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 Introduction by Yanyin Zi, Rikkyo University

David H. Shinn and Joshua Eisenman's latest book, *China's Relations with Africa: A New Era of Strategic Engagement*, is an essential resource for students and researchers seeking to understand the dynamic and multilayered nature of China's involvement in Africa. The book expands on the authors' previous work¹ and examines China's political and security engagement across different governance levels, from bilateral relations to regional and sub-regional institutions. Shinn and Eisenman explore how China has developed a dense and durable network of interlocking and mutually reinforcing relationships, simultaneously advancing both its own interests and those of African actors. This book is likely to become a companion to other influential works, such as Ian Taylor's *China and Africa: Engagement and Compromise*, Lina Benabdallah's *Shaping the Future of Power*, and Anshan Li's *China and Africa in Global Context*, which reinforces its importance in the academic discourse on China-Africa relations.²

Elisa Gambino praises the book's scope and its analysis of China-Africa relations, particularly issues of security and political engagement. She commends the discussion on party-to-party relations and the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP)'s growing influence, as well as the focus on maritime security and China's strategic interest in African ports. However, she suggests that certain sections, such as China's engagement with regional economic communities and the impact of trade asymmetries, could have been further expanded with insights from African Studies and international trade debates. Overall, she regards the book as a valuable resource for researchers and students, noting its significant contribution towards understanding China's strategic networks in Africa while raising critical questions about African agency and sovereignty.

Hodzi compliments Shinn and Eisenman's study as "an invaluable first-port-of-call resource," highlighting its significance as one of the most comprehensive resources on China-Africa relations. It examines China's geopolitical objectives in Africa, focusing on strategic engagements in areas such as politics, security, the media, the military, technology, and regional organizations. While the book provides a detailed overview, Hodzi critiques the portrayal of China's influence as overly monolithic, overlooking the diversity of Chinese actors and the limited oversight Beijing has over private enterprises in Africa. Additionally, the review notes a lack of depth in some sections, particularly regarding regional organizations and education. The discussion on digital authoritarianism is also questioned, as Hodzi argues that it does not sufficiently account for why African agencies are adopting Chinese technologies. Despite these limitations, Hodzi concludes that the book is an essential resource for scholars and policymakers which offers valuable insights into China's long-term strategic objectives and Africa's role in global geopolitics.

¹ David H. Shinn and Joshua Eisenman, *China and Africa: A Century of Engagement* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

² Ian Taylor, *China and Africa: Engagement and Compromise* (Routledge, 2007); Lina Benabdallah, *Shaping the Future of Power: Knowledge Production and Network-Building in China-Africa Relations* (University of Michigan Press, 2020); Anshan Li, *China and Africa in Global Context: Encounters, Policy, Cooperation and Migration* (Routledge, 2022).

Both Gambino and Hodzi engage in the discussion on party-to-party relations. Gambino commends the authors for incorporating rich interview data and a detailed timeline of party visits by both Chinese party leaders and African delegations. The discussion on how the CCP has established and fostered relationships with political parties across different countries and the political spectrum highlights how these ties directly influence the engagement of Chinese state-owned enterprises with African political parties. This approach contrasts with the strategies which are typically adopted by Global North countries in their dealings with Africa. Importantly, this growing interaction does not suggest a one-sided influence. Some studies on African agency³ have revealed that certain African countries have been more strategic and effective in exercising agency in their relations with China. As Shinn and Eisenman note, some African countries managed to negotiate their interests without fully embracing Chinese ideologies or governance and development models (44-49).

The asymmetrical power relations between China and African countries are a recurring theme. Shinn and Eisenman question whether Beijing's strategy, which combines host diplomacy, training, and exchanges with African leaders, is achieving its intended outcomes, and whether it can sustainably challenge the enduring influence of the Global North in Africa (154). Shinn and Eisenman argue that while African political leaders do exercise some agency, it remains limited, preventing them from fully determining the nature and extent of their engagement with China (44-45). To date, many scholars have observed that China has a clear strategy for Africa, whereas Africa lacks a coordinated strategy for engaging with China.⁴ Even when individual African countries have strategies, a unified continental approach is still absent.

The book offers a valuable glimpse into the minds of key actors, including political leaders, senior bureaucrats, and diplomats, while also humanizing these strategic engagements. It demonstrates that China-Africa relations are not solely state-centric or driven by government agendas, but also involve journalists and civil society organizations. That said, in relation to the reviewer's comment on the "monolithic" aspect of this book, it could be further strengthened by addressing the role of the broader Chinese population on the African continent, providing a bottom-up perspective. Many of these individuals, such as traders, shop owners, and entrepreneurs, shape China-Africa relations in concrete,

³ Jean-Pierre Cabestan, "African Agency and Chinese Power: The Case of Djibouti, South African Institute of International Affairs", *Policy Insights* 93 (2020): 1-17; Jean-Pierre Cabestan, "Seychelles: How a Small Island State is Navigating Through the Emerging Competition Between India and China," *Seychelles Research Journal* 3:1 (2021): 56-81; Peter Volberding and Jason Warner, "China and Uranium: Comparative Possibilities for Agency in Statecraft in Niger and Namibia," Working Paper 11 (2017), China Africa Research Initiative (CARI), School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), Johns Hopkins University, Washington, DC: <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/248139/1/sais-cari-wp11.pdf>.

⁴ Chris Alden, *China in Africa* (Zed Books, 2007); Deborah Bräutigam, *The Dragon's Gift: The Real Story of China in Africa* (Oxford University Press, 2009); Fantu Cheru and Cyril Obi, *The Rise of China and India in Africa: Challenges, Opportunities and Critical Interventions* (Zed Books, 2010).

everyday ways.⁵ Yet, their voices and contributions are often overlooked in international media and academic discourse. Similarly, future works that incorporate the experiences of African communities in China would add valuable depth and nuance to the analysis.⁶ The lack of collaboration across disciplines often constrains our understanding, limiting us to either top-down approaches (such as international relations or political science) or bottom-up perspectives (such as anthropological and sociocultural research). Moving forward, more interdisciplinary research will be crucial to fully grasp the complexities of China-Africa relations.

Contributors:

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Joshua Eisenman is a Professor of Politics at Keough School of Global Affairs at the University of Notre Dame, and Senior Fellow for China Studies at the American Foreign Policy Council. His academic research has appeared in journals such as *World Development*, *Third World Quarterly*, and the *Journal of International Development*. He holds a PhD in Political Science from University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).

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Elisa Gambino is a Hallsworth Research Fellow in Political Economy at the Global Development Institute of the University of Manchester, UK. Her research focuses on the intersection of China's outward economic engagement and African countries' development trajectories, with a focus on trade, manufacturing, and infrastructure.

Obert Hodzi is a Senior Lecturer in Politics at the University of Liverpool, United Kingdom. His research focuses on the politics of human rights and development and non-Western emerging powers in global

⁵ Irene Yuan Sun, *The Next Factory of the World: How Chinese Investment Is Reshaping Africa* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2017); Yanyin Zi, *Iron Sharpens Iron: Social Interactions at China Shops in Botswana* (Langaa RPCIG, 2017).

⁶ Adams Bodo, *Africans in China: A Sociocultural Study and Its Implications on Africa-China Relations* (Cambria Press, 2012); Gordon Mathews, Gustavo Lins Ribeiro, and Carlos Alba Vega, eds., *Globalization from Below: The World's Other Economy* (Routledge, 2012).

governance, with expertise in China and Africa. He is the current chairperson of the Chinese in Africa Africans in China Network (CAAC). His work includes a monograph, *The End of China's Non-Intervention Policy in Africa*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

David H. Shinn and Joshua Eisenman's *China's Relations with Africa: A New Era of Strategic Engagement* offers an updated, in-depth, and comprehensive examination of China's evolving influence across Africa. Focusing on political and security engagement, and building on their 2012 book,¹ the authors provide a far-reaching analysis of China's engagement with Africa, including party-to-party relations, its relations with regional economic communities, and security engagement. They effectively contextualize and skilfully examine these topics in the broader historical and political trajectories, thereby offering an account of the multiscalarity of these relations and their ramifications.

While the authors acknowledge that bilateral relations still represent the basis of Sino-African engagement (9), their foregrounding of networks and their interconnections across different levels of governance captures both the evolving nature of relations on the ground and the emerging trends in existing literature on China's outward engagement.² Overall, the book shows that Africa has gradually become crucial in the context of China's strategic engagement. This process has taken place through a deepening of bilateral relations and engagement in international organizations (chapter 2), as well as growing connections with regional and sub-regional institutions in Africa (chapter 3). At the same time, the multifaceted nature of relations, which reflects the multiplicity of actors that make up "China" and includes party-to-party relations (chapter 4), propaganda targeting African audiences (chapter 5), and security interests (chapter 6) and engagement (chapters 7, 8, 9, and 10), brings to light the variety of interests and actors involved in contemporary China-Africa relations.

The authors reveal how Chinese actors, which range from the Communist Party of China (CPC) (91) to state-owned companies in the port sector (272-281), have "created partnerships with more African elites across a broader range of political and security sectors than ever before" (327). Overall, the book's main thesis is that, through engagement with Africa, China is seeking to legitimize its perceived and projected position as the leader of and amongst developing countries. This is supported by the authors' rich interviews, survey data, and analysis of documents, as well as their synthesis of existing literature (17-19). The book focuses on what the authors term a "lattice-work of relationships" (8), or the multitiered and multiscalar networks through which China-Africa relations unfold, and on a range of Chinese actors across scales and sectors to bring to the fore the Sinocentric, yet multi-layered, nature of China-Africa engagement today, and how this has materialized.

The focus on China-Africa relations at multiple scales (continental, regional, national, and sub-national), and in different spheres (security and political engagement), crafts a helpful matrix to understand the mechanisms and strategies that contribute to supporting China's quest to solidify its position as "the core of

¹ David Shinn and Joshua Eisenman, *China and Africa: A Century of Engagement* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

² See, for instance, Lina Benabdallah, *Shaping the Future of Power: Knowledge Production and Network-Building in China-Africa Relations* (University of Michigan Press, 2020); Nana de Graaf, "China Inc. goes Global: Transnational and National Networks of China's Globalising Business Elite," *Review of International Political Economy* 27:2 (2020): 208-233.

an international coalition of developing countries” (12). To do so, Shinn and Eisenman start with an analysis of China’s bilateral and global diplomacy in the context of the country’s engagement with African nations, as well as its relations with African regional and sub-regional organizations. These chapters (chapters 2 and 3) impressively discuss not only the context and evolution of engagement but also do a great job at presenting the specific Chinese apparatus that governs each type of relations. Indeed, China is characterized by a decision-making system that “in spite of its authoritarian nature, [is] not the monolithic top-down state machine that Beijing presents and Western observers perceive.”³ This thread runs through most chapters, which significantly enhances the narrative clarity and makes this book a valuable teaching resource.

The emphasis placed upon examining engagement at the regional and sub-regional levels is particularly welcome considering the lack of literature on the topic. Through a run-down of Chinese engagement with different organizations across the African continent (69-77), the book is able to strengthen the argument around multilayered networks of engagement. This part of the book could have taken a further step by drawing out which factors contribute to different forms of engagement with African Regional Economic Communities (RECs). For instance, the authors note that China has solid relations with all member states of the Economic Community of Central African States, “but has shown little interest in the subregional organization itself” (76). Here, it could have been helpful to have drawn from broader African Studies literature on RECs, which explores the emergence of specific political and security norms within different African regions,⁴ and to have considered whether different forms of engagement are motivated by Chinese interests or the functioning/performance of RECs themselves.

In a similar fashion, as the book considers trade asymmetry as one of the key issues that were exacerbated by COVID-19 (16), chapter 3 could have also included additional examples from the trade sector. This is particularly timely in the context of the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), which builds on the progress made to facilitate trade within regional blocks. The book could have contributed to debates around whether the AfCFTA will foster or hinder Africa-based production in the context of rising Chinese investment in manufacturing.⁵ While this might appear to shift the focus away from the book’s interest in political and security engagement, initiatives aimed to enhance intra-African trade are connected to some of the issues discussed in the book, such as the non-traditional security challenge of food security (172-177). In short, more engagement with questions arising from the resurgence of regional free trade agreements, and in this case the AfCFTA specifically, could have strengthened some sections which are related to non-traditional security challenges.

³ Daniel. R. Hammond, “Policy Entrepreneurship in China’s Response to Urban Poverty,” *The Policy Studies Journal* 41:1 (2013):119-146, here 122.

⁴ Daniel Bach, *Regionalism in Africa: Genealogies, institutions and Trans-State Networks* (Routledge, 2017).

⁵ Chris Alden and Jing Gu, “China–Africa Economic Zones as Catalysts for Industrialisation,” *The Institute of Development Studies and Partner Organisations* 182 (2021): <https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12413/16629>.

The chapter on party-to-party relations (chapter 4) makes a crucial contribution to the study of China-Africa relations. The rich interview data and the detailed timeline on Party visits that underpin this chapter shine through and support the chapter's argument. Under President Xi Jinping, as shown by the increase in training programs and cross-party meetings (93-102), party-to-party engagement has intensified. Additionally, visits by African delegations reached their highest intensity before COVID-19, then moved online and becoming more sporadic, at least bilaterally (86). In addition to the more granular observations, the chapter provides a larger picture that is important in contextualizing empirically grounded observations made by other researchers. For instance, Shinn and Eisenman's discussion of how the CPC has established and fostered relations with political parties across countries and the political spectrum (113) resonates with Kathy Lam's findings on the engagement of Chinese state-owned enterprises with political parties in Ghana, which, she argues, highlight the necessity to "balance and maintain relationships with all of the political parties, not only those in power."⁶ This chapter is a key resource for researchers who are interested in exploring the political reach and influence of the CPC in African nations.

Another key thread in the book is security. Shinn and Eisenman point to that growing Sino-African engagement means that new security challenges have emerged for China. This topic has been the subject of discussion of several previous works on China-Africa relations,⁷ especially with respect to how China seeks to influence norm-making in the context of post-conflict engagement⁸ by promoting visions of security cooperation that are centered on the so-called security-development nexus.⁹ The authors highlight the fact that African nations have proven fundamental in many respects, and particularly in supporting efforts to address vital domestic needs such as raw materials or food provision. Therefore, strong relations are key in addressing emerging security challenges in Sino-African engagement. In the second half of the book, evidence from different countries and across types of security engagement (i.e., military training, maritime security) sheds light on how the non-interference policy that has characterised, and arguably been central to, the expansion of China's presence on the African continent will change when and if needed (336-339). The authors see these changes as a response to challenges to Chinese interests.

The book provides a comprehensive and clear outlook on maritime security in particular. Chapter 9 not only runs through the key interests that China and other actors have in the context of African ports and waters, but also highlights the fact that China has been able to position itself as a key actor in maritime security. The chapter explores the interests of various Chinese actors, in line with previous chapters, including state-owned companies and the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). It provides an apt

⁶ Kathy N. Lam, *Chinese State-Owned Enterprises in West Africa: Triple-Embedded Globalization* (Routledge, 2017): 55.

⁷ Jean-Pierre Cabestan, *African Agency and Chinese Power: The Case of Djibouti*, South African Institute of International Affairs, 2020: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep29586>.

⁸ Chris Alden and Daniel Large, "On Becoming a Norms Maker: Chinese Foreign Policy, Norms Evolution and the Challenges of Security in Africa," *The China Quarterly* 221 (2015): 123-142.

⁹ Ilaria Carrozza, "Legitimizing China's Growing Engagement in African Security: Change within Continuity of Official Discourse," *The China Quarterly* 248:1 (2021): 1174-1199.

analysis of how geopolitical rivalry could influence Chinese maritime strategy and the centrality of African ports.

The chapter suggests that African ports that are developed with Chinese participation are part of a much larger maritime strategy, as evidenced, for instance, by the number of berths and ports operated by Chinese companies on the continent (274). This understanding suggests that Chinese companies and the Chinese state share a unified vision, or that the latter ultimately determines the interests of the former. Nevertheless, as has been shown in China Studies literature on state-business relations,¹⁰ state ownership does not fully determine the strategy of state-owned enterprises, who have considerable operational autonomy.¹¹ Also, in the context of China-Africa engagement, the expansion of state-owned companies in sectors that are closely-related to maritime security, such as construction, takes place in the context of the balancing of those companies of their market- and profit-seeking overseas activities and their responsibilities in China's political economy¹².

This part would therefore have benefited both from further engagement with the abovementioned literature that is focused on state-business relations in China's political economy and from more emphasis on the role of commercial interests in shaping, if not driving, Chinese companies' overseas engagement. For instance, while China Merchants Port (CMPort) has demonstrated considerable interest in East African ports, starting from the now-stalled Bagamoyo Port in Tanzania,¹³ it should be noted that this region's ports are some of the very few that have not been fully privatized, and that have therefore attracted attention of Chinese and non-Chinese port operators alike. Along similar lines, the example of China Communication Construction Company (CCCC) in Kenya's port development and modernization could have benefitted from further contextualisation on the lack of Chinese participation in the agenda-setting, conceptualization, and design of the projects mentioned, as well as the broader connectivity initiatives they

¹⁰ Kjeld Eric Brødsgaard, "Politics and Business Group Formation in China: the Party in Control?" *The China Quarterly* 211 (2012): 624-648; Brødsgaard, "'Fragmented Authoritarianism' or 'Integrated Fragmentation'?" in Brødsgaard, ed., *Chinese Politics as Fragmented Authoritarianism* (Routledge, 2015): 38-55; Andrew Mertha and Brødsgaard (2017) "Introduction," in Brødsgaard, ed., *Chinese Politics as Fragmented Authoritarianism* (Routledge, 2017): 1-14; Andrew Mertha, "Fragmented Authoritarianism 2.0": Political Pluralisation of the Chinese Policy Process," *The China Quarterly* 200 (2009): 995-1012.

¹¹ Karen Jingrong Lin, et al, "State-owned Enterprises in China: A Review of 40 Years of Research and Practice," *China Journal of Accounting Research* 13:1 (2020): 31-55.

¹² Zhengli Huang and Gediminas Lesutis, "Improvised Hybridity in the 'Fixing' of Chinese Infrastructure Capital: The Case of Kenya's Standard Gauge Railway," *Antipode*, 55:5 (2023):1587-1607; Ching Kwan Lee *The Specter of Global China: Politics, Labour, and Foreign Investment in Africa* (University of Chicago Press, 2017); Yi-Chong Xu, "Chinese State-owned Enterprises in Africa: Ambassadors or Freebooters?" *Journal of Contemporary China*, 23:89 (2014): 822-840.

¹³ Frangton Chiyemura, Elisa Gambino, Tim Zajontz, "Infrastructure and the Politics of African State Agency: Shaping the Belt and Road Initiative in East Africa," *Chinese Political Science Review* 8 (2022): 105-131.

are part of (i.e., Lamu Port and Lamu-South Sudan-Ethiopia Transport Corridor),¹⁴ highlighting that the funding is coming from domestic Kenyan sources.

Overall, this book stands out as a critical resource for students and researchers who are interested in understanding China's dynamic and multilayered engagement with Africa. Shinn and Eisenman not only highlight the breadth of Chinese networks and their engagement with a broad range of African actors, but also question the long-term implications of these relations for African sovereignty and agency. Specifically, they highlight how through the development of "interlocking and mutually reinforcing relationships, China has created a dense and durable network of ties with Africans that advance its influence and interest simultaneously" (329). The focus on networks of ties places this book in great company, likely becoming a companion to Lina Benabdallah's *Shaping the Future of Power*.¹⁵

¹⁴ Elisa Gambino, "Corridors of Opportunity? African Infrastructure and the Market Expansion of Chinese Companies," in Hugh Lamarque and Paul Nugent, eds., *Transport Corridors in Africa* (James Currey, 2022): 286-316.

¹⁵ Lina Benabdallah, *Shaping the Future of Power*.

Amidst the existing extensive literature on China-Africa engagements, few books serve as comprehensive resources or textbooks on the subject.¹ For instance, David H. Shinn and Joshua Eisenman in their 2012 book, *China and Africa: A Century of Engagement*, examine China's engagement with all African countries and regions in areas such as politics, security, trade and investments and military.² In *China and Africa: The New Era*, published in 2021, Daniel Large provides a comprehensive assessment of the historical and contemporary relations between China and African countries. In a 2019 edited volume, Chris Alden and Large explore key themes on China-Africa engagement which include agency, media, race, development, and security.³

Shinn and Eisenman's new book, *China's Relations with Africa: A New Era of Strategic Engagement*, stands out as the most comprehensive resource book on China-Africa strategic engagements. Unlike the other books, it addresses a broad range of themes and debates, focusing on China's geopolitical objectives in Africa. It explores China's engagement with African countries and regional organizations in key areas, such as politics and political parties, media and propaganda, military and security, as well as information and technology, all of which are examined through a strategic security lens. Unlike Shinn and Eisenman's previous book, *China's Relations with Africa* offers broad-based analyses of the historical, political, security, and strategic engagements in critical areas of information and technology, maritime and food security, media, political party engagements, peacekeeping, and agency between China and Africa from a strategic security perspective. It is thus an invaluable first-port-of-call resource for students at all levels as well as scholars of China-Africa relations.

Based on "systematic data, informal in-person interviews, online surveys, official documents and statements, media reports and scholarly publications" (17), the book locates Africa in China's geostrategy by analysing the strategies and actions that China employs to brace its position as a global power, one which is capable of providing public goods and competing with the United States for global influence. The book moves from a broad placement of Africa within China's geostrategy (chapter 1) and the bilateral and global relations (chapter 2) to a more focused discussion of regional and subregional relations (chapter 3), then an exploration of Party-to-Party relations (chapter 4), which outlines how China considers political parties to be the backbone of its bilateral and global relations (91). The rest of the chapters are streamlined to focus on key themes such as Africa-focused propaganda (chapter 5), security strategy and interests (chapter 6), protecting interests and managing conflicts (chapter 7), security diplomacy (chapter 8), and maritime

¹ David Shinn and Joshua Eisenman, *China and Africa: A Century of Engagement* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012); Daniel Large, *China and Africa: The New Era* (Polity Press, 2021); Chris Alden and Large, eds., *New Directions in Africa-China Studies* (Routledge, 2019).

² Shinn and Eisenman, *China and Africa: A Century of Engagement*.

³ Alden and Large, eds., *New Directions in Africa-China Studies*; Large, *China and Africa*.

security (chapter 9). This is followed by technology and information strategy (chapter 10) and concludes with a projection of trends in China-Africa strategic relations (chapter 11).

The strength of the book is its focus on China's strategic and security engagements with African countries and regional organizations on a broad range of key areas that have not been covered in a single volume. These engagements range from traditional and non-traditional security, maritime security, and information and technology security, and demonstrate the expanding scope of China-Africa relations beyond the traditional economic and political relations. By framing their analysis from a strategic-security perspective, the book suggests a monolithic China that in some ways acts as the puppet master of all the various actors doing its bidding on the continent. This monolithic China has, the authors argue, woven a complex web of actors including: individuals; national and private organizations; and states at national, regional, continental, and global levels. Surveys and research by both academics and institutions such as McKinsey, have, however, revealed that most Chinese firms on the continent are private enterprises, and that the Chinese government is not aware of the activities of most of these actors on the continent.⁴ In that sense, China's web is not as coherent and monolithic as the authors suggest.

Nonetheless, it remains true that China has creatively created a web of connections with a diverse range of African actors ranging from individuals to national, regional, continental, and global actors. The authors argue that China uses this web to capture the imagination of its African actors through Africa-focused propaganda (119-154), and wholly-sponsored tours of China for African leaders that point to the success of its economic development and the sophistry of its economy. Alexander Dukalskis explains this by arguing that the Chinese government's strategy is aimed at both managing its image abroad and marketing itself as the best partner for the Global South.⁵ The strategy encompasses promotional tactics of persuasion such as cultivating opinion shapers and influencers who then speak positively of China in their countries, and obstructive strategies, which may include targeting critics of China in other countries and pressuring governments to constrain Chinese critics in their countries. Shinn and Eisenman focus mainly on the promotional aspects of the strategy such as host diplomacy (13-14) (that is, all-expenses paid trips for government and party officials from African countries) and Africa-focused propaganda through Chinese media such as the *China Daily*, *Xinhua*, *China Global Television Network* (CGTN) and *China Radio International* (343). It would have been interesting to get an overview of China's obstructive strategies such as extraterritorial repression and censorship despite its non-intervention policy.

The authors argue that despite China's efforts to promote its influence and strategies in Africa, some African actors, such as Seychelles' president, tend to focus on the benefits of their engagement with China

⁴ Yuan Lrene Sun, Kartik Jayaram, and Omid Kassiri, *Dance of the Lions and Dragons: How Are Africa and China Engaging, and How Will the Partnership Evolve?* (McKinsey & Company, 2017); Ian Taylor, *China's new role in Africa* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2009); Ding Fei, Motolani Peltola, and Shuo Zhang, "Unpacking the Competitive Relations among Chinese Business Actors in Africa," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 66:2 (2023): 1-32, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2023.2225072>.

⁵ Alexander Dukalskis, *Making the World Safe for Dictatorship* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

without fully adopting or internalising the ideologies and models of Chinese governance and development in their countries (97). In all this, Shinn and Eisenman question whether Beijing's strategy of using a combination of host diplomacy, training, and exchanges with African leaders is reaping the intended benefits and whether it can sustainably challenge the enduring linkage between the Global North and Africa (154). Or, as summarized by Ian Taylor, could it be that Africans are simply exchanging dependencies from the Global North to China?⁶ Shinn and Eisenman argue that although African political leaders exercise some agency in this relationship, it is limited, and hence they are unable to effectively determine the extent of their engagement and dependencies on China (44-45). Shinn and Eisenman conclude that Africa's future will likely never be independent of the tentacles of either the West or China, and that Africa's agency is limited to choosing which of the two partners it will engage. Shinn and Eisenman thus describe the bar for agency by African actors as being quite low.

Nonetheless, the authors still found some credible examples of African agency that have consequential significance to Chinese engagement on the continent, particularly in relation to the nature and scope of Chinese activities in countries such as Namibia, Ghana, and Seychelles (44-49). There is a notable absence in this narrative of the agency of subregional organizations like the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) and the continental bodies like the African Union (AU) to influence China's engagement with their member states. More insights on why these organizations, and especially the AU, fail to harness African voices and set the agenda for the continent's strategic engagements with China would have helped to explain why China continues to drive bilateral and multilateral relations on the continent.

The historicization of China's strategic engagements with Africa provides context necessary to understanding contemporary strategic engagements between the two. Throughout the book Shinn and Eisenman skilfully weave the historical and the contemporary in China's relations with Africa in a manner that demonstrates the continuity of China's strategy on the continent. The main thrust is that China's strategic interests in Africa are multitier and interlocking (8-11) such that they are difficult to understand in their contemporary iterations without this history being highlighted. In other words, they advance the argument that there is continuity in China's strategic objectives in Africa, and that with each era, Chinese leaders adapt the means of attaining those objectives. For instance, Shinn and Eisenman trace developments in China-Africa engagements from Chairman Mao Zedong's ideological struggle for influence in the Third World (14, 144), President Deng Xiaoping's low-profile strategy (5), President Jiang Zemin's emphasis on utilising multilateral frameworks to enhance China's reputation (10, 110), President Hu Jintao's African diplomacy through the "Harmonious World" concept (6, 199), to President Xi Jinping's national rejuvenation and era of a new type of international relations (6). In doing so, they demonstrate the progressive continuity of China's engagement with the continent.

Shinn and Eisenman streamline their discussion on the theme of strategic security, which appears throughout the book. However, even in their attempt to streamline, the vast array of topics covered in the

⁶ Ian Taylor, *Africa Rising? BRICS - Diversifying Dependency* (James Currey, 2014).

book mean that at times depth is sacrificed for breadth. As a result, the book lacks sufficient depth; perhaps a two-volume work would have been more appropriate. For instance, the sections on regional organizations (69-78) and education (133-139) could have been expanded to explain why regional organizations play a peripheral role in China-Africa engagements. On education, they could have demonstrated how education, which propelled China to becoming the second biggest recipient of African students before the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak, has affected people-to-people relations in China-Africa interactions.

What the book lacks in depth it makes up in the quality and diversity of views from policymakers in the making of China-Africa relations. It provides a glimpse into the minds of key actors such as political leaders, senior bureaucrats, and diplomats in China-Africa relations, and humanizes the strategic engagements, showing that the relations are not just state-centric, and state-driven but also include journalists and civil society organizations like China House, which is a non-governmental organization based in Kenya and is often obscure in the discourse on China-Africa relations. In doing that, the book demonstrates the role played by some African actors in attempting to shape their engagement with China. Shinn and Eisenman are careful not to generalise and make an important observation that the asymmetrical relations between China and individual African countries differ depending on the government capacity of each African country. However, at times the authors offer minimal critical analysis of their interviewees' views and opinions, which gives the impression that some parts of the book, especially the section on editorial line (126-128) are a compilation of statements by interviewees.

The book presents a critical view of Chinese technological advancements in Africa (295-326). Shinn and Eisenmann argue that China uses its technology, including artificial intelligence and surveillance technology, to advance strategic objectives and “extend its influence in Africa and become the global leader” (326) in technological and informational security. This analysis concurs with works by scholars like Willet H. Gravett, who argues that China is using developing countries to test its surveillance technology, hence it is a digital colonizer.⁷ While that may be the case to some extent, it should be noted that most Chinese technology actors in Africa are private or semi-private entities which are often selected by African governments based on the affordability of their programs. The agency of African actors in using Chinese technology to advance their own national and personal interests is understated in this respect, which results in a portrait of Africa as a passive recipient of Chinese technology.⁸

Similarly, Shinn and Eisenman argue that “the China model of digital authoritarianism is spreading beyond China’s borders” (308). The basis for their assertion is that the technology which is acquired from Chinese

⁷ Willem H Gravett, “Digital Coloniser? China and Artificial Intelligence in Africa,” *Survival* 62:6 (2020): 153-178, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2020.1851098>; Suneel Kumar, “China’s Digital Expansionism in Africa and the US Counter-Strategies,” *Insight on Africa* 16:2 (2024): 146-165.

⁸ Bulelani Jili, “The Spread of Chinese Surveillance Tools in Africa: A Focus on Ethiopia and Kenya,” in Chux Daniels, Benedikt Erforth, and Chloe Teevan, eds., *Africa–Europe Cooperation and Digital Transformation* (Routledge, 2022): 32-49.

firms such as Huawei and Zhongxing Telecommunication Equipment (ZTE) is being used for repression, censorship, and other non-democratic practices. This alone does not suggest that there is a “China model of digital authoritarianism” (308). Nor does the fact that African governments are acquiring these Chinese technologies for nefarious purposes. Shinn and Eisenman cite China’s export of technology infrastructure and equipment which has been used to surveil and repress political opponents by governments in Zambia, Uganda, and Zimbabwe (317). A discussion of what makes digital technology authoritarian and what makes a “model of digital authoritarianism” would have been useful.

The chapter on “projecting trends in China-Africa strategic relations” (327-344) provides a launching pad for further research. This is critical because it demonstrates the ability of Shinn and Eisenman to forecast possible futures of China-Africa strategic engagements, such as: the proposed rebounding of China’s strategic relations with Africa (328); the continued consolidation of the multitier network of relationships with African political elites (329); the shift by China to Africa for food, fuel, and minerals (334); and the expansion of China-Africa technology and information security cooperation (340-341). In addition, it also provides scholars and policymakers with insights on areas for further analysis and research. As such, it is a comprehensive resource text that is applicable to both scholars and practitioners.

In sum, *China’s Relations with Africa: A New Era of Strategic Engagement* provides a comprehensive analysis of Africa’s role in China’s geostrategic objectives. Through systematic analysis of data, including official government reports and statements as well as in-person interviews with political party and government officials, journalists, academics, and NGO personnel, the book demonstrates the complex and multitier nature of China’s engagement with Africa. The book is therefore an invaluable first port-of-call resource for students, scholars, and policymakers who are interested in gaining valuable insights in Africa’s role in China’s geostrategy, because it provides a broad-based analysis of the political, security, and strategic engagements in critical areas of information and technology, and maritime and food security from a strategic security perspective.

Response by David H. Shinn, George Washington University, and
Joshua Eisenman, University of Notre Dame

We thank H-Diplo for organizing this exchange of views on our book, *China's Relations with Africa: A New Era of Strategic Engagement*. H-Diplo is an important service that organizes meaningful dialogue in the academic community. We are grateful to Elisa Gambino and Obert Hodzi for taking the time to provide their thoughtful and constructive comments on our work.

We are pleased that Hodzi describes our book as “an invaluable first-port-of-call resource” while Gambino calls it a “critical resource” for students and researchers who are interested in understanding China’s dynamic and multilayered engagement with Africa. That was our goal when we began this project five years ago, and it is satisfying that both well-respected scholars came to this conclusion.

We also appreciate that both reviewers note our effort to place China’s contemporary political and security engagement with Africa within its proper historical context. This was a primary objective of our first book, *China and Africa: A Century of Engagement*, and we chose to continue the pattern in this book as well.¹ This approach adds essential context to help readers better understand China-Africa relations today and increases the shelf life of the book.

The primary criticism of our work focuses on omissions. Hodzi comments that “the vast array of topics covered in the book mean that at times depth is sacrificed for breadth. As a result, the book lacks sufficient depth: perhaps a two-volume work would have been more appropriate.” He identified the sections on regional organizations and education as examples.

China's Relations with Africa, as the name suggests, covers all aspects of China’s political and security relationships with Africa. That said, standard length requirements and a lack of material on some topics meant that we were able to drill down deeper on some issues more than others. We chose to focus on the role of the party and the security sector because under President Xi Jinping these issues have come to dominate the strategic relationship. Of course, researchers can have legitimate disagreements about whether we chose the right issues to focus on.

Another reason we could not delve deeper, particularly in those issues related to security, is the difficulty of conducting research on some topics. In his book, Hodzi recognized that there is a lack of accessible data, and the subject is considered highly sensitive in both China and African countries.² Our research, which is based on hundreds of personal interviews with policymakers and experts in China, Africa, and the United

¹ David H. Shinn and Joshua Eisenman, *China and Africa: A Century of Engagement* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

² Obert Hodzi, *The End of China's Non-Intervention Policy in Africa* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019): 21.

States; proprietary survey data; and which cites official statements, academic monographs, journalistic accounts, and non-governmental organization reports, is specifically aimed at overcoming this challenge.

Gambino argues that we could have added more discussion on China's relations with African regional economic communities, the impact of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement, regional free trade agreements, and examples of China's trade asymmetry with Africa. In fact, an early draft of the manuscript included a chapter on several economic issues that had important political implications. We analyzed China's growing trade surplus with Africa and the fact that 90 percent of China's imports are raw materials such as oil and minerals while nearly all of its exports are value-added goods. This resulted in growing concerns in African capitals. We also looked at the China "debt trap" debate, but concluded that it was grossly exaggerated because Beijing is responsible for only about 12 per cent of Africa's external debt. China is a major donor in several African countries such as Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Zambia where debt does pose a challenge to the relationship. So far, however, China has not seized or threatened to seize assets in Africa due to tardy or nonpayment of debt. Due to length limitations, and because those issues are largely economic, as opposed to political or security related, we ultimately decided to condense our discussion to less than two pages (43-44) in chapter 2.³

³ There is a rich body of literature on these topics. Examples include Arkebe Oqubay and Justin Yifu Lin, eds., *China-Africa and an Economic Transformation* (Oxford University Press, 2019); Deborah Brautigam and Won Kidane, "China, Africa, and Debt Distress: Fact and Fiction about Asset Seizures," Policy Brief 47 (2020), China Africa Research Initiative (CARI), School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), Johns Hopkins University, Washington, DC: <https://hdl.handle.net/10419/248226>; Kevin Acker, Deborah Brautigam, and Yufan Huang, "Debt Relief with Chinese Characteristics," Working Paper 39 (June 2020), China Africa Research Initiative (CARI), School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), Johns Hopkins University, Washington, DC: http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3745021; Linda Calabrese and Xiaoyang Tang, "Africa's Economic Transformation: The Role of Chinese Investment," ODI Global (June 2020): <https://odi.org/en/publications/africas-economic-transformation-the-role-of-chinese-investment/>; Oyintarelado Moses, Cecilia Springer, and Kevin P. Gallagher, "Demystifying Chinese Overseas Lending and Development Finance," Boston University Global Development Policy Center Policy Brief 018 (April 2023): https://www.bu.edu/gdp/files/2023/04/GCL_PB_018_Chinas_OLDF_FIN.pdf; Alex Vines, Creon Butler, and Yu Jie, "The Response to Debt Distress in Africa and the Role of China," Chatham House Africa Programme (December 2022): <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-12/2022-12-15-africa-china-debt-distress-vines-et-al.pdf>; Noah Cheruiyot Mutai, et al., "Examining the Sustainability of African Debt Owed to China in the Context of Debt-trap Diplomacy," *Scientific African* 24 (2024): <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sciaf.2024.e02164>; Jingya Xu and Zhouying Song, "Competitiveness and Evolution of China-Africa Trade Network: Evidence from Value-Added Extend Decomposition," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* (2025): <https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096251313538>; Sanela Mrdakovic and Milos Todorovic, "China-Africa Trade and Investment Relations Under the Belt and Road Initiative," *Economic Themes* 61:2 (2023): 171-196.

In recent years, an enormous amount of research has been published on China's economic relations with Africa, while relatively little has appeared on the political and security relationship.⁴ There have been studies on specialized political and security topics such as China's political relations with individual African countries, China's contribution to UN peacekeeping operations in Africa, and the role of Chinese private security companies in Africa.⁵ But what has been missing until now is a comprehensive book that ties together these important themes and explains how they relate to each other and advance China's broader strategic objectives in Africa.

Hodzi argues that the narrative should have included more on African agency and China's relations with African regional and subregional organizations and why the African Union failed to harness African voices and set the agenda for the continent's strategic engagement with China. Unfortunately, there has been limited primary and field research done on China's relations with subregional organizations. More has been done on China's relationship with the African Union, but that work has been largely descriptive.⁶ We agree that research on China's relations with African regional and subregional organizations remains a rich topic for additional field research and our book would have benefitted had we pursued it further.

We did, however, offer several reasons why African organizations have been unable to set the agenda in their relations with Beijing. Unlike China, 54 African nations do not speak with one voice, their members often act at cross purposes, and, as the more powerful partner, China is able to negotiate side deals with individual countries. China also provides funding to the African Union and some subregional organizations that their member states do not want to jeopardize by opposing Chinese priorities. The African Union is

⁴ One notable exception is the edited volume by Chris Alden, Abiodun Alao, Zhang Chun, and Laura Barber, eds., *China and Africa: Building Peace and Security Cooperation on the Continent* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

⁵ See, for example, Jonas Parello-Plesner and Mathieu Duchâtel, *China's Strong Arm: Protecting Citizens and Assets Abroad* (Routledge, 2015); Shuwen Zheng and Ying Xia, "Private Security Companies in Kenya and the Impact of Chinese Actors," Working Paper 44 (February 2021); China Africa Research Initiative (CARI), School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), Johns Hopkins University, Washington, DC: <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/248172/1/sais-cari-wp44.pdf>; Oita Etyang and Simon Oswan Panyako, "China's Footprint in Africa's Peace and Security," *The African Review: A Journal of African Politics, Development and International Affairs* 47:2 (2020): 336-356; Tim Ditter, Kaia Haney, Tsun-Kai Tsai, and Carita Reid, "The Military and Security Dimensions of the PRC's Africa Presence: Changes in a Time of Global Shocks," Channel News Asia (CNA) (October 2024): <https://www.cna.org/reports/2024/10/The-Military-and-Security-Dimensions-of-the-PRCs-Africa-Presence.pdf>.

⁶ For example, see, Luo Jianbo, "Advancing China's Multilateral Diplomacy in Africa," *Contemporary International Relations* 16:12 (2006): 11-25; Stacey Links, "Parameters and Pathways Agency in the Case of the Southern Development Community", in Florian Schneider, ed., *Global Perspectives on China's Belt and Road Initiative* (Amsterdam University Press, 2021): 141-169; Francis Ikome, "The Role and Place of the African Union in the Emerging China-Africa Partnership", in Axel Harneit-Sievers, Stephen Marks, and Sanusha Naidu, eds., *Chinese and African Perspectives on China in Africa* (Pambazuka Press, 2010): 201-212; Ian Taylor, *The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC)* (Routledge, 2011).

slowly beginning to take some initiative in setting the agenda for the triennial summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, which Beijing continues to underwrite.

Hodzi points out that China's relations in Africa are not as monolithic as our analysis suggests, noting that most Chinese companies operating on the continent are private. While this is true, China's largest and most powerful companies in the construction, oil, and security sectors are either state-owned companies (SOEs) or, like Huawei and ZTE, are semi-private and maintain close connections with the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the People's Liberation Army. Most of the truly private Chinese companies are small local enterprises that play only a modest role in China's strategic relations on the continent.

Gambino argues that state ownership of companies "does not fully determine the strategy of state-owned enterprises, who have considerable operational autonomy." Citing research on Chinese state-business relations, Gambino argued that SOEs' commercial interests, not politics, remain their primary drivers, and we respectfully disagree. Our research shows that under Xi Jinping, the expansion of party branches and ideological training in all firms, from large SOEs to small private firms, has enhanced the role of the party as companies make decisions. SOEs are key instruments for the implementation of CPC policies and strategic initiatives, explains Kjeld Erik Brødsgaard, director of the China Policy Program at the Copenhagen Business School.⁷ Under Xi Jinping, the party's growing control over SOEs suggests prior research that identified high levels of SOE independence may be outdated. China's state-owned construction companies are managed by the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council and ultimately answerable to the party.

Gambino also notes that Chinese company involvement in port financing and construction may largely be driven by commercial interests. We agree that some Chinese-financed and constructed ports in Africa, depending on location and the particulars of the project, may largely be driven by commercial interests. Some Chinese-financed and constructed ports in Africa are even ill-suited for military purposes, while others can be adapted for dual use by the People's Liberation Army Navy. We accept Gambino's point that we could have better articulated the drivers behind China's port development projects.

Hodzi quotes our statement in chapter 10 that "the China model of digital authoritarianism is spreading beyond China's borders" and argues that purchases of communications technology from Chinese firms such as Huawei and ZTE "alone" do not prove there is a China model of digital authoritarianism. We agree that the activities of Huawei and ZTE "alone" do not suggest that there is a China model of digital authoritarianism. For this reason, we presented extensive evidence (307-308; endnotes 77-89) detailing how China is proliferating digital authoritarianism and demonstrating that Huawei and ZTE are only among some of the most important implementers of the policy.

⁷ Kjeld Erik Brødsgaard, "Can China Keep Controlling Its SOEs?" *The Diplomat*, 5 March 2018. See also Wenjuan Nie, "China's State-owned Enterprises: Instruments of Its Foreign Strategy?" *Journal of Contemporary China* 31:135 (2021): 383-397.

Finally, we reiterate our appreciation for the time that Elisa Gambino and Obert Hodzi devoted to their careful reviews of the book. Their positive comments are most welcome, and their criticisms were constructive. We are grateful for their continued contributions to the academic discourse on China-Africa relations and we wish them success in the future.