

## **2024 Africa-Americas Forum on China**

### **Plenary and Breakout Session Summaries**

For a second year in a row, Florida International University convened 23 experts and over 100 participants from across Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean to compare and contrast how the People's Republic of China engages in both regions. This year's theme was "Transregionalism," where participants sought to identify and develop new frameworks and methodologies on how to study the PRC's engagement across the Global South. Participants hailed from Howard University, the Yale Institute for Advanced Study, FLACSO Argentina, University of Witwatersand (South Africa), University of Pretoria (South Africa), U.S. International University (Kenya), the Africa-Sino Centre of International Relations, Atlantic Council Global China Hub, and the U.S. Institute of Peace.

#### **Plenary Session: Methodologies/ Frameworks for Transregionalism**

In his opening remarks, FIU Gordon Institute Associate Director Leland Lazarus emphasized the need for frameworks to study China's transregional influence, especially given Africa and Latin America's young populations, resource wealth, and shared historical ties. Paul Nantulya (Africa Center for Strategic Studies) pointed out that there are already existing mechanisms connecting the two continents (ie. the Afri-Caribbean Trade and Investment Forum, and FOCAC/CELAC), and that these mechanisms can be leveraged to share best practices.

The plenary panel featuring Dr. Tatiana Carayannis (Institute of Advanced Study), Dr. Bob Wekesa (University of Witwatersand), Dr. Pavithra Jayawardena (University of Colombo) and Dr. Mengshu Zhan (University of Johannesburg and Howard University) introduced critical perspectives on transregional research, discussing how area studies might limit a comprehensive understanding of China's influence. The fact that some Global South scholars on China haven't spent a significant time living in China or speak Chinese also distorts local viewpoints about China. More universities in Africa and LAC should also stand up Chinese Studies and/or Asian Studies departments to train the next cadre of scholars who truly understand the relationship.

#### **Breakout Sessions:**

##### **Dealing with Debt**

The "Dealing with Debt" panel examined the evolving dynamics of Chinese lending in Africa and Latin America. Henry Tugendhat from the U.S Institute of Peace and Yufan Huang from Cornell University provided insights into Chinese lending trends, challenges, and the future of debt diplomacy. Chinese banks, particularly the China Exim Bank, continue to support African infrastructure projects, though lending from China Development Bank has declined since 2016. Recently, private Chinese banks have cautiously entered Africa's debt markets, signaling a shift

in the landscape. Projects like Angola's Kakuta Cabeza Dam exemplify China's significant infrastructure investments, while African countries, such as Zambia and Angola, strive to reform debt management practices, centralizing control to ensure transparency.

However, Chinese lending faces numerous challenges. Many African countries struggle with economic planning and corruption, while infrastructure projects often lead to unsustainable debt. For example, Laos' investments in unneeded dam projects have heightened debt burdens without adequate revenue generation, and without robust debt relief, these crises remain unresolved. China's debt diplomacy also faces hurdles with bilateral rescheduling, raising internal debates about its sustainability and the implications for diplomatic relations, particularly when countries, like Angola, repeatedly seek relief. China's gradual involvement in multilateral financial frameworks like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) also poses strategic questions, especially given disputes over voting power, which affect debt restructuring dynamics globally.

The session addressed China's debt strategies, specifically its reliance on bilateral debt rescheduling rather than multilateral frameworks like the Paris Club. While this approach offers diplomatic leverage, repeated bilateral rescheduling has led to financial losses and raised concerns about its long-term viability. In addition, the strategy of resource-backed lending, historically preferred by Chinese banks, has not always proven reliable, as demonstrated by Venezuela's defaults on oil-backed loans.

A unique challenge in China's lending practices is institutional fragmentation. Unlike the centralized debt management structures of G7 nations, China's banks operate with limited coordination, often handling negotiations independently. This has led to inconsistencies in debt management, and comparisons were drawn to Japan's structured approach, which could offer lessons for China as it adapts its practices.

Chinese banks have also faced a steep learning curve in safeguarding their investments, as traditional mechanisms like escrow accounts have not prevented defaults. To protect their interests, Chinese banks are now seeking sovereign guarantees for project financing. There is also growing interest in co-financing with multilateral entities like the World Bank, as shared risk can improve project viability and address long-term lending issues.

In response to the perception that Chinese lending is predatory, the speaker argued that most Chinese loans are structured commercially, with terms similar to those from other international lenders. Nonetheless, calls for greater transparency remain, urging China to clarify its lending practices and enable a more balanced assessment of its role in global debt markets.

Looking forward, the forum suggested China may reduce its lending for high-risk infrastructure projects unless better risk management mechanisms are established. Despite the challenges, Africa's infrastructure needs are immense, creating continued demand for external financing. The session highlighted the potential for China to adopt concessional terms and strengthen multilateral cooperation to meet Africa's needs sustainably.

The discussion concluded with an emphasis on understanding African debt dynamics and the implications of China's debt strategies on these economies. If China refines its approach, learning from experiences like Japan's, it can contribute to a more stable financial environment for African countries. The need for more multilateral engagement and transparency will be essential for China to maintain its role in the region's development, countering misconceptions about its lending practices while supporting sustainable growth across Africa and Latin America.

## **Secure Supply Chains and Critical Minerals**

The "Secure Supply Chains and Critical Minerals" session focused on the geopolitics of critical minerals, particularly the roles of China and the U.S. in Africa and Latin America. Christian Geraud Neema of the China-Global South Project opened by discussing the need for African nations to align their understanding of critical minerals, which are crucial for technology and green energy transitions. Currently, African nations lack a cohesive strategy, with many countries not controlling or profiting directly from their resources due to foreign ownership of the mining sector. This is exacerbated by China's dominance in minerals, especially lithium, with significant investments in Argentina and Chile, which serve as essential hubs for lithium production. Chinese companies utilize brownfield investments, avoiding the riskier greenfield projects, and often acquire local companies incrementally to control mineral operations.

China's influence is not limited to Africa but extends across Latin America, particularly in Argentina, where it dominates lithium extraction. In 2024, 65% of Argentina's lithium exports went to China, with Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) gradually acquiring full ownership of key projects. Dr. Juliana Gonzalez Jauregui of FLACSO Argentina highlighted that China's hold on the lithium market—leading in refining, battery production, and components—strengthens its supply chain position for renewable energy and electric vehicles (EVs). This dependence has environmental implications, as unchecked Chinese operations in Latin America often impact local communities adversely. Gonzalez pointed out that while Chile is trying to industrialize its mining sector independently, countries like Bolivia lack the resources and stability to do so.

The conversation also touched on technology's role in the critical mineral value chain. Artificial intelligence (AI) and big tech are seen as potential tools to streamline operations, though Neema argued that Africa must position itself within the supply chain to benefit from its resources fully. However, Africa's technology sector currently lacks development beyond extraction, and much of the value-added processes occur outside the continent. Both Neema and Gonzalez agreed that increased research and development (R&D) funding in Africa and Latin America could help these regions capture more value from their resources, potentially reducing reliance on foreign investment and enhancing technological autonomy.

In addressing the environmental and regulatory challenges associated with critical minerals, the speakers contrasted the U.S. and China's investment approaches. The U.S. has been cautious, with a preference for innovation-led investments, while China has moved aggressively into

foreign mineral markets. Neema argued that U.S. investments could better compete with China by embracing innovation and providing alternative financing options for African nations.

The session underscored the challenges of advancing up the value chain by producing finished products. Currently, African countries focus largely on extraction, with limited initiatives to establish downstream industries like battery manufacturing or AI-driven resource management. Building an AI or technology sector in Africa would require substantial investment in R&D, which could shift the region's role in global technological transitions. However, achieving this requires overcoming competition between African and Latin American countries, as each strives to lead in mineral cooperation. For example, a 2022 deal between Zambia and China to create a lithium value chain faltered due to ownership disputes.

The discussion concluded with reflections on global mining subsidies, which complicate trade within regulated markets like the U.S. and EU. These regulations often leave Latin American countries stuck as raw material suppliers, unable to capture value from further processing. Despite global interest in critical minerals, private investments remain focused on Latin America, given Africa's perceived higher risks.

In summary, the session highlighted the pressing need for African and Latin American nations to develop coherent mineral strategies, invest in R&D, and build local industries. While competition often overshadows cooperation, strategic alliances and increased funding in tech-driven projects could empower these regions to gain leverage within global supply chains, addressing both economic and environmental sustainability challenges posed by the critical mineral sector.

## **Climate and Environment**

The "Climate Change and Environmental Protection" session examined the challenges and opportunities of environmental sustainability in Africa and Latin America, emphasizing the impact of climate change, resource extraction, and global competition for critical minerals. This discussion highlighted the importance of local expertise to understand transregional dynamics and how China and the U.S. engage differently across these regions. Cesar Gamboa (Derecho Ambiente y Recursos Naturales in Peru), Dr. Monica Nunez Salas (University of Minnesota) and Kennedy Manduna (University of Witwatersand South Africa) underscored the need for comparative research to identify patterns in China's investments in Africa and Latin America, noting, however, that such analyses risk oversimplifying complex issues.

The session explored the influence of climate change and resource extraction on social and environmental systems. For example, the demand for lithium from the "Lithium Triangle" (Bolivia, Argentina, and Chile) has placed environmental pressures on indigenous lands and local communities. In the Amazon, deforestation and fires have worsened due to global supply chain demands, meat consumption, and land clearing. Such pressures have environmental and social ramifications, fueling problems like human trafficking along development corridors such as the Southern Interoceanic Highway. Another example is Peru, where economic priorities

sometimes conflict with environmental protections due to extractive industries and global supply chain demands.

African resources play a crucial role in the global energy transition, with over 50% of the world's critical mineral deposits located in Africa. Minerals like copper, essential for green technology, are primarily mined in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Zambia. Amid U.S.-China geopolitical tensions, competition over these resources has intensified as both superpowers seek to secure supply chains for digital and green technologies. Africa, however, faces the challenge of extracting value from these resources while preventing exploitative practices.

The forum proposed policy recommendations to empower African countries in negotiations with global powers. These included advocating for revised World Trade Organization (WTO) regulations to support resource nationalism, creating regional mineral clusters, and shifting from extractive practices to more sustainable and beneficial models. Africa was encouraged to move from a “rule-taker” to a “rule-maker” role, developing policies that prioritize resource control, sustainable practices, and long-term economic benefits. Strengthening policies to regulate artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM), addressing double taxation, and considering debt cancellation as a form of ecological reparations were also recommended to enhance Africa's autonomy in global mineral markets.

The session concluded with an emphasis on Africa's need to establish a specialized team of negotiators with deep expertise in critical mineral markets. With clear, empowering policies, African countries can better balance resource nationalism and foreign direct investment (FDI) to secure a sustainable and prosperous future. Additionally, the forum stressed the need for African and Latin American countries to collaborate on building frameworks for environmental protection and resource management, ensuring that economic gains do not come at the cost of environmental degradation or social inequality.

## **Security and Law Enforcement**

The Law Enforcement and Security panel highlighted the increasing influence of Chinese security cooperation in Panama and similar trends across Africa. Alonso Illueca (Universidad Santa Maria la Antigua in Panama) stated that after Panama established diplomatic ties with China in 2017, China began significant security projects, notably a Security and Emergency Operations Center equipped with advanced surveillance technology, similar to systems used in China's Shenzhen and Xinjiang. This raised privacy and human rights concerns, as this technology could potentially be used for authoritarian surveillance. China's influence in Panama's law enforcement includes a pending extradition treaty and deportation arrangements, which lack robust legal safeguards, sparking fears of human rights violations. Furthermore, Panama's strategic importance, with assets like the Panama Canal and critical infrastructure investments by China, positions it at the center of a broader geopolitical competition between the U.S. and China.

Arhin Acheampong (Afro-Sino Centre of International Relations) and Paul Nantulya (Africa Center for Strategic Studies) underscored concerns that Chinese-linked criminal groups and data access via cybersecurity collaborations might compromise Panama's national security. It also drew parallels with Africa, where China's influence has grown through security personnel training, surveillance technology exports, and extradition agreements. China's Safe Cities initiatives in Africa mirror Panama's experiences, generating similar debates over privacy and authoritarianism. The speakers concluded by stressing that both African and Latin American nations should share insights and strategies to manage Chinese influence, focusing on enhancing democratic governance, transparency, and human rights protection in security and law enforcement. The U.S.-China rivalry for influence poses significant challenges, and cooperative research between these regions could bolster their responses to external pressures.

### **Emerging Technology (AI, Space)**

The "Emerging Technologies" session examined China's advancements in AI, cybersecurity, and space exploration, along with the implications of these technologies for African and Latin American nations. Moderated by Dr. Donavon Johnson (Florida International University), with insights from Major General John Wharton (Florida International University) and Dr. Mnyandu Phiwokuhle (Howard University), the session emphasized China's focus on AI and cybersecurity, both deemed national priorities by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). China's willingness to prioritize national security over individual privacy has driven the development of robust surveillance technologies, which are increasingly deployed domestically and exported to countries worldwide, often in low-governance regions. Wharton stressed that other nations should align their AI and cybersecurity standards with global norms rather than adopting China's model, which integrates technology into state control mechanisms.

The discussion also addressed the concept of "digital sovereignty" as a central goal for China, which seeks to exert control over digital information both within its borders and in the countries it partners with. China's strategic model of international engagement spans three levels: partnership, strategic partnership, and strategic cooperation partnership, allowing varying degrees of influence in foreign digital and data infrastructures. The panelists noted that China's export of technology to lower-capacity countries often leaves these nations dependent on Chinese systems and standards, which may carry implications for their data sovereignty. This reality underscores the need for African countries to enhance their regulatory capabilities to manage foreign technology investments effectively.

Another key area of focus was China's significant progress in space, marked by achievements like lunar landings, Mars exploration, and the development of a space station. China's investments in space-based assets—such as satellites for GPS, communications, and intelligence—illustrate its strategic interest in establishing dominance in the space domain. The panelists highlighted the gap in international space warfare regulations, which could lead to a potential arena for unchecked aggression and cyberattacks. This reality raises concerns for

countries worldwide, especially those with limited space capabilities. The session urged African countries to build expertise in space technology, advocating for an overhaul of education systems to foster a deeper understanding of emerging technologies.

The forum also highlighted a need for ethical AI and emphasized the notion that “whoever controls the data will be king,” underscoring the importance of data sovereignty and control. In conclusion, the session called for African nations to strategically invest in technological education, regulatory frameworks, and multilateral partnerships to safeguard against overreliance on any single foreign power for critical technological infrastructure. This strategy, coupled with efforts to establish data sovereignty and control, would better position African countries to navigate the geopolitical and technological shifts driven by China’s growing influence in AI, cybersecurity, and space.

## **Disinformation and Media**

The "Disinformation and Media" panel explored China’s influence on global media narratives, disinformation strategies, and soft power initiatives in Africa and Latin America. Margaret Myers (Inter-American Dialogue), Maria Montt (Pontificia Universidad Catolica de Chile), Parsifal D’Sola (Andres Bello Foundation) and Dr. Hlengiwe Dube (University of Pretoria, South Africa) discussed how China tailors its international messaging, strategically translating phrases to avoid political connotations, thus presenting itself as a friendly developing nation. This approach is supported by China’s domestic network of international communication centers, established across 26 provinces since 2023, to promote favorable narratives globally. These centers collaborate with local media to drive a pro-China agenda, effectively spreading propaganda under the guise of benign cultural exchange.

Hlengiwe Dube noted the rising presence of both U.S. and Chinese content in Africa, reflecting broader geopolitical competition. Historically, China’s relationship with Africa evolved from supporting anti-colonial movements to prioritizing economic partnerships and trade, particularly in critical mining sectors. However, a lack of transparency regarding the details and impact of Chinese mining projects in Africa has raised concerns. This opacity extends to the broader landscape of China-Africa relations, where economic ties are often not publicly scrutinized, leaving local populations uninformed about the implications of resource extraction projects.

China’s influence in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) was also discussed, highlighting the region’s growing engagement with Asia. LAC and African students are increasingly drawn to Chinese universities, reflecting China’s effective use of educational soft power to foster long-term relationships. Social media platforms, especially TikTok, have also emerged as significant tools for shaping China’s image. For instance, popular influencers from LAC and Africa are invited to China, where they create content showcasing the country’s attractions, contributing to a favorable image of China abroad. This strategy of engaging social media influencers helps China reach younger audiences directly, bypassing traditional media channels that may portray it less favorably.

The panel addressed the role of public opinion in shaping foreign investments and development projects, particularly in Latin America, where protests and public dissent have delayed or halted Chinese-backed projects. Local and Western media play a critical role in these dynamics, often shaping public perception and influencing project viability. Countries like Colombia, aware of their dependency on Chinese investment, face significant challenges balancing national interests with foreign pressures.

China's use of "pre-emptive engagement" was discussed, with panelists noting how China frames its resource extraction projects in terms of sustainable and mutually beneficial development, although these initiatives are often viewed as opportunistic. Civil society and grassroots organizations are vital in monitoring these projects, but their influence varies depending on media transparency and the local government's stance on foreign investments. This gap has sometimes allowed China to assert control over critical sectors with limited public oversight.

The session concluded by noting that China's nuanced media strategy has positioned it as both a pragmatic investor and a cultural ally to developing nations. Its success in shaping media narratives across Africa and Latin America, combined with strategic investments and influencer campaigns, exemplifies a sophisticated model of soft power that resonates with Global South audiences. However, concerns about transparency, media influence, and public accountability persist, especially as China continues to expand its footprint in these regions. This growing influence underscores the importance of fostering independent media and transparent governance to ensure that local populations remain informed about the long-term implications of Chinese investments.

### **Open Discussion/Final Thoughts**

Finally, participants highlighted the value of comparative studies and transregional perspectives, which could inform future partnerships and scholarly initiatives. One participant from Tanzania mentioned the need to build basic local awareness about PRC activities, and that journalism and data are crucial in that endeavor. The participants underscored the unique role of the Africa-Americas Forum in fostering these cross-regional dialogues, and looked forward to next year's in-person forum.