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Examining Sinophobia and Sinophilia in Africa in the Context of the Belt and Road Initiative from 1991 to 2023: A Case Study of Djibouti

1. Ghanbarali. Mohamadi¹ : Department of Political science, Ne.C., Islamic Azad University, Neyshabour, Iran

2. Hossein. Shariati²: Department of Political Science, Ne.C., Islamic Azad University, Neyshabur, Iran

3. Ali. Ghorbanpour(Dashtaki)³: Assistant Professor, Department of Political science and economics, Hakim Sabzevari University, Sabzevar, Iran

*corresponding author's email: hossein.shariati@iau.ac.ir

ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the simultaneous phenomena of Sinophilia (pro-China sentiment) and Sinophobia (fear or hostility toward China) in Africa, with a focus on the Republic of Djibouti as a critical case study over the period from 1991 to 2023. Centering on China's relations with African countries—particularly Djibouti—the study poses the following question: what factors have contributed to the formation, persistence, and interaction of Sinophilia and Sinophobia in the Republic of Djibouti during the 1991–2023 period? Using an analytical framework that integrates theories of realism (to understand security and geopolitical calculations), international political economy (to analyze loans, debt, and interdependence), and postcolonialism (to grasp the historical and discursive roots of South–South cooperation), the article argues that Djibouti's experience represents an extreme and instructive example of geography-rent-based realpolitik. In this model, the state, by adopting an actively Sinophilic approach, has transformed China's presence into a driver of infrastructural development and a source of revenue. However, this trajectory has also led to deep and asymmetric security–economic dependence, creating conditions for the emergence of Sinophobia centered on narratives of “debt-trap diplomacy,” sovereignty concerns, and the unequal distribution of benefits. The findings indicate that Djibouti, by leveraging its relative agency and engaging in great-power balancing, has so far avoided the most severe outcomes, yet the sustainability of this model depends on economic diversification and improvements in domestic governance. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that the dynamics of Sinophilia and Sinophobia in Africa must be understood at the intersection of the international system's structure, host countries' development strategies, and the legacy of North–South relations.

Keywords: *Sinophilia; Sinophobia; Djibouti; China; Belt and Road Initiative; Africa; realism; political economy; debt diplomacy*

Introduction

China's rise as an economic and geopolitical superpower in the twenty-first century has been one of the defining transformations of contemporary international relations. This shift is particularly evident in Africa, which over the past two decades has witnessed a rapid and unprecedented expansion of Beijing's economic, financial, and strategic presence. The large-scale Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, has become the principal framework for this engagement, bringing with it massive investments in transportation, energy, and communications



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infrastructure (1, 2). However, this pervasive and transformative presence has generated complex and sometimes contradictory social and political reactions within African host countries. On the one hand, Sinophilia, as an official and at times popular discourse, emphasizes developmental opportunities, the provision of an alternative model to the West, and principles such as “win–win” cooperation, non-interference in internal affairs, and South–South cooperation (3-5). On the other hand, Sinophobia, as a critical discourse, raises serious concerns regarding heavy debt burdens, the erosion of economic sovereignty, environmental degradation, and unequal trade patterns (6-8).

In this context, the Republic of Djibouti, due to its unique strategic location at the Bab el-Mandeb Strait—a vital global maritime chokepoint—and its acceptance of China's first overseas military base in 2017, has become an ideal and somewhat extreme case study for an in-depth examination of this duality (9-11). The temporal focus of this article spans from 1991 to 2023, a period that begins with the consolidation of central government authority in Djibouti following the civil war, continues with the strengthening of relations with China, and culminates in the peak of BRI-related projects and the establishment of the Chinese military base (12, 13).

Given Djibouti's pivotal role in the contemporary political and economic geography of Africa and the Middle East, and its position as an advanced example of engagement with China, a systematic examination of this case is necessary from multiple perspectives.

The central question addressed in this article is how and why Djibouti has simultaneously become an arena for state-level Sinophilia and societal Sinophobia. To answer this question, the present study employs a composite theoretical framework and, through a case study of Djibouti, examines the drivers, manifestations, and consequences of this dual phenomenon.

Literature Review and Research Background

The scholarly literature on China–Africa interactions can be broadly classified into three main approaches: (1) studies focusing on developmental opportunities and China's role in filling Africa's infrastructure gaps; (2) critical–security approaches emphasizing risks such as “debt-trap diplomacy” and geopolitical penetration; and (3) approaches highlighting African agency and the ways in which African states manage, shape, or resist Chinese initiatives (14-16). Existing research relevant to the present study can be summarized as follows.

Fallahati and Zargar (2025), in an article titled *The New Era of Strategic Interactions in China–Africa Relations*, argue that China, by offering economic and operational proposals to African countries, has enabled them to benefit from trade and development opportunities across the continent. At the same time, they note that these strategic relations face challenges and criticisms, including concerns about the emergence of imbalanced relationships between the two sides (17).

In a study on the components of China's soft power in Africa, it is argued that the Chinese government, through extensive and organized use of soft power, is implementing a comprehensive and forward-looking global strategy on the continent. According to this perspective, China's presence in Africa has expanded significantly due to regular China–Africa summits, positive negotiation outcomes, and the growing influence of Chinese state media and cultural institutions. Consequently, China's soft power instruments include culture, educational and cultural exchanges, strengthened diplomacy, and the provision of financial aid and investment across various sectors, with the ultimate objective of shaping favorable public opinion and securing African governments' support for China's long-term political and economic goals in Africa (18, 19).

Greer (2018), in an article titled *One Belt, One Road, One Big Mistake*, highlights the contrast between China's official narrative and the realities underlying investment decision-making. He argues that the official discourse of the Chinese Communist Party leadership and President Xi Jinping frames the BRI as a historic mission to offer a "Chinese model of socialism" to poorer regions of the world. However, Greer contends that Beijing's investment decisions are often driven less by financial logic and more by geopolitical needs and domestic political motivations of Chinese planners. As a result, many projects labeled under the BRI lack solid financial justification and are ultimately prone to failure (6).

He (2017), in a study examining the strategic formation of the Belt and Road Initiative, evaluates the project in terms of cost–benefit considerations and objectives across different countries. He argues that many BRI-related projects are closely tied to political agreements through which Chinese state-owned enterprises receive exclusive bidding rights, often outside competitive tendering processes involving other international firms, and remain largely unaccountable. He further suggests that projects financed through low-interest Chinese loans may weaken host countries' capacity to service their debts, particularly given the high costs of implementation (19, 20).

In an analysis of Kenya's debt situation, it is argued that the country's debt problems are far deeper than Chinese loans alone. While Chinese loans account for a significant share of Kenya's bilateral external debt, they constitute a smaller proportion of total external public debt, with multilateral borrowing—particularly from the World Bank—representing the largest share. From this perspective, debt-trap claims are largely based on misinterpretations of loan structures and conditions, and responsibility should not be attributed solely to China. The analysis emphasizes that commercial external borrowing and weak domestic governance have also played substantial roles in exacerbating Kenya's debt challenges (7).

Cannon (2025), in an article titled *Maps Showing China's Growing Influence in Africa Distort Reality—But Some Risks Are Real*, argues that visual representations of Chinese projects in Africa are often produced irresponsibly by media and policymakers. By placing Chinese flags across maps depicting all African states, such representations reduce complex economic relationships to simplistic visualizations of "foreign intrusion" and contribute to the securitization of China–Africa relations. This approach may heighten fears of dependency and encourage specific audiences—such as the United States, Japan, and France—to perceive China's presence as a direct challenge to their interests. Despite criticizing these representations, Cannon underscores the existence of genuine security risks associated with China's expanding role. The key challenge for African states, he argues, lies in ensuring that China's growing influence—particularly in infrastructure, digital networks, and security—does not undermine national sovereignty. Ultimately, such engagement can become either an opportunity or a liability, depending entirely on the extent to which African governments are able to define, defend, and adhere to their national interests when shaping partnerships on their own terms (21).

Theoretical Foundations

Realism

Realism has consistently attracted policymakers' attention due to the close alignment of its assumptions with the realities of international politics. Accordingly, the principal assumptions and core tenets of realism can be summarized as follows.

Primacy of national interest: National interest is regarded as the primary guide of states' foreign policy (22).

Principal actor: States are recognized as the main actors in the international system.

Power and human nature: This theory emphasizes the power-seeking nature of human beings and views state power as the decisive factor shaping interstate relations and foreign policy decision-making. Consequently, foreign policy is merely an instrument for realizing national interests and increasing power, and the calculation of interests is conducted on the basis of power (22).

Structure of the international system: The international system is anarchic (that is, lacking a central authority rather than lacking order), and the principle of self-help governs state behavior; as a result, states' ultimate objective is survival. From this perspective, realists distinguish between domestic and international realms of governance: while authority prevails domestically, no such overarching authority exists at the international level (23).

Morality and balance of power: Morality and international norms do not play a decisive role in international relations. Therefore, the only effective method of constraining expansionist states is the balance of power, through which states come to view peace as more beneficial than war (22, 24).

Critique of idealism: Influenced by thinkers such as Machiavelli and Hobbes, classical realists portrayed humans as inherently self-interested and states as institutions oriented toward security and survival, arguing that nationalism takes precedence over democracy. In contrast, idealists, driven by excessive optimism, emphasize democracy and internationalism (24).

The Revival of Realism and the Neorealist Approach

In the early 1980s, in reaction to behavioralism and under the conditions of the Cold War, realism was revitalized through a new methodological approach that gave rise to neorealism (structural realism). This approach sought to render realism more scientific by adhering to epistemological principles such as causal explanation, the objectivity of facts independent of subjective perception, and the importance of empirical testing for uncovering generalizable truths (16, 25).

Structural Primacy in Neorealism

Neorealism, particularly within the theoretical framework of Kenneth Waltz, elevates the level of analysis from the state to the international system. Neorealists argue that the structure of the international system—defined by anarchy in the sense of the absence of a central authority—determines the rules of the game and compels states to behave in similar ways under structural pressures. Accordingly, state behavior can only be meaningfully understood in light of systemic constraints (26).

While neorealism preserves the assumptions of state-centrism, rationality, and survival inherited from classical realism, it locates the roots of war and peace not in human nature but in the distribution of power at the systemic level. Unlike classical realism, which analyzes politics from the inside out, neorealism proceeds from the outside in. Although it emphasizes structure, neorealism—unlike its classical predecessor—acknowledges limited forms of cooperation and the role of international institutions, and accepts the possibility of achieving relative gains (22, 26).

Neorealist Considerations in Understanding the International System

1. Waltzian neorealism, in contrast to realism's emphasis on state-centrism, survival, and self-help, is grounded in the centrality of the system governing international relations.

2. Whereas realism views international politics as the product of decisions made by individuals and states, Waltz considers such an approach reductionist and maintains that the most important organizing principle of international politics is the structure of the international system.
3. Waltz distinguishes between the international system and the structure of the international system. The system refers to a particular pattern of behavior governing interacting states, whereas structure denotes the arrangement and distribution of power at the systemic level.
4. From Waltz's perspective, states are the most important actors in the international system, but not the only ones; limited forms of transnational cooperation and the participation of non-state actors in shaping national and international security are both conceivable and legitimate (24, 26).

Decision-Making Models, National Interests, and National Objectives

One of the key concepts of neorealist foreign policy theory is national security. In this framework, national interests are defined in terms of national security. Given neorealism's objectivist orientation, national interests are embedded within the concept of national security and exist independently of the preferences or perceptions of foreign policy decision-makers. Foreign policy is therefore security-oriented, and all decisions, actions, and behaviors can be explained and analyzed in terms of national security. Consequently, survival in an anarchic international system constitutes the primary objective. States seek to preserve and enhance their security by expanding their influence over other states, as security is ensured not only through maximizing control over resources and national power, but also by shaping how other states employ their power. This strategy is pursued either directly through the creation of asymmetric interdependence via bilateral relations, or indirectly within the framework of regional and international organizations and institutions (26).

Given the significance of changes in China's foreign policy, some analysts have divided it into three discursive periods, identifying the era of Xi Jinping as the beginning of a new discursive phase alongside the Mao and Deng Xiaoping periods (18). In essence, Xi Jinping's foreign policy remains a continuation of China's developmentalist foreign policy trajectory established after 1979; however, China's external behavior has departed from the flexible patterns of previous decades and has become marked by greater political and military assertiveness (2).

According to Robert Kagan, China currently faces no tangible external military threat and enjoys the most stable borders of its modern history. Consequently, Kagan adopts a skeptical view toward China's rising military expenditures (27). In this regard, data released by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute indicate that China's military spending ranks second globally in comparison with other countries (28).

Because China's development and its transformation into a major global power depend fundamentally on sustained economic growth, deeper engagement with the international system has become essential. In this context, in October 2012, Xi Jinping established the Department of International Economic Affairs within China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, whose primary responsibility is to coordinate with domestic institutions to expand international and regional economic cooperation (29).

Another significant initiative was the announcement of China's "new normal" in 2014, which refers to fundamental economic reforms, a substantial portion of which concern international economic engagement. These reforms aim to expand China's influence, increase outward foreign direct investment, and ultimately contribute to sustained economic growth (19).

International Political Economy (IPE)

International Political Economy, which since the 1970s has emerged as a distinct field of study within International Relations, represents an academic attempt to theorize profound transformations in global politics (14, 30). The nature of this field requires examining multi-dimensional issues that cannot be classified solely within the boundaries of pure economic theory or only within the framework of international politics; IPE focuses on the complex interaction between political power and global economic structures (15, 16).

In addressing the core domains of IPE, we can observe how domestic interests, political logics, and international financial structures mutually shape one another.

With respect to international trade, the principal challenge is that each country's trade policy is a function of conflicting interests among domestic stakeholders; for instance, importers typically prefer a low exchange rate, whereas exporters tend to favor a higher exchange rate (31). In practice, these conflicts lead to a more fundamental dilemma: fear of political dependence versus the economic benefits associated with free trade.

In this context, realists have consistently maintained that interdependence—especially when asymmetric—does not necessarily prevent the outbreak of war. Accordingly, they emphasize national economic self-sufficiency as a political priority, even at the cost of economic inefficiency (22, 26).

In the domain of international finance, understanding global monetary structures requires attention to the political interests of leading actors. The Bretton Woods system, established under U.S. leadership, is a prominent example of this linkage: the United States considered the stabilization of a liberal economic order essential to strengthening its political position. Yet when the continuation of this system was judged detrimental to the domestic political position of the Nixon administration in the early 1970s—largely due to current-account deficits and pressure on the U.S. dollar—the United States unilaterally withdrew from its international commitments and prioritized domestic considerations.

A focus on multinational corporations suggests that a central concern of contemporary IPE may be the tension between states and these transnational actors. Liberals highlight the growing role of multinational corporations and the weakening of states, whereas Marxist structuralist perspectives view their managers as a transnational class sustaining capitalism. By contrast, realists such as Cohen argue that state power remains decisive, and multinational corporations operate within the bounds of state sovereignty (30). For developing countries, multinational investment entails both opportunity and the threat of political dependence; in effect, development under such conditions unfolds within a context of asymmetric interdependence, where Northern (developed) countries often impose their development models on the South and make support conditional on political alignment (15).

Finally, the concept of hegemony—drawing on theorists such as Antonio Gramsci—is central. A hegemon is a dominant power that not only occupies a leading economic position, but also sets behavioral rules through military capability and ideological influence. The primary indicator of hegemony is legitimacy and credibility. According to hegemonic stability theory (a realist approach), durable global order depends on the existence of a stabilizing leader; this order is not merely economic, but a political configuration that motivates states to align with it for both economic and political reasons (15, 32).

Interdependence Theory

The interdependence approach emerged in the late 1970s to explain the growing interconnectedness of national economies. As trade deepened and investment and financial–banking relations expanded among advanced industrial countries, national economies were drawn closer together, contributing to the formation of a new global economic structure. This theory argues that all countries have faced an extensive range of disruptive economic factors, while possessing a diminished capacity to control such disruptions. Interdependence thus produced a paradox: on the one hand, it provided incentives for greater cooperation, and on the other hand, it encouraged competition (33).

The successful management of transnational economic relations through political cooperation constituted a core proposition within IPE's interdependence perspective. Yet behavior that enabled the empowerment of transnational companies often led national leaders to become disillusioned and to return their attention to the management of the national economy.

Interdependence-oriented IPE moved beyond classical liberal theory and, in light of technological transformations and changes in market mechanisms in the contemporary world, placed the economy under the broader rubric of politics. A group of interdependence theorists proposed a different configuration of politics and economics. Joseph Nye and Robert Keohane argued that economic change does not negate politics; rather, it produces a new form of politics. From a realist standpoint, while military power can dominate and control economic relations, the use of military force in issues other than direct threats to vital national interests is unnecessary and irrelevant. For example, U.S. nuclear capabilities have no meaningful relevance to its international financial policies. Power in an interdependent global economy is conceptually complex: influence varies across issue areas, such that a country that dominates international financial relations may be vulnerable in international trade. States' use of power is constrained in each domain by international regimes operating through explicit or implicit agreements (for example, the functional role of the WTO) (33).

Nye and Keohane also argued that interdependence generates a new source of power, often conceptualized as networks of asymmetric interdependence—meaning that interdependence reshapes politics. They sought to preserve and justify the management of the international economy through a more effective political theory framework. Although these arguments represented a major reworking of liberal IPE, they were less successful in explaining North–South relations. Dependency theory maintains that developing countries remain dependent on industrial countries and therefore remain underdeveloped and unable to acquire the capital and technology necessary for achieving economic independence (15, 16).

World-systems theory focuses on the “structure of domination and dependency” in the international system—a structure fused with capitalist predominance and exploitation. For proponents of this theory, the determining element in the international system is not states but social classes that struggle either to sustain capitalism or to transcend it. In other words, conflict between exploiters and the exploited reflects systemic imbalance, and the system will eventually undergo a fundamental transformation. Up to this point, this perspective does not differ substantially from Marx's theory of class struggle and its implications (14).

Postcolonial Theory

As Brown and Ainley note, our understanding of the world is wholly conditioned by how we define the world (34). In this vein, postcolonial studies introduce a new critical sensibility into International Relations and position themselves directly against mainstream paradigms such as realism and liberalism. Like other critical theories, postcolonialism directs its principal critique toward state-centrism, materialism, militarism, conflict-orientation, and reductionism. However, its key distinction lies in its point of departure: the recognition of the Western-centric character of mainstream theory. Postcolonial scholars argue that dominant interpretations take Western experience as their baseline.

Situated within post-structuralism and critical theory, this approach employs tools such as genealogy and archaeology to examine how discursive formations and subjectivities are produced (5, 35). Accordingly, it emphasizes two main functions: first, revealing monopolies and exclusions that validate the power and privilege of central epistemic systems; and second, revitalizing peripheral knowledges that have been marginalized by dominant modes of teaching and producing the human sciences (5).

This approach both analyzes the dispersion of local knowledges and examines the tactics used to instrumentalize or suppress these knowledges. A major point of distinction between postcolonialism and other critical approaches is its explicit political commitment: whereas critical theory, through deconstruction of the existing order, seeks to find voices for the marginalized, postcolonialism begins with an overt political commitment to subaltern groups, abandoning rigid boundary-making in favor of mutually constitutive relations (36). Ultimately, the final objective is to ground ideals in intersubjectivity and to create “intercultural agreement” based on a non-dominating and emancipatory interpretation of relations between self and other (35).

Critique of Critical Theory on the Mainstream

Critical theory, by challenging the status quo, makes it possible to articulate alternative readings of international politics. From a metatheoretical perspective, mainstream International Relations has presented structures and relationships that are inherently historical and changeable as universal and “natural,” whereas international politics is in fact embedded in the “unjust” social relations of capitalism (32). The core critique is that the mainstream treats the texture of international politics as fixed and regards the repetition of patterns as inevitable. Within the international system, it conflates distinction with mere difference and cannot account for qualitative differences between the economic order of the late nineteenth century and the post–World War II order. It largely points only to shifts from multipolarity to bipolarity, while the decisive difference lies in the hegemonic form of state–society relations across the two eras (33).

The emphasis of critical theory on the dynamism and mutability of structures opens the way for recognizing the constructed nature of the existing order and imagining its possible alternatives. This critique is rooted in the belief that established knowledge is produced by dominant power as an instrument for reproducing domination, and that no scientific theory is immune from critique (16). Critical theory seeks a just account of a desirable order—one in which all groups (including women and the entire Global South) can participate (16).

Postcolonialism, in its effort to deconstruct the existing order, bears clear resemblances to feminist theory. Both currents aim to critique the “male-centered” status quo in international relations. A key question posed by

postcolonial writers regarding the representation of Black subjects by White authors is whether the “subaltern” can truly possess a voice independent of dominant representation (37).

Critical Theory and Postcolonialism as Emancipatory Pathways in International Relations

The primary function of critical theory—like postcolonialism—is emancipatory: emancipation means freeing agency from structural constraints and expanding its capacity to shape society and the surrounding order. This foundational concern divides theories into two broad categories: problem-solving theories and critical theory. Problem-solving theories, operating with a positivist orientation, accept the existing order and its injustices and seek remedies within that order. By contrast, critical theory, oriented toward an “ideal” or “desirable” condition, is concerned with fundamental transformation and the attainment of emancipation; accordingly, it examines processes of change, critiques the status quo, and advances possible alternatives. This critical stance rests on the belief that “theory is always for someone and for some purpose” (16).

The dominance of mainstream theorizing in international relations—often reinforced by the hegemon’s interest in preserving the status quo—obstructs the emancipatory objective (38). Critical theory attempts to identify the presuppositions embedded in each society and to liberate individuals from unwarranted and unreflective acceptance of such views; this process is treated as a form of human emancipation because it releases us from grounding our actions in the “normalized” acceptance of those views (25).

The Central Role of Postcolonialism in Emancipation

Postcolonial theory also addresses the constraints that modern order has imposed on human emancipation. It prioritizes two principal axes of inquiry: first, reflection on the relationship between geographical reality and world history in the era of European colonialism and after its dissolution; and second, engagement with new forms of knowledge produced through creative resistance to colonial discourses. This approach views the world and its narratives through a distinct critical lens in order to foreground the possibility of emancipation from the prevailing order.

Postcolonialism, like critical theory, attends both to objective material reality and to the specific ways reality, culture, representation, and knowledge are construed (5). It treats the international system as a construct whose foundational feature is Westernization, showing that although colonialism as an imperial formation largely ended on the eve of World War I, the Westernization of the world has continued in postcolonial form.

Emancipation in postcolonialism becomes possible through resistance to Western and colonial discourses, and is realized through reflection on the world’s geographical and historical realities and through liberation achieved by awareness and understanding. This field, which initially developed as a branch of cultural studies connected to nationalism, ethnicity, and cultural identity, is now among the most flourishing areas of cultural studies and one of the most valuable achievements of cultural theory, because it focuses more than other theories on the human subject and sustained reflection on identity.

On the other hand, as noted in earlier discussions, postcolonialism, by recognizing the Western-centric character of mainstream International Relations and by maintaining an explicit political commitment to subaltern groups, pursues an objective similar to critical theory: the pursuit of intercultural agreement based on a non-dominating interpretation (34-36). This approach is also linked to feminism, since both currents seek to critique the “male-

centered” status quo and raise the fundamental question of whether the “subaltern” can genuinely possess an independent voice beyond dominant representations (37).

Dimensions of China’s Influence in Africa

In recent decades, China–Africa economic and political relations have expanded markedly. China, as one of the world’s largest markets, seeks natural resources, consumer markets, and political cooperation with African countries. It has made substantial investments in African infrastructure, mining, and industries. While these relations have created opportunities and challenges, they have also generated new forms of connectivity between China and the African continent.

In practice, Africa is widely regarded as one of China’s strategic spheres of influence. Chronic infrastructure weaknesses and slow development processes, alongside abundant natural resources and underexplored markets, have prompted Beijing to pay heightened attention to the region over recent decades. This trend has expanded political, economic, and cultural interactions between China and African states. Accordingly, Beijing’s influence in Africa can be understood across three interconnected levels: cultural, economic, and political–security.

1. Cultural–identity dimension

This dimension represents the most foundational—and simultaneously the most concealed—level of influence. Here, influence is achieved through the socialization of relations and their linkage with the target society’s identity and culture. Such influence deepens political and economic relations and facilitates the formation of durable dependencies between the two sides. Cultural influence thus functions as a soft instrument for consolidating China’s presence at the societal level and for legitimizing its role among African publics.

2. Economic dimension

This dimension of influence is more visible and is concentrated on the pursuit of economic benefits. Through investment, trade, lending, and the implementation of infrastructure projects in Africa, China seeks to strengthen economic ties and secure its long-term presence. Although economic relations inherently generate interdependence, China can utilize such interdependence in a purposive manner to expand political influence. In this framework, the economy becomes a vehicle for deepening the structural dependence of African countries on Beijing (7, 20).

3. Political–security dimension

This is the most explicit and traditional level of influence, directly linked to states’ fundamental objectives: increasing power and ensuring security and survival. China, through political cooperation, support within international institutions, and military training, seeks to consolidate its geopolitical position in Africa. However, the full realization of political and security objectives depends on cultural and economic support, since political power is unlikely to be durable without sustained social and economic influence (22, 26).

China’s strategy in Africa is thus an integrated configuration of cultural, economic, and political influence. Interacting with one another, these dimensions have produced a complex structure of dependency and cooperation, enabling China to evolve gradually from a primarily economic actor into a geopolitically consequential power on the African continent.

Soft Power as a Guarantee for Safeguarding China's Interests in Africa

China seeks extensive and durable cooperation with African countries in order to expand its influence and power across the continent and globally. As a result, it requires a mechanism that can help secure and stabilize that influence. That mechanism is soft power. Soft power consists of shaping others' preferences and choices through attraction rather than coercion. It plays a key role in the stability and durability of China's economic influence in Africa. China attempts, through soft power, to broaden the acceptance of its politico-economic model in this region of the world. One example is China's investment in the education sector of African countries. This investment has increased China's soft power to such an extent that French, which historically enjoyed strong popularity, is gradually being displaced by the Chinese language. This outcome reflects government support for Chinese-language education. For instance, Kenya—one of the world's major markets for Chinese goods and capital—encourages the teaching of this language in public schools.

European countries and the United States are losing their standing in Africa. These actors are widely resented among African peoples due to their long histories of colonialism, violence, slavery, and genocide. African governments that previously maintained relations with them largely out of fear now, with China's emergence, show less willingness to continue such subordination. By contrast, because China lacks a colonial record in Africa, its influence and acceptability among the public have expanded. At the same time, one should not overlook the role of Chinese messaging and media practices that portray China's actions as wholly benevolent in persuading public opinion (3, 5).

Analyzing the Transformation of China–Africa Relations: From Isolation to Economic Hegemony

China–Africa relations have passed through two distinct phases.

1. The Mao Era: Self-Reliance and Political Objectives
2. During the Mao era, China's objective was to achieve full self-reliance and independence from external powers. These policies led to China's relative isolation from the world. Politically, China secured the United Nations seat by supporting Third World countries, but economic programs in this phase largely stalled.
3. The Deng Xiaoping Era: Reforms and Entry into the Global Economy
4. With Deng Xiaoping's rise and the introduction of "Chinese socialism" (a model distinct from the Soviet experience), China opened its doors to the world. The first step was to attract foreign capital to compensate for developmental lag. Accordingly, until the mid-1990s, China's priority was capital attraction, and no major shift in relations with Africa was observed.
5. Second Step: Economic Extraction and Structural Influence (from 1995 onward)
6. After consolidating its economic position, China entered its second step—economic extraction from Africa. Factors that facilitated this included:

African countries' commitment: Some African states perceived their political survival as indebted to China's support; consequently, they became dependent on China for the provision of essential goods.

Explosive growth in trade: The volume of trade between China and Africa increased from USD 3 billion in 1995 to USD 143 billion in 2018, and rose to USD 254 billion in 2021. Accordingly, Beijing has become a major exporter of consumer, manufactured, and infrastructure-related products to Africa, while importing raw materials from the continent (4).

From 2009 onward, China has replaced older colonial powers such as France in key domains and has set a long-term objective of surpassing the European Union as Africa's largest trading partner by 2030. In this regard, China's future investments are expected to concentrate on natural resources, agriculture (given the importance of food security), and the utilization of Africa's young population as a labor force (39).

Although Beijing, in response to the "win-win deal" versus "debt trap" debate, claims that its relations with Africa are mutually beneficial and that it provides generous loans and project designs without structural-reform conditionalities (unlike other international institutions), many economists label this approach "debt-trap diplomacy." They argue that China's core strategy is not merely large-scale investment in Africa's critical infrastructure (roads, railways, ports, etc.), but rather a broader agenda aligned with Beijing's policies and the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative (1, 8).

Regarding the debt-trap claim, it can be argued that although Beijing invests heavily in African infrastructure amid high-profile rhetoric about generous assistance, its large-scale lending generates intense economic dependence on China. Where African states are unable to repay, repayment may be demanded through raw materials or through the transfer of operating and management rights over infrastructure assets.

Accordingly, China can ultimately use this leverage to impose preferred political and economic concessions on vulnerable governments. In this view, Beijing is pursuing a multi-layered strategy that, under the guise of development assistance, seeks to consolidate a peripheral economic-political order favorable to China—an outcome that critics interpret as a novel form of dependency (7, 8).

The Belt and Road Initiative

China's Belt and Road Initiative, launched in 2013, has transformed the country's geopolitical interactions with the world, particularly with Africa. The Republic of Djibouti, due to its vital position at the Bab el-Mandeb Strait (a route through which roughly 30% of global container traffic transits), has become one of the focal points of this initiative (9, 12).

By adopting a strategy of "strategic Sinophilia" (strategic alignment with China), the Djiboutian government has sought to transform the country into a "logistics hub" and the "Singapore of Africa," relying heavily on large-scale Chinese investments (9, 12).

Key projects include the Doraleh port, the Addis Ababa–Djibouti railway, and the establishment of China's first overseas military base in Djibouti. However, this rapid expansion of influence has generated social anxieties often framed as Sinophobia (fear of China) within Djiboutian society, concentrated around four main axes:

Debt-trap mechanism: fear of losing sovereignty over strategic national assets such as ports in the event of inability to repay large Chinese loans, analogous to the Hambantota port scenario in Sri Lanka.

China expands its influence through large loans for infrastructure development (railways, ports, airports) in African countries. These loans are often accompanied by the export of Chinese labor, machinery, and workers. Many African governments are unable to repay principal and interest on time, increasing their dependence on China. By accepting repayment risk, China uses this dependence for economic, political, and geopolitical gains. Moreover, loan contracts may include clauses that allow repayment through raw materials or the transfer of operational/management rights over infrastructure in cases of default. For example, reports about the alleged seizure of Uganda's Entebbe airport (denied by China) and the Hambantota port experience in Sri Lanka (2015) have amplified fears of similar actions by Beijing and fueled Sinophobia (8, 20).

Security and political sovereignty: concern that independence may be weakened due to China's direct military presence and economic dependence on a single actor (11, 12).

Unequal distribution of benefits: limited and low-quality job creation for local labor and the intensification of social inequalities (40).

Identity and cultural issues: the impact of the large-scale influx of Chinese workers and managers on local social fabric.

From the start of economic reforms and the introduction of "socialism with Chinese characteristics" by Deng Xiaoping and his associates in the late 1970s, relations between China and Africa underwent changes such that ...

Soft-power and cultural influence: alongside investment, China seeks to expand acceptance of its politico-economic model in Africa through soft power.

Expansion of Mandarin: the teaching of Mandarin has increased sharply across African countries.

Media investment: Beijing, by investing in media networks, seeks to suppress sensitive and oppositional content and to display its cultural policies and international positions in ways that justify the Chinese governance and development model (8).

Over the past two decades, China has pursued an ambitious strategic approach to shaping its relations with developing countries in the Global South, from Africa to Latin America. These interactions are no longer only about ideology or geography; they increasingly center on vast economic interests and Beijing's ambition to change the rules of the global game.

When Xi Jinping came to power, his objective was to transform China from a "rule follower" into a "rule setter." Accordingly, the Belt and Road Initiative—conceived as a vast network of physical infrastructure linking the Global South—became the principal instrument of this shift.

In practice, China's relationship with Africa began very visibly with an influx of financing; recall that by 2016 Angola had received USD 15 billion in oil-backed infrastructure loans from China. Yet with China's domestic economic slowdown, Beijing has been compelled to tighten its belt. This has created a major dilemma: China wants to protect its investments and advance its strategic influence, but simultaneously does not want to appear as a "debt predator." It wants to be the "brother" of the Global South, not a new colonial power.

A key point is that China typically prefers bilateral relations over multilateral negotiations and seeks distance from Western frameworks in order to retain full control over terms and conditions—especially because some projects involve large financial and environmental risks and have been implemented without transparent oversight.

The West has not remained passive and has responded with initiatives such as "Build Back Better World." Nonetheless, many developing countries, after the COVID-19 crisis, require practical and tangible assistance rather than diplomatic slogans.

Ultimately, the real test for Beijing is whether it can act beyond injecting money and acquiring political credit. As analyses suggest, massive spending does not automatically translate into public trust or "winning hearts and minds," and China still has a long path ahead in building genuine connective bridges (1).

Djibouti

Djibouti, a small state in the Horn of Africa, has high geopolitical significance due to its location at the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and the transit of roughly 30% of global container-ship traffic through this chokepoint (9). It is widely

viewed as a gateway to the African continent and a vital corridor for global trade, particularly for Middle Eastern oil flows (9).

This country is considered a gateway to Africa and a critical route for global trade, especially Middle Eastern oil. China's presence in Djibouti is not merely an economic investment or a purely security-driven move; rather, it constitutes part of a broader roadmap known as the Belt and Road Initiative (1, 9).

Beijing has extended its influence in Djibouti across the following domains:

Economic and infrastructural: Doraleh Port: China has invested in the construction and management of this major port, and control over it enables Beijing to monitor key commercial arteries (9).

Djibouti–Ethiopia Railway: Through a reported USD 4 billion investment, China built this railway to connect Ethiopia to Djibouti's ports, increasing the two countries' economic dependence on China (20).

Free Trade Zone: The largest free trade zone in Africa has been established with Chinese investment (13).

Military and security: China opened its first overseas military base in Djibouti in 2017, enabling greater oversight of maritime traffic. The base—reported to have a capacity of 10,000 personnel—was established for counter-piracy operations and the protection of China's economic interests (10, 11). Beijing also cooperates with Djibouti in areas such as security information exchange, training of military and security forces, military communications, and the production and supply of defense equipment (11).

Debt and diplomacy: Djibouti's debt to China has reportedly exceeded USD 1.5 billion and reached around 70% of its GDP. This situation has intensified concerns about a "debt trap," meaning that China could exploit Djibouti's inability to repay loans in order to extract additional strategic concessions (7, 8).

Political and diplomatic influence: Through investment and financial assistance, China has gained substantial political influence in Djibouti, and Djibouti has repeatedly supported China's positions within international institutions (12).

In any case, Beijing's influence—alongside benefits such as investment and job creation—has also generated disadvantages, including the erosion of economic sovereignty and long-term dependency. At the same time, this influence helps China secure a strategic platform for expanding its reach, increasing the security of energy and goods supply lines, and strengthening its competitive position vis-à-vis the United States in Africa (12, 13).

Sinophobia and Sinophilia

Sinophilia (pro-China sentiment): a set of positive views that interpret cooperation with China as an opportunity for development, investment, and an enhanced international role for Djibouti.

Sinophobia (fear/hostility toward China): a set of concerns and anxieties regarding China's economic and strategic penetration, typically revolving around "debt-trap" narratives, sovereignty loss, and social and environmental consequences.

In practice, the trajectory, historical background, and enabling conditions for these two phenomena can be examined across the following periods:

Period (1991–2000): After the civil war (1991–1994), Djibouti faced severe developmental challenges, including poverty, unemployment, and shortages of basic infrastructure. In this period, relations with China were limited and largely confined to diplomatic exchanges and small-scale assistance. Djibouti's primary focus remained on traditional partners such as France and on receiving support from Western financial institutions (9, 12). At this stage, neither Sinophilia nor Sinophobia had taken on a clear form, because China's presence remained marginal.

The era of Sinophilia; period (2000–2015): This period coincided with the rise of Sinophilia as the dominant paradigm. It witnessed a fundamental shift in Beijing–Djibouti bilateral relations. Several factors contributed to the formation and consolidation of a strong Sinophilic discourse. China emerged as a principal architect and investor in Djibouti's infrastructure, and Chinese contractors implemented key projects such as the Djibouti–Addis Ababa railway, the Doraleh multipurpose terminal, and the Djibouti free trade zone (9, 41). These tangible projects formed the core of the Sinophilia discourse. The Djiboutian government and aligned media repeatedly emphasized that China was helping modernize the country without strict political conditionalities (in contrast to Western institutions).

At the same time, Beijing consolidated its strategic presence in Djibouti through an approach that leveraged infrastructure platforms. China not only invested in ports but also established its first overseas military base in Djibouti in 2017. The Djiboutian government framed this presence as a factor contributing to regional stability and security and as a source of additional revenue (land rent) (10, 11).

South–South discourse and non-interference: By emphasizing “South–South cooperation” and the principle of “non-interference in internal affairs,” China presented itself as a reliable partner for Djibouti. This posture stood in direct contrast to Western partners' policies, which were often conditioned on improvements in human rights and governance. Consequently, the Chinese model became highly attractive to the Djiboutian state and reinforced official-level Sinophilia (3).

The gradual emergence of Sinophobia (2015–2023): As China's presence intensified and Djibouti's borrowing increased, a critical discourse began to take shape. This discourse was promoted mainly by international actors, China's geopolitical competitors, and to some extent by domestic and international critics.

Debt trap and economic dependence: The central axis of Sinophobia in Djibouti is debt and economic dependence. Critics argue that the level of debt weakens Djibouti's economic sovereignty and may lead to the loss of strategic assets (such as ports) in the event of repayment difficulties—an outcome framed as a “debt trap” (7, 8).

Geopolitical competition and external pressures: Countries such as the United States, France, and Japan—each with military facilities in Djibouti—have voiced concerns about China's growing influence. By warning about Beijing's strategic objectives, they have sought to advance a Sinophobia narrative among Djiboutian elites (11, 21).

Social and environmental issues: Although less prominent, criticisms have also been raised regarding local labor conditions in Chinese projects, limited technology transfer, and environmental impacts associated with large-scale construction initiatives. Such criticisms are often articulated by local and international civil society organizations (40).

Overall, based on the foregoing, Sinophilia—because of the tangible benefits of cooperation with China (infrastructure, employment, and revenue from base leases)—remains the dominant and official discourse in Djibouti, and the Djiboutian state has strategically leveraged great-power competition to maximize its interests (12).

As for Sinophobia, it constitutes a secondary but growing discourse. It has not become institutionalized at the official state level, yet it is increasingly visible in international media narratives, economic reporting, and rival diplomatic circles. The continued salience of this discourse may pressure the Djiboutian government to act more cautiously in debt negotiations with China and in managing relations with other powers. In other words, Djibouti is caught in a “China dilemma”: on the one hand, it depends on Chinese capital and expertise to realize its development ambitions; on the other hand, it is concerned about the long-term consequences of this rising dependency (12, 20).

From 1991 to 2023, Djibouti–China relations have traveled a long path from relative indifference to a deep strategic partnership. Along this path, a strong Sinophilia paradigm emerged, grounded in the delivery of immediate development benefits and the rhetoric of respect for Djibouti’s sovereignty, and this paradigm continues to be maintained by the Djiboutian state (3, 12). However, from the second half of the 2010s onward, Sinophobia has surfaced as a critical voice. Although it has not displaced Sinophilia as the dominant discourse, it has nevertheless made the bilateral relationship more complex by foregrounding financial, economic, and geopolitical risks (7, 21).

For example, China’s expanding role in Africa’s digital ecosystem is a double-edged sword. While Huawei and other Chinese firms have contributed to Africa’s telecommunications and digital transformation, these investments also increase Beijing’s potential influence over data security, cyber sovereignty, and information flows. In practice, such dynamics could enable the use of networks for surveillance, intelligence collection, or political leverage. Likewise, Chinese-managed ports in Djibouti may serve both commercial and military purposes. They can potentially provide Beijing with a strategic position along key maritime corridors such as the Red Sea, enabling China—during periods of conflict—to restrict access to these ports or use them to expand naval presence, in ways that critics compare (by analogy) to China’s behavior in the South China Sea (11, 21).

Conclusion

The case of Djibouti over the period 1991–2023 demonstrates that Sinophilia and Sinophobia are not opposing phenomena, but rather two sides of the same coin, produced by the logic of a high-risk yet calculated development strategy.

With a realist understanding of its primary asset—geography—the Djiboutian state deliberately sought to attract Chinese capital to achieve an infrastructural leap and to generate revenue through leasing land for a foreign military base. In the short term, this form of state-led Sinophilia appears to have achieved a degree of success: Djibouti has emerged as a regional logistics hub and, by hosting all rival powers, has elevated its diplomatic standing. However, this success has come at the cost of deep and asymmetric security—economic dependence on China. Massive debt (approximately 70% of GDP), Beijing’s direct military presence, and Chinese control over vital projects such as the Doraleh port and the railway to Ethiopia have created concrete conditions for the growth of Sinophobia. These concerns, present at various levels of society, largely revolve around fears of “losing sovereignty in exchange for loans.”

Compared with other African countries, Djibouti’s primary lesson is a warning against over-specialization in a rent-based economy. While countries such as Ethiopia or Rwanda have used cooperation with China to establish productive and industrial foundations (for example, in electric vehicle manufacturing or mineral processing), Djibouti’s model generates a specific form of vulnerability. The case shows that African agency, although it may succeed in balancing great powers, remains fragile in the absence of a long-term strategy for economic diversification and genuine local participation in the benefits of development. Perhaps by recognizing and exploiting its “geographical capital,” the Djiboutian state seeks to transform itself into a “logistics hub” and the “Singapore of Africa.” In reality, Djibouti’s development model reminds us that in an era of great-power competition, geopolitics can be both a blessing and a curse.

In any case, the dynamics of Sinophilia and Sinophobia in Africa cannot be explained solely by analyzing China’s intentions or the constraints of the international system. As the Djibouti case illustrates, these dynamics primarily reflect domestic development choices, the quality of governance, and the diplomatic skill of host countries.

Ultimately, the future of Africa–China relations and the balance between Sinophilia and Sinophobia will depend largely on African countries' ability to steer this cooperation toward more inclusive, transparent, and higher value-added models. The distinction between these two phenomena therefore lies in strategic foresight, collective bargaining power, and sound domestic governance.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

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The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

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Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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