Development and Cooperation

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China on the global stage

Focus: How a major power is expanding its influence **Opinion:** The current Ebola outbreak should be regarded in a broader context **Around the world:** Consequences of the recognition of slavery as humanity's worst crime DEval Opinion Monitor: support for development aid is growing again in Germany

Opinion — 5

The Ebola outbreak highlights how important it is to invest in prevention, p. 5.

Photo: picture alliance / AP Photo/Moses Sawasawa / Moses Sawasawa

"Musk offers options for individual persons or states to cope with global environmental disaster, but nothing that would make the planet safe for all of humankind."

Hans Dembowski, p. 12

Around the world — 15

Photo: Nathalie Bertrams

In South Africa, the effects of deindustrialisation are evident, p. 21.

31 Focus — China on the global stage

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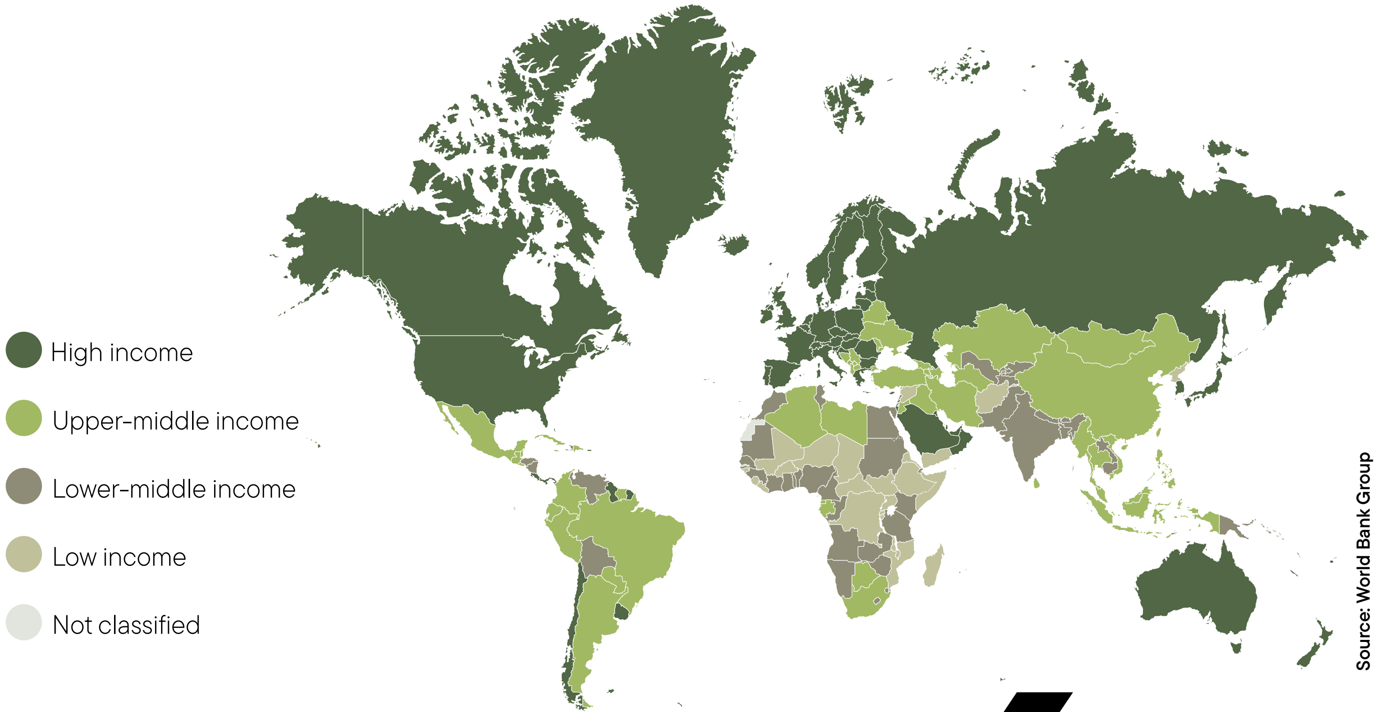
Cover photo by tolotola / Adobe Stock.

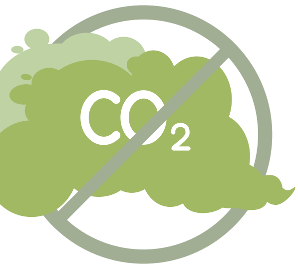
China shapes the daily lives of many people in developing and emerging economies. Among the reasons for Beijing's growing influence are its export strength and massive investments in infrastructure. However, in recent years, China has scaled back its large state-backed loans for construction projects in the Global South. African countries are now paying more to China in debt repayments than they receive in new loans. Now more than ever, Western democracies need to demonstrate that what they have to offer is more sustainable than what the authoritarian regime in Beijing can provide.

Six economies move to a higher income category

The World Bank has released its *2026-2027 Country Income Classifications.* Togo moved from low to lower-middle income. Jordan, Micronesia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Vietnam moved from lower-middle to upper-middle income. No countries moved down.



Source: World Bank Group



Good news

Despite the rest of the world still attempting to reach climate commitments set in previous years, Bhutan, the small country in the Himalayas, is ahead of the curve. Due to rigorous dedication to its own constitution and the well-being of its citizens, Bhutan has managed *to become the first country in the world that is carbon negative.* With its founding laws emphasising that 60 % of the country's land must be preserved for forestry, it has created the ideal circumstances for maintaining low CO_2 levels.

In addition, its national philosophy, Gross National Happiness (GNH), views environmental sustainability and economic development as complementary goals, rather than competing priorities. By expanding its definition of progress to include what is elsewhere seen as a limitation, Bhutan has shown that a more inclusive approach can achieve greater success.

6

January

In 2026, this date marked Fat Cat Day – the point at which the CEOs of the 100 companies in the UK's main stock-market index had already earned more than the average worker makes in a whole year. This is according to *calculations by the High Pay Centre think tank,* which estimates CEOs' median pay at about $ 1780 an hour.

Assuming they work 62.5 hours a week, those bosses would have overtaken the UK's annual median wage by noon on the third working day of the year. In countries like Brazil, the gap is even starker: according to a joint analysis by Oxfam and the International Trade Union Confederation, it would take an average worker 490 years to earn the equivalent of a CEO's annual salary.

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

HEALTH

Ebola is not the only emergency

The current Ebola outbreak should not be viewed in isolation. It is being met by a healthcare system that has already been pushed to its limits by years of conflict, forced displacement and chronic underfinancing. In order to successfully contain Ebola, we will have to fight much more than a virus.

BY JASMIN BEHRENDS AND STEPHANIE JOHANSSEN

Measles outbreaks, epidemic levels of malaria, lack of access to healthcare for pregnant women – the medical needs in the eastern Congolese province of Ituri, and in the entire Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), are enormous, says Maria Mashako, a medical coordinator for Doctors Without Borders. "These are urgent medical needs that existed even before the arrival of Ebola."

"And all of this has been put more or less on hold. Even routine immunisations for children are not running. This is a ticking time bomb that will expose us to even more public health challenges in the future," Mashako continues.

With the majority of all confirmed cases of Ebola fever caused by the Bundibugyo virus, Ituri Province remains the epicentre of the outbreak. This 17th outbreak of Ebola fever in the DRC was declared by the World Health Organization (WHO) in mid-May 2026 and continues to spread at an unprecedented rate. By early July, over 1700 infections had been confirmed and hundreds of deaths registered. Extremely limited diagnostic and laboratory capacities are making effective testing and tracing very difficult.

CONFLICT AND DISINFORMATION

In the midst of this deadly epidemic, the years-long intense conflict between state and non-state actors continues to rage. International humanitarian law is being disregarded by all sides and egregious acts of violence, including sexualised violence, are being perpetrated against the civilian population. At the moment, no serious political efforts are being made to implement a peace agreement. Even medical facilities are not safe from the violence. Healthcare workers have repeatedly been the victims of deadly attacks.

Moreover, many people lack trust in a healthcare system that was weak to begin with. Poverty in the region is extreme, but patients nevertheless often have to pay for treatment out of pocket. Communities have lived through frightening Ebola outbreaks before – and have often experienced the trauma of losing loved ones without being able to properly say goodbye. They also frequently lacked information about the exact progression of the disease. Such memories are shaping their perception of current measures. A response focused solely on Ebola risks reinforcing people's impression that their other healthcare needs matter less.

An approach driven by economic and security interests would be disastrous in the current situation too. All too frequently, interests in mineral resources guide the decisions of powerful – and often external – actors in the DRC, instead of the priorities and needs of the Congolese people. What is needed is a cooperative and good-faith approach that takes the concerns and needs of those affected seriously and breaks down barriers and stigmas. That includes making people feel safe, for instance by allowing them to have contact with their families despite being in isolation, which would encourage them to come to health centres earlier.

> "Many people lack trust in a healthcare system that was weak to begin with."

RESEARCH ON RARE EBOLA VIRUSES IS NOT PROFITABLE ENOUGH

Although Ebola Bundibugyo virus disease has been known since 2007, to date there is neither an approved vaccine nor medication to treat it. Effective diagnostic tools are also difficult to access. These research gaps are not primarily a scientific problem, but rather a political and economic one: pharmaceutical companies do not consider research on rare Ebola viruses profitable. This leaves medical teams on site with little remedies of supportive care such as administering

A patient in isolation at a treatment centre in the province of Ituri in eastern DRC.

Photo: picture alliance/Xinhua News Agency/Zheng Yangzi fluids and controlling symptoms. But when it comes to containing epidemics, one thing is crucial above all else: speed.

Negligence on this scale should not happen again. Following the large outbreak in West Africa in 2014, it took until 2020 for the first effective treatment against the Ebola virus that was circulating at that time to be available on the market. Whereas countries like the USA stockpiled large supplies, affected countries still lack fast, reliable and, above all, affordable access to medical treatments. For that reason, public research funds should be tied to binding access requirements from the start so that new products can be made available where they are needed most.

$ 518 MILLION NEEDED

The WHO and the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) have proposed a regional plan to contain the outbreak. A total of $ 518 million is needed to support Africa's affected countries.

Countries like Germany have significant political, scientific and medical capacities to contribute to stopping the outbreak. The additional € 13 million recently pledged by German Development Minister Reem Alabali Radovan therefore sends an important signal. It is essential that this assistance translates into long-term political responsibility.

Germany can now show that its claim to be a reliable partner in global health also holds true during times of crisis. Three factors are key:

1. Coordinated political leadership across all agencies is needed. In light of the recent restructurings in the relevant ministries, clear divisions of responsibility and close coordination between the Foreign Office, the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and the Ministry of Health are essential. As was the case in 2014, coordination mechanisms such as a special representative could be helpful.

2. Germany must further strengthen its support for humanitarian aid and the development of resilient healthcare systems. That includes, in particular, investments in diagnostic, laboratory and surveillance capacities, as well as in the treatment of the affected population on site.

3. Germany needs to create dependable evacuation and treatment options for humanitarian aid workers. Anyone who is deployed in an outbreak must be able to rely on quick and safe medical care. Germany has the expertise and treatment capacities to support this safety.

The Ebola outbreak demonstrates once again that epidemics cannot be stopped in laboratories or hospitals alone. Instead, they can only be overcome in places where healthcare systems have been strengthened, research has been publicly funded – and people trust the medical care they are offered. Anyone who is only responding to the current outbreak will be caught off guard by the next one. If the global community makes sustainable investments now, it will also protect people in future epidemics.

Doctors Without Borders has been operating in the DRC for many years and works closely with local health authorities. In response to the Ebola outbreak, the organisation significantly expanded its emergency measures: over 1400 personnel have been deployed specifically to contain the virus. The teams now operate seven Ebola treatment centres and over 15 observation centres in the affected regions of Ituri and North and South Kivu, support local healthcare facilities, train medical personnel and supply personal protective equipment.

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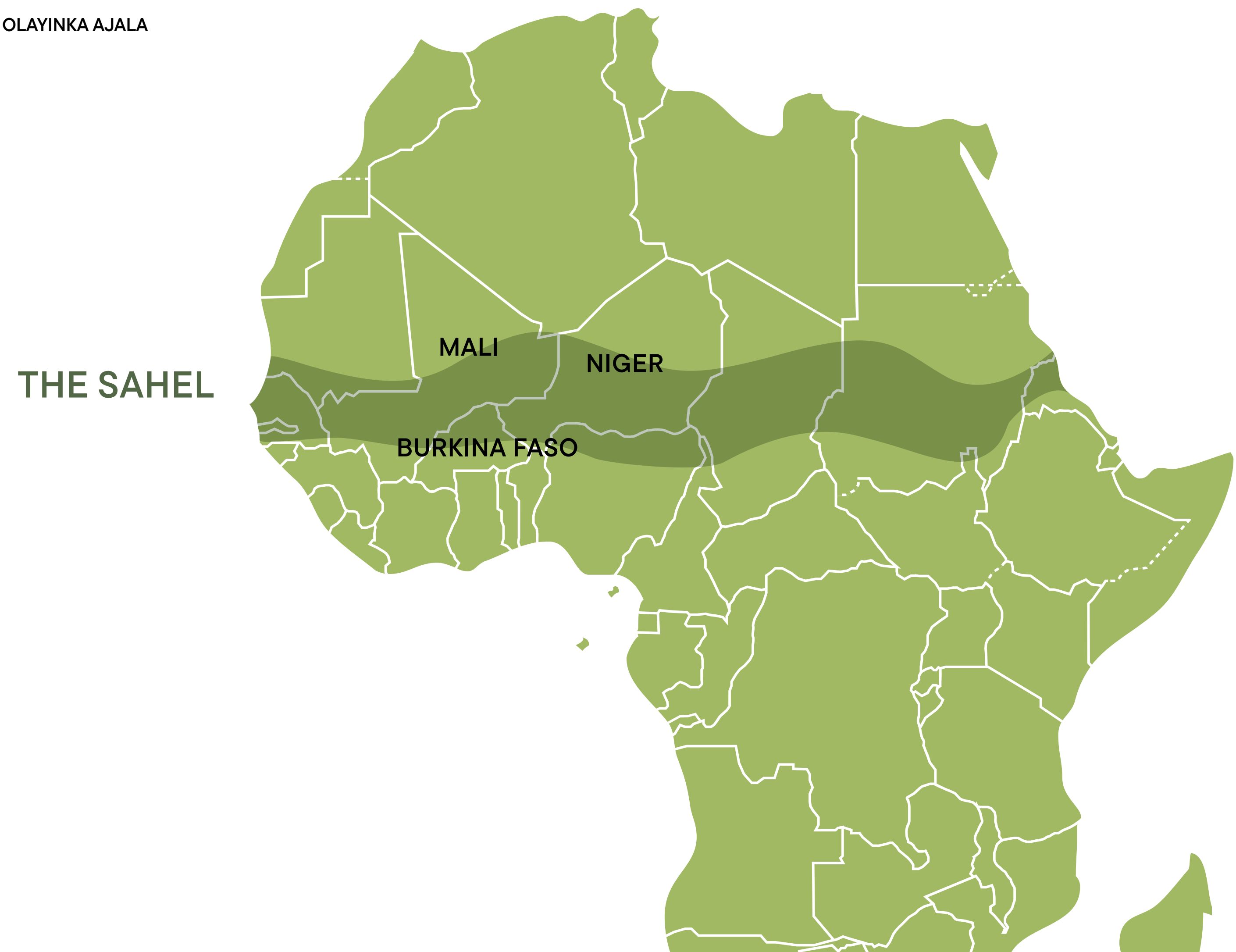
CONFLICT

Why military solutions keep failing in the Sahel

Lasting peace in the Sahel depends less on foreign military partners than on addressing Tuareg grievances, climate pressures and failing governance. Armed groups continue to exploit these conditions, especially where states lack legitimacy and public trust.

BY OLAYINKA AJALA



When the military governments of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso expelled French forces from their countries and turned to Russia as a new security partner, many observers saw this as a geopolitical realignment. For the citizens of these countries, however, this change reflected something deeper: years of international cooperation in the fight against terrorism had brought neither security nor stability nor development.

The situation in Mali is particularly precarious at the moment. Since 2012, when Tuareg rebels launched an uprising in northern Mali, armed groups have steadily expanded their influence within the country and across the Sahel region. Hundreds of thousands have been displaced, and economic growth has stagnated. Around a decade later, a wave of military coups swept across the region. The inability of democratic leaders to end insecurity was cited as the main reason for the takeovers. The current debate continues to be dominated by the issues of terrorism, foreign intervention and rivalry between the major powers. All of these are important, but they are not at the heart of the problem.

The crisis in the Sahel is primarily political in nature. Armed groups in the region have gained influence not only because of state weakness, but also because many citizens feel marginalised, neglected and alienated by the governments that claim to represent them. Insurgent groups have exploited this situation by recruiting vulnerable young people into their ranks.

> “Terrorism is a symptom rather than the actual cause of instability.”

Until these problems are resolved, neither military operations nor new international alliances are likely to lead to lasting peace.

THE REBELLION THAT NEVER REALLY ENDED

The crises in Mali date back decades and began even before the emergence of jihadist groups. Since the country gained independence in 1960, the Tuareg communities in the north have repeatedly accused successive governments of political marginalisation, insufficient investment and economic neglect.

Several peace agreements have been signed between the Tuareg and the central government in Bamako, promising greater participation and development, but their implementation has had no tangible effect. This has fuelled mistrust and discontent, which have built up over generations.

Tensions reached their peak in 2012 with the major Tuareg uprising. Tuareg fighters who had fled to North Africa and returned with weapons from Libya following the fall of the dictator Muammar al-Gaddafi joined forces with Islamist rebels to attack government institutions in several parts of the country. The attack dramatically altered the regional security situation. What began as a nationalist uprising soon became intertwined with jihadist insurgencies and criminal networks.

Since the 2012 rebellion, national and international attention has increasingly focused on terrorism. However, many communities in northern Mali believe that issues such as political representation, state legitimacy and local governance have never been adequately addressed. They have simply been overshadowed by the debate on security.

WHY FRANCE HAS LOST THE BATTLE FOR LEGITIMACY

At the request of the Malian government, France intervened in 2013 with Operation “Serval”, which was initially welcomed by many Malians. The French-led operation halted the Islamists’ advance southwards and prevented the collapse of the Malian government. Subsequently, the United Nations also became involved through the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA).

As part of the operation to halt violent extremism, France deployed thousands of soldiers across the Sahel. Despite the foreign intervention – which was accompanied by substantial international funding and years of counter-terrorism operations – the security situation in many areas has deteriorated since then.

There was widespread disappointment amongst the population, as people had hoped for an improvement in the security situation but instead witnessed increased violence, deteriorating living conditions and increasingly unstable state institutions. The result was a rise in xenophobic sentiment, particularly anti-French sentiment, throughout the region.

Following a long period of unsuccessful counter-terrorism measures, France came to be associated with the poor status quo. Many believe that France’s presence in the Sahel was solely to protect its political and economic interests. Whether this perception was entirely justified is of secondary importance compared to the fact that it gained political traction. Across the Sahel, politicians and citizens alike began to look for alternative partnerships.

Soldiers wait for the funeral of Mali's former defence minister, Sadio Camara, to begin. He died in an Islamist attack in Mali in April.

Photo: picture alliance / ASSOCIATED PRESS / Boubacary Bocoum

RUSSIA'S ADVANTAGES AND LIMITATIONS

As dissatisfaction with traditional Western allies grew, Russia exploited this disappointment. By presenting itself as an alternative to Western partners, Moscow has successfully expanded its influence in Mali and other parts of the Sahel.

Whilst the partnership with Western allies has focused on issues of democracy, governance and human rights, cooperation with Russia in the fields of security and the economy offers governments in the Sahel an alternative partnership that provides political flexibility and places less emphasis on these issues.

However, the change in security partners has not resolved the crises in the region. The root causes of instability remain. The population of the Sahel continues to suffer from poverty, marginalisation, poor public services and limited political representation. Armed groups continue to exploit these frustrations. This has led to a democratic setback in the region. Since 2020, there have been five successful coups in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso.

CLIMATE CHANGE IS EXACERBATING AN ALREADY DIRE SITUATION

The region is facing increasingly unpredictable rainfall, prolonged droughts and severe environmental degradation. Communities that depend on arable farming, pastoralism and natural resources are under unprecedented pressure.

> "Military force may temporarily curb violence. But lasting peace requires something far more complex: political justice."

Whilst climate change does not directly cause conflicts, it has exacerbated existing hostilities. As grazing land shrinks, competition between herders and settled farmers has intensified, particularly over resources – above all, water. This has had a further impact on people's livelihoods. When they collapse, armed groups exploit the situation. They boost their recruitment numbers by offering vulnerable local people alternative means of sustaining themselves.

Ironically, some measures – for example large-scale projects like building solar farms or bio-fuel plantations – to tackle climate change have caused further problems. Recent field research suggests that climate action can exacerbate existing tensions, particularly when it ignores local circumstances rather than focusing on initiatives led by the communities themselves.

THE LESSON THAT POLICYMAKERS KEEP MISSING

The prevailing international response to the problems in the Sahel has so far focused on counter-terrorism. Over the past 10 years, a considerable proportion of resources has been allocated to military aid, security cooperation and stabilisation measures. Yet the violence continues.

The Sahel region has one of the youngest populations in the world, whose potential for significant economic development has so far gone untapped. The recent support for military coups amongst young people highlights their disappointment with successive democratic regimes.

Policymakers should invest in youth employment, vocational training and entrepreneurship programmes, while expanding access to quality education and digital skills. Equally important is creating meaningful avenues for political participation and civic engagement. By addressing unemployment, exclusion and marginalisation, governments can reduce the appeal of armed groups, strengthen social cohesion and harness the region's demographic dividend for sustainable development.

Furthermore, states have a responsibility to protect their citizens from armed groups. However, military measures alone cannot resolve crises whose causes are political, social and economic in nature. Alternative mechanisms for combating terrorism, which focus on ethnic and regional grievances, are the key to long-term peace in the region. The same principle applies throughout the Sahel. Citizens who have little trust in state institutions will not regard governments as legitimate partners in the areas of development or security.

The Tuareg question clearly illustrates this reality. A community that feels excluded from national political structures cannot be pacified in the long term through the use of force. Niger, for example, has succeeded in integrating the Tuareg to some extent. Under President Mahamadou Issoufou, Niger managed to address some of the concerns of the Tuareg in the country and to involve them in government, which helped to appease the group.

Peace requires more than just fighting insurgents. First and foremost, the circumstances that allow insurgencies to arise must be eliminated. The experience of the past decade shows that no foreign actor or intervention can replace legitimate and accountable governance. Lasting peace cannot be imported; it must be built within a country's own borders.

A POLITICAL SOLUTION TO A POLITICAL CRISIS

Ultimately, the future of Mali and the entire Sahel region will not be determined by the latest military operation, a foreign alliance or a security initiative. It will depend on whether governments succeed in restoring the trust of marginalised communities, granting them meaningful political representation and creating economic prospects for citizens who have long felt abandoned by the state.

The lesson to be learnt from decades of crisis is clear: terrorism is a symptom rather than the actual cause of instability. The conflicts in the Sahel cannot be understood without recognising the significance of historical grievances, particularly within the Tuareg communities. They cannot be resolved without addressing the climatic pressures that are undermining people's livelihoods. And they cannot be brought to an end without improving governance and accountability. Military force may temporarily curb violence. But lasting peace requires something far more complex: political justice.

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Photo: picture alliance / ZUMAPRESS.com / Gina M Randazzo

Protests in the run-up to SpaceX's initial public offering, which made Elon Musk the world's first trillionaire.

PLUTOCRACY

Another step towards Muskism

Elon Musk briefly became the world's first trillionaire in dollar terms thanks to the initial public offering (IPO) of his corporation SpaceX in June. The flotation ripped off small investors, however. Musk's business model is to safeguard state sovereignty with private services, which gives him considerable political influence. More money means he can express his right-wing authoritarianism even more vehemently.

BY HANS DEMBOWSKI

How Musk became a super-rich, well-networked plutocrat is the topic of "Muskism", a book by Quinn Slobodian, a historian, and Ben Tarnoff, a technology expert. They warn that he may leave his mark on the 21st century in a similar way as Henry Ford shaped the 20th century. Ford's assembly lines changed industrial production around the world and became the basis of what is now called "Fordism".

The co-authors are not sure Musk will prove similarly influential, but they believe such a dystopian scenario may indeed come true. Musk's big promise, they explain, is autarky thanks to technology even in times of a fragmenting world order. He safeguards the sovereignty of states in important fields, but in doing so makes them depend on him and his companies. His overarching idea is the automation, purging human activity from production to the extent possible. Muskism is completed, according to Slobodian and Tarnoff, once an elitist white minority becomes unassailable and indeed indistinguishable from the use of technology.

SPACEX LAUNCHES HALF OF ALL ROCKETS

What may feel like science fiction is actually coming true bit by bit. Indeed, governments depend on SpaceX because the company launches satellites into orbit, and its satellite network Starlink provides internet access in many places.

Last year, SpaceX accounted for about 85 % of orbital rocket launches in the USA and 50 % internationally. Ukraine's military belongs to the parties that depend on Starlink. Musk, moreover, has made SpaceX the parent company of xAI, his artificial intelligence venture, and X (formerly Twitter), his social media platform. Both lose large sums of money, but have received a huge capital injection thanks to the IPO.

In contrast to normal capital market conventions, Musk has retained full control of SpaceX. The shares he has kept have more voting rights than the ones he has sold, so other shareholders cannot hold him accountable.

LIKE A PYRAMID SCHEME

The IPO made Musk much richer on 12 June – to the detriment of smallholder investors. As Nobel laureate Paul Krugman argued on his Substack, the event was designed like a "Ponzi scheme", which is another term for pyramid scheme. That was the case because major stock market indices changed their rules – to Musk's benefit and as he had demanded.

In the past, indices only included new shares several months after an IPO, when the share price had stabilised so its future development had become more easily assessable. By contrast, the NASDAQ 100 and the FTSE Russell included SpaceX soon, giving the share a strong boost. After all, major financial companies which run index-tracking funds need SpaceX shares, and that drives up the price. That, in turn, attracted retail investors who feard they might miss out on a historic opportunity. That fear was delusional, as Krugman warned as early as 17 June, and by 22 June, the share was indeed trading below the initial price it had had only 10 days before.

> "The high price the US government pays for Musk's supposedly cheap rocket launches is its dependence on the plutocrat."

Those who believed in Musk's unfailing business talent thus lost money. At the same time, risk-averse investors who prefer index trackers to specific shares were ripped off too. Their portfolios now include SpaceX as part of their index funds. The plutocrat benefited considerably from long-standing rules having been abandoned, even though, at the time of writing, his fortune is now worth a little less than $ 1 trillion due to the lower share price. As other tech share prices dropped too, other Silicon Valley plutocrats saw small declines in their fortunes as well.

Krugman, the celebrity economist, spelled out many good reasons for his expectation of the share price dropping soon. For example, he considered it disproportionate that, in terms of market capitalisation, SpaceX rose above Amazon even though it had recorded a loss of almost $ 5 billion in 2025, while its turnover of $ 19 billion did not even amount to one quarter of Amazon's $ 78 billion net income.

VISIONS FAILING

Krugman appreciated Musk's hyping skills, acknowledging that the short-time trillionaire is prone to selling fantastic dreams. His promises typically fail, however:

- His boring company has never built an alternative transport system ("Hyperloop") or even a single commercial tunnel.
- There are no fully self-driving Tesla taxis.
- Neuralink, the Musk enterprise that is supposed to use brain implants to hook up persons with computers, is still experimenting and does not have a viable product.

Some consider Musk to be a genius because he has opened space to private enterprises. What they miss is the role of the US government. The high price the US government pays for Musk's supposedly cheap rocket launches is its dependence on the plutocrat.

The trend started in 2001 when the Department of Defense under President George W. Bush decided to reduce defense spending by outsourcing more generously to the private sector. Slobodian and Tarnoff tell the tale of how Musk grabbed that opportunity to establish a monopoly on space-related services. According to the two co-authors, Musk's mindset has been shaped by science fiction as well as the fortress mentality that prevailed among the white minority as he was growing up in apartheid South Africa.

NO CONCERN FOR SUSTAINABILITY

In Musk's eyes, humankind is facing a dramatic end game, in which he will either prevail or perish. Sustainability is not a concern of his. He offers options for individual persons or states to cope with global environmental disaster, but nothing that would make the planet safe for all of humankind.

It fits the picture that, on behalf of Donald Trump, he dismantled USAID, the aid agency, immediately after the right-wing populist returned to the White House in 2025. Healthcare for all, education for all or merely food for all are global ambitions that were spelled out in the UN Sustainable Development Goals in 2015. In Musk's perspective, they are woke nonsense. Muskism is the economic equivalent of Donald Trump's authoritarian idea of superpowers being entitled to share the planet among themselves – and then exploiting it without regard for anyone else.

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SLAVERY

“Recognition creates responsibility”

The United Nations’ recognition of the trafficking of enslaved Africans and racialised chattel enslavement as humanity’s gravest crime has reshaped the global debate on reparations. Leading politicians from Africa and the Caribbean made it clear that the next step must be to translate this recognition into tangible action for justice, development and international cooperation.

BY DASMANI LAARY

The declaration that slavery constitutes the gravest crime against humanity and its adoption by the UN General Assembly are based on a simple but powerful truth: slavery is not only a historical tragedy but has also shaped the modern world.

According to the “SlaveVoyages” database, between the 16th and 19th centuries, some 12.5 million Africans were forced onto transatlantic slave ships, with around 10.7 million surviving the journey from Africa to the Americas. Millions more died whilst being captured, on forced marches or in captivity. Behind these figures lie torn families, destroyed communities and shattered cultures.

The slave trade generated immense wealth, which fuelled industrialisation in Europe and America, whilst many African societies were weakened by population decline, political fragmentation and economic exploitation. These legacies continue to shape development outcomes and inequalities to this day. Although slavery was officially abolished in the 19th century, its consequences remain deeply embedded in political, economic and social systems.

Ghana’s President John Dramani Mahama, who presented the historic resolution on slave trade to the UN, emphasised that coming to terms with this past requires a forward-looking perspective: “History does not ask us to inherit guilt. It asks us to inherit responsibility.” Reparatory justice, he argued, is not about reopening old wounds but about creating a more just future while seeking reconciliation grounded in truth.

BEYOND RECOGNITION

Less than three months after the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution A/RES/80/250, Accra has emerged as a focal point of this debate. The message from the High-Level Consultative Conference held there in June under the theme “Next Steps” was unambiguous: recognition must lead to implementation.

For decades, advocacy work has focused on securing formal recognition of slavery as a crime against humanity. In Accra, the focus went well beyond mere recognition. Participants argued that restorative justice must evolve into a development framework that strengthens institutions and promotes equitable global partnerships.

The UN resolution of 25 March 2026 marked a diplomatic milestone, but the heads of state and government in Accra emphasised that recognition alone could not make amends for centuries of injustice. As Mahama put it: “The adoption of

Ghana's foreign minister, Samuel Okudzeto Ablakwa, at the opening of the Consultative Conference in Accra.

Photo: picture alliance / AP Photo/Reuben Ekow Quansah / Reuben Ekow Quansah

"Enslaved women had to endure sexual violence, reproductive exploitation and family separation, yet their stories remain underrepresented."

the resolution was never intended to mark the end of the journey. It was intended to provide the foundation for a more meaningful process of engagement, reflection and action." The delegates agreed that recognition is of limited value unless it leads to tangible improvements in people's lives.

THE ACCRA NEXT STEPS COMMITMENTS

The conference therefore focused on translating this recognition by the UN into concrete policy measures. The outcome of the conference, the "Accra Next Steps Commitments on Reparatory Justice", extends the concept of reparation beyond financial compensation.

It links historical accountability with legal reforms, education, public health, cultural reparations, debt justice and technology transfer. Its aim is clear: to eliminate structural inequalities rooted in slavery and colonialism. Mahama, whose initiative was supported by 123 UN member states, whilst all Western states abstained and the US, Israel and Argentina voted against it, succinctly summed up the central premise: "Recognition creates responsibility."

He also emphasised the importance of remembrance: "A few places in the world bear such vivid physical testimony to this history as our country. From Elmina in the Central Region and Cape Coast to Assin Manso and Osu, our land holds some of the most visible reminders of a system that uprooted millions."

The Nigerian Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka reiterated this view and warned against regarding slavery as a closed chapter. Contemporary forms of exploitation, including human trafficking and forced labour, show that "the slave trade is not over."

The Accra Next Steps Commitments redefine reparations justice as a long-term development agenda. Mahama called for a practical international roadmap based on "truth-telling, research, education, memorialisation, restitution of cultural heritage and legal pathways", emphasising the need for cooperation between governments, academia, civil society, religious organisations and international organisations.

WHAT REPARATIONS MIGHT INCLUDE

Barbados' prime minister, Mia Amor Mottley, described the moment as historic. For her, reparations include stronger education systems, improved healthcare, debt relief and monetary compensation. She referred to the Caribbean Community and Common Market's (CARICOM) revised ten-point plan as a basis for coordinated action between Africa and the Caribbean and urged both regions to pursue a joint development agenda.

Building on this call to action, Liberian President Joseph Boakai called for a coordinated African implementation framework to be developed in collaboration with CARICOM and diaspora organisations, as well as an expansion of research, education and cultural restitution.

The role of the African diaspora was a key focus of the discussions. Mahama described the descendants of enslaved Africans as "rights holders" whose knowledge and experiences must shape the path ahead. The participants called for closer cooperation between African states, CARICOM, the African Union, the United Nations and diaspora organisations.

COMPENSATION FOR GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN SLAVERY

The conference also highlighted the need to address gender-specific experiences of slavery, which are also included in CARICOM's new ten-point plan as a specific demand for compensation for gender-based violence. Mahama pointed out that enslaved women had to endure sexual violence, reproductive exploitation and family separation, yet their stories remain underrepresented. The Accra Commitments therefore emphasise gender-responsive approaches and recognise that effective measures must reflect these different historical realities.

To maintain momentum, three international panels have been announced: a Global Advisory Panel on Reparatory Justice, an Expert Panel on the Restitution of Cultural Artefacts and a Global Legal Panel on Reparatory Justice to explore pathways under international law. These bodies are expected to support implementation through policy guidance, legal expertise and technical coordination.

RECOGNITION IS ONLY THE STARTING POINT

The Accra conference did not set out to redress centuries of injustice. Instead, it established a framework for tackling their ongoing consequences. The message was clear: recognition is only the starting point.

The implications extend beyond Africa and the Caribbean and raise wider questions regarding historical accountability and global inequality. Whether this framework will be successful depends on political commitment, adequate resources and long-term cooperation between governments, multilateral institutions and civil society.

The UN's recognition has reshaped the global debate. In Accra, work began on defining the response to this. The task now is to assess whether this momentum is leading to measurable progress for the societies that are still suffering the consequences of the gravest crime in history.

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DEVELOPMENT POLICY AND THE GERMAN PUBLIC

Support for development aid growing again in Germany

More than half of the country's population supports national expenditure on development cooperation (DC) or even wants to see it stepped up, according to the latest DEval Opinion Monitor. Altruistic motives for DC are more likely to convince those surveyed than the argument that such spending is in Germany's own interests. What this implies in terms of how DC should be designed and communicated.

BY HELGE ZILLE

Protest against funding cuts in German development aid in front of the Federal Chancellery in July.

Photo: picture alliance/dpa / Michael Ukas

German development cooperation has been under pressure for several years. For one thing, the German government has cut funding significantly. Curtailing development aid budgets is a trend that is also evident in other countries. And for another thing, German DC has sparked considerable public criticism – which peaked when subsidies for cycle paths in Peru were discussed in early 2024. Though the intensity of the criticism has since diminished, German DC still faces strong headwinds in the form of everything from calls for spending cuts to fake news campaigns.

The Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) responded to the challenges by publishing a reform plan at the beginning of 2026. In it, the BMZ highlights Germany's economic interests and how DC benefits Germany directly.

How does the German population view German development policy against this backdrop? More than two thirds (68 %) were in favour of it, at least in principle, in July 2025. At 76 %, support for humanitarian assistance is somewhat higher still. This is the finding of the latest Opinion Monitor for Development Policy. Since 2018, the German Institute for Development Evaluation (DEval) has been publishing its Opinion Monitor, which tracks public opinion on and knowledge of development policy and the degree to which people engage with this field of policy (see below).

Just over half of respondents (52 %) in November 2025 supported Germany's current level of DC spending or even wanted to increase it. This percentage is slightly up on the low it reached in January 2024 (47 %), but it remains well below the broad-ranging development aid consensus seen in the years 2019-2022. During this period, around two thirds of those surveyed wanted to maintain or step up DC spending.

DOUBTS ABOUT THE EFFECTIVENESS OF DC

Respondents often justify their critical stance by saying that they doubt that German DC is effective or that it reaches the intended recipients. They also suspect that corruption leads to funding getting siphoned off in partner countries.

Only a minority believes that Germany can't afford this development aid. However, the percentage of those who do almost doubled between 2019 and 2025, from 15 % to 29 %. This reflects the conflicts that German DC is increasingly facing over the way it is allocated.

That said, the criticism that is often expressed stems from a lack of knowledge. For example, though most respondents see that progress has been made in combating infant mortality, providing girls with access to education and increasing the global vaccination rate, they significantly underestimate this progress. The majority also don't know that extreme poverty has been slashed from 44 % to 10 % of the global population – probably the biggest achievement in development in the past 35 years. In fact, 60 % of those surveyed think that global poverty has increased since 1990.

> "Good communication is also particularly worthwhile because nearly three quarters of those surveyed do not have firmly entrenched attitudes towards DC. On the whole, they are open to learning more about it."

DC EXPENDITURE OVERESTIMATED BY A FACTOR OF 18

For years, people have also been hugely overestimating how much of Germany's gross national income is spent on DC. Rather than the presumed figure of around 10 %, it was actually only 0.56 % in 2025. This means that Germany once again fell short of the ODA target of 0.7 %.

If the population perceives DC as having too little effect while at the same time overestimating DC expenditure, this can fuel criticism of "inefficient" DC – especially given the funding gaps and pressure to cut costs in the German pension, health and social welfare system. By contrast, if development successes can be better communicated, this can lead to better approval ratings for spending on DC.

ALTRUISM MORE CONVINCING THAN NATIONAL INTERESTS

One possible approach to public communication would be to emphasise the concrete benefits that DC has for Germany and to stress how it serves Germany's economic interests. This line of argumentation is also enshrined in the BMZ's reform concept. However, it is questionable whether this will be enough to convince the German public.

Respondents to the Opinion Monitor say they are convinced above all by altruistic motives such as the degree of need in partner countries or the possibility to do a lot of good with modest resources. Even those who oppose DC are more likely to support altruistic motives than arguments that development aid is in Germany's own interests. DEval also randomly presented respondents with texts describing different reasons for engaging in DC. Once again, it was altruistic motives that increased DC approval ratings, whereas motives relating to national interests had no impact on the level of approval.

IMPROVING DC AND FOCUSING ON EVIDENCE-BASED COMMUNICATION

To ensure its broad acceptance among the population in the long run, further work is needed on the very substance of development cooperation. In the medium term, DC that is designed to produce maximum impact, uses taxpayers' money even more efficiently and reduces corruption will enjoy greater public support. Honest and evidence-based communication that highlights both DC outcomes and wider global development trends is likewise important.

> "For years, people have been hugely overestimating how much of Germany's gross national income is spent on DC. Rather than the presumed figure of around 10 %, it was actually only 0.56 % in 2025."

Good communication is also particularly worthwhile because nearly three quarters of those surveyed do not have firmly entrenched attitudes towards DC. On the whole, they are open to learning more about it. They are most convinced by altruistic motives and information about sectors such as water supply, education, health or food security. Effective communication will therefore reflect these preferences – without simply reproducing stereotypes.

SOURCE

Schneider, S. H., Gödderz, A., Zille, H., Gmeineder, M., Leßke, F. and Bruder, M., 2026: *Opinion Monitor for Development Policy 2026. Knowledge, Motives and Reservations in Disruptive Times.* German Institute for Development Evaluation (DEval), Bonn.

Data used for the DEval Opinion Monitor for Development Policy 2026

The DEval Opinion Monitor is based on data obtained in surveys (of around 2000 respondents) that have been regularly conducted by DEval since 2023 and on data collected by the Development Engagement Lab (DEL) since 2019. The DEL publishes short surveys (of around 1000 respondents) that are carried out twice a year and a comprehensive annual panel survey (of around 6000 respondents). In addition, DEval conducts topic-specific surveys.

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SOUTH AFRICA

Africa's largest economy is deindustrialising

Industrial regions across the world are struggling to adapt as heavy industry declines. In South Africa's Vaal Triangle, the closure of steel mills and rising unemployment reveal the human consequences of this trend.

BY NATHALIE BERTRAMS AND TRISTEN TAYLOR

Union Street in the city of Vereeniging, south of Johannesburg.

Photo: Nathalie Bertrams

South Africa's manufacturing and heavy industry sectors are contracting, and the economy is simplifying towards raw-material exports, services and agriculture. Economists describe the country as a case of "premature deindustrialisation" – the loss of industrial capacity before reaching high-income status.

The consequences are visible in the Vaal Triangle, south of Johannesburg. Since the 1920s, the Vaal's steelworks, smelters and power stations have provided stable work and shaped entire communities. But now the factories are closing.

The job losses have been enormous, especially within the metals sector and heavy industry. Over the last two decades, hundreds of thousands of manufacturing jobs have disappeared, including 61,000 in the last quarter of 2025 alone.

Kabelo Ramkgathadi of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) has worked in the metals sector for nearly 25 years, rising from general worker to drill operator. Today, he represents union members across the Vaal Triangle.

"When I joined the industry," Ramkgathadi says from across his desk at NUMSA's Vanderbijlpark office, "it was not difficult for any individual to get a job. You would resign or be dismissed from one company and get the job next door."

At the end of 2025, the global steel giant ArcelorMittal shut down its Vereeniging steelworks – cutting 3500 jobs – and gave notice of retrenchments at its Vanderbijlpark steelworks. These job losses are on top of the region's 55.2 % unemployment rate.

Thirty-seven-year-old Bongani Mokoena (name changed) confirms that the post-apartheid social mobility that Ramkgathadi hinted at above is faltering. Mokoena first joined a steel manufacturer as a general worker. Later on, he was able to, as he puts it, "set the broom aside" and become a specialist machine operator earning $ 3.16 an hour. With overtime, he earned $ 480 to $ 600 a month but is now unemployed. He finds it hard to find a job and reports that his friends in the metal industry are telling him that they too "don't get jobs anymore."

As for those who recently matriculated from high school, Mokoena states that "it's bad. You'd be very lucky to get a spot in retail."

HIGH ELECTRICITY PRICES AND ARTIFICIAL ECONOMICS

The immediate cause of the closure of heavy industry is that electricity and rail transport prices have risen to uneconomic levels, making it cheaper to import goods instead.

According to the Energy Intensive Users Group of Southern Africa, electricity prices rose from $ 0.012/kWh in 2008 to $ 0.10/kWh in 2024. The price increases for both rail and power stem from the government's failure to make infrastructure investments in the 2000s and two decades of widespread corruption. Blackouts and rail disruptions are frequent.

The underlying cause of the deindustrialisation is a clash between two economic policies. When the National Party came into power in 1948 and started apartheid, it embarked on an industrial policy that aimed to uplift Afrikaners and defend Christian nationalism. Steel, minerals, power and rail were all in the state's hands and weren't required to make a profit.

Etienne Rousseau, the founding managing director of the state-owned petrochemical firm Sasol, described the industrial ethos in 1948 as "artificial economics and government protection."

After apartheid came to an end in 1994, and especially during the presidency of Thabo Mbeki (1999–2008), government policy focused on privatising industry. The hope was that competition on the global market would grow the economy.

> "The price increases for both rail and power stem from the government's failure to make infrastructure investments in the 2000s and two decades of widespread corruption."

The state-owned South African Iron and Steel Industrial Corporation (ISCOR) was fully privatised in 2001 with the unbundling of its iron ore assets. A few years later, the Indian billionaire Lakshmi Mittal took over the steel side.

"ArcelorMittal now, their main objective is to maximise profit," Ramkgathadi says. He points out that this is a move away from the objective of ISCOR, which was not necessarily to maximise profit but to ensure stability.

NUMSA, the metalworkers' union, argues that the only way to save the steel industry is to renationalise it.

ArcelorMittal South Africa refused to be interviewed for this article.

DEBT AND DRUGS

Vincent Ndemande lives in Sebokeng, a major township within the Vaal Triangle. He's a chef, but his position isn't permanent. "A lot of people now are working short shifts," he says. "Before, you could support your family and pay your debts. Now people take out loans and end the month deeper in debt."

Sewage runs down both unpaved and paved roads in Sebokeng. But the decay of infrastructure isn't only affecting poor townships. The formerly prosperous cities of Vanderbijlpark and Vereeniging are also in a dire state due to the decades-long collapse of the local municipality.

Faatema Patel works as a pharmacist on a main street in Vereeniging's central business district. Dirt, rubbish and potholes define the road. After the steel mill closed and workers subsequently lost their medical insurance, Patel's pharmacy's revenue declined 20% over the course of a month, she says.

Retrenched workers, according to Patel, will enter "the public health system, which is really struggling. We see patients from the public health system every day that come to us looking for medication that is just not available in the public health sector."

Some of those medications are HIV antiretrovirals, for which, according to Patel, the private sector provides a month's supply for about $22. To compare, the Social Relief of Distress grant, the government's basic welfare measure that provides short-term aid to South Africans in need, gives recipients $23 a month. About nine million people rely on this grant.

From township to affluent suburb, Vaal Triangle residents complain about drugs, particularly nyaope: a cheap mixture of heroin, cannabis and household chemicals like pool cleaner and rat poison. The social fabric is being torn apart.

> "Faatema Patel's pharmacy stopped selling over-the-counter codeine medication because teenage boys were constantly coming in to buy it."

Selina Marilitsi was a cleaner at a manganese smelter, which supplied alloys for the steel industry. The smelter closed in 2020, and she hasn't had a job since. Though her entire life has become a struggle, her greatest concern is her two boys, both at school.

"We don't want drugs," she says. "Drugs are killing our kids." Marilitsi argues that kids should go to school, get an education and help their parents. "We ask that this gets fixed," she says.

> "In the view of more than a few residents, the Vaal built up the nation's economy, and in return, the governing African National Congress sank the region into poverty."

Faatema Patel's pharmacy stopped selling over-the-counter codeine medication because teenage boys were constantly coming in to buy it, often making the excuse that their younger brothers were ill. Codeine is an opioid drug, which can cause addiction and poisoning, among other things.

CIVIL SOCIETY RESPONDS

Communities are trying to compensate for the collapse of public services. In Roshnee, a suburb on the edge of the Vaal developed under apartheid for Indian South Africans, residents have taken responsibility for basic infrastructure and security. They repair potholes, organise patrols and support local schools. Residents say crime within the suburb has effectively disappeared.

In nearby Sebokeng, residents also fight crime. They volunteer with the Community Policing Forum, for example, which organises patrols because police presence is sparse. The Forum also tries to keep drugs and weapons out of schools.

Yet these efforts are too limited to fully replace the services the state should provide.

POLITICAL DISILLUSIONMENT

A commonality across the Vaal is the sense of being cast aside. In the view of more than a few residents, the Vaal built up the nation's economy, and in return, the governing African National Congress sank the region into poverty.

"I feel betrayed. I know what they promised," Bongani Mokoena says in front of a train station that no longer operates. "And I know what they are still promising, and none of that is happening. And it's scary because I have kids in this broken country."

Unionist Kabelo Ramkgathadi predicts that "there will be an uprising at some point, where people will say, no, away with the government. I don't know how they are going to do that. But you can see it coming, slowly but surely."

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UN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Four future scenarios for the 2030 Agenda

What will happen to the UN Sustainable Development Goals beyond 2030? Given how increasingly fragmented and geopolitically fraught the world is just now, negotiations at next year's SDG Summit are likely to be difficult – and various outcomes are conceivable. Research conducted by GIZ sheds light on the most contentious issues, the role various actors could play and why forging alliances is more important than ever.

BY JOHANNES KUMMEROW AND JÖRN GEISSELMANN

Will the UN Sustainable Development Goals be abandoned after 2030? Their future is uncertain.

Photo: ppicture alliance / photothek / Thomas Koehler

It's a mixed picture as far as the achievements of the 2030 Agenda so far are concerned. Most of the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals are very unlikely to be achieved by 2030. Nonetheless, many countries have embarked on a path to more sustainable development since the goals entered into force at the beginning of 2016. The closer the Agenda's end date looms, the more and more development actors are asking themselves what might come next. According to the Pact for the Future, published after the Summit of the Future in September 2024, talks on possible future scenarios should begin at the SDG Summit in New York in September 2027.

> "The geopolitical rivalry between the US and China will play a crucial role in determining the orientation of any post-2030 agenda."

Research carried out by Germany's bilateral cooperation agency GIZ highlights essentially four plausible scenarios for what might follow the 2030 Agenda. The authors conducted interviews with scientists from Japan, Mexico and South Africa and surveyed a number of experts – including from the German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS), the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) and Beyond Lab, a UN think tank. They also engaged in numerous discussions with people within GIZ who focus on the 2030 Agenda and a possible follow-up to it.

1. **No new agenda:** Geopolitical tensions and declining interest in sustainable development make it impossible for the international community to agree on any follow-up agenda. Negotiations are abandoned.

2. **Several new agendas:** Two or more rival agendas are adopted. One, for instance, by countries wishing to pursue more ambitious climate action and another by "climate laggards" that would rather stick with fossil energies long-term. Two agendas – one shaped by the EU and the other by China – are also conceivable.

3. **Extension of the existing agenda:** The international community decides to continue the 2030 Agenda in order to at least preserve the consensus reached in 2015. It's conceivable that marginal amendments would be made to certain targets and indicators.

4. **A single new agenda:** Following intensive negotiations, the international community approves a single new agenda. This might involve focusing more on basic needs again, as was the case with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), or might see global public goods take centre stage. It could take a more transformative and holistic approach than the 2030 Agenda – or indeed be influenced to a much greater extent by anti-liberal and autocratic states.

It's unclear which period a new agenda might cover. For the most part, timelines of 10, 15 or 20 years have been proposed. The possibility of setting milestones is also being discussed. Though a new agenda might be adopted, there is a real risk that the majority of countries could pay virtually no attention to its implementation due to a lack of support among their populations.

However, it's also conceivable that a new system of incentives could be created to encourage implementation. In this context, considerable hopes are already being pinned – to some extent unrealistically – on the private sector stepping in to pay for a post-2030 agenda to be implemented.

KEY CONTENTIOUS ISSUES FOR A POST-2030 AGENDA

The whole subject of environmental conservation and climate action could turn out to be one of the main bones of contention during negotiations of a post-2030 agenda. Ever more states see it as an obstacle to growth or dismiss efforts to protect the environment and climate as an ideological scam. This is already leading, among other things, to declining climate ambitions worldwide.

Environmental and climate action could enjoy greater acceptance again if the international debate on global public goods gained further momentum. Furthermore, new narratives – ideas such as human and planetary well-being, regenerative sustainability and intergenerational equity – could lend renewed buoyancy to environmental policy. Often rooted in local traditions, these concepts can provide a framework for sustainable ecological development. However, a post-2030 agenda also needs to reconcile many states' interests in the areas of energy security, growth and infrastructural development with the imperatives of climate action.

We are also seeing growing global resistance to issues such as human rights, gender equality and good governance. Numerous countries categorically reject such concepts, claiming they have been forced upon them by others. If even a watered-down interpretation of these issues could be adopted in negotiations, this would mark a significant success.

Digital sovereignty and transformation could be enshrined in a post-2030 agenda as goals in their own right, building on the 2024 Global Digital Compact – the UN's comprehensive global framework for digital cooperation. On the other hand, digitisation could also remain more of a cross-cutting issue in future given the rapid advances in artificial intelligence (AI), not to mention possible setbacks such as dwindling investments.

KEY ACTORS IN THE NEGOTIATIONS

The geopolitical rivalry between the US and China will play a crucial role in determining the orientation of any post-2030 agenda. Given the views of the current US administration, it would already be a step in the right direction if it decided to take a passive stance by opting out of the negotiations rather than obstructing them. However, since the US is so unequivocally opposed to multilateral institutions and the 2030 Agenda at present, it is also perfectly possible that Washington would seek to thwart any efforts to reach agreement. Though the outcome of the 2028 US presidential elections could result in a more positive attitude towards the United Nations, it is highly unlikely that the politics of the Trump years would be reversed entirely before 2030.

China is already taking advantage of the power vacuum left behind by the US. It is using initiatives such as the Global Development Initiative (GDI) and the Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI) to lay the foundations for shaping the post-2030 agenda in line with Chinese interests and values. Whether China manages to get the BRICS+ states to back it will determine to some extent whether it can achieve this. As things currently stand, the group – which comprises Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa and a number of other countries – lacks a common vision.

Russia, at least, has already made reference to China's GDI in its first remarks about the post-2030 agenda. At the same time, Moscow will continue its efforts to increase its influence on the G77 with a view to bringing about an anti-liberal and fossil fuel-based future.

ALLIANCE BETWEEN THE EU AND THE GLOBAL SOUTH?

The European Union may find it hard to agree on a common line in negotiations on the post-2030 agenda. The possibility that the EU could become politically paralysed by internal rifts and see its role diminished as a result cannot be excluded either. However, it is also conceivable that an alliance of the EU and countries of the Global South might succeed in coming up with an alternative to the Chinese and US narratives – one based on mutual interests and respect, as well as on a clear vision for a socially just and green transformation.

It's well known that nothing happens in the UN without the G77. Since they all have their own individual interests, however, the countries in this group shouldn't be viewed as a homogeneous bloc. On the one hand, some emerging economies in particular equate a strong political will to bring about change with a serious desire to pursue an ambitious agenda for the future. And even some of the least developed countries (LDCs) are staunch supporters of a follow-up agenda with objectives no less lofty than the 2030 Agenda. On the other hand, many autocratic countries and oil states within the G77 criticise the progressive goals enshrined in the current Agenda and are more likely to obstruct the post-2030 agenda negotiations.

Quite apart from the nation-states themselves, regions and cities are playing a growing role in implementing the SDGs. Nonetheless, their influence will remain curbed by the worldwide surge in nationalism and their lack of representation at official UN negotiations.

Civil society, being a non-state actor, will make an important contribution when it comes to mobilisation and agenda setting ahead of talks. However, its ability to actually sway the official negotiations tends to be limited. To make matters worse, civil society's scope for action is severely restricted in many states, and many NGOs in the Global South have been plunged into financial crisis following the withdrawal of USAID. In some cases, state-affiliated think tanks that reflect their respective governments' position are taking their place.

IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION AND GERMANY'S ROLE

In its Third Voluntary National Review 2025 and its coalition treaty, the German government has announced that it is firmly in favour of supporting an ambitious post-2030 agenda framework. International expectations of Germany as a champion of sustainable development and multilateral action have increased once again following the (partial) withdrawal of the US.

The authors believe that Germany and the EU need to develop their own narratives and objectives for the negotiations. Otherwise, the vacuum risks being filled with other actors' competing and less ambitious narratives. With political and public interest in sustainable development on the decline, global well-being and sustainable development should be linked to the current priorities of the German government, the EU and our partners in the Global South. These include, in particular, promoting economic development, infrastructure and security.

The success of negotiations at the UN will hinge on whether countries can agree on a common stance in support of an ambitious post-2030 agenda. Germany has the means, capacity and extensive international network necessary to build bridges with the Global South and other partners. Dialogue with China and emerging powers such as Indonesia, Brazil, South Africa and India is essential to better understand each other's positions and identify possible areas of common ground.

DIALOGUE ON THE POST-2030 AGENDA

To reflect the 2030 Agenda's whole-of-society approach, as many voices as possible should also be heard in the post-2030 process. Existing and new multi-actor platforms are an obvious way to facilitate exchange not only with civil society but also with other stakeholders such as the private sector and academia, international donors and municipal actors. Major international conferences should be used for the post-2030 dialogue process and to set the agenda; meanwhile, the North-South Commission established by the German government could also generate impetus for developing narratives jointly with the Global South.

The future of the global agenda remains extremely uncertain. This makes it all the more important for the German government and all countries interested in promoting the global common good to forge strategic alliances with a view to achieving a good outcome in the post-2030 negotiations – one that will benefit everyone, not to mention the planet.

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We invite people who work in different sectors and live all around the world to contribute to D+C/E+Z. The editors request that no unsolicited manuscripts be sent, but proposals for contributions are welcome. After editing manuscripts according to journalistic standards, we ask the authors to approve the final texts before publishing their items. As we edit interviews for clarity and brevity, we also ask our interviewees for approval of the final manuscripts to ensure we do not distort their message. That is standard practice in German journalism.

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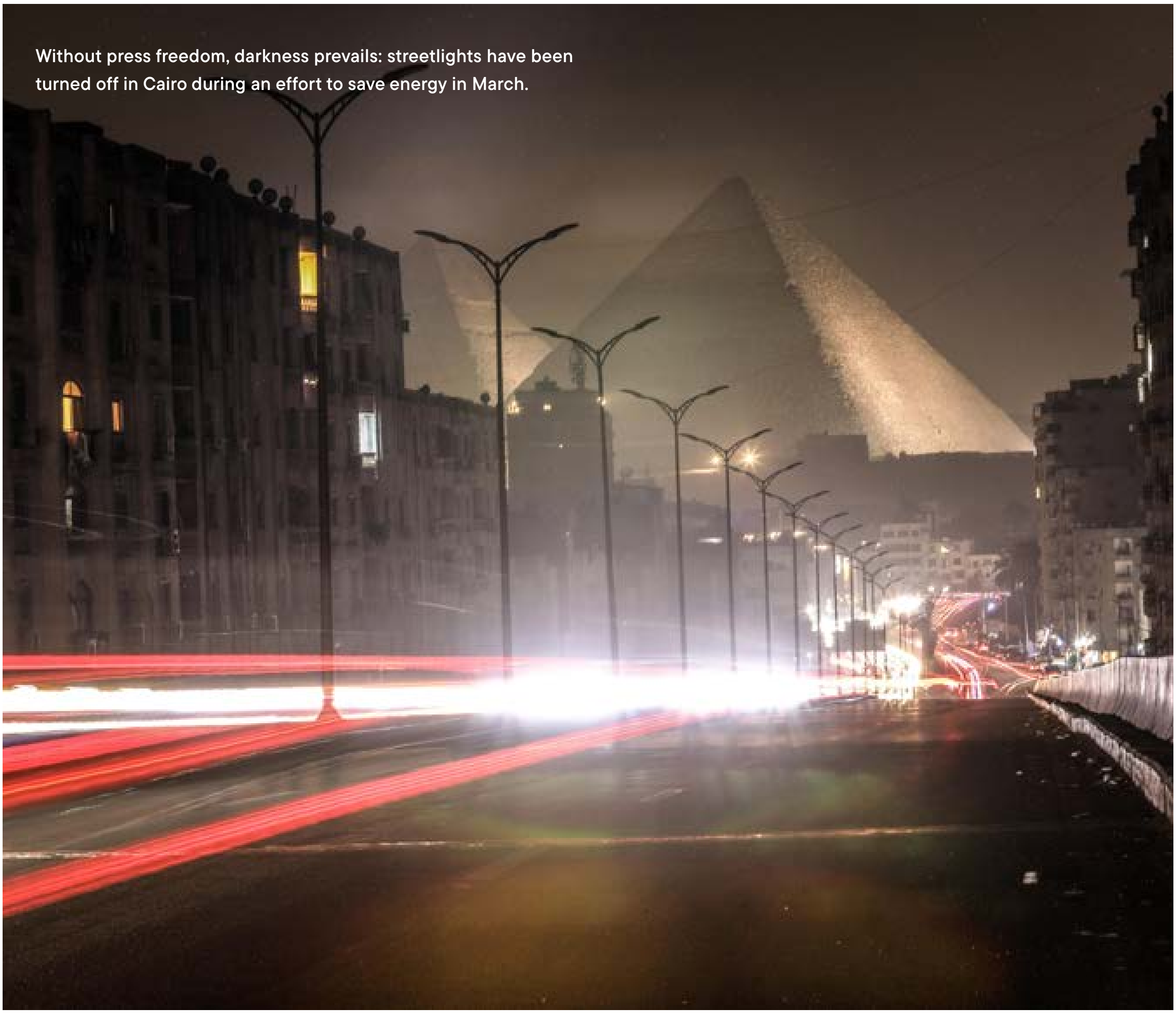

Without press freedom, darkness prevails: streetlights have been turned off in Cairo during an effort to save energy in March.

Photo: picture alliance / Anadolu / Mohamed Elshahed

PRESS FREEDOM

What it means to be a journalist in President Sisi’s Egypt

For many journalists in Egypt, reporting means living with surveillance, intimidation and the constant fear of detention. A reporter describes how uncertainty has become part of everyday life under President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi.

BY MOSTAFA NABIL

I grew accustomed to the sound of danger. It appears on my phone as “Unknown caller”. When that happens, my heart drops. I take a few seconds, then answer. Not answering may be worse. In Egypt, when National Security officers decide to visit a journalist’s home, they often arrive at dawn. I’m a journalist myself living in Egypt, and I have seen what that can mean for colleagues: broken doors, confiscated belongings, terrified families, insults and physical abuse.

The voice is familiar. It’s the National Security officer responsible for my file. He often sounds polite. He asks what I have written recently, why I chose a certain angle, what I meant by a specific sentence. Sometimes the call ends after a few minutes. Sometimes he asks me to come to the National Security office in Nasr City, an area in the eastern part of Cairo.

Yet a visit there is never just a visit. Many journalists and activists have disappeared after being summoned, only to reappear weeks or months later before prosecutors, accused of terrorism-related offences or “spreading false news”. They get 45 days of pre-trial detention, and then the detention is renewed again. When the legal limit of two years pre-trial detention approaches, a new case can be opened against them. Human-rights groups call this practice “rotation”.

At the gate in Nasr City, I hand over my phone. An officer takes me upstairs. The officer in charge of my file asks questions in the same calm tone. But there is usually another man sitting in the corner. He interrupts with short, sharp sentences: “You know this could be a terrorism charge.” Or: “You know this could be considered spreading false news.”

EGYPTIAN PRESS “UNDER SIEGE”

I don’t know why I’m not in prison yet. I also don’t know why many of my colleagues are. I work for an opposition newspaper, and in the newsroom, I’m surrounded by the photographs of colleagues who have spent years behind bars. What makes the pressure especially difficult is that we rarely know where the red lines are. Under Hosni Mubarak, the limits were clearer: don’t touch the president or his family. Under Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, the limits are vague, shifting and invisible.

That uncertainty is not unique to me. The think tank Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP) has described the Egyptian press environment as “under siege”. Reporters Without Borders counted 18 detained journalists as of June 2026. Independent outlets are viciously targeted. Websites like those of Mada Masr, Al Manassa and Zawia3 are regularly blocked.

The pressure reaches families too. Human-rights groups have warned of “punishment by proxy”: relatives of exiled journalists and activists are arrested, harassed or banned from travel. That’s why at home, my family and I have what we call the “black night system”: there is a bag with my clothes, medications and other essentials, and a jacket and easy-to-wear shoes that stay near the bed all the time. My family has the phone numbers of lawyers, activists and journalists to call if security forces break into our apartment at dawn.

We have rehearsed what to do. My family should not argue with the officers. They should gather in one bedroom and stay silent. I should go with the officers without resistance, because resistance could bring more abuse.

CARRYING ON DESPITE THREATS

The psychological pressure is almost unbearable. I live in fear most of the time. I dream of the police breaking down the door. Before publishing, I read my work again and again. I ask people I trust to read it too. We discuss who might be offended, how dangerous the piece might be, and what the response could be: a phone call, a summons to Nasr City, a long trip to prison. Yet these discussions do not bring certainty. Nobody really knows the red lines of journalism in Sisi’s Egypt today.

Still, I continue to work. Not because I’m brave in any heroic sense, but because documentation matters. Where prison conditions, enforced disappearances, torture allegations and political prosecutions can be hidden behind official silence, journalism preserves facts that power wants erased.

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China on the global stage

Photo: Unsplash – Annie Spratt

Growing presence, changing course

China has become an ever-present force in more and more parts of the Global South, even though it has scaled back its lending for major infrastructure projects. Western democracies should improve what they have to offer, rather than cutting development budgets.

China is shaping the daily lives of many people in developing and emerging economies more than ever before: they commute in vehicles "Made in China" on roads financed by Chinese loans to jobs in companies that do business with Chinese firms. One reason for this is China's export strength: the country's exports to Africa, Latin America, India and the ASEAN states continued to grow significantly in 2025. Another is the more than 900 infrastructure projects that Beijing has poured hundreds of billions of dollars into throughout the Global South. Infrastructure development under the "Belt and Road Initiative" is primarily being carried out by Chinese firms. The fact that they are delivering what people have often long been waiting for is bolstering China's reputation.

Beijing is known for not attaching any conditions relating to governance to its development engagement – with the exception of not recognising Taiwan – and for showing limited interest in working conditions and environmental regulations. However, these factors only partly explain its success. China's long-standing relationships with African countries and the fact that it is not perceived as a former colonial power also help explain why it enjoys a more positive image in many places than it does in Western democracies.

No one who is committed to liberal-democratic values can be indifferent to China's growing influence. Beijing is exporting not only electric cars and solar cells, but also its vision of an authoritarian political system. For example, Chinese companies are embedding software that enables censorship into the physical internet infrastructure they supply. China is exerting influence over groups like BRICS+ and the G77 to shape the changing world order according to its interests – for instance, to exercise more state control over the internet even beyond its borders.

Domestically, the Communist Party, under alleged billionaire Xi Jinping, is tightening its grip on information and public discourse. As of July this year, a "Law on Promoting Ethnic Unity and Progress" is forcing minorities who were already being persecuted to assimilate into majority society.

CHINA IS RETHINKING ITS LENDING STRATEGIES

In recent years, Beijing has significantly rolled back its large state loans for construction projects in the Global South, especially in Africa. The risk of default was simply too high. African countries are now paying China more to service their debts than they receive in fresh loans from Beijing. For some countries, this situation carries serious risks. The fact that Beijing is increasingly focusing its lending on economically viable projects confirms that upholding certain standards in state lending is a move that makes sense and also protects lenders.

Now more than ever, Western democracies need to prove that what they have to offer is more sustainable, in the fullest sense of the word, than what the authoritarian regime in Beijing can provide. Analyses by the German Institute for Economic Research have demonstrated this with respect to the economic viability of loans to African states. Nevertheless, offers must be made more attractive: more targeted, less bureaucratic and more focused on public-private partnerships.

People around the world yearn for development *and* democracy. In Latin America, this is particularly true in places where China is building infrastructure, as Marcela Ibáñez and Alain Schläpfer report in this issue. These people deserve the best possible alternative. Western democracies' current cuts to development aid budgets, however, are sending precisely the wrong signal.

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DEVELOPMENT REGIME

"Learn from mistakes"

Since the early 1980s, China has risen from a very poor, low-income country to a higher-middle income country which leads the world in terms of exports. That was neither brought about by Communist dogmatism nor by free-market orthodoxy, but by the regime's pragmatism, as Stefan Dercon of Oxford University argues.

STEFAN DERCON IN AN INTERVIEW WITH HANS DEMBOWSKI

China's Communist Party likes to explain its spectacular economic success with its determined leadership and long-term thinking. Is dictatorship really the clue?

No, it is not. Things are far more nuanced. The growth rates of countries under democratic and authoritarian rule are basically the same on average over time, as research has shown. The big difference is that dictatorships often deviate from the average in much greater swings. Their success can thus be more spectacular, but catastrophes are often far worse too.

Does that apply to the People's Republic?

Yes, its recent history offers examples of both. In the first 30 years after the Communist revolution in 1948, China suffered desperate poverty. The so-called great leap forward was supposed to industrialise villages in the years 1958 to 1961, but the neglect of agriculture caused a devastating famine, in which 20 million to 30 million people lost their lives. In the mid-1960s, Mao Zedong, the country's first Communist leader, launched a Cultural Revolution that resulted in further turmoil and stagnation. For decades under Mao, China's standard of living remained comparable to that of poor sub-Saharan countries. Things only began to change when Deng Xiaoping rose to power in 1978 after prevailing in the inner-party power struggles that followed Mao's death in 1976.

So, when Deng got his chance, he started liberalising the economy?

Well, that is what it looks like in retrospect. Chinese experts tell a different story. Deng initially focused on a reform of governance, not market-oriented reforms. A key aspect was his devolution of central power. Under him, Communist leaders at the provincial levels were given the authority to make and implement policies. At the same time, the Central Committee held them responsible for results. Deng understood that a huge country like China

> "China is not endowed with fossil resources, so relying on renewable energy makes a lot of sense. Once you generate a lot of electric power, e-mobility becomes the obvious choice."

cannot be run effectively by a small group of people residing in the capital city. While the Central Committee could command a quite effective state apparatus, it would never be able to respond to specific local needs and opportunities in such a huge and diverse country.

Delegating real authority to lower levels, however, is not typical of authoritarian rule. It means admitting that the top leader does not always know best. It will also only work in a fact-based policy environment. In a typical dictatorship, underlings will tell the „dear leader“ only what they think he wants to hear. Otherwise, they might put themselves at risk. Did China's Communist Party really deviate from that pattern under Deng?

Yes, it did. An important reason was that Deng did not want to repeat mistakes. He was eager to learn from them. His famous metaphor of "crossing the river by feeling the stones" expresses this desire. He and the group of reformers in the Party that he represented had an idea of where he wanted to take the country, but it was not obvious how that was possible. His solution was to test different approaches – and that proves that he was not simply enforcing brilliant long-term policies. In order to learn from mistakes, of course, one must admit that they happen. Rather than pretending to always know best, Deng and others in the Party leadership paid attention to facts.

Were mistakes made?

Yes, lots of them. Here is an example: everybody knows that the special economic zone of Shenzhen was an amazing success and became a model for other special economic zones. What most people do not know, is that when the experiment started, Shenzhen was only one of four special zones. The other three failed and haven't been heard of since. We can assume that many other policy measures flopped, but did not become part of public memory.

In today's language, we might say that Deng refused to micromanage things. Did he lead by creating the vision of a prosperous China that would rise to its rightful place as the world's most important country, which it had been for millennia? The Party seems committed to that vision.

Once more, that is what things look like in hindsight. Deng's primary concern was not some global ambition. He wanted to perpetuate his Party's rule at home, so he wanted it to be legitimate in people's eyes. That could be achieved by economic growth, food security and alleviating poverty. After the many crises that had rocked the

View of the Lujiazui Financial District in Shanghai, China.

Photo: picture alliance/dpa/HPIC/Wang Gang country under Mao, he saw how dangerous it was to rely only on violent oppression. Economic modernisation looked safer. The vision of progress that Deng established in the Party hierarchy was actually quite self-serving. It was also spectacularly successful in terms of both reducing poverty and creating legitimacy.

Many dictatorships are basically kleptocracies with no concern for any common purpose. That is different in China. Is that connected to Confucian philosophy? After all, Chinese emperors wielded immense and inscrutable powers, but, according to Confucian thinking, they were supposed to ensure harmony in society. In China's collective memory, moreover, failure of the central power means civil war and hardship, whereas imperial rule means peace.
I would not romanticise Communist rule in China. Confucian tradition may play a role, but it does not shape the regime's decision-making. The Party is normally quite pragmatic. Its underlying motivation is to stay in control with as little opposition as possible. The leadership likes problems to be solved before they become intractable. What is striking is that it normally does not crush protests against grievances such as air pollution, for example. Instead, it looks for ways to reduce them. In late 2022, masses of people rallied peacefully against the Covid-19 lockdown in many cities. The regime did not suppress them with force. It ended the lockdown. What it will not accept is criticism of its leading role in society, but even public discussions about poorly performing officers occur.

Is economic policymaking basically pragmatic too?
Yes, the regime is not enforcing some kind of premeditated free-market programme. It is grasping opportunities as they arise. If liberal orthodoxy were driving the Party, it would have privatised the huge loss-making state-owned enterprises a long time ago. It probably does not want to confront the vested interests involved. Masses of workers, as well as the careers of some officials, depend on those companies.

Some European environmentalists say that, thanks to long-term thinking, China has become a strong proponent of climate action. It is indeed focusing on renewable energy and e-mobility. What do you say?
Most of all, I see short-term pragmatism. China is not endowed with fossil resources, so relying on renewable energy makes a lot of sense. Once you generate a lot of electric power, e-mobility becomes the obvious choice. The regime, moreover, is trying to export as many goods as possible. It tries to anticipate what will be in strong global demand next. Paying attention to the international climate debate, it has decided to maximise its global market share in relevant technologies. I would not legitimise dictatorship by somehow arguing it serves long-term interests when the short-term benefits are so obvious.

Is any fundamental guiding idea driving the Party's economic policies?
For a long time, it was to move workers, gradually and in a controlled way, from agriculture, in which they laboured away in desperate poverty, to more productive jobs in manufacturing. That was comparatively easy, not only because of the huge rural population, but also because the new industries did not threaten existing businesses. Things are more difficult now, not least because of demographic change. It was easier, moreover, to reap the rewards of high growth when China was still a low-income country. When someone gets a first pair of shoes, that is a big deal. The second means twice as much. The fifth or sixth pair, however, does not make a big difference anymore. Once people's fundamental needs – food, clothing and shelter – are satisfied, they begin to take interest in other things and start to consider their longer-term outlook. They become more demanding. My impression is that the nationalistic rhetoric Xi Jinping uses is meant to divert attention from related problems.

> "The Party is normally quite pragmatic. Its underlying motivation is to stay in control with as little opposition as possible."

Do you see a willingness to learn from mistakes in China's Belt and Road Initiative, which China uses to fund infrastructure projects in developing countries? Sovereign debt has become a serious issue once more, not only in Africa.
Chinese lending has become much more cautious. Officials do not want to lose face, so they will not admit in public that something went wrong. Nonetheless, their action shows that they have become more risk-aware. The credit flow peaked nine years ago. Initially, policymakers believed they could rise to several challenges by letting Chinese companies implement foreign projects on the basis of government loans. They wanted to improve trade opportunities, manage domestic employment problems and raise China's international profile that way. They have obviously learned that things can go wrong, and that corruption often compounds that kind of problem.

What about corruption in China itself?
It will always be an issue because the country has few checks and balances. Research has shown, however, that the Party is serious about getting a grip on it. In a dictatorship, one always suspects that an anti-corruption purge basically serves to eradicate opponents of the leadership from positions of influence. By contrast, China's regime seems to be trying to limit officials' illegitimate self-enrichment as best it can.

What can developing countries learn from China's example?
Not that state-led development will always lead to success. Instead, that it is essential to pay attention to factual reality and to learn from mistakes. Moreover, the central importance of common purpose: a shared commitment of those with power to foster growth and development. While it is clear that the Chinese regime has been willing to resort to repression if it feels threatened, it has done an effective job of gaining legitimacy in the eyes of most of its population by improving people's standard of living. By the way, that kind of legitimacy matters in Western countries too. In spite of their democratic constitutions, widespread economic and social discontent is fostering support for right-wing authoritarianism, questioning legitimacy of the existing leadership that only can be resolved through delivering on people's needs and expectations.

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CHINA IN NUMBERS

The world’s top exporter, GHG emitter and bilateral lender to Africa

Over the past four decades, China has emerged as one of the biggest players on the world stage and has significantly extended its influence across the Global South. Here are nine facts and figures that map that ascent.

BY LUCIA DEON

1.4 billion

is China’s population. The figure was less than one billion in the early 1980s. It peaked in the early 2020s and has been declining ever since. As a result, China has ceded the title of the world’s most populous country to India. (1)

$ 3.8 trillion

was the value of China’s exports of goods and services in 2025. No other country exported more. (4)

$ 19.6 *trillion*

was China’s GDP in 2025, making it the second-largest economy globally after the US ($ 30.8 trillion). In 2005, China’s GDP stood at 2.3 trillion (5th in the world). (3)

About **800** million

people in China have been lifted out of extreme poverty between the late 1970s and the early 2020s, contributing about three quarters of the global reduction in the number of people living in extreme poverty. (2)

44.3 %

of China’s merchandise exports went to Global South countries in 2024 – significantly more than to the US (14.7 %) or Western European countries (13.8 %). (5)

29.2 %

of the world’s total greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions came from China in 2024 – more than the combined emissions of the next three largest emitting economies, the US (11.1 %), India (8.2 %) and the EU (5.9 %). (8)

More than 900

infrastructure projects in the Global South were financed by China between 2008 and 2024, totaling more than $ 315 billion. These contributed to developments in transportation, energy, information and communication as well as water, sanitation and waste. (6)

$ 62.2 billion

was the amount of debt stock owed by African countries to China’s public lenders in 2024, accounting for about nine percent of Africa’s external debt. Additionally, African countries owed $ 20.1 billion to China’s private lenders. China is Africa’s biggest bilateral lender. (7)

43.9 %

of the world’s renewable energy capacity is installed in China. Fossil fuels provide 58 % of China’s electricity. (9), (10)

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The Chinese-built Entebbe Expressway in Uganda.

AFRICA

China is a main character, but Africa needs to write the script

China has undeniably come to play a key part in Africa's development story. The crucial question now is whether African countries can shape this role in line with their own visions.

BY RONALD SSEGUJJA SSEKANDI

On any given day in Uganda's capital, Kampala, China is impossible to miss. From downtown Kampala to the city's fast-growing suburbs, Chinese-owned supermarkets, restaurants and wholesale shops have become a familiar part of the urban landscape. Students attend Mandarin classes at Makerere University's Confucius Institute, hoping language skills might open doors to scholarships, jobs or business opportunities. Chinese-made motorcycles weave through traffic, driving on roads built by Chinese contractors, and businesses rely on infrastructure financed by Chinese loans.

All over Africa, China is no longer a distant global power. It has become part of everyday life. That presence is reflected in the numbers. Total bilateral trade between China and Africa reached an all-time high of $ 348 billion in 2025, making China the continent's largest bilateral trading partner for the 17th consecutive year. Yet China's influence on the continent extends beyond trade. It is visible in infrastructure projects, universities, diplomatic relations and, increasingly, the choices African governments make as they navigate a changing global order.

China's growing footprint presents opportunities as well as dilemmas. It offers African countries alternative sources of financing, trade and investment, but also raises questions about debt and dependency.

A CHANGING ECONOMIC LANDSCAPE

Chinese firms are now central players in sectors that were once dominated by Western contractors and multilateral institutions. Across the continent, Chinese companies have built roads, railways, airports and energy facilities at a scale and speed that many African governments would have found difficult to achieve with their traditional partners.

Uganda offers a vivid example of this shift. Chinese contractors have played leading roles in major infrastructure projects such as the Karuma and Isimba hydropower dams, as well as the Entebbe Expressway. The scale of these projects is considerable. The 600 MW Karuma Hydropower Project, for example, commissioned in 2024, cost approximately $ 1.7 billion, with about 85 % financed through a loan from China's Exim Bank.

This turn towards China is partly due to China's willingness to finance major infrastructure projects, with loans, construction and supply often bundled through state-backed companies – even though China has granted fewer direct loans over the last ten years. For governments with urgent development needs, the model is extremely attractive, as it promises visible results that align with their political timelines – such as terms of office. However, there are concerns about transparency, procurement practices and long-term debt sustainability.

THE APPEAL OF NON-INTERVENTION

African politicians mostly counter these fears with assertions that infrastructure gaps are being addressed in ways that Western-led models often failed to achieve. One of the distinguishing features of China's engagement is its stated policy of non-interference in domestic political affairs. Unlike many Western donors, China generally does not attach governance or human-rights conditions to its financing.

For some African governments, this approach is a key advantage. In contexts where Western conditionality has been experienced as intrusive or obstructive due to lengthy negotiations over governance reforms, China's model appears more pragmatic and respectful of sovereignty.

Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni, who has ruled the country for over 40 years, has frequently highlighted the importance of infrastructure financing without extensive political conditions. He sees China's partnership as a preferred route to close the country's development gaps.

Yet this approach is also debated. Critics argue that the absence of governance conditions can enable weak accountability or reinforce existing political structures without encouraging reform.

> "While economics often dominates headlines, China's influence is also expanding quietly through education, scholarships and cultural exchanges."

THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE: DEVELOPMENT AND DEPENDENCY

Much of China's engagement in Africa is linked to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has financed transport networks, ports, power projects and industrial infrastructure across the continent. Supporters argue that these investments are helping to close Africa's infrastructure gap, reduce business costs and support industrialisation. Critics, on the other hand, point to rising debt burdens, the dominance of Chinese contractors in some projects and the limited transfer of technology and skills in certain sectors. Another worry is that some African countries may become overly dependent on Chinese financing and markets.

These concerns have led some observers to describe aspects of China's engagement as having neo-colonial characteristics. The comparison is contentious. China does not govern African territories nor exercise the direct political control associated with colonial rule. However, questions about dependency, bargaining power and whether local economies are benefiting enough from these investments continue to shape the debate.

Ultimately, the more important question may not be whether China resembles past colonial powers, but whether African countries are securing sufficient value from the relationship. Roads, power plants and trade opportunities matter, but so do technology transfer, local employment, industrial development and the ability of African governments to negotiate from a position of strength.

CHINA'S ZERO-TARIFF TREATMENT

An aspect that is becoming increasingly important alongside China's landmark infrastructure initiatives is trade. Under President Xi Jinping, China is granting zero-tariff treatment to 53 African countries from May on. The regulation applies to every country except Eswatini, which is excluded because of its support for Taiwan. The move expanded earlier preferential arrangements that had primarily benefited least developed countries and was widely interpreted as a signal that Beijing wants to deepen commercial ties with the continent.

For countries like Uganda, the opportunities are significant. Fish products as well as coffee, cocoa, sesame and other agricultural commodities could gain improved access to one of the world's largest consumer markets. Uganda exported approximately $ 92.6 million worth of goods to China in 2024, but imported more than $ 2.7 billion, highlighting the scale of the trade imbalance that policymakers would like to narrow.

WILL TRADE WITH CHINA UNDERMINE THE AFCFTA?

China's zero-tariff treatment also raises questions about Africa's own trade ambitions. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), which brings together the African Union member states within the world's largest free-trade area by population, was designed to boost trade within Africa itself. Some economists now worry that easier access to Chinese markets could encourage African countries to continue looking outwards rather than strengthening regional value chains.

> "According to an Afrobarometer survey, approximately 63 % of Africans in the 34 countries surveyed expressed a positive view of China's economic and political influence."

Others see the two initiatives as complementary rather than competing. Better access to Chinese consumers could create incentives for African manufacturers to increase production, while AfCFTA provides a regional platform through which goods can be processed, assembled and traded before reaching global markets.

The real test will be whether Africa uses these opportunities to export more finished products – and thus retain a larger share of added value on the continent – rather than simply shipping more raw materials abroad. If managed well, China's tariff concessions could support industrialisation and diversify exports. If not, they risk reinforcing long-standing patterns in which Africa exports raw commodities and imports manufactured goods.

The challenge for Africa is not simply to sell more to China, but to sell differently – exporting roasted coffee rather than coffee beans and processed minerals rather than raw ore, to make sure that trade relationships become balanced and mutually beneficial.

CHINA'S QUIETER INFLUENCE

While economics often dominates headlines, China's influence is also expanding quietly through education, scholarships and cultural exchanges. Thousands of African students study in China, many on Chinese government scholarships. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, China had become one of the leading destinations for African students outside the continent. In Uganda, Makerere University's Confucius Institute offers Mandarin language courses to students, professionals and businesspeople seeking opportunities linked to China's growing presence.

For many young Africans, China is increasingly viewed not only as a development or trading partner but also as a place to build professional networks and explore career opportunities. Chinese society and culture are attracting more attention, too. Whether this translates into lasting political influence remains uncertain, but it represents a form of soft power that is often overlooked in discussions about China's role in Africa.

PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF CHINA

At the same time, public attitudes towards China in Africa are far from uniform. Whereas government officials often emphasise the benefits of infrastructure development, trade and investment, local businesses sometimes express concern about competition from Chinese firms, particularly in the construction and retail sectors.

> "The challenge for Africa is not simply to sell more to China, but to sell differently."

In Uganda, many citizens associate China with roads, the aforementioned power generation projects and affordable consumer goods. Chinese-built infrastructure is often cited as evidence of tangible development. Nonetheless, concerns are occasionally raised about labour practices, the treatment of local contractors and the country's growing debt obligations linked to major infrastructure projects.

However, China's influence remains broadly popular across much of Africa. According to an Afrobarometer survey, approximately 63 % of Africans in the 34 countries surveyed expressed a positive view of China's economic and political influence, with infrastructure development frequently cited as a key reason.

There is also a generational dimension. Younger Africans, increasingly connected through digital platforms, are forming their own views – often less tied to historical alliances and more focused on economic opportunity, employment and entrepreneurship.

One thing is certain, in any case: China's role in Africa cannot be reduced to a single narrative. For African countries, the challenge is not to choose between China and other partners, but to ensure that all external partnerships support national development priorities. The real measure of success will be whether these relationships create jobs, strengthen local industries and generate long-term prosperity. In that sense, the story of China in Africa is ultimately a story about Africa itself – its choices, its bargaining power and its place in a changing world.

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An African journalist flies a kite at the 2024 Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in Beijing.

Photo: picture alliance / Xinhua News Agency / Li He

MEDIA

How China is expanding its media influence in Africa

Chinese state-affiliated companies are increasingly investing in Africa's media infrastructure. The country has widened its partnerships in the field of content production, for example, by sponsoring trips to major Chinese cities for African journalists and influencers. This carries the risk of "diluted" journalism, particularly given the precarious state of the continent's media industry. As geopolitical competition intensifies, China's influence in Africa will continue to grow.

BY ALPHONCE SHIUNDU

If you look at the social media posts of journalists or influencers in Kenya these days, you're likely to come across a photo of a journalist hiking on the Great Wall of China or a video of an influencer dancing in the streets of a Chinese city. This is due in part to the efforts of the Chinese Embassy in Nairobi to invite influencers and journalists to China, but also to the growing popularity of Chinese social media apps in Kenya.

TikTok is the second most popular social media platform (after Facebook) in Kenya and the third-largest source of total internet traffic after Google and Facebook, according to a 2025 report by the US technology company Cloudflare. Even amongst messaging apps, the Chinese platforms QQ and WeChat rank second and third, trailing only WhatsApp.

China is a new player in a region where the colonial legacy of Western countries remains a strong presence – and this at a time when geopolitical competition between the world's major powers over Africa's growth potential and its vast mineral resources is in full swing, says Admire Mare, head of the Department of Communication and Media Studies at the University of Johannesburg in South Africa.

According to Mare, China's investments in African media serve the political and economic agenda of the Asian giant. "It's about making it easier for them to get their foot in the door," says Mare. "If you look at all the media investments China has made in Africa, the aim is to promote positive media coverage for China."

Emeka Umejei, a research fellow at the University of Johannesburg's Institute of Communication and Media Studies and author of the book "China in African media", is currently a visiting scholar at Academia Sinica in Taiwan. In his view, China appears to have subtly shifted from state-directed media expansion to a more embedded form of influence, based on partnerships with local media and engagement with journalists and influencers.

TRADITIONAL AND SOCIAL MEDIA

China had previously established media organisations in Africa, including radio (China Radio International), television (China Global Television Network, CGTN), print media (China Daily) and digital media (websites and social media pages). In addition, the Chinese news agency Xinhua maintains 37 correspondent offices in Africa. These organisations have active partnerships and agreements for content sharing with African media organisations.

However, China no longer relies only on its media companies to win over the hearts and minds of people in Africa, explains Umejei. "It uses a variety of channels. The most effective of these are the China-funded journalist exchange programmes, media partnerships and content-sharing agreements," he says.

It therefore appears that China is currently pursuing a two-pronged strategy, using traditional media to boost its credibility while at the same time relying on social media to win over young audiences.

In Kenya, Chinese news organisations have entered into agreements with media institutions such as the Kenya News Agency, the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (the state broadcaster) and the Media Council of Kenya. These agreements cover areas such as training, equipment, scholarships and exchange programmes.

> "Media organisations in the West have cut back on their reporting teams in Africa."

At the same time, the authors of a report published by Africa Check, an organisation dedicated to information resilience, fact-checking and media literacy, noted a rise in "influencer diplomacy". This refers to the use of influencers with a wide reach to spread China's narrative. "The risk for public opinion lies in the formation of an emotional, largely uncritical affinity particularly among younger Kenyan audiences towards Chinese interests. By prioritising aesthetics and personal storytelling, influencer content can displace policy-focused debate with superficial lifestyle narratives, potentially increasing receptiveness to external influence," state the authors.

INVESTMENTS IN COMMUNICATION INFRASTRUCTURE

China is also investing in African media companies and communications infrastructure, for example through a controversial project launched in 2016: when Zambia ran into difficulties with the rollout of digital broadcasters, the powerful media group StarTimes – which has close ties to the Chinese government – stepped in to help by setting up a joint venture, in which it holds a 60 % stake.

StarTimes has also played a key role in Kenya's transition to digital television, and figures from March by the state-run Communication Authority show that it controls 44 % of the Kenyan digital television market.

Another example is Chinese technology giant Huawei: it continues to work with the Kenyan company Safaricom, East Africa's largest telecommunications provider, on rolling out 5G networks and infrastructure for mobile payment services.

TRIPS TO CHINA AS SOFT POWER

China's "soft power" lies in the fact that some influencers and journalists in Africa – whose media organisations can barely afford to pay salaries – feel a sense of obligation towards China when they are invited to visit the country and receive an expense allowance. They are then likely to report in a China-friendly manner in the hope of getting on the local Chinese embassy's good side and being invited back, according to scholar Umejei.

> "China is currently pursuing a two-pronged strategy, using traditional media to boost its credibility while at the same time relying on social media to win over young audiences."

"Some of them have travelled there and returned with money. They have used the money to build houses or complete ongoing projects. Some bought cars with it," says Umejei, citing interviews with journalists from several African countries. He adds that some of the beneficiaries of such trips to China "are beginning to champion [China's] economic and political interests in newsrooms across Africa because they want to return there."

This raises some serious questions. How can a country that imprisons its own journalists become a magnet for African journalists? On the other hand, many countries court foreign journalists – so what's wrong with China doing the same?

TOOLKIT TO STRENGTHEN CHINA'S INFLUENCE

Umejei says that China's aim is not to discourage people in Africa from consuming other media that put forward narratives serving the interests of China's geopolitical rivals, but to ensure that pro-Chinese messages reach the general public in Africa.

Reports on Chinese platforms focus on mega-projects, tourism and inventions in order to portray China as "developed". However, the close ties between China and African governments, as well as the scarcity or complete absence of critical reporting on democracy, elections or freedom in the Chinese media, have certainly drawn criticism from African viewers.

"When it comes to political or economic news, nobody will trust CGTN. But when it comes to tourism, documentaries and adventure programmes, that's exactly what people will be watching [on CGTN]," says Umejei.

Mare adds that China's aggressive self-promotion in traditional media, on social media and in the entertainment industry is part of the toolkit used to strengthen China's influence in Africa. Above all, the aim is to consolidate its economic and political interests – particularly in light of declining media investment from the West.

THE WEST IS TRAILING BEHIND IN THE AFRICAN MEDIA LANDSCAPE

Mare notes that Western fears regarding Chinese influence in African media should be viewed against the backdrop of dwindling Western investment in media development in Africa. Scholarships and exchange programmes for journalists in Western capitals have been scaled back dramatically over the last two decades, he argues.

Furthermore, media organisations in the West have cut back on their reporting teams in Africa, meaning that important stories go unreported and causing them to lose their African audiences. Some of the media outlets that used to cover geopolitically relevant issues from Africa are facing political pressure in their home countries; for example, several media companies are currently undergoing legal proceedings in the US.

All these factors have given China a foothold in the continent's newsrooms. Over the past two decades, an increasing number of African journalists have joined Chinese media organisations, travelled to China and written for Chinese publications.

> "How can a country that imprisons its own journalists become a magnet for African journalists?"

This trend is hardly surprising for other reasons, too. Western-funded media support agencies have come under criticism for bringing media experts to the continent to give African journalists training in Western-style journalism. "Some of these people don't even understand the context, and that's a problem for me, because you can't just come here and diagnose a problem you know nothing about," says Mare.

Finally, if an African journalist wishes to travel to the West as part of a scholarship or exchange programme, they must meet strict visa requirements that in some cases include providing details of their income. As journalists on the continent are poorly paid, very few are likely to meet the financial criteria necessary to be granted a visa for the West. Obtaining a visa for China for the funded fellowships, on the other hand, Mare argues, is much easier.

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Chinese thermal imaging cameras are exported worldwide and are increasingly used for surveillance as well.

Photo: picture alliance / CFOTO

INTERNET GOVERNANCE

State sovereignty and censorship

Regimes around the world agree with China's ideas about how the internet should be controlled. Chinese firms export digital technologies that enable states to control online content, and China is lobbying internationally for more state sovereignty when it comes to regulating the internet.

BY ISAH SHAFIQ

In January, Iranians were almost completely cut off from the rest of the world: the internet was shut down, cries for help could no longer be heard, and the flow of information from the country dried up. The government had often blocked communication networks in the past, but now, amidst massive demonstrations and extreme repression, even the one internet link that had otherwise always continued to function – the Starlink satellite network – was severely disrupted. It came as a shock to many, even beyond the Iranian opposition, that the regime had succeeded in paralysing most satellite connections.

The Iranian regime has established a sophisticated system of digital blockades, surveillance and censorship. Experts believe that it cooperates to this end with the Chinese government and uses technologies supplied by Chinese state-owned firms. This would certainly tie in very well with China's international internet policy and its notion of "digital sovereignty".

> "Alongside physical internet infrastructure, China also frequently supplies embedded software that facilitates centralised control and censorship functions."

Within China, the internet has long been subject to state control. Virtually all key infrastructure such as backbone networks, mobile networks and the principal internet gateways to other countries is run by state-controlled telecommunication companies. Strict regulations define the content requirements for platforms and applications wishing to operate within this infrastructure. The free flow of information across borders is by no means a priority in Chinese internet governance. This is also why the regime has been seeking for some time to impose its own norms abroad.

FREE INTERNET VERSUS STATE SOVEREIGNTY

Since commercialisation of the internet began in the early 1990s, a multi-stakeholder model has evolved in many areas of the global digital world: states, businesses, civil society and the technological community design and manage much of the internet. One central intention behind this approach is to ensure that non-state actors – especially private firms with an economic interest in global networks – make state censorship more difficult.

However, by no means everyone shares this vision of the internet as a borderless and self-regulated realm that is not subject to conventional forms of state authority. Authoritarian states in particular have been rebelling against this notion for some time. China is foremost among them and is doing so with growing success. As so often, Beijing's argumentation is rooted in the principle of state sovereignty – and in the idea that the multi-stakeholder model was heavily US-biased, despite its liberal rhetoric. By framing the narrative in this way, China is striking a chord not only with other authoritarian regimes, but also with those positioned more in the middle of the ideological spectrum – somewhere between statist and liberal systems.

As the birthplace of the internet, the US still enjoys a structurally privileged position within the digital order. For example, the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), which is crucial for the internet to function, remains subject to US jurisdiction. Registered in California, the non-profit organisation ensures, among other things, that web addresses (domain names) function consistently worldwide. China has long been advocating for such central tasks to be assigned to intergovernmental organisations like the International Telecommunication Union (ITU).

There have been calls ever since the early 2000s for states to take a more central role in regulating the internet. Then, in 2012, positions became more entrenched at the World Conference on International Telecommunications (WCIT-12). The issue being discussed was whether the ITU should also be responsible for internet-related matters – thereby raising them to the intergovernmental level.

A China- and Russia-led coalition of 89 states, including many emerging economies and developing countries, signed a treaty containing clauses to this effect. However, 55 mainly Western member states refused to sign it because they were concerned about potential state control.

CHINA EXPORTS CENSORSHIP SOFTWARE

Ever since, China has repeatedly taken a leading role in initiatives relating to state cyber sovereignty. In this context, Beijing has used its powerful voice on several occasions – including through non-Western blocs such as the G77 and BRICS+ – to persuade countries of the Global South to form coalitions within UN institutions.

At the same time, China is using its Digital Silk Road, a key element of the country's Belt and Road Initiative, to export its own technical norms and standards to partner countries. Alongside physical internet infrastructure, China also frequently supplies embedded software that facilitates centralised control and censorship functions.

Chinese tech giant Huawei, for example, installed telecommunications infrastructure in over 60 countries that contains tools allowing governments to monitor and censor online activities in real time. The technology has been actively used for state censorship in at least 17 cases, according to technology researchers Valentin Weber and Vasilis Ververis.

TRAINING IN INTERNET CONTROL

Technology transfer is often supervised by Chinese engineers who train local security personnel in how to use the tools. Chinese authorities also provide government agencies abroad with training courses and workshops on topics such as cyberspace control, public opinion management and monitoring of online dissent. Other countries model their own cybersecurity legislation on the Chinese system, which is clearly attractive to many states.

> "The free flow of information across borders is by no means a priority in Chinese internet governance."

Is global interconnectedness at risk of collapsing if more and more states follow China's example? Probably not. China and other authoritarian states do have an interest in remaining connected – if for no other reason than the economic importance of access to global markets and supply chains. It's likely that the internet in authoritarian states will continue to be largely compatible with the rest of the world on a technical level, even if its degree of permeability is tightly controlled.

Liberal states are also in the process of negotiating how much state control they believe is necessary on the internet. If information flows too freely, this can destabilise not only authoritarian but also liberal political systems – for example, if they become the target of disinformation from abroad or if foreign powers attempt to influence them in other ways. Other aspects require consideration too, such as the need to protect children and young people from inappropriate content. It's true that liberal states take a different view of digital sovereignty than China does and define different boundaries accordingly. However, laws such as the EU's Digital Services Act (DSA) make it clear that the internet is increasingly subject to stricter rules and standards in Europe, too.

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MACROECONOMICS

How China's export policy impacts developing and emerging market countries

China's economic policy relies on industrial overproduction and is flooding the world market with cheap exports. Developing and emerging market countries may profit in the short term, but China's actions increase the risk that they will find it harder to establish local industries and create productive jobs.

BY WOLFGANG KRIEGER

A China-made truck for export to Africa is loaded onto a China-Africa shipping route at Yantai Port in Shandong Province.

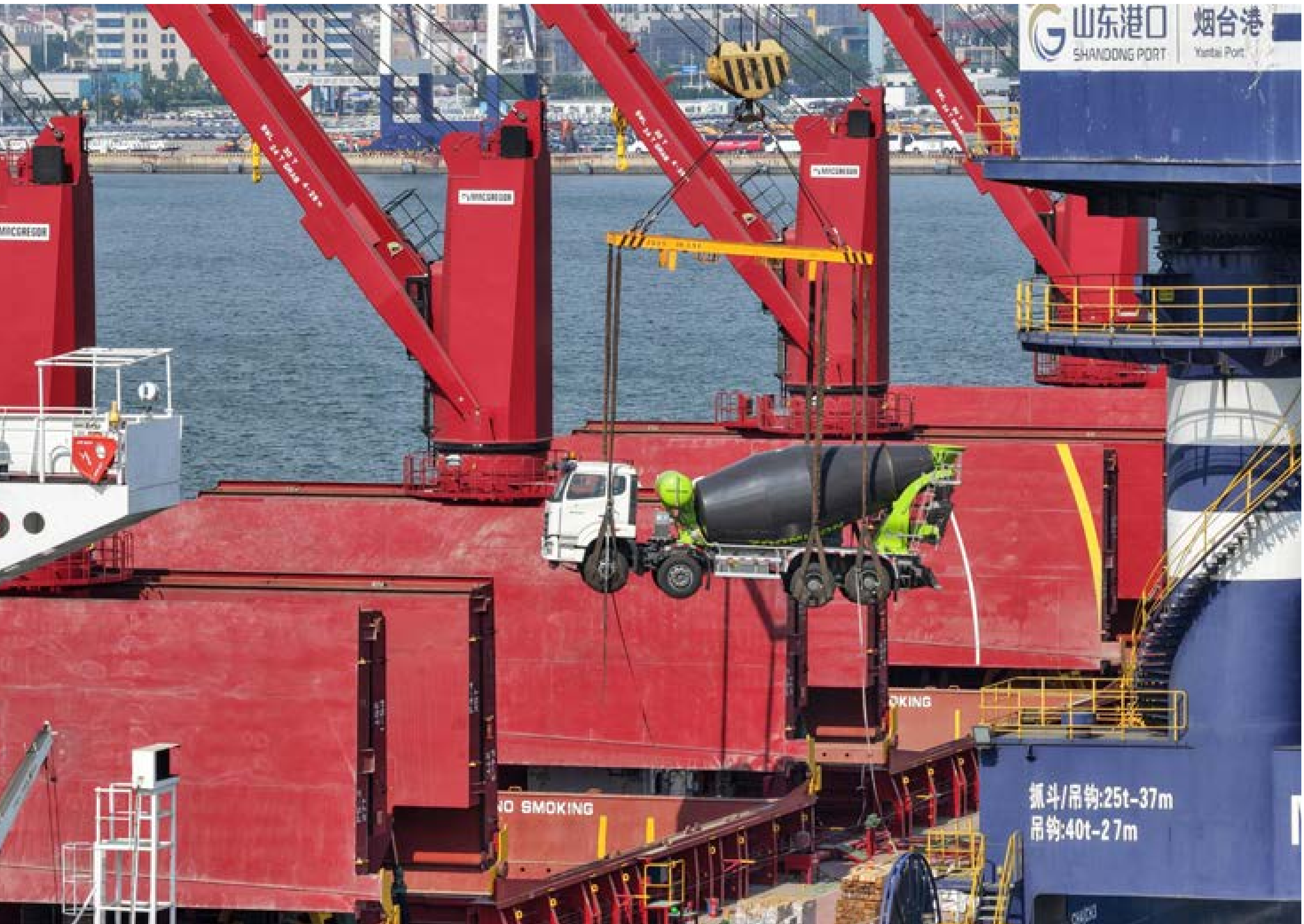

Photo: picture alliance / HPIC / stringer

International trade is currently experiencing a period of profound shifts, and China is an important factor. With goods exports of about $ 3.8 trillion and a trade surplus in goods of about $ 1.2 trillion in 2025, China was the world's largest exporter of goods by a wide margin. For comparison, in 2025, the EU achieved a trade surplus in goods equivalent to about $ 150 billion, whereas the USA recorded a trade deficit of about $ 1.25 trillion.

China's surplus is the result of a structural change and a modified trade policy: cecause domestic demand is flagging, the Chinese government is selectively promoting the expansion of industrial capacities in sectors that are in high demand internationally – from electromobility to batteries to solar technology. In many of these sectors, China has created significant overcapacities in production that it wants to sell abroad.

The growing volume of goods is encountering markets that are increasingly saturated or closed off. In the USA and EU, governments are reacting with anti-dumping tariffs and industrial policy countermeasures. As a result, China's exports to the USA, for example, fell by 20 % in 2025 in response to higher US tariffs. Chinese suppliers are now facing greater pressure to expand into other markets, particularly in developing and emerging market countries.

MORE CHINESE EXPORTS TO AFRICA, LATIN AMERICA AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

Significant shifts in global trade flows prove that they are succeeding. Whereas the importance of traditional markets like the USA and Europe is stagnating or receding, China's integration in developing regions continues to grow dynamically. Imports from China have markedly increased in Africa and Latin America in particular: in 2025, Chinese exports to Africa grew by 25.8 %, to ASEAN countries by 13.4 %, to India by 12.8 % and to Latin America by 7.4 %.

In each region, variations on the same basic pattern play out: while consumers and companies profit from the lower prices of goods imported from China, local industries experience increasing competitive pressure – particularly in labour-intensive sectors like the textile industry or basic machinery manufacturing.

In Latin America in general, there is a pronounced structural asymmetry: according to data from the Chinese customs authority, in 2025, China exported goods worth just under $ 300 billion to the region. At the same time, the region delivered goods worth about $ 250 billion to China, primarily from Brazil, Chile and Peru. The corresponding trade deficit is increasing in many countries as a result.

Dependency on trade in primary commodities is intensifying as well: countries are mainly exporting unprocessed raw materials and agricultural products and importing higher-value industrial goods. This practice exposes them to fluctuating commodity prices and makes it difficult for them to develop their own industrial capacities.

In Africa, China has now become the most important trading partner for many national economies. The total bilateral trade volume has reached around $ 350 billion, though Chinese exports, worth $ 225 billion, far exceed the country's $ 123 billion in imports from Africa. At the same time, Africa only makes up a comparatively small share – about 5.5 % – of all Chinese foreign trade.

A more integrated pattern can be observed in Southeast Asia. The ASEAN region is deeply embedded in Asian supply chains and is profiting from rising investments. Its total trade volume with China amounts to just over $ 1 trillion, though Chinese exports, valued at $ 665 billion, also far exceed the $ 389 billion in goods that China imports from ASEAN countries. Moreover, the majority of technologically demanding value creation is still concentrated in China.

SHORT-TERM GAINS, LONG-TERM GOAL CONFLICTS

From a macroeconomic perspective, the influx of cheap imports offers advantages at first. For one thing, it curbs inflation. For another, lower prices on investment goods facilitate important infrastructure projects and industrial modernisation. One example is renewable energy: the cost of solar modules has fallen dramatically over the past decade, which made this technology broadly competitive in many countries for the first time.

> "While consumers and companies profit from the lower prices of goods imported from China, local industries experience increasing competitive pressure."

> "At the international level, multilateral institutions like the World Trade Organization (WTO) can help make competitive distortions more transparent and at the same time ensure that developing countries have sufficient leeway for their own industrial policy strategies."

But these advantages are offset by structural risks. The increasing pressure from imports particularly impacts local industries, which often do not produce on the same scale or receive state support. As a result, domestic companies lose market shares, investors stay away and industrial learning processes slow down. This can lead to declines in industrial employment, such as those described using the term "China Shock" in the mid-2010s in connection with the USA and later Brazil and other countries.

In Southeast Asia, the effect of cheap imports is less pronounced at the moment: countries like Vietnam and Indonesia are successfully integrating into global supply chains, but they often remain in production segments that create less value. In some industries, including the electronics and textile sectors, the majority of intermediate products comes from abroad, while the local supply remains limited.

In African national economies, this pressure to conform is exerted especially early in the development process. Competition from cheap imports can make it more difficult to develop an industrial base right from the start. The export structure, often dominated by raw materials, exacerbates this dynamic.

The development policy debate about industrial policy as an instrument for structural change and employment is taking on a new dimension because of these developments. For example, the time windows in which new industries can establish themselves in developing and emerging market countries are narrowing significantly. Classic approaches, such as providing temporary protection for some industry branches or targeted support, are reaching their limits earlier because global competition has become fiercer.

The limited economic policy leeway in many countries is exacerbating the situation. Trade policy protection measures are often restricted by international obligations or difficult to implement politically. Moreover, the countries in question are often highly indebted and closely economically interdependent, not least with China. The latter is true of Zambia, which, in response to its debt crisis, has had to negotiate debt restructuring with Chinese creditors in particular, and Laos, whose economic development is being strongly shaped by China-financed infrastructure projects such as the China-Laos railway.

An active industrial policy also requires institutional capacities, long-term planning and fiscal resources – conditions that obtain only to a limited degree in many places.

STARTING POINTS FOR A DIFFERENTIATED STRATEGY

Against this backdrop, developing and emerging market countries need a differentiated economic policy strategy. At the national level, selective industrial policy measures can help actively steer adaptation processes. Protection measures for strategic sectors that are temporally limited and tied to performance goals could be useful. Strengthening local value creation, for instance through appropriate qualification programmes, is equally important.

Regional integration is becoming more significant in this context. Larger internal markets – for instance as part of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) – create opportunities to achieve price advantages through increased production volumes and to reduce dependency on imports. This is particularly relevant because intra-African trade so far makes up only about 15 % of the total foreign trade of African countries and therefore lags far behind other world regions.

THE ROLE OF THE WTO

At the international level, multilateral institutions like the World Trade Organization (WTO) can help make competitive distortions more transparent and at the same time ensure that developing countries have sufficient leeway for their own industrial policy strategies. Possible measures include stricter transparency and notification requirements for state subsidies and preserving Special and Differential Treatment (SDT) for developing and emerging market countries.

> "Countries like Vietnam and Indonesia are successfully integrating into global supply chains, but they often remain in production segments that create less value."

However, the WTO is currently experiencing a serious crisis. Its Dispute Settlement Body is only marginally functional following the US blockade at the end of 2019. Furthermore, the WTO has been criticised for years because some member states – particularly China – do not always completely fulfil their notification requirements relating to subsidies or do not do so on time. This makes it more difficult for the WTO to monitor measures that could distort competition.

If China itself were to adopt a different economic policy, that could also be part of the solution. Existing inequalities would be reduced if China were to pursue a more balanced growth model, particularly one that shifts away from export-oriented industrial expansion and towards stronger domestic and service-driven growth. At the moment, however, it is unlikely that it would make such a change to its economic strategy.

IMPLICATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT FINANCING

Development financiers like the DEG – Deutsche Investitions- und Entwicklungsgesellschaft believe that while financing for private investments in industry and infrastructure is important, its quality is paramount. Projects should strengthen local value creation, facilitate technology transfer and create skilled, fair jobs. Special focus should be placed on investments that go beyond mere assembly. Equally central is the promotion of qualifications that allow employees to access better jobs and implement technical advancements.

In sum, China's export policy and current changes to the global economy are creating enormous challenges for the national economies of developing and emerging market countries. How well they overcome them depends in large part on the extent to which they are able to take advantage of the short-term opportunity presented by cheap imports without undermining the foundation of their own industrial development.

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Photo: picture alliance / ASSOCIATED PRESS / Fernando Vergara

Workers supervise the unloading of metro train cars in Bogotá, after disembarking from China, in September 2025.

CHINA IN LATIN AMERICA

An unexpected boost for democracy

Critics have warned that Chinese projects could chip away at democracy in Latin America. Our research suggests the opposite may be happening.

BY MARCELA IBÁÑEZ AND ALAIN SCHLÄPFER

Ports, dams, highways, power lines: over two decades, Chinese firms and finance have reshaped a region long treated as "Washington's backyard". By 2025, as the US cut aid across Latin America, Beijing was pledging a nine-billion-dollar credit line and steadily taking its place.

The economic record is mixed: Ecuador's Coca Codo Sinclair dam ended in costly legal disputes over defects, while Peru's Chancay megaport moved $ 2 billion in trade in its first year and cut sailing times to Asia by almost two weeks. But beyond the balance sheet, these projects share something else. They are visible, attributable and politically legible to the people living near them. That is what drew our attention.

There is widespread concern that sustained engagement with an authoritarian donor like China normalises authoritarian practice and corrodes democratic values. However, when we dug into the data, we found that in Latin America the relationship runs in the opposite direction.

> "Chinese projects are highly visible, and because they are associated with an authoritarian state, they invite citizens to reflect not only on what their governments deliver but also on the political model those governments choose to embrace."

INCREASING SUPPORT FOR DEMOCRACY

We combined data on the location of Chinese development projects with nearly two decades of Latinobarómetro surveys across 18 countries. In total, we analysed 940 subnational regions, of which 16% received at least one Chinese development project during the study period. For each subnational region, we compared democratic attitudes before and after a Chinese project arrived against regions that never received one. The design lets us isolate the local political effect of exposure from broader national trends.

The result was clear: support for democracy increased shortly after projects arrived and remained higher even a decade later. No other donor produced anything similar. American aid, World Bank lending and European development finance produced no comparable movement in democratic attitudes.

What mechanism creates this response? We tested the hypothesis that Chinese projects might have raised local incomes, and more prosperous people tend to be more democratic. They did not: exposure produced no improvement in respondents' assessments of their financial situation or their life satisfaction. Nor were people reacting against China as a geopolitical threat and pivoting toward the United States. Opinions of China and the United States did not change.

THE METRO AND THE MIRROR

To better understand this response, we held focus groups in Bogotá, home to one of the largest Chinese infrastructure projects currently underway in Latin America. The Colombian capital had tried to build a metro since the 1940s, a promise broken by one administration after another, lost to corruption and political turnover. The line now taking shape, an elevated viaduct curving above the city's avenues, is being built by a Chinese consortium and is roughly three-quarters complete. What do people living alongside it think?

Nearly all participants knew that the metro was being built by a Chinese consortium, and their assessment of the project was generally favourable. As one respondent put it, "In China they put up a bridge in a week." People pointed to the visible progress of construction and described the builders as "serious people" who "come to do what they are supposed to do."

At the same time, the participants were well aware that China was politically different from Colombia. One participant described China as "a communist state" that "decides for you even whether you can have children or not" and spoke of the "coercion of people's freedom."

Yet what stood out most was how quickly discussion of the Chinese project became a discussion of Colombia itself. Rather than focusing on China, respondents used the metro as a lens through which to evaluate their own government. As one participant remarked, "If it weren't for the Chinese, we would still be talking about corruption surrounding the metro, or about how it never got built."

Chinese projects become a mirror for domestic politics. Their visibility, together with China's authoritarian political model, encourages citizens to reflect on the character of the governments that brought them in. In Colombia, where democratic institutions are relatively robust, that reflection centred on corruption and government competence. But what happens when the government itself has authoritarian tendencies? Does the comparison shift from competence to democracy itself?

A MARKER, NOT A MODEL

This is exactly what we find. The pro-democratic effect is strongest in electoral autocracies such as Venezuela under Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro or Nicaragua under Daniel Ortega, where governments pair authoritarian rule with close ties to Beijing. There, Chinese projects are followed by roughly a five-percentage-point increase in agreement that democracy is preferable to any other form of government, alongside declining confidence in state institutions including the presidency, congress, the courts, the police and the army.

> "Rather than focusing on China, respondents used the metro as a lens through which to evaluate their own government."

The effect is smaller in electoral democracies, where support for democracy increases by just over two percentage points, and it is absent in consolidated ones. The more authoritarian the incumbent, the stronger the democratic reaction. Where the government brands itself as socialist, the backlash extends to economics as well. Respondents express higher support for free markets and private enterprise.

Unlike trade or financial flows, infrastructure projects are visible. Citizens know who built them and who brought them to their country. As a result, projects become a way of judging governments. In Colombia, that judgment is mainly about competence and corruption. In more authoritarian settings, it increasingly becomes a judgment about the political system itself.

The conventional worry is that money from Beijing quietly normalises the idea that democracy is optional. Our findings suggest a more complicated picture. Chinese projects are highly visible, and because they are associated with an authoritarian state, they invite citizens to reflect not only on what their governments deliver but also on the political model those governments choose to embrace. In Latin America, that reflection appears to have strengthened rather than weakened democratic attitudes.

SOURCE

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