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Aid or Influence? Strategic Deployment of Development Assistance by India and China in Africa

First Author: Ms. Sayee Barokar

Co-author: Dr. Sejal Yadav

Abstract

Development aid in the Global South has long walked the line between generosity and geopolitical strategy. In the 21st century, India and China, both former recipients of aid, have emerged as influential donors, employing development assistance as a strategic tool of soft power and global engagement. Africa has become a focal point of this evolving dynamic, where aid projects, partnerships, and diplomacy reflect deeper strategic ambitions.

How do African states navigate the competing development efforts of India and China? In what ways do countries like Kenya, Ethiopia, and Tanzania exercise agency in shaping these aid relationships, rather than merely receiving them? While China's high-profile, infrastructure-driven approach has received significant scholarly attention, India's quieter, capacity-focused model remains comparatively underexplored. More importantly, much of the existing literature tends to focus on what donors do, often overlooking how African states perceive, respond to, and shape these relationships.

This paper examines how Kenya, Ethiopia, and Tanzania engage with and interpret Indian and Chinese development assistance. It shifts the lens from donor intentions to recipient strategies, highlighting how these states actively negotiate between multiple partners, prioritize their own development agendas, and redefine the contours of South–South cooperation. Rather than framing them as passive beneficiaries, this study emphasizes the agency of African nations in navigating and influencing the broader aid landscape.

Key words: Development Aid, South-South Cooperation, India-China in Africa, African Agency, Donor-Recipient Relations.

Introduction

In the shifting landscape of 21st-century development cooperation, Africa has become a central arena for new forms of South-South engagement. No longer solely the preserve of traditional donors from the Global North, development aid now features emerging powers, most notably India and China, both of which were themselves major aid recipients in the recent past. Their engagement with African nations is not simply altruistic; it is shaped by a combination of strategic, economic, and diplomatic considerations. While this dynamic has attracted substantial scholarly interest, the majority of existing research privileges donor perspectives, leaving the agency of African states underexamined. The dominant focus on China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its high-profile infrastructure projects has overshadowed the quieter but persistent development diplomacy of India, which emphasizes capacity-building, technical training, and soft power (Mawdsley 2012; Beri 2011). Even more overlooked is the question of how African countries themselves, such as Kenya, Ethiopia, and Tanzania, navigate, negotiate, and strategically shape these aid relationships to align with their national priorities.

The literature on China's African engagement is extensive, with studies documenting large-scale infrastructure financing, concessional loans, and strategic investments in resource and transport sectors (Brautigam 2011; Kitissou 2007). Often framed through realist and dependency theory lenses, this body of work interprets Chinese aid as both a development enabler and a geopolitical tool, highlighting the risks of debt dependency and the asymmetry of power between donor and recipient. While some scholars recognize that African governments can push back or renegotiate terms (Alden & Large 2011), these insights are often incidental, not the focus of sustained comparative analysis. The gap widens when considering India's role. India's aid programs, such as the Pan-African e-Network, the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme, and concessional lines of credit, have been examined primarily in isolation, with few studies placing them alongside China's model in a comparative framework (Chaturvedi 2016; Suri 2018). This absence limits our understanding of how recipient states assess, combine, or prioritize these distinct approaches.

Some methodological differences in the scholarship also contribute to this imbalance. China-focused research frequently relies on quantitative data, trade figures, project volumes, debt ratios, that offer scale but miss the nuances of political bargaining (Gilpin 2023). India-focused studies often use qualitative accounts or policy document analysis but lack systematic cross-country comparison, making it difficult to generalize about African responses (Vaidyanathan 2019). A smaller body of mixed-methods work (Whitfield & Fraser 2010; Swedlund 2017) highlights how African negotiators adapt donor proposals to fit domestic agendas, yet such studies remain rare and tend to treat "African agency" as a background variable rather than the central object of inquiry.

Thematically, the contrast between China's infrastructure-heavy model and India's capacity-building approach is well established (Mawdsley 2012; Beri 2011). China's projects tend to be highly visible and rapid in execution, while India's focus on education, Information and Communication Technology (ICT), and healthcare produces less immediate but potentially more sustainable outcomes. However, much of the literature positions African states as passive recipients of whichever model is offered, rather than as strategic actors who choose, combine, or reject elements from each. In reality, countries like Ethiopia have welcomed Chinese financing while setting limits on terms perceived as extractive; Kenya has diversified its partnerships to draw on both BRI infrastructure and Indian scholarship programs; and Tanzania has pursued aid that aligns closely with its domestic industrial and social policies. These examples suggest that recipient strategies are neither uniform nor reactive, they are deliberate and shaped by political, economic, and institutional contexts.

Still, most accounts capture this agency in isolated case studies without situating it within a broader comparative analysis. Cross-national studies that evaluate African responses to both India and China as overlapping but distinct aid paradigms remain scarce. This gap is partly due to the difficulty of accessing detailed data on internal policy deliberations in African states, but also reflects a disciplinary bias in international relations and development studies towards the actions of major powers. As a result, we have an incomplete picture of how African states actually operationalize the oft-cited principle of "demand-driven" cooperation, how they initiate, negotiate, and structure aid to fit sectoral priorities, and how they use donor competition to improve outcomes.

This study is grounded in secondary qualitative research, drawing exclusively on scholarly literature, policy reports, and credible media coverage. It does not involve fieldwork, in part due to time constraints, and acknowledges the limits this places on primary data collection. The analysis is therefore interpretive rather than empirical, synthesizing diverse perspectives rather than privileging a single narrative. By being transparent about these limitations, the study aims to remain methodologically grounded, open to multiple interpretations, and conscious of the fact that no single account can capture the full complexity of African agency in South-South cooperation.

Research Gap

While existing scholarship on development cooperation between Africa and emerging powers has extensively examined the economic, infrastructural, and geopolitical dimensions of engagement, particularly China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its large-scale infrastructural diplomacy (Brautigam, 2011; Alden & Large, 2011), there remains a significant void in the comparative, recipient-focused analysis of African agency within these relationships. The literature recognises that African states are no longer passive aid recipients (Whitfield & Fraser, 2010; Mawdsley, 2012), yet most studies stop short of exploring in detail how countries like Kenya, Ethiopia, and Tanzania actively negotiate, adapt, and strategically select between different donor models to advance their own national priorities.

China’s model, often characterised by concessional loans, rapid infrastructure delivery, and visible state-led projects, has been extensively documented and critiqued through realist and dependency theory lenses (Kitissou, 2007; Six, 2009). India’s approach, framed as soft power diplomacy, centred on capacity-building, education, ICT initiatives, and historical solidarity, has received some scholarly attention (Beri, 2011; Chaturvedi, 2016), but much of it is descriptive, focusing on official policy narratives or project listings rather than interrogating its comparative reception and negotiation within African states. While some works acknowledge both models side by side (Achen et al., 2023), they rarely investigate the micro-level decision-making and bargaining processes within African governments that shape which model is adopted, adapted, or resisted in different sectors such as health, education, and infrastructure.

Methodologically, there is a persistent bias toward macro-level quantitative analyses, tracking trade flows, debt ratios, and aid volumes, that, while valuable, often obscure the nuanced, qualitative realities of how African officials perceive, evaluate, and strategically leverage these partnerships (Swedlund, 2017). Richer qualitative research exists in isolated case studies but lacks comparative depth across both donor models, leaving unanswered how the same African state might respond differently to India and China depending on sectoral needs, political priorities, or governance structures. Furthermore, while donor strategies are often examined in the context of competition or complementarity, the agency of recipients in orchestrating this competition to maximise developmental gains remains underexplored.

This gap is compounded by the absence of sustained analysis that integrates theoretical perspectives, such as postcolonial critiques of South-South cooperation’s claim to equality (Six, 2009) with institutionalist frameworks recognising African bargaining power (Whitfield & Fraser, 2010), to produce a holistic view of the aid relationship. Existing literature either foregrounds power asymmetries or celebrates mutual benefit, but rarely bridges the two to account for strategic agency within structural constraints.

This paper, therefore, seeks to investigate how Kenya, Ethiopia, and Tanzania navigate their engagements with India and China not merely as recipients, but as actors that actively shape, prioritise, and balance these relationships. It will analyse how differences in donor modalities, China's infrastructure-led model and India's capacity-building approach, are understood, negotiated, and utilised by African states to serve their own developmental visions. In doing so, the study aims to fill the gap in comparative, recipient-oriented scholarship and contribute to a more balanced understanding of agency within contemporary South-South cooperation.

Research Question

How do African states such as Kenya, Ethiopia, and Tanzania strategically navigate and shape their engagements with India's capacity-focused aid model and China's infrastructure-heavy approach within the framework of South-South cooperation?

The concept of "African agency" has been defined and redefined by scholars across development studies, political economy, and international relations, each attempting to capture its depth, resilience, and varied manifestations in the donor–recipient relationship. While dependency theorists have traditionally framed African states as constrained by structural inequalities (Frank, 1969; Six, 2009), postcolonial scholars have broadened the concept, emphasising negotiation, adaptation, and the reassertion of political autonomy within asymmetrical relationships (Whitfield & Fraser, 2010; Carmody, 2013). In more recent institutionalist approaches, agency is seen not merely as resistance but as proactive agenda-setting, where recipient states actively design policies to align external resources with domestic priorities.

In this study, African agency is examined in the specific context of two divergent but overlapping aid paradigms. China's model, rooted in large-scale infrastructure, concessional loans, and rapid project delivery, has been widely critiqued for its geopolitical and economic leverage, yet also recognised for its tangible, visible development impact (Brautigam, 2011; Kitissou, 2007). India's model, grounded in capacity building, education, ICT, and technical cooperation, projects a softer image based on shared colonial histories and cultural affinities (Beri, 2011; Chaturvedi, 2016). Both claim to follow "demand-driven" principles, but the operational realities of how African governments interpret, negotiate, and prioritise between them remain underexplored.

To interrogate this interplay, it is necessary to establish that African states are not simply "balancing" these donors but are strategically sequencing, combining, or even playing them against one another to maximise developmental and political outcomes. This question also requires engagement with the sectoral dimension: in what ways might a state like Kenya prefer China's model for transport infrastructure but turn to India for health capacity building? How might Ethiopia leverage China's financing scale while safeguarding debt sustainability through Indian partnerships? How does Tanzania's foreign policy orientation influence its preference or receptivity to one model over another?

In essence, and through condensation, the research question probes whether the aid relationship between India, China, and African states is a story of donor dominance or one of negotiated interdependence, where African agency is central to the outcome. By situating the question at the intersection of theory (postcolonial, realist, and institutionalist) and grounded policy practice, the study aims to reveal not only what these donors bring to Africa, but how African actors themselves define the terms of engagement, and in doing so, reshape the very idea of South-South cooperation.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a secondary qualitative research design, relying on the systematic collection, examination, and synthesis of existing scholarly and policy literature. The research question, how Kenya, Ethiopia, and Tanzania negotiate, differentiate, and strategically utilize development aid from India and China, requires a nuanced understanding of recipient agency within the framework of South-South cooperation. Such complexity is better addressed through interpretive, context-rich analysis rather than purely quantitative measurement.

The primary data set consists of peer-reviewed journal articles, monographs, policy reports, and credible think-tank publications that directly address India-Africa and China-Africa development cooperation, with particular attention to East African case studies. The selection criteria were guided by three considerations:

1. Relevance: Sources must address either India's or China's development cooperation with Africa, or African agency in donor-recipient relations.
2. Credibility: Priority was given to peer-reviewed scholarship and institutional reports with established research credentials.

3. Comparative Value: Preference for works that allow thematic and analytical comparison between the Indian and Chinese models, or provide rich detail on African negotiation processes.

The study applies a thematic analysis approach. Literature was first organized into broad themes, donor strategies, African agency, comparative frameworks, and sector-specific engagement, and then critically examined for convergences, divergences, and underlying assumptions. This facilitated the identification of recurring patterns in donor behaviour, as well as gaps in how African agency has been represented. By synthesizing these themes across multiple sources, the analysis reconstructs a more balanced narrative that foregrounds recipient perspectives.

Given the reliance on secondary data, the study is interpretive and analytical rather than empirical. The absence of fieldwork means that first-hand accounts from African policymakers, diplomats, or negotiators could not be incorporated directly. Additionally, time constraints limited the scope of literature reviewed, and language barriers may have excluded some non-English sources. These limitations are acknowledged as areas for future research, particularly for scholars undertaking primary data collection or multilingual archival work.

Despite these constraints, the chosen methodology is appropriate for the study's aims. Secondary qualitative analysis enables the integration of a diverse range of perspectives, drawing on both established scholarship and contemporary developments. It also allows for a comparative framing of India's and China's aid models while situating African states as active agents within this evolving diplomatic and developmental landscape.

Hypothesis

While existing literature frames African countries as passive recipients of donor agendas, this study hypothesizes that African states like Kenya, Ethiopia, and Tanzania are not merely reacting to aid offers but are actively shaping the terms and scope of development engagement. They compare India's and China's aid models, choosing and negotiating based on strategic, sectoral, and political considerations. The hypothesis, therefore, posits that African agency is central, not peripheral, to the emerging South-South cooperation landscape.

History of Development Aid in Africa

The history of development aid in Africa is closely linked to the continent's colonial past and the geopolitical rivalries of the 20th century. In the decades following independence, African nations became arenas where global powers projected influence through financial assistance, technical support, and large-scale projects. During the Cold War, aid was often tied to political alignment: Western donors, led by the United States and its allies, promoted market-oriented policies and political liberalisation, while the Soviet Union and its partners supported socialist models and state-led development. For many African states, aid came with significant political and economic conditions, which limited their ability to independently set priorities.

This pattern continued into the post–Cold War era, when the structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s and 1990s deepened Africa's dependence on Western institutions like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. These programmes required governments to liberalise economies, reduce public spending, and privatise state assets in exchange for loans. While they aimed to stabilise economies, they often weakened social services, increased unemployment, and reduced state capacity. Over time, frustration with conditionalities led African leaders to seek alternative sources of support.

The early 21st century marked a turning point with the rise of South-South cooperation. Countries in the Global South, many of which had once been aid recipients themselves, began engaging as donors. This shift was not only financial but also political, it was framed as a partnership among equals, emphasising mutual benefit, solidarity, and respect for sovereignty. African states began to diversify their development partnerships beyond the traditional North-South axis, welcoming investment and aid from emerging economies such as Brazil, Turkey, India, and China.

Within this broader transformation, aid became more than a source of funds; it became a tool for African states to negotiate better terms, avoid over-reliance on a single partner, and seek projects aligned with their own national priorities. This diversification of partners set the stage for the growing importance of India and China in Africa's development landscape, each bringing distinct historical ties, strategies, and ambitions that would reshape the continent's engagement with external powers.

India and China: From Recipients to Donors

India and China's roles as development partners in Africa cannot be understood without first recognising that both were major recipients of aid during much of the 20th century. In the decades after independence, India received significant assistance from Western countries, the Soviet Union, and international institutions to fund industrialisation, infrastructure, and social welfare programmes. Similarly, China, recovering from internal upheaval and isolation, benefited from Soviet aid in the 1950s and later engaged with limited external support before its economic reforms in the late 1970s triggered rapid growth.

As their economies expanded, both countries gradually shifted from being primarily aid recipients to becoming emerging donors. This transformation was not only economic but also ideological. India and China began to frame their development cooperation as part of a South-South partnership, grounded in shared experiences of colonialism, underdevelopment, and global marginalisation. They positioned themselves as different from traditional Western donors by emphasising equality, mutual benefit, and non-interference in domestic affairs.

The roots of these partnerships can be traced back to moments of postcolonial solidarity, such as the 1955 Bandung Conference and the early years of the Non-Aligned Movement, where African and Asian leaders sought to promote cooperation outside the Cold War blocs. India's engagement with Africa was also reinforced by the historical presence of the Indian diaspora in East and Southern Africa, which provided cultural and commercial linkages that persisted into the 21st century. China's historical ties were more political, rooted in its support for African liberation movements during the 1960s and 1970s.

Institutional frameworks later formalised these relationships. China's Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), launched in 2000, provided a platform for large-scale infrastructure financing, concessional loans, and high-visibility projects, often tied to its Belt and Road Initiative. India's approach, in contrast, evolved around programmes like the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) scheme, scholarships for African students, and initiatives such as the Pan-African e-Network Project, which connected African countries to Indian institutions for telemedicine and distance education. While China's model emphasised rapid, tangible infrastructure development, India's emphasised human resource development, capacity building, and technology transfer.

By the early 21st century, both countries had established themselves as significant players in Africa's aid and investment landscape. However, their different modalities of engagement offered African states distinct choices. This divergence, between China’s infrastructure-heavy, high-profile investments and India’s quieter, capacity-building projects, created space for African governments to exercise agency, negotiating terms and selecting partners according to their own political and developmental priorities.

Comparative Analysis

Kenya, Ethiopia, and Tanzania are chosen as focal cases in this study because they represent three of the most significant arenas of Indian and Chinese engagement in East Africa, while also offering distinctive political and developmental contexts that highlight African agency. Kenya stands out for its role as a regional hub with a diversified economy and visible Chinese infrastructure investments alongside Indian health and ICT initiatives. Ethiopia, as a landlocked state pursuing rapid industrialisation, demonstrates how aid is integrated into ambitious structural transformation projects, making it a critical site for both China’s large-scale infrastructure and India’s capacity-building efforts. Tanzania, with its long history of South–South cooperation and non-aligned diplomacy, illustrates how African states balance legacy ties with pragmatic negotiation of new aid flows. Together, these three cases allow for a comparative exploration of how African governments navigate divergent donor models, revealing not just patterns of dependence or influence, but strategies of choice, bargaining, and selective adoption that reinforce the central hypothesis of this study.

Kenya

Kenya’s engagement with both China and India reflects a deliberate balancing of immediate infrastructure needs with long-term human capital development. China’s presence in Kenya is highly visible, especially through flagship projects such as the Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) connecting Mombasa to Nairobi, financed largely through concessional loans from the Export-Import Bank of China[1]. Beyond the SGR, China has funded and constructed road networks, energy plants, and special economic zones, consolidating its reputation as a central partner in Kenya’s physical connectivity and trade facilitation[2]. The speed of delivery and the

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[1] Brautigam, D. (2011). *The Dragon’s Gift: The Real Story of China in Africa*. Oxford University Press

[2] Kitissou, M. (2007). *Africa in China’s Global Strategy*. London: Adonis & Abbey.

sheer scale of these projects have been welcomed by policymakers seeking to fast-track economic transformation, particularly under Kenya's Vision 2030 development agenda. Yet this visibility has also sparked debate about debt sustainability, project cost-effectiveness, and the long-term value of mega-infrastructure[3]. Civil society groups, opposition leaders, and sections of the Kenyan press have repeatedly questioned whether these projects disproportionately benefit Chinese contractors and whether the financial burdens undermine Kenya's fiscal autonomy[4].

India's engagement, though less visually dramatic, has followed a steadier and quieter trajectory. Through the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme, thousands of Kenyan officials and students have benefitted from scholarships and short-term training in ICT, public administration, and engineering[5]. Indian pharmaceutical firms, such as Cipla and Ranbaxy, have supplied affordable medicines to Kenya for decades, positioning India as a reliable partner in public health[6]. Telemedicine facilities established under the Pan-African e-Network project have further extended healthcare access, linking Kenyan hospitals to Indian medical institutions and facilitating specialist consultations across borders[7]. Additionally, Indian private investment has been channelled into Kenya's agricultural and light manufacturing sectors, supported by lines of credit from the Indian government[8]. These initiatives, though less conspicuous than Chinese-built railways or highways, respond directly to Kenya's priorities in human capital development and healthcare expansion.

What stands out is Kenya's ability to actively negotiate these relationships rather than passively accept them. For example, while the government embraced Chinese loans to build the SGR, it also rejected or renegotiated projects where financial or strategic misalignment became apparent, such as the extension of the SGR to Malaba, which was scaled back due to debt concerns[9]. At the same time, Kenya has consistently welcomed India's capacity-building

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[3] Corkin, L. (2013). *Uncovering African Agency: Angola's Management of Chinese Credit Lines*. Routledge.
[4] Madowo, L. (2018). "Kenya's Standard Gauge Railway: Debts and Dilemmas." *BBC Africa*.
[5] Beri, R. (2011). "India's Africa Policy in the Post-Cold War Era: An Assessment." *Africa Review*, 3(1).

[6] Vaidyanathan, R. (2019). "Indian Health Diplomacy in East Africa." *Contemporary South Asia*.

[7] Vaidyanathan, R. (2019). "Indian Health Diplomacy in East Africa." *Contemporary South Asia*.

[8] Chaturvedi, S. (2016). "India's Development Cooperation: The Emerging Model." *RIS Discussion Paper.*
[9] Kamau, M. (2020). "Kenya shelves SGR extension over debt concerns." *The East African*.

and technical cooperation programmes, recognising their value in advancing long-term development goals without creating unsustainable liabilities. This dual-track engagement reflects a conscious effort to diversify external partnerships, ensuring that no single donor dominates its development trajectory.

Kenya’s approach demonstrates the nuanced agency of African states in navigating South–South cooperation. By adopting China’s infrastructure finance in ways that accelerate trade and logistics, while simultaneously leveraging India’s expertise in ICT, education, and healthcare to strengthen its human capital base, Kenya shows that it is not merely reacting to donor offers. Instead, policymakers are strategically selecting, combining, and even reshaping external assistance to match domestic needs. In doing so, Kenya underscores the central argument of this paper: African states are not passive recipients of aid but active negotiators who shape the terms, scope, and utility of external engagements to serve national development agendas.

Ethiopia

Ethiopia has emerged as one of the most prominent African partners for both China and India, strategically using their distinct aid models to serve multiple dimensions of its ambitious national development agenda. Its engagement with these two Asian powers reflects not passivity, but an active process of selection, negotiation, and adaptation to national priorities.

China’s role in Ethiopia is highly visible through large-scale infrastructure projects and industrialisation initiatives. The Addis Ababa–Djibouti Railway, financed primarily through Chinese concessional loans and built by the China Railway Engineering Corporation (CREC), has been hailed as a landmark project in linking landlocked Ethiopia to international trade routes[10]. While the railway has significantly reduced transport times and boosted regional connectivity, it has also generated controversy due to cost overruns, debt servicing difficulties, and reliance on Chinese contractors for both operations and maintenance[11].

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[10] Brautigam, D. (2011). *The Dragon’s Gift: The Real Story of China in Africa.* Oxford University Press.

[11] Gilpin, R. (2023). “China, Africa and the International Aid System.” *Journal of International Development.*

Complementing transport infrastructure, China has invested heavily in Ethiopia's industrial parks, most notably Hawassa Industrial Park and the Eastern Industrial Zone. These spaces, developed with Chinese financing and firms, were designed to accelerate Ethiopia's industrial transformation by attracting foreign investors and creating export-led growth[12]. They have contributed to job creation and manufacturing capacity, yet concerns persist about low wages, limited technology transfer, and Ethiopia's growing dependency on Chinese capital and expertise.

India's presence in Ethiopia, though less immediately visible, has been consistently significant and directed towards long-term capacity building. Under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme, hundreds of Ethiopian officials, engineers, and agricultural specialists have received scholarships and technical training[13]. Indian private firms, particularly in pharmaceuticals, floriculture, and textiles, have become some of the largest foreign investors in Ethiopia, often backed by concessional credit from the Indian government[14]. The Pan-African e-Network, pioneered by India, has enhanced Ethiopia's healthcare access through telemedicine links and expanded opportunities in higher education via distance learning[15]. Indian agricultural experts have also worked with Ethiopian counterparts to support food security, while affordable Indian pharmaceuticals have helped reduce healthcare costs.

Ethiopia's strategy towards these two donors underscores its pragmatic exercise of agency. Large-scale infrastructure projects from China are integrated into Ethiopia's state-led industrialisation drive, while India's focus on human resource development and private sector investment complements these ambitions by providing the skilled workforce and institutional capacity needed for sustainability. This dual approach is deliberate: Ethiopia has welcomed Chinese financing to overcome its infrastructural bottlenecks, but has simultaneously pursued Indian expertise in ICT, education, and agriculture to avoid overdependence on a single donor.

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[12] Kitissou, M. (2007). *Africa in China's Global Strategy.* Adonis & Abbey.

[13] Chaturvedi, S. (2016). *The Development Compact: Theoretical and Practical Dimensions of Indian Development Cooperation.* Routledge.

[14] Vaidyanathan, R. (2019). "Indian Health Diplomacy in East Africa." *India Quarterly.*

[15] Beri, R. (2011). "India's Soft Power in Africa." *Strategic Analysis.*

Importantly, Ethiopia has demonstrated its willingness to renegotiate terms when projects prove misaligned with its interests. Debt restructuring negotiations with China have been undertaken to ease repayment burdens, while some contracts have been re-examined to ensure cost-effectiveness[16]. In parallel, Ethiopia has actively courted Indian investments in areas neglected by Chinese aid, signalling a capacity to compare, balance, and diversify donor contributions. This agency-driven selectivity confirms the central hypothesis of this study: Ethiopia is not a passive stage for donor competition, but an active participant shaping how India and China's models are deployed within its domestic priorities. By leveraging the strengths of each donor while hedging against their weaknesses, Ethiopia demonstrates that African states exercise strategic choice in aid partnerships.

Tanzania

Tanzania's engagement with India and China has been shaped by a long history of pragmatic diplomacy, non-alignment, and a strong emphasis on sovereignty in development decision-making. As one of the founding members of the Non-Aligned Movement under Julius Nyerere, Tanzania cultivated partnerships beyond the West from the early years of independence, laying the groundwork for durable ties with both China and India. This historical backdrop continues to influence how Tanzania evaluates and negotiates donor relationships, balancing the material benefits of large-scale infrastructure against the more understated, long-term contributions of capacity-building.

China's presence in Tanzania is among the oldest in Africa, symbolised most famously by the construction of the Tanzania-Zambia Railway (TAZARA) in the 1970s[17]. Built at a time when Western financiers had turned down Tanzania's request, TAZARA became an emblem of China's solidarity with African liberation and postcolonial development. In recent decades, Chinese engagement has expanded into new sectors, particularly transport, ports, and energy. The proposed Bagamoyo Port project, envisioned as one of Africa's largest deep-water ports,

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[16] Whitfield, L. & Fraser, A. (2010). *Negotiating Aid: African Agency and Donors.* Palgrave Macmillan.

[17] Monson, J. (2009). *Africa's Freedom Railway: How a Chinese Development Project Changed Lives and Livelihoods in Tanzania.* Indiana University Press.

reflected Beijing's ambition to position Tanzania as a maritime hub[18]. While its potential for trade expansion was significant, the project also sparked controversy over contractual terms, sovereignty concerns, and debt exposure. Tanzanian leaders eventually suspended and renegotiated elements of the deal, demonstrating agency in reshaping donor proposals[19]. Beyond ports, China has financed and constructed numerous roads, bridges, and power projects that promise improved connectivity and industrial growth. Yet concerns over project transparency, debt sustainability, and limited technology transfer have been recurrent.

India's role in Tanzania, though less visible, has been consistently significant and embedded in softer domains. Through the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme, Tanzanian professionals have received training in ICT, agriculture, and healthcare[20]. Educational scholarships and the Pan-African e-Network have expanded access to higher education and telemedicine, while Indian pharmaceutical exports have made essential medicines affordable and widely available[21]. Indian private firms have also invested in sectors such as small and medium enterprises, agro-processing, and consumer goods, often supported by government-backed credit lines[22]. These initiatives are complemented by Tanzania's sizeable Indian diaspora, which has reinforced commercial and cultural linkages over decades.

Tanzania's policy responses to these two models illustrate deliberate and selective engagement. While large-scale Chinese infrastructure proposals align with the country's long-term connectivity and industrialisation goals, Tanzanian governments have insisted on renegotiating contracts, ensuring local labour participation, and seeking more favourable financing conditions[23]. The decision to pause or delay certain projects, including Bagamoyo,

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[18] Kitissou, M. (2007). *Africa in China's Global Strategy.* Adonis & Abbey.

[19] Whitfield, L. & Fraser, A. (2010). *Negotiating Aid: African Agency and Donors.* Palgrave Macmillan.

[20] Chaturvedi, S. (2016). *The Development Compact.* Routledge.

[21] Vaidyanathan, R. (2019). "Indian Health Diplomacy in East Africa." *India Quarterly.*

[22] Beri, R. (2011). "India's Soft Power in Africa." *Strategic Analysis.*

[23] Gilpin, R. (2023). "China, Africa and the International Aid System." *Journal of International Development.*

signals an unwillingness to accept terms that undermine fiscal or political stability. At the same time, India's focus on capacity-building and human development has been actively welcomed as a complementary strategy, addressing Tanzania's needs in education, skills training, and healthcare without creating significant debt liabilities.

This blended approach reflects Tanzania's careful sequencing of partnerships: leveraging China's ability to deliver large, visible projects while turning to India for more gradual, sustainable investments in people and institutions. Such a strategy not only maximises developmental gains but also mitigates risks of overdependence. Tanzania, therefore, exemplifies the central hypothesis of this paper: African states are not passive recipients of aid but active negotiators, selectively adopting, reshaping, and balancing donor engagement to serve domestic objectives.

Comparative Synthesis

Looking across Kenya, Ethiopia, and Tanzania, what stands out is not uniformity, but variation in how African states navigate the presence of India and China. Each country has faced the same two aid models, China's large-scale infrastructure and India's capacity-building partnerships, yet the ways in which they have engaged with these models reveal deliberate choices. Kenya has embraced Chinese railways and energy plants for rapid connectivity, but simultaneously leaned on Indian technical and health cooperation to build human capital under Vision 2030. Ethiopia has tied its industrialisation drive closely to China's industrial zones and export corridors, while using Indian training and private investments to cultivate skills and diversify sectors such as agriculture and pharmaceuticals. Tanzania, meanwhile, has pursued a careful balancing act: negotiating Chinese megaprojects on stricter terms, even pausing them when risks mounted, while steadily deepening Indian cooperation in education, healthcare, and entrepreneurship.

These cases together suggest that African states are not simply reacting to donor offers but actively calibrating their choices to suit national development priorities. What may look like dependence on the outside, Kenya's debt to China, Ethiopia's reliance on industrial parks, or Tanzania's flirtation with mega-infrastructure, appears, on closer examination, as part of a broader strategy of negotiation, recalibration, and selective acceptance. The presence of two distinct but overlapping aid models gives these governments room to manoeuvre, hedging against risks by drawing on the strengths of each.

The hypothesis of this paper, that African states act with agency, comparing and choosing between India and China rather than submitting passively to either, is therefore not only validated but enriched. The agency does not look the same in Nairobi, Addis Ababa, and Dodoma, but it is visible in all three contexts. It lies in the quiet rejection or reshaping of unfavourable projects, in the prioritisation of sectors that matter most domestically, and in the ability to turn donor competition into national advantage. Together, these cases highlight that the story of South–South cooperation cannot be told solely through donor strategies; it must also be read through the pragmatism, constraints, and ambitions of African states themselves.

Theoretical Reflections

The findings from Kenya, Ethiopia, and Tanzania bring fresh perspective to the dominant theoretical debates in international relations and development studies. Much of the literature on China's aid in Africa has leaned toward a realist interpretation, seeing its projects as tools of strategic influence and geopolitical positioning[24]. The evidence from these three countries partly affirms this view, Chinese infrastructure projects are indeed large-scale, highly visible, and tied to long-term economic and political leverage. However, the case studies also reveal that realism alone cannot account for African responses. Governments have not accepted Chinese projects uncritically; they have renegotiated terms, paused initiatives, or balanced them with alternatives. This demonstrates that realism, with its emphasis on the power of stronger states, underestimates the bargaining space that African governments actually exercise[25].

Soft power theory, especially as articulated by Joseph Nye, provides a useful lens for India's aid strategy[26]. India's investments in education, ICT, healthcare, and cultural diplomacy resonate with the long-term priorities of African governments. The positive reception of scholarships, technical training, and pharmaceutical cooperation confirms that India's

[24] Kitissou, M. (2007). *Africa in China's Global Strategy*. Adonis & Abbey.

[25] Brautigam, D. (2011). *The Dragon's Gift: The Real Story of China in Africa*. Oxford University Press.

[26] Nye, J. (2004). *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. Public Affairs.

approach is shaped by attraction and affinity rather than coercion. Yet, the cases also show that India's soft power is not universally sufficient; in areas requiring rapid infrastructure or industrialisation, African governments have turned to China. This indicates that soft power, while valuable, works best when complemented by material investment, and its explanatory power is limited if considered in isolation[27].

Dependency theory has long warned that Global South partnerships can replicate earlier hierarchies of economic dependence[28]. Some of the findings echo this concern, particularly in Ethiopia and Kenya, where debt burdens and operational reliance on Chinese firms highlight structural vulnerabilities. However, the African responses suggest a more complex picture. By selectively adopting Indian or Chinese aid, and by actively reshaping or contesting projects, these states demonstrate agency that dependency theory often downplays[29]. Instead of being locked in cycles of dependence, they display flexibility and strategic calculation in managing donor relationships.

Postcolonial and institutionalist frameworks arguably provide the most accurate lens for interpreting the evidence. These perspectives emphasize the agency of African states, the importance of context, and the negotiated nature of aid relationships[30]. In each of the three cases, governments framed their engagement with India and China in ways that aligned with domestic development strategies, Vision 2030 in Kenya, export-led industrialisation in Ethiopia, and sovereign decision-making in Tanzania. Rather than being passive recipients, these states have shown that they can use donor competition to their advantage, selectively integrating Chinese and Indian offers into their national agendas. This aligns with Whitfield and Fraser's call to move beyond deterministic models and to recognize negotiation as a two-way process[31].

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[27] Chaturvedi, R. (2016). "India's Development Partnership: Key Policy Shifts and Institutional Evolution." *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*.

[28] Frank, A. G. (1967). *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America*. Monthly Review Press.

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[30] Mawdsley, E. (2012). *From Recipients to Donors: Emerging Powers and the Changing Development Landscape*. Zed Books.

[31] Whitfield, L. & Fraser, A. (2010). *Negotiating Aid: The Structural Conditions Shaping the Negotiating Strategies of African States*. International Negotiation.

Taken together, these findings complicate traditional theoretical divides. Realism and dependency theory help explain elements of Chinese and Indian engagement, but they fall short of capturing the agency of African states. Soft power theory illuminates India's approach but requires supplementation to explain why African governments often seek Chinese infrastructure simultaneously. Postcolonial and institutionalist approaches, which foreground agency and negotiation, appear most consistent with the evidence from Kenya, Ethiopia, and Tanzania.

Implications

The comparative findings from Kenya, Ethiopia, and Tanzania carry significant implications for both scholarly debates and policy practice. First, they challenge the still-prevalent perception of African states as passive recipients of donor agendas. The evidence demonstrates that governments actively differentiate between India's and China's models, adopting projects strategically, renegotiating terms, and even resisting offers that do not align with domestic priorities. This underscores the importance of situating African agency at the centre of South–South cooperation analysis, moving beyond donor-centric narratives[32].

Second, the findings complicate assumptions about donor competition. While media and policy commentary often frame India and China as rivals in Africa, the case studies show that African governments rarely adopt this binary view. Instead, they combine Chinese infrastructure with Indian capacity-building in ways that serve complementary national objectives. This suggests that "donor competition" may, in practice, function as "recipient opportunity," allowing African states to harness multiple partnerships simultaneously for greater developmental gain[33].

Third, the implications extend to broader debates on development effectiveness. For China, the findings suggest that large-scale projects, while attractive for their visibility and scale, risk rejection or renegotiation if they fail to demonstrate long-term sustainability or create fiscal strain. For India, the cases highlight that soft power and capacity-building, though well

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[32] Whitfield, L. & Fraser, A. (2010). *Negotiating Aid: The Structural Conditions Shaping the Negotiating Strategies of African States*. International Negotiation.

[33] Carmody, P. (2011). *The New Scramble for Africa*. Polity.

received, must be scaled up and made more visible if they are to remain competitive against China's infrastructural dominance. Both donors face the challenge of aligning their models more closely with recipient-driven agendas and ensuring local ownership, transparency, and accountability[34].

Finally, the study has normative implications for the theorisation of South-South cooperation. By showing how African states actively shape the trajectory of aid relationships, it reinforces postcolonial critiques of donor-dominated discourse and validates institutionalist perspectives that stress negotiation, adaptation, and agency. More broadly, it calls for rethinking the global narrative of development partnerships, recognising that the Global South is not merely acted upon but is increasingly shaping the future of international cooperation on its own terms[35].

Limitations

This study is primarily a secondary, qualitative analysis based on existing scholarly literature, policy reports, and publicly available data. As such, it does not include fieldwork, interviews, or first-hand ethnographic material. While this allows for a broad comparative perspective across multiple countries, it also limits the depth of insight into the day-to-day negotiations and internal political processes within African governments. Access to such data often requires extended field research, stakeholder interviews, and privileged archival access, which were beyond the scope of this project due to time and resource constraints[36].

Another limitation lies in the availability and reliability of sources. Much of the data on Chinese aid is well documented through high-profile projects, while India's engagements are comparatively underreported in both academic and media outlets. This unevenness in documentation may skew perceptions of visibility and impact. Similarly, official donor

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[34] Chaturvedi, R. (2016). "India's Development Partnership: Key Policy Shifts and Institutional Evolution." *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*.

[35] Mawdsley, E. (2012). *From Recipients to Donors: Emerging Powers and the Changing Development Landscape*. Zed Books.

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narratives often dominate the discourse, while African perspectives are harder to access directly, posing the risk of reproducing some of the asymmetries the study seeks to critique[37].

The study is also temporally bounded. Given the rapidly evolving nature of India's and China's foreign aid strategies, particularly in response to global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine war, and shifting geopolitical alignments, the conclusions drawn here reflect a particular moment in time. New policy initiatives or renegotiations could alter dynamics significantly, meaning that findings should be read as situated within this specific temporal context rather than as static truths[38].

Finally, the paper does not attempt to represent the entirety of Africa. By focusing on Kenya, Ethiopia, and Tanzania, it highlights three illustrative cases of African agency, but these cannot be assumed to represent all African states. Other countries may exhibit different negotiating strategies, shaped by their unique political economies, histories, and donor relationships[39].

Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights by foregrounding African agency and offering a comparative, recipient-focused perspective that is often missing in the literature. Acknowledging these constraints underscores the need for further empirical research, especially recipient-led narratives, which could deepen and refine the arguments advanced here.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore how African states, specifically Kenya, Ethiopia, and Tanzania, engage with the development cooperation models of India and China. Much of the existing literature has focused on donor strategies, portraying Africa primarily as a stage for geopolitical rivalry. The central hypothesis of this paper challenged that framing, suggesting

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[37] Mawdsley, E. (2012). *From Recipients to Donors: Emerging Powers and the Changing Development Landscape*. Zed Books.

[38] Carmody, P. (2020). *Development Theory and Practice in a Changing Global Order*. Routledge.

[39] Whitfield, L. & Fraser, A. (2010). *Negotiating Aid: The Structural Conditions Shaping the Negotiating Strategies of African States*. International Negotiation.

instead that African states act as active agents, selectively negotiating, adopting, or rejecting elements of Indian and Chinese aid to advance their own development priorities.

The comparative analysis of the three countries affirms this hypothesis. Kenya demonstrated a careful balancing act, embracing Chinese infrastructure while simultaneously relying on Indian capacity-building in education, ICT, and healthcare. Ethiopia pragmatically used Chinese projects to drive industrialisation while leveraging Indian engagement for human capital development. Tanzania, drawing on its historical legacy of non-alignment, strategically sequenced Chinese infrastructure with Indian capacity-building while resisting projects that threatened its fiscal or political sovereignty. These cases illustrate not passive acceptance, but agency exercised through choice, negotiation, and alignment with domestic agendas[40].

Theoretically, the findings nuance traditional international relations approaches. Realism explains elements of China's infrastructural dominance, and soft power illuminates India's capacity-building strategy, but neither framework adequately captures the centrality of African agency. Instead, postcolonial and institutionalist perspectives, emphasizing negotiation, hybridity, and recipient decision-making, best reflect the evidence presented[41].

The implications extend beyond theory. By showing that African states actively shape aid outcomes, the study underscores the importance of recipient-led development planning. Donor competition does not inevitably lead to dependency; instead, it can create bargaining space for African states to secure better terms, provided they maintain strategic clarity and domestic accountability[42]. This perspective challenges the one-dimensional narrative of Africa as a passive battleground and situates it as a co-author of South–South cooperation, shaping not only its own developmental path but also the global aid architecture.

At the same time, the study recognizes its limitations. As a secondary, qualitative analysis, it cannot capture the full richness of internal policy debates or the long-term impacts of aid projects. Nonetheless, by foregrounding African perspectives and agency, it contributes to a

[40] Brautigam, D. (2011). *The Dragon's Gift: The Real Story of China in Africa*. Oxford University Press.

[41] Whitfield, L. & Fraser, A. (2010). *Negotiating Aid: The Structural Conditions Shaping the Negotiating Strategies of African States*. International Negotiation.

[42] Carmody, P. (2011). *The New Scramble for Africa*. Polity.

more balanced understanding of development cooperation and highlights areas for further empirical research, including fieldwork and recipient-driven narratives.

In conclusion, the evidence from Kenya, Ethiopia, and Tanzania validates the hypothesis: African states are not merely recipients of Indian and Chinese aid but are strategic actors who compare, negotiate, and shape these engagements. Future scholarship and policy must therefore move beyond donor-centric analyses to recognize the complex, evolving, and decidedly active role of African states in defining the trajectory of South-South cooperation.

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