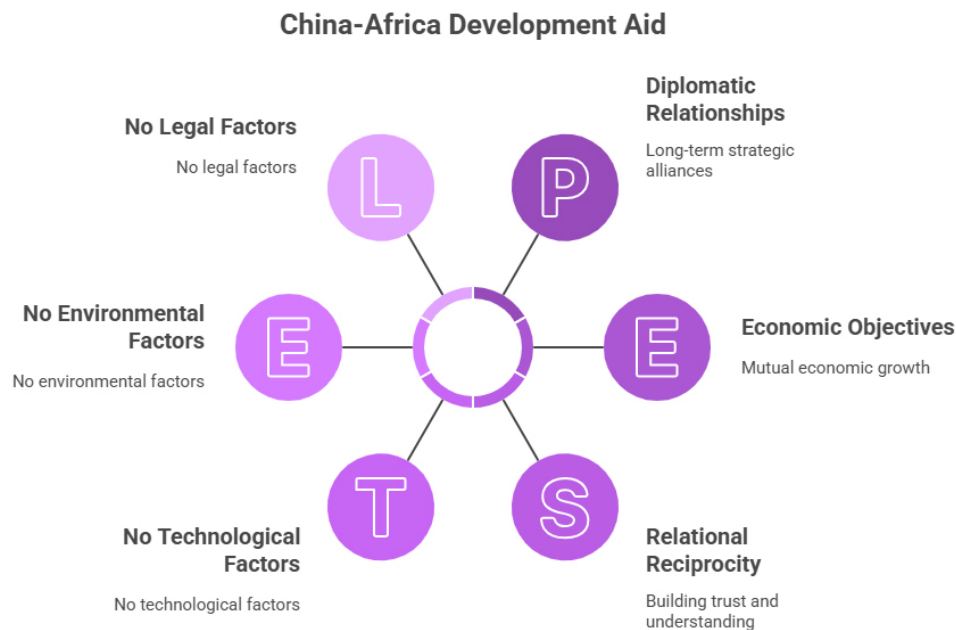


Figure 1 Shows Key economic, political, and relational factors shaping China-Africa development aid.

resonate with African political elites seeking alternatives to conditional aid regimes (Inoue & Costa Vaz, 2012; Muhr, 2016). While critics interpret this discourse as strategic diplomacy, proponents argue it reflects a distinct mode of engagement grounded in relational continuity. The perspective lies in reconceptualizing strategic interests as embedded within social relationships, suggesting that trust and reciprocity function not merely as rhetoric but as structural mechanisms shaping allocation and cooperation outcomes.

2.6 Philanthropy, Private Giving, and Non-State Chinese Actors in Africa

Beyond state-led financing, China's engagement in Africa increasingly includes philanthropic foundations, corporate social responsibility initiatives, faith-based giving, and individual charity. This diversification reflects transformations in China's domestic political economy, including private wealth expansion and outward corporate investment. Chinese non-state actors contribute to disaster relief, health services, education, and community development, often operating parallel to formal state aid (Kim, 2019; Olateju & Adebisi, 2025). Warmerdam (2015) highlights how foundations and civil society organizations advance solidarity-driven initiatives in areas such as hospital construction and educational support, challenging purely state-centric interpretations of China–Africa cooperation. Public opinion research further reveals that overseas assistance in China is motivated by both national interest and humanitarian concern (Cheng & Smyth, 2016). Conceptually, these activities can be understood as expressions of “soft moral power,” where legitimacy derives from ethical commitment and relational engagement rather than coercion or material inducement. Power and Mohan (2010) note that community-level initiatives foster relational legitimacy through trust-building rather than transactional exchange.

The novelty of incorporating philanthropy into the analysis lies in revealing a pluralized architecture of development cooperation, where moral, relational, and strategic logics intersect within China's broader global engagement.

2.7 Identified Research Gaps

Existing scholarship provides multiple yet fragmented explanations for China's development assistance to Africa. One strand interprets Chinese aid as an expression of South–South solidarity grounded in shared historical experiences and mutual development

(Smith, 2014). second perspective emphasizes economic rationality, arguing that aid allocation supports resource security, market expansion, and outward investment by Chinese firms (Pauselli, 2021). A third body of work highlights the aid–diplomacy nexus, linking development cooperation to political alignment, soft power, and multilateral positioning (Lin & et al., 2016). Sectoral studies further reveal differentiated patterns: health and education projects often reflect developmental and reputational objectives, while infrastructure and extractive investments demonstrate stronger commercial and geopolitical orientation. ICT engagement complicates interpretation by combining modernization with technological standard-setting (Wang et al., 2020). Recent scholarship incorporates public opinion and philanthropic dimensions, illustrating the coexistence of humanitarian values and strategic interests (Cheng & Smyth, 2016). However, much of the literature remains analytically compartmentalized and reliant on binary classifications of altruism versus self-interest (Welén, 2024). Although relational approaches highlight trust, historical continuity, and negotiated mutuality (Benabdallah, 2022; Rudyak, 2023) they often lack systematic comparative integration. Consequently, there remains no unified framework that reconciles economic, political, relational, and moral dimensions an analytical gap this study addresses through a strategic–relational synthesis.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study examines China's strategic approach to development assistance in Africa, focusing on economic, political, relational, and developmental dimensions. Rather than framing Chinese aid as either altruistic or self-serving, it adopts a comparative synthesis of empirical and theoretical studies to capture the complexity of Africa-China development cooperation. The study aims to contribute to both scholarly and policy debates by identifying systematic patterns, conceptual convergences, and analytical tensions across diverse methods, sectors, and geographies. The analysis draws on a political economy perspective that integrates the roles of the state, market, and institutions, alongside International Relations frameworks, including soft power and strategic/relational diplomacy. This lens allows for a more nuanced understanding of Chinese aid, moving beyond purely economic or normative interpretations. Given the fragmented literature and limited attention to philanthropic

and relational aspects, a qualitative comparative synthesis is employed. This approach accommodates the multiple dimensions of Chinese engagement, including state-led aid, state philanthropy, and private contributions.

3.2 Data Sources

The analysis focuses on secondary sources that include peer-reviewed journals, academic books, policy reports from global organizations and think tanks, and case-based empirical studies. Primary sources include research on Chinese development finance, aid allocation and sectoral analysis on Africa (Gold & et al., 2021; Harchaoui et al., 2021). U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (2022) and Garrido (2021) assess

U.S. and Chinese development finance. A selection criterion for empirical studies included data-driven studies with transparent methodologies, and some engagement with thorough debates on aid motives versus development results. The study, aside from state-led aid literature, also draws upon the literature of Chinese philanthropic foundations, charitable organizations, and overseas individual giving. Included in this are some studies on engagement of Chinese civil society with disaster relief, health philanthropy, education in Africa, as indicated in Figure 2 (Cheng & Smyth, 2016; Warmerdam, 2015), such an approach demonstrates how the study considers the role of non-state actors in the development cooperation discourse that is usually attributed to the Chinese state.

Contrasting Approaches in China–Africa Aid



Figure 2 Comparison of traditional aid models with China’s strategic–relational framework.

3.3 From Binary Models to a Strategic–Relational Framework

To guarantee analytical depth, infrastructure, health, education, and digital connectivity are among the varied sectors the literature covers. To show how motivations may differ across policy and recipient contexts, the coverage of various sectors and regions is essential for analysis. Although this study lacks a formal meta-analysis, it adheres to the systematic guidelines for inclusion, comparison, and thematic coding to minimize selection bias and increase analytical rigor.

3.4 Analytical Framework

The analytical framework integrates strategic altruism and relational exchange theory in examining

China’s aid behavior. Strategic altruism views aid as constructively framing developmental goals and positive long-term strategies, countering the claim that altruism and self-interest cannot be reconciled (Welén, 2024). This perspective enables the study to characterize Chinese aid projects as developmental expressions and, in this sense, as “investments” in political goodwill, market opportunity, and global standing. In the recent literature on China–Africa relations, relational exchange theory emphasizes reciprocity, trust, and long-term engagements, as opposed to purely transactional reciprocity (Benabdallah, 2022). This framework focuses on the aid relations within sustained diplomatic engagements, particularly those shaped by the partnership’s historical dimension, relational continuity, and diplomatic negotiations. Together, these frameworks

enable a more nuanced analysis of how economic, political, and social dimensions intersect in Chinese development cooperation, providing a coherent alternative to binary donor-interest models.

4 RESULTS

4.1 *Patterns in Aid Allocation*

The literature shows that China's distribution of aid in Africa follows a consistent strategy driven by its economic, political, and relationship-building interests. Previous studies indicate that Chinese development aid tends to be more generous to countries with abundant and unexploited natural resources, large and expanding markets, or considerable diplomatic clout (Gold & et al., 2021). This systematic distribution of aid suggests that countries that receive aid are being evaluated against China's resource-seeking, market-creating, and political goodwill objectives, consistent with its expansionist economic and political strategies (Biggeri & Sanfilippo, 2009; Qiu, 2025). In parallel, distribution patterns reveal a certain degree of relational and historical sensitivity. The influence of a partner's status as a diplomatic ally, involvement in global backing of China's fundamental policies, specifically the One-China policy, and historical participation in cooperation on development projects seems to strengthen the aid reciprocity and trust-building mechanisms. The evidential endorsement of the intertwined nature of strategic interests and relational factors affirms the multiple layers of a phenomenon that appears to be driven solely by economics or purely altruism. Aid distribution by sectors also indicates an absence of uniformly applied patterns, as the blend of developmental, political, and commercial elements varies along the lines of the specific features of the recipient country and the bilateral relations.

4.1.1 *Anomalies and Deviations from Economic Determinism*

Although allocation patterns demonstrate strong economic and diplomatic considerations, the evidence does not support a strictly resource-driven or politically deterministic model. Several empirical studies show that resource-poor countries have received substantial Chinese development financing, particularly in health, education, and public administration sectors (Liu, 2024; Wang et al., 2020). These allocations are not easily explained through a narrow commercial logic, especially where direct material returns to China are limited or absent. Similarly, while diplomatic alignment, including support for the One China

policy, correlates with sustained engagement, it does not fully predict aid intensity. Some politically aligned states receive modest support, whereas other states with less visible diplomatic backing maintain stable development cooperation (Gold & et al., 2021; Madzoke & Wu, 2024). This variability indicates that political alignment functions as a facilitating condition rather than a strict determinant. Furthermore, several infrastructure projects have been implemented in countries with weak short-term commercial prospects, suggesting that long-term positioning and relational continuity may outweigh immediate economic calculation (Harchaoui et al., 2021). The presence of scholarships, medical missions, and agricultural demonstration centers in low-income, low-resource environments reinforces the argument that developmental and relational considerations operate alongside strategic interests. Taken together, these anomalies complicate mono-causal interpretations. The distribution of aid reflects layered decision-making processes in which economic opportunity, diplomatic positioning, and relational trust interact rather than substitute for one another.

4.1.2 *Layered Allocation Logic*

The comparative synthesis suggests that China's aid allocation operates through a layered logic composed of structural, relational, and developmental dimensions. At the structural level, macroeconomic and geopolitical considerations shape the broad orientation of engagement, including market access, trade corridors, and long-term supply security (Daly et al., 2020; Kolstad & Wiig, 2011). This level explains the concentration of financing in infrastructure and extractive sectors. At the relational level, historical diplomatic ties, elite exchanges, and participation in cooperation forums influence continuity and project selection. Studies grounded in relational exchange theory indicate that sustained interaction builds reputational trust, which in turn facilitates new agreements (Benabdallah, 2022; Rudyak, 2023). Aid allocation therefore reflects accumulated relational capital. At the developmental level, sector-specific needs and host country priorities shape project design. Health capacity building, vocational training, and education programs respond to locally articulated development agendas, even when they offer limited direct strategic return (Lin & et al., 2016). This dimension reveals responsiveness that cannot be reduced to economic gain. These layers do not operate independently. Instead, they overlap and reinforce one another, producing allocation outcomes that appear hybrid

but are in fact structured by intersecting logics.

4.2 Sectoral Findings

The analysis of sectors shows different aids from China in various sectors. Health aid: Chinese funded hospitals, sickness-prevention programs, and distribution of medical personnel show both selfless and selfish qualities. As for the selfless side, these hospitals help the recipient country's ability and further global health security. This is positive for the development of the country (Lin & et al., 2016). Overall health aid is demonstrating and strengthening soft power, diplomatic loyalty, and future engagement. Every health aid is almost always cinching the country.

4.2.1 Sectoral Stratification of Motivations

Sectoral comparison reveals differentiated motivational density across policy domains. Extractive and large-scale infrastructure projects exhibit high strategic concentration. These projects often facilitate trade connectivity, enable resource flows, and support the overseas expansion of Chinese firms (Gold & et al., 2021; Kolstad & Wiig, 2011). Aid in the building of infrastructural facilities and the construction of telecommunication networks, the integration of highways, the construction of digital platforms, and the provision of energy equipment are perceived as aids for the long construction of influence as support. In these sectors, developmental outcomes coexist with commercial positioning. ICT projects demonstrate a mixed configuration. All these facilities help the Chinese merchants financially (Wang et al., 2020).

Digital infrastructure enhances local connectivity and administrative efficiency while simultaneously embedding technological standards and supply chains favorable to Chinese companies (Wang et al., 2020). Technology that benefits the Chinese is further advocated and the basic regional and global techniques are stressed. The duality of infrastructure and ICT aid where developmental benefits coincide with long-term strategic positioning exemplifies the hybrid nature of China's aid motivations. The strategic component is present but operates through long-term technological integration rather than immediate extraction. In contrast, health and education sectors display stronger developmental and relational characteristics. Medical teams, hospital construction, and scholarship programs generate limited short-term economic return but produce reputational goodwill and elite network formation (Indrayani et al., 2025; Lin & et al., 2016). These initiatives

enhance diplomatic trust and relational legitimacy rather than direct material gain.

This stratification indicates that motivations vary in intensity rather than type. Economic, political, and relational drivers are present across sectors, yet their relative prominence shifts depending on policy domain.

4.2.2 Strategic Altruism in Sectoral Practice

Across sectors, developmental initiatives frequently generate indirect strategic benefits. Health programs strengthen local public systems while simultaneously reinforcing China's image as a reliable partner. Scholarship schemes contribute to human capital development while fostering long-term interpersonal networks that shape future diplomatic engagement. Infrastructure projects stimulate economic growth in recipient countries while facilitating trade and investment linkages (Harchaoui et al., 2021). This pattern aligns with the concept of strategic altruism, which recognizes that developmental contributions and long-term strategic positioning are not mutually exclusive (Welén, 2024). Rather than viewing altruism and self-interest as opposites, the evidence suggests that development outcomes form part of a broader strategy of relational investment. Sectoral analysis therefore illustrates that Chinese aid operates through embedded reciprocity (Jin, 2025). Projects create tangible public goods, but they also generate relational capital, policy access, and market familiarity. The coexistence of these dimensions does not indicate contradiction. It reflects a model in which development cooperation functions as both material support and strategic engagement (Table 2).

4.3 Political and Geopolitical Embeddedness

The synthesis indicates that political considerations are embedded within development cooperation, yet they do not operate as rigid determinants of aid distribution. Diplomatic alignment, particularly support for core sovereignty positions, appears to facilitate stable engagement. However, the relationship is better understood as reinforcing rather than dictating cooperation patterns. Political convergence increases predictability and trust, but it does not mechanically produce higher aid volumes (Gold & et al., 2021). Security engagement further illustrates this embedded logic. In contexts where Chinese investments and diaspora communities are present, development assistance often coincides with institutional capacity building and stabilization efforts. This alignment suggests that aid functions as a preventive mechanism that supports broader

Table 2 shows Comparative Motivational Indicators Across Aid Sectors

Sector	Primary Motivations	Evidence of Altruism	Evidence of Strategic/Relational Int
Health	Capacity-building, public health	High	Moderate
Education	Scholarships, training programs	High	Moderate
ICT	Digital infrastructure, tech standards	Moderate	High
Infrastructure	Transport, energy, ports	Moderate	High
Extractives	Mining, oil-related projects	Low	High

economic and diplomatic continuity (Gu et al., 2016; Li & Dottin, 2011). Yet the emphasis remains developmental in form, framed through infrastructure rehabilitation, public administration support, or technical training rather than overt political conditionality. Comparatively, this political embeddedness differs from traditional donor models in which aid is frequently tied to governance reform benchmarks. In the Chinese case, influence appears to be cultivated through partnership continuity and policy dialogue rather than formalized conditions. The political dimension is therefore relational and embedded rather than coercive. It operates through sustained engagement that gradually shapes diplomatic alignment while preserving the language of sovereignty and mutual respect (Benabdallah, 2022). This configuration reinforces the interpretation that political motivations coexist with economic and relational considerations. They contribute to the overall architecture of cooperation without overriding sectoral differentiation or developmental programming.

4.4 Relational Dynamics and Reciprocity Structures

Beyond economic and geopolitical factors, the literature consistently highlights the centrality of relational continuity. Aid is embedded in long-standing diplomatic forums, repeated high-level visits, and symbolic narratives of shared developmental experience. These interactions construct what relational exchange theory identifies as trust-based reciprocity rather than immediate transactional exchange (Hodzi, 2020; Rudyak, 2023). The evidence suggests that projects often function as reaffirmations of partnership rather than isolated economic instruments. Scholarship programs, training initiatives, and agricultural demonstration centers cultivate interpersonal familiarity and elite networks that extend beyond individual project cycles. Over time, these networks reinforce cooperation by reducing uncertainty and facilitating negotiation. Relational capital accumulates gradually and shapes future allocation

decisions (Zhu, 2023). Importantly, reciprocity within this framework does not imply direct quid pro quo exchange. Instead, it reflects expectations of long-term goodwill and diplomatic responsiveness. African political elites often interpret engagement through the language of solidarity and policy autonomy, which contrasts with experiences of conditional assistance (Inoue & Costa Vaz, 2012; Soulé, 2020). This perception contributes to relational legitimacy, which in turn stabilizes cooperation even in the absence of immediate economic gain. The relational dimension therefore provides explanatory power for anomalies identified earlier. Countries with limited resource endowments may still receive sustained engagement when relational continuity is strong. Trust, historical ties, and repeated diplomatic interaction influence cooperation outcomes alongside strategic calculation.

4.5 Philanthropy and Non-State Engagement as Soft Moral Power

The inclusion of philanthropic and non-state actors broadens the analytical scope of Chinese development engagement. Corporate social responsibility initiatives, foundation-led projects, and individual charitable contributions operate alongside state-sponsored programs but follow partially distinct logics. These activities frequently focus on disaster relief, local health facilities, scholarships, and community development (Warmerdam, 2015). Unlike large-scale infrastructure or extractive projects, many philanthropic interventions generate limited commercial return and minimal geopolitical leverage. Their significance lies in symbolic and relational domains. They communicate empathy, solidarity, and shared developmental identity. Public opinion research indicates that overseas charitable giving in China is supported not only by perceptions of national interest but also by humanitarian concern (Cheng & Smyth, 2016). This moral framing complicates purely instrumental interpretations.

Conceptually, these actions function as soft moral power. Rather than attracting through cultural appeal or strategic inducement, they cultivate legitimacy through ethical narratives and interpersonal engagement. Small-scale projects embedded in local communities strengthen micro-level trust, which complements macro-level diplomatic relations (Olateju & Adebisi, 2025). Even when indirectly enhancing China's international image, these initiatives cannot be reduced to centralized state strategy (Pauselli, 2021). The presence of non-state actors therefore pluralizes the architecture of development cooperation. It reveals that China's engagement operates through a state market society nexus in which governmental objectives, commercial expansion, and moral narratives intersect but are not identical. This layered configuration reinforces the study's broader finding that development cooperation cannot be adequately explained by binary models of altruism versus self-interest.

4.6 Synthesis: Toward a Strategic-Relational Configuration

Across allocation patterns, sectoral differentiation, political embeddedness, and philanthropic engagement, a coherent configuration emerges. Chinese aid to Africa reflects structured coexistence of economic strategy, diplomatic positioning, relational continuity, and moral narrative (Gold & et al., 2021; Kim, 2019). These dimensions interact dynamically rather than sequentially. Economic considerations shape macro-orientation and sectoral concentration. Political alignment enhances stability and diplomatic trust. Relational exchange builds continuity across project cycles. Philanthropic initiatives deepen legitimacy at societal levels. None of these dimensions alone explains observed patterns (Caria & Ghinoi, 2025). Together, they form a strategic-relational configuration in which development cooperation operates simultaneously as material support, diplomatic engagement, and long-term relationship building (Jin, 2025). This synthesis resolves the empirical tensions identified in earlier sections. Apparent contradictions between developmental outcomes and strategic positioning become comprehensible when interpreted as mutually reinforcing rather than mutually exclusive. Aid projects generate public goods while embedding long-term influence (Rudyak, 2023; Wang et al., 2020). Relational trust facilitates economic engagement. Moral narratives strengthen political legitimacy. The results therefore substantiate the argument that Chinese development cooperation in Africa is best understood

as a layered system of strategic altruism and relational exchange. This framework provides a more precise analytical lens than binary donor motivation models and aligns with the sectoral and spatial variation observed across the literature.

There seems to more or less be a consistent pattern across different sectors: While some interventions tend to have stronger developmental logic, almost all aid activities have embedded strategic or relational considerations, even if they are less pronounced. Even when projects are described as altruistic or humanitarian, they are likely to be designed to further some diplomatic, economic, or relational objectives, even if those are not openly stated. This reinforces the observations that suggest that the 'aid' strategy, as it relates to China, is not a simplistic description and is best understood as an integrative model of strategic-relational engagement. Overall, the results indicate that Chinese aid to Africa embodies hybrid motivations, where economic, political, and relational objectives coexist with developmental narratives. Patterns in allocation and sectoral targeting demonstrate the need for analytical frameworks that account for the interplay of multiple drivers, rather than assuming mutually exclusive motivations.

5 Discussion

The findings demonstrate that China's development cooperation in Africa operates through a layered configuration best explained by strategic altruism (Figure 3). Rather than reflecting purely altruistic or purely self-interested motives, aid allocation reveals the coexistence of developmental provision and national strategic positioning. Infrastructure and extractive sectors exhibit high strategic density, aligning with resource security and trade integration patterns identified by Gold and et al. (2021) and Kolstad and Wiig (2011). However, systematic deviations from economic determinism emerge, particularly in health and education, where developmental intensity remains strong despite limited direct commercial return, consistent with (Lin & et al., 2016). Political alignment appears to stabilize engagement rather than mechanically determine allocation volumes, reinforcing findings that diplomatic convergence functions conditionally rather than transactionally (Biggeri & Sanfilippo, 2009; Daly et al., 2020). ICT projects occupy an intermediate position, blending modernization, technological standard-setting, and strategic connectivity (Wang et al., 2020). Furthermore, relational continuity and historical ties significantly mediate engagement patterns

(Benabdallah, 2022; Rudyak, 2023). Collectively, these results indicate sector-specific gradations of motivational intensity rather than categorical differences, confirming Welén's (2024) proposition that altruism and interest are context-dependent and mutually reinforcing.

The present findings align partially with political economy perspectives emphasizing resource access and market expansion (Gold & et al., 2021; Kolstad & Wiig, 2011). Similar to Harchaoui et al. (2021), infrastructure financing is associated with subsequent trade and investment integration. However, unlike reductionist interpretations, this study identifies consistent engagement in non-resource sectors, challenging deterministic economic explanations and supporting critiques by Liu (2024) and Ojakorotu and Dan-Woniwei (2019). Political explanations linking aid to diplomatic alignment and UN voting behavior receive partial support (Gold et al., 2021), yet results confirm that alignment alone does not guarantee higher aid flows (Biggeri & Sanfilippo, 2009; Daly et al., 2020). This nuance challenges portrayals of Chinese aid as transactional vote-buying. Relational scholarship emphasizing trust and historical continuity (Benabdallah, 2022; Rudyak, 2023) finds strong empirical resonance, particularly in explaining allocation anomalies across resource-poor contexts. Additionally, philanthropic and non-state engagement documented by Warmerdam (2015) and Cheng and Smyth (2016) supports the integration of soft moral power into analysis. Compared to DAC-focused governance models (Mawdsley, 2010; Smith, 2014), the findings highlight structural and ideological divergence without normative hierarchy. The study therefore advances existing scholarship by synthesizing these strands into a unified strategic-relational framework (Sautman & Hairong, 2007).

The findings carry important theoretical and policy implications. Theoretically, the study challenges binary donor motivation frameworks by demonstrating structured coexistence between economic, political, relational, and moral dimensions. Sectoral differentiation suggests motivational layering rather than inconsistency, refining debates surrounding strategic altruism (Olateju & Adebisi, 2025). For policymakers in African states, recognizing the layered logic of Chinese engagement enhances negotiation capacity. Infrastructure projects generate public goods and economic integration while simultaneously embedding long-term trade and technological standards. Understanding this duality supports more strategic alignment of external financing with domestic industrialization agendas,

reinforcing recipient agency as emphasized by (Cabral & Shankland, 2013) Globally, the findings contribute to debates comparing Chinese and DAC models. While Chinese cooperation emphasizes non-interference and mutual benefit, traditional DAC approaches prioritize governance conditionality (Mawdsley, 2010; Smith, 2014). Rather than framing one as superior, the evidence suggests that each reflects distinct historical foundations and trade-offs between sovereignty, speed of delivery, and institutional accountability. The study therefore supports a more pluralistic understanding of contemporary development finance architectures.

The study faces several empirical constraints. First, the opacity and aggregation of Chinese development finance data limit precise sectoral and financial differentiation (Dunford, 2020). Grants, concessional loans, and commercial credits are often reported collectively, complicating systematic comparison. Mapping efforts highlight ongoing inconsistencies in reporting practices (Rochat, 2025; Soulé, 2020). Second, much of the available literature relies on donor-side documentation and macro-level datasets, while grounded recipient-level evaluations remain comparatively limited. Consequently, relational and developmental interpretations are derived from comparative synthesis rather than extensive primary fieldwork. Third, structural bias within aid research tends to privilege narratives of geopolitical competition and debt risk, potentially overshadowing incremental institutional learning and localized outcomes (Rudyak, 2023). Although this study mitigates these constraints through cross-sectoral synthesis and comparative analysis, it remains embedded within an uneven evidentiary landscape. Future research would benefit from micro-level project evaluations, longitudinal recipient perspectives, and clearer financial disaggregation to further refine the strategic-relational model proposed herein.

6 Conclusion

This study demonstrates that China's engagement in Africa cannot be adequately explained through a binary lens of benevolence versus strategic self-interest. The findings indicate a hybrid configuration in which economic diplomacy, infrastructure development, political signaling, and selective social investment operate simultaneously. Allocation patterns reveal sensitivity to resource endowments and diplomatic alignment; however, sustained commitments in health, education, and capacity building complicate purely instrumental interpretations.

China's Hybrid Aid to Africa

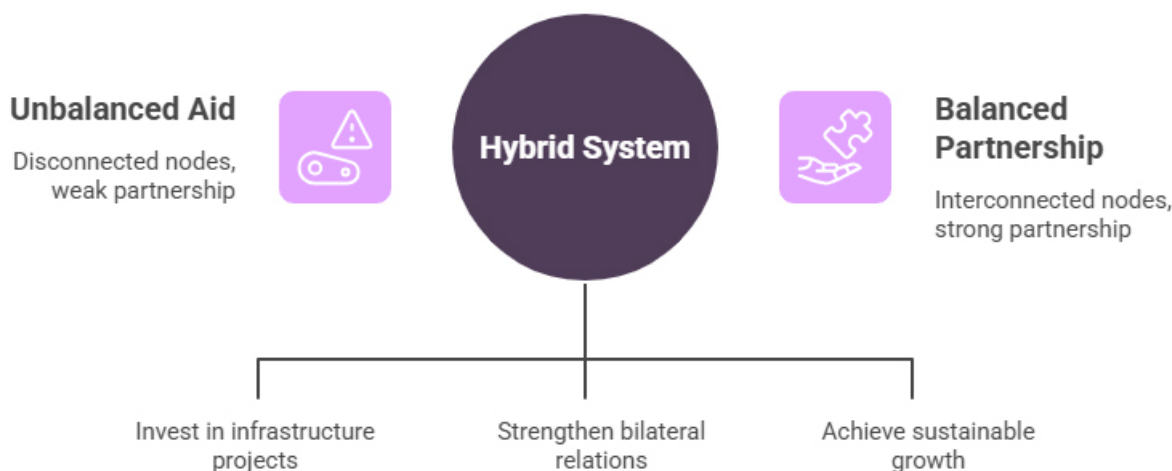


Figure 3 Shows Hybrid structure of China's aid integrating infrastructure, bilateral relations, and sustainable growth.

Relational dynamics are central to understanding these outcomes. Historical ties, political trust, and negotiated reciprocity shape both allocation and implementation processes. Recipient governments exercise agency by integrating Chinese finance into national development strategies, resulting in diverse outcomes across the continent. Variations reflect differences in governance capacity, debt management approaches, and institutional coherence rather than a uniform donor intention. Comparative analysis highlights structural distinctions between Chinese and Western development models. Whereas governance-oriented frameworks emphasize conditionality and procedural accountability, Chinese cooperation prioritizes infrastructure provision and state-to-state negotiation. Each approach entails trade-offs: institutional reform may enhance transparency but slow delivery, while infrastructure-led engagement accelerates visible transformation yet raises concerns regarding financial sustainability. Overall, the evidence supports a strategic-relational interpretation, recognising Chinese aid as an integrated diplomatic, economic, and developmental instrument within an evolving global development architecture.

7 Declarations:

Ethics approval and consent to participate: This research is a qualitative comparative synthesis based on secondary data analysis, including peer-reviewed journals, academic books, and policy reports. As the study did not involve

direct interaction with human subjects or the collection of primary personal data, institutional ethics board approval and formal consent to participate were not required.

Consent for publication: Not applicable. This manuscript does not contain any individual person's data, images, or videos.

Availability of data and material: The data supporting the findings of this study are drawn from publicly available secondary sources, including academic literature, official development finance reports such as those from the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation, and research on Chinese development finance. All sources analysed are cited within the manuscript's reference list.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares that there are no financial or personal relationships with other people or organisations that could inappropriately influence or bias the findings of this research.

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