African Journal of Economics and Sustainable Development
ISSN: 2689-5080
Volume 9, Issue 3, 2026 (pp. 44-56)

AFRO-SINO RELATIONS AND ITS IMPACT ON THE INTEGRATION AND DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA: A CASE STUDY OF GHANA.

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Cite this article:

Samuel Seidu Mahama, Adam Bawa Yussif, Jacob Ibrahim Abudu, Smith Wayo Mahama (2026), Afro-Sino Relations and Its Impact on the Integration and Development in Africa: A Case Study of Ghana. African Journal of Economics and Sustainable Development 9(3), 44-56. DOI: 10.52589/AJESD-7QX5RT0E

Manuscript History

Received: 6 Mar 2026

Accepted: 8 Apr 2026

Published: 25 Jun 2026

ABSTRACT: *This article critically examines the nascent Ghana–China bilateral relations and their implications for Africa's regional integration and development. Employing a constructivist and interpretivist paradigms-influenced exploratory qualitative research design, the research is grounded in semi-structured interviews with purposively selected policy actors and experts recruited from leading ministries and civil society bodies. Through thematic analysis, the study establishes that while China's emergence in Ghana has resulted in the development of infrastructure, learning processes, and flows of social commerce, all these are inclusive of structural imbalances, degradation of the environment, elite capture, and undermining of democratic sovereignty. The respondents identified "One China Policy" as a marker of conditionality of soft power, and were most concerned with clandestine loan agreements, devastating devastation of local production by subsidized exports, and Chinese intrusion into political funding. Additionally, the study establishes that China's bilateral approach hinders the collective integration processes of Africa, i.e., those pursued through AfCFTA and ECOWAS, by promoting fragmentation and weakening policy coherence at the regional level. Drawing on the theory of economic integration and dependency criticism, the research concludes by calling on African nations, and in particular Ghana, to reassess their foreign policy to make it appealing to long-term regional ambitions. It suggests open, transparent, and strategically bargained relationships that deepen continental solidarity and sustainable development.*

KEYWORDS: Afro-Sino, Regionalism, Integration, Development.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Regionalism and bilateralism have long dominated debates on economic integration, both in academic literature and in broader public discourse, and their relevance has only grown alongside globalisation. Regional integration in Africa has deep roots, stretching back to the 1960s (Maddox, 2016), though the current era is distinct in that genuinely African-led initiatives, shaped by African leaders with African objectives, have come to the fore. Any serious discussion of this terrain must also reckon with how Western powers and China have used regional integration and bilateral arrangements to pursue their own economic and political interests on the continent.

Ghana and the People's Republic of China established formal diplomatic ties in 1960. The relationship developed steadily, creating the conditions for close personal engagement between political leaders, most notably during the tenures of Nkrumah and Premier Zhou Enlai. Subsequent high-level visits, including President Kufuor's trip to China in 2002 and President Hu's visit to Ghana in 2003, consolidated the bilateral relationship further. What remains less settled is whether Ghana has actually benefited from this engagement, and whether the relationship has had any meaningful bearing on regional integration in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA).

Africa's history of coup d'états produced considerable political instability and eroded trust among states, many of which were perceived as beholden to former colonial powers. China entered this environment through a diplomatic approach built around soft power, and has since become a significant actor in African affairs. The relationship, commonly referred to as Afro-Sino ties, has attracted growing scholarly attention in International Relations and Diplomacy, and has generated substantive questions about its consequences for the continent. Given China's rise as a global economic power, the relationship warrants careful evaluation, not simply in terms of its symbolic dimensions but in terms of its concrete effects on African nations.

Ghana has extended considerable political support to China over the decades. Nkrumah backed the PRC's reinstatement to the United Nations in the 1960s and sided with China during its territorial dispute with India in 1962. The 2006 Beijing Summit and Third Ministerial Conference of FOCAC further anchored China's partnerships across Sub-Saharan Africa, Ghana included. The two countries have signed cooperation agreements across several sectors, with Ghana's continued endorsement of the One China Policy, which rejects Taiwan's status as an independent state, forming the political basis of all bilateral cooperation. Beyond this, both governments have agreed to coordinate within multilateral institutions such as the United Nations and the WTO, and China has expressed support for the African Union and NEPAD as frameworks for African development.

In practical terms, cooperation has extended to agriculture, trade, investment, and infrastructure. Agricultural exchanges have covered irrigation, agro-processing, and technology transfer. On the investment side, both governments have committed to promoting bilateral opportunities, and the Chinese government has encouraged its banks to contribute to the China-Africa Development Fund, intended to support Chinese enterprises investing in African projects. Trade agreements have been concluded with the stated aim of expanding and balancing commerce between the two countries, including widening access for African goods in Chinese markets. Infrastructure remains perhaps the most visible area of partnership, with

Article DOI: 10.52589/AJESD-7QX5RT0E
DOI URL: https://doi.org/10.52589/AJESD-7QX5RT0E

Chinese firms involved in the construction of roads, housing, and, more recently, a hydropower facility.

Aid and debt relief have also featured prominently in the relationship. China has become a significant development partner for Ghana, providing loans, grants, and technical assistance. Ghana was among the beneficiaries of China's 2006 commitment to increase development assistance to African countries by 2009. A substantial share of this aid has gone toward infrastructure, including a US$2 billion barter arrangement tied to road construction. In 2007, China agreed to cancel $25 million of Ghanaian debt accumulated since 1985.

The literature on integration through regionalism and bilateralism in Africa remains contested (Bischoff, 2021). Some studies find positive effects (Bischoff, 2021; Gondwe, 2021; Fanta, 2021), while others document adverse outcomes (Igwe et al., 2021; Mulindwa, 2020). These inconsistencies, set against the backdrop of China's growing trade presence in Africa, make the subject a productive area for further inquiry.

Objectives of the Study

1. Understanding the Nature and Dynamics of Ghana–China Bilateral Relations
2. Examine the Perceived Benefits of China's Presence in Ghana
3. Assessing the Impact of the Ghana–China Relationship on Africa's Integration Agenda
4. Unveiling Challenges to Africa's Integration Based on Ghana–China Relations

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Several scholars (Braun et al., 2024; Butorina & Borko, 2022) claim that economic integration theory consists of two stages, both of which tackle the political and economic aspects of contemporary. The first stage involves traditional economic integration frameworks, which describe the potential advantages of integration and are often alluded to as static analysis. The second phase consists of the new economic integration perspectives that emerge in response to changing economic situations and trade. This is often referred to as dynamic model of economic relations (Brida et al 2020). Under static economic integration, J. Viner argues in his theory of economic integration that trade creation raises a country's welfare while trade diversion undermines it (Ejones, 2020). Viner's theory basically suggests that countries would be motivated to engage in integration if the benefits outweigh the costs or if integration brings about more trade creation than trade diversion. The inability of the Viner model to explain the sufficiency of trade creation under static analysis incited researchers such as Bella Balassa to present dynamic effects analysis. This is a modern tool for analyzing the effects of economic integration on welfare. Balassa refers to the main dynamic effects of integration: "large-scale economies, technological change, as well as the impact of integration on market structure and competition, productivity growth, risk, and uncertainty" (Balassa, 1961, p. 117). Schiff and Winters (1998) describe the dynamic effects of economic integration as anything that influences the cost of medium and long-term economic growth of countries participating in the integration agreement. The dynamic paradigm, which most researchers refer to as new regionalism, is thus characterized by dynamic effects such as greater competition, capital flow,

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economies of scale, transfer of technology, and increased productivity. The theoretical dimension of integration predicts the possibility of empirical contradictions or inconsistencies, making it highly imperative to consider its reassessment.

Empirical Review of Literature

Scholarship on China's engagement with Africa has grown rapidly over the past two decades. Empirical studies have mapped the scope, forms, and consequences of Afro-Sino relations across political, economic, and development dimensions, producing a body of evidence that is both substantial and contested. The findings range from infrastructure-led growth and South-South solidarity on one hand, to environmental degradation, policy dependency, and democratic vulnerability on the other. This paper draws on the most relevant empirical evidence for the Ghanaian context and situates it within the broader continental debate on sovereignty and regional integration.

One of the more consistent findings in the literature is that Chinese involvement has expanded infrastructure development and increased government spending capacity. Chinese firms have built roads, hospitals, airports, power plants, and government buildings across Ethiopia, Kenya, Zambia, and Ghana (Brautigam, 2009; Corkin, 2011; Mohan & Lampert, 2013). In Ghana specifically, Aidoo and Hess (2015) document the role of Chinese development financing in filling investment gaps that traditional donors have left behind. Debrah and Asante (2019) similarly found that China's concessional lending and project support generated temporary employment, improved connectivity, and enhanced the government's capacity to deliver basic services.

Yet the trade dimension tells a more complicated story. China is now Africa's largest trading partner, but the structure of that trade reproduces familiar asymmetries. Africa exports raw materials while importing manufactured goods, a pattern that several scholars have linked to entrenched trade dependency (Kaplinsky & Morris, 2009). In Ghana, the influx of Chinese textiles, electronics, and construction materials has undercut local manufacturers, contributing to factory closures, informalization of the economy, and market saturation (Odoom, 2016). Aryeetey and Baah-Boateng (2017) add that despite generating capital inflows, Chinese investments have largely failed to produce backward linkages or meaningful technology transfer.

Similar concerns appear in the literature on Chinese Special Economic Zones in Africa. Farole and Mberg (2014) argue that while SEZs can, under the right conditions, catalyse industrialisation, most Chinese-backed zones in Africa operate as enclave economies with weak connections to broader national industrial strategies. A study of Chinese-led industrial parks in Ghana by Obeng-Odoom (2021) found that these operations rely predominantly on foreign labour, machinery, and inputs, leaving local actors with limited participation in value chains.

The political dimensions of Sino-African relations have also attracted empirical attention, particularly around questions of sovereignty, policy autonomy, and governance. Large (2008) and Alden and Large (2013) argue that China's non-interference principle gives African governments access to capital and political support without the governance conditionalities attached to Western aid, which can reinforce regime stability in the short term but may also entrench authoritarian tendencies and weaken democratic accountability over time.

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In Ghana, there is evidence that China's growing presence is quietly reshaping the political landscape. Arthur (2017) documents cases in which Chinese actors have covertly funded electoral campaigns and party finances, opening channels for policy capture. Agomor (2015) highlights how Chinese contracts have frequently been concluded without parliamentary oversight or transparent procurement processes, creating conditions for elite rent-seeking and clientelism. These findings raise genuine questions about how external bilateral ties interact with democratic consolidation, particularly in hybrid political systems.

With the advent of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), researchers have begun examining how bilateral relationships with China shape continental integration efforts. Taylor (2016) and Tull (2021) argue that China's state-driven bilateralism undermines pan-African institutional cohesion. A comparative analysis of East and West African regional blocs by Taylor and Olayiwola (2021) found that countries with deep bilateral ties to China tend to prioritise domestic infrastructure deals over regional trade corridors, resulting in fragmented policy implementation and reduced intra-African cooperation.

Empirical work focused specifically on Ghana remains limited but is growing. Adusei (2022) argues that Ghana's relationship with China has been simultaneously enabling and constraining. Chinese investment in transport infrastructure has positioned Ghana as a logistical hub for West Africa, but Chinese market dominance and the absence of coordination with regional industrial policy risk undermining AfCFTA's goals of trade liberalisation and industrial integration. These findings sit within a wider body of work questioning whether donor-led bilateral development approaches serve or subvert multilateral regional agendas.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

This study adopted a qualitative exploratory design grounded in constructivist and interpretivist assumptions. This approach was suited to the subject matter because Ghana-China bilateral relations and their implications for African integration involve contested political and economic terrain where stakeholder perceptions, institutional positions, and interpretive meanings matter as much as measurable outcomes. Rather than seeking generalisable findings, the study aimed to understand how key actors make sense of the relationship and its consequences, working with participants within their normal institutional and professional contexts.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with a purposively selected sample of twenty key informants. The sample size was determined by the principle of informational adequacy: interviews continued until no substantively new themes emerged, consistent with the logic of purposive sampling in elite interview research (Kvale, 2007; Robinson, 2014). Participants were drawn from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Regional Integration, the Ministry of Trade and Industry, academia, civil society, and the policy analysis community. Selection criteria prioritised depth of experience with Ghana-China relations, institutional proximity to regional integration processes, and relevance to the theoretical concerns of the study.

Interview data were analysed thematically using NVivo 11. Transcripts were read repeatedly and coded inductively from participants' own accounts, with codes subsequently organised into

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thematic clusters aligned with the study's objectives. This dual movement between inductive and deductive reasoning allowed the analysis to remain grounded in participants' perspectives while maintaining dialogue with established theoretical frameworks, including dependency theory, soft power, and regional integration policy. Reflexivity and memo-writing were practised throughout to keep interpretation both transparent and critically aware.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study examined the nature, implications, and complexities of Ghana-China bilateral relations within the broader context of Africa's political and economic integration. Drawing on elite interview data and engaging primarily with dependency theory, soft power, and economic integration theory (Balassa, 2013), the findings offer a textured and at times ambivalent account of Ghana's engagement with China. The relationship that emerges from the data is not reducible to a simple story of benefit or exploitation. It is shaped by genuine opportunity alongside structural vulnerability, cooperative intent alongside asymmetric outcomes, and pragmatic statecraft alongside real political risk.

Nature and Dynamics of Ghana–China Bilateral Relations

The public rhetoric of win-win cooperation that frames Ghana-China relations obscures a more contested and uneven reality. Official statements, diplomatic exchanges, and summit-level encounters consistently invoke the language of mutual benefit and South-South solidarity, projecting an image of two sovereign partners engaging on equal terms. The findings of this study, alongside a growing critical literature, suggest otherwise. Ghana's engagement with China takes place within a broader geopolitical and economic structure in which the weight of Beijing is considerable, and where diplomatic cordiality often serves as a surface for more calculated exchange.

Few illustrations of this imbalance are as telling as Ghana's consistent endorsement of the One China Policy. Officials tend to present this as a routine diplomatic position, but the majority of interviewees understood it differently, as a symbolic concession traded for economic access rather than an expression of genuine ideological alignment. One interviewee put it directly: "Beijing wants Ghana to disregard Taiwan. But honestly, what do we stand to gain by doing that? It's actually a surrender, not diplomacy." This reading aligns with Nye's (2004) account of soft power conditionality, in which powerful states use attraction, persuasion, and financial inducement to secure the compliance of weaker ones without resorting to direct coercion. For Ghana, endorsing the One China Policy is less a foreign policy position than a form of diplomatic currency, one that purchases loans, infrastructure, and political goodwill.

The consequences of this soft power dynamic, however, extend well beyond symbolic politics. China's economic presence in Ghana is broad and deeply embedded. Chinese firms operate across construction, energy, retail, and telecommunications, often under state-backed agreements with limited transparency or public accountability. Interviewees acknowledged the infrastructural returns of Chinese financing but were equally candid about the dependency this creates. The roads, hospitals, and power stations that serve as visible markers of the partnership are frequently funded through loan arrangements that bypass parliamentary scrutiny, with terms that carry long-term implications for Ghana's fiscal autonomy.

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More troubling still are the environmental consequences of the partnership in resource-rich areas. Chinese investment in extractive sectors has been linked to mining operations that breach environmental regulations, damage ecosystems, and displace communities. One respondent described the situation in stark terms: "They come in the name of development but leave behind poisoned rivers and dying forests. If this continues, we'll soon be importing drinking water." These accounts sit within a broader scholarly debate on neo-extractive South-South relations (Carmody, 2011; Tull, 2006), which argues that rising powers like China are reproducing the extractive logic of earlier Western engagement with Africa, treating resource-rich states as sites of accumulation rather than genuine development partners. Where regulatory frameworks are weak and political elites stand to gain from short-term arrangements, environmental stewardship and long-term sustainability tend to lose out.

Employment patterns in Chinese-led projects have generated further grievance. Research consistently shows that Chinese firms prefer to bring workers from China rather than hire locally, limiting job creation and foreclosing opportunities for skills transfer (Mohan & Lampert, 2013; Obeng-Odoom, 2021). The effect is a sense of exclusion that sits uneasily alongside the developmental justifications offered for these projects. As one informant put it: "They bring their own engineers, their own cooks, even their own drivers. We are only hired to dig and carry."

Political concerns compound these economic and environmental ones. Allegations of Chinese involvement in campaign financing, covert lobbying, and elite capture point to a troubling intersection of economic influence and political patronage. When external actors can shape domestic policy through informal channels, democratic institutions are weakened and national sovereignty is further eroded. For Ghana, and for Africa more broadly, this poses a particular challenge at a moment when continental institutions like the AfCFTA and the African Union depend on coherent, transparent, and nationally owned policy agendas.

There is also a structural geopolitical dimension worth noting. China's preference for bilateral arrangements, rather than the multilateral frameworks favoured by traditional Western donors, encourages competition among African states for Beijing's attention. This dynamic fragments the momentum for continental integration and dilutes Africa's collective leverage in international negotiations. Ghana finds itself in a paradoxical position: it hosts the AfCFTA Secretariat and has long been a standard-bearer for pan-African thinking, yet its bilateral entanglements with China risk pulling in the opposite direction.

Perceived Benefits of China's Presence in Ghana

Despite the criticisms that surround Ghana's deepening engagement with China, a significant number of respondents in this study pointed to concrete socio-economic gains that the bilateral relationship has produced. Education, infrastructure, and trade were consistently identified as areas where Chinese involvement has delivered tangible returns. Participants were clear that these gains have contributed to Ghana's national development, even as they acknowledged the broader context of strategic dependency and unequal power relations in which they occur.

Education was the first advantage raised, and more specifically, access to scholarships and study exchanges facilitated by the Chinese government. Several respondents described how Ghanaian students who would otherwise have had no realistic prospect of studying abroad had received government-sponsored places at Chinese universities. As one put it: "Most of my

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friends went to China to study under government scholarships. It was something that was not there before."

This sits within China's wider soft power strategy in Africa, which combines educational diplomacy, cultural cooperation, and a non-interference posture (King, 2013; Li, 2018). Investment in human capital does more than deepen bilateral ties in the immediate term. It cultivates, over time, an African professional class educated within Chinese institutions and familiar with Chinese frameworks of governance and cooperation. The influence is gradual rather than overt, but it positions China not merely as a financier but as a shaper of knowledge and a long-term influence on future African leadership.

Infrastructure was the second area respondents identified, and Chinese contributions here were described as both visible and consequential. Roads, bridges, public facilities, and energy projects funded or constructed by Chinese firms were repeatedly cited as meaningful additions to Ghana's physical development. Relative to some Western donors, whose assistance tends to come heavily conditioned and bureaucratically slow, Chinese intervention was generally seen as faster and more project-focused. Yet this perception was not uncomplicated. As one respondent observed: "Yes, the roads are good. But we never know what the conditions of the deals are. One day we wake up and find we have traded our future."

This tension runs through much of the evidence. The infrastructure is real and appreciated, but it is typically financed through concessional loans whose terms are not disclosed publicly, raising legitimate concerns about transparency, debt sustainability, and the burdens being passed to future generations. This pattern reflects what Brautigam (2009) identifies as a defining feature of Chinese development assistance, where speed of delivery and project execution take precedence over institutional accountability. For many Ghanaian stakeholders, the result is a dual experience: gratitude for visible development and unease about costs that remain largely hidden.

Trade and the effects of Chinese imports on domestic industry represented a third, and arguably more structurally significant, area of concern. Several interviewees pointed to the sheer volume of low-cost Chinese goods in Ghanaian markets and linked their prevalence directly to the decline of local manufacturing. One respondent captured the frustration bluntly: "Our welders, tailors, even traders can't cope."

This reflects a dynamic central to dependency theory, whereby foreign-controlled consumption patterns suppress indigenous industrialisation and lock peripheral economies into the role of consumer rather than producer (Rodney, 1972; Ake, 1996). The short-term appeal of cheap imports for consumers does not offset the longer-term consequences: local producers find it increasingly difficult to compete, expand, or survive, and the conditions for endogenous growth and domestic job creation steadily erode.

The reach of Chinese imports across textiles, electronics, and machinery has also reshaped consumer preferences, supply chains, and informal trading networks. While greater product variety may benefit lower-income households in the short run, the underlying dynamic is one of consumption-led dependency that raises questions about long-term sustainability. As Chinese firms extend their presence into wholesale and retail sectors, the space available to Ghanaian entrepreneurs within the domestic economy continues to narrow.

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Impact of the Ghana–China Relationship on Africa's Integration Agenda

The study also sought to understand how Ghana's bilateral relationship with China intersects with Africa's broader aspirations for continental integration. The tension between bilateralism and the pan-African values underpinning initiatives like the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) surfaced repeatedly across interviews. Most respondents expressed concern that China's trade relationship with Ghana, concentrated heavily in consumer goods, is distorting the continent's industrialisation agenda. As one interviewee put it: "When our African markets are flooded with Chinese products, then what is African production today? On what grounds do we construct AfCFTA?"

Beyond trade, several respondents pointed to China's preference for bilateral engagement as a structural obstacle to continental solidarity. By negotiating state by state rather than through multilateral frameworks, China's approach encourages fragmentation at precisely the moment when African countries need to act collectively. "Every country is negotiating on its own account, but union implies we must use one voice," one respondent observed. This concern aligns with Taylor's (2016) argument that China's Africa policy is fundamentally bilateral and country-specific in its orientation, which sits uneasily with pan-African institution-building.

Political interference emerged as a further dimension of the problem. A number of participants alleged that Chinese business interests fund political parties in Ghana, creating conditions in which policy can be steered away from national and regional priorities toward the preferences of external actors. One respondent described the logic starkly: "They sponsor both the big parties. This way, whoever gets into office, their interests are guaranteed. What does that do to African solidarity, though?" Such accounts reinforce the case for stronger institutional safeguards against external actors shaping domestic political outcomes in ways that compromise democratic governance and collective continental bargaining.

Challenges to African Integration Arising from Ghana-China Relations

The study's final objective examined the systemic constraints that the Ghana-China relationship may impose on African integration more broadly. Interviewees identified a cluster of interconnected concerns: opaque loan agreements, weakening democratic accountability, environmental degradation, and the fragmentation of regional policy coherence.

Transparency in bilateral arrangements was the most frequently raised issue. "We do not know what our leaders are signing," one respondent said, "and that is not only a threat to Ghana but to the entire region." The absence of parliamentary oversight and public disclosure around the terms of Chinese-funded agreements was seen not merely as a domestic governance failure but as a regional vulnerability, given how much continental integration depends on harmonised and accountable policy environments.

Environmental degradation linked to Chinese-backed extractive activity was a second major concern, particularly among respondents from rural areas. "They bring machines, chemicals, even their own workers. We are left with polluted rivers and nothing to show." This pattern has been described in the literature as enclave capitalism, in which external actors control economic enclaves that operate independently of national development strategy and regional economic interest (Mohan & Lampert, 2013). The wealth generated circulates outward rather than feeding into local or continental development.

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Respondents also raised concerns about the erosion of democratic accountability. China's engagement approach, which does not attach governance conditionalities to its financing, was seen by some as creating space for elite rent-seeking and weakening state accountability mechanisms. "They don't question. That is why leaders adore them," one respondent remarked. The observation points to a genuine tension between the short-term appeal of unconditional financing and the longer-term institutional costs of governance without scrutiny.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined Ghana-China bilateral relations and their implications for African integration, drawing on elite interviews and engaging with dependency theory, soft power, and regional integration frameworks. What emerges is a relationship that resists simple characterisation. The tangible gains, including scholarships, infrastructure, and expanded trade, are real and acknowledged by respondents. But they sit alongside structural costs: opaque loan agreements, displacement of local industry, environmental degradation, allegations of political interference, and a bilateral logic that fragments rather than supports continental integration efforts.

Ghana's position as host of the AfCFTA Secretariat makes these tensions especially pointed. The country is simultaneously a standard-bearer for pan-African integration and a state whose bilateral entanglements risk pulling against the very institutional solidarity that integration requires. Resolving this tension demands greater transparency in bilateral agreements, stronger parliamentary oversight, and a more deliberate effort to align Chinese engagement with domestic industrial policy and regional trade objectives.

The Ghanaian case carries lessons beyond its borders. Across Sub-Saharan Africa, governments are navigating the same difficult balance between the immediate appeal of Chinese financing and the longer-term imperatives of sovereign and regionally coherent development. What this study contributes is a grounded account of where that balance currently stands and what is at stake if it is not more carefully managed. Moving from asymmetric dependence to strategic agency will require not just better negotiation with China, but stronger institutions, more informed public deliberation, and genuine solidarity among African states.

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