

Shinn, D. H., & Eisenman, J.

China's Relations with Africa: A New Era of Strategic Engagement

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1. Introduction

The monograph *China's Relations with Africa: A New Era of Strategic Engagement* represents one of the most comprehensive contemporary syntheses of China-Africa relations, with a particular focus on their political, security, and strategic dimensions. The authors proceed from the premise that over the past decade Africa has shifted from a peripheral region of Chinese foreign policy to an integral component of China's geostrategy, especially in the context of the Xi Jinping era and the growing emphasis on relations with the so-called Global South (Shinn & Eisenman, 2023, ch. 1, pp. 1-3).

Building on their long-term research agenda, the authors further develop their analytical approach to China-Africa relations by systematically integrating diplomatic, security, party-to-party,

and institutional forms of engagement into a coherent framework of 'China-Africa strategic partnership'. They argue that China's presence in Africa is structured as a multi-level network of bilateral, regional, and global linkages aimed at advancing China's strategic interests, most notably regime stability, economic security, and the enhancement of China's international standing, while simultaneously reinforcing a Sinocentric conception of international order (Shinn & Eisenman, 2023, ch. 1, pp. 8-12).

In terms of its thematic focus, the monograph is highly relevant to research on contemporary great-power competition in Sub-Saharan Africa, as it provides a detailed account of China's security cooperation, military presence, party-to-party diplomacy, and multi-lateral activities across the continent (see chs. 6-9). At the same time, the

book conceptualises China's engagement primarily within a bilateral China-Africa framework, which makes it a particularly useful point of departure for further research concerned with the broader geopolitical configuration and with triangular diplomacy among China, the United States, and France in Sub-Saharan Africa. Within the existing literature on China's presence in Africa, the publication ranks among the most comprehensive studies addressing the political and security dimensions of these relations, thereby complementing predominantly economically oriented analyses and advancing the debate on China's role in Africa into an explicitly geopolitical register.

2. Summary of the Book's Main Arguments

The central argument of the monograph is that under Xi Jinping's leadership Africa has evolved from a relatively marginal arena of Chinese foreign policy into a fully-fledged and structural component of China's geostrategy. The authors argue that this transformation reflects a broader shift in Chinese strategic thinking, in which relations with the developing world, and Africa in particular, are conceived as a key instrument for advancing China's core strategic interests. These interests include regime stability, sustained economic growth, and the strengthening of China's international position within an environment perceived as characterised by United States hegemonism (Shinn & Eisenman, 2023, ch. 1, pp. 1-6).

According to the authors, China's engagement in Africa is constructed as a multi-level and internally interconnected network of relationships encompassing bilateral state diplomacy, cooperation within global institutions, interaction with regional and sub-regional organisations, and intensive party-to-party ties. Taken together, these dimensions constitute a Sino-centric model of influence embedded in the concept of the *China-Africa Community of Shared Future* and grounded in a normative vision of a hierarchically structured yet declaratively 'win-win' international order (Shinn & Eisenman, 2023, ch. 1, pp. 8-14; ch. 3).

From a methodological perspective, the book relies on a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches. The authors draw on extensive data sets, most notably their original database of party-to-party exchanges between the Chinese Communist Party and African political parties from 2002 to 2022, as well as on field research, interviews with political and security elites, and a systematic analysis of official documents and statements (Shinn & Eisenman, 2023, ch. 4, pp. 85-114; ch. 1, pp. 15-18).

Empirically, the monograph covers a wide range of areas of Chinese engagement in Africa, including political and multilateral diplomacy, security cooperation, military training, United Nations peacekeeping operations, maritime security, and the protection of Chinese overseas interests. Attention is also paid to technological and information security, with the authors examining the expanding role of Chinese firms in

telecommunications, surveillance technologies, and cyber capabilities across the continent (Shinn & Eisenman, 2023, chs. 6–10).

3. Critical Analysis

The principal strength of the monograph lies in its exceptional empirical depth and analytical rigour. The authors convincingly demonstrate that China's policy toward Africa does not consist of isolated or opportunistic initiatives but rather constitutes a long-term and strategically coherent approach that integrates security, economic, and normative dimensions of foreign policy. This strategic orientation is particularly evident in the chapters devoted to the 'holistic concept of security' and to the protection of China's overseas interests, in which the African continent is interpreted as a space crucial to sustaining economic growth, regime stability, and China's international standing (Shinn & Eisenman, 2023, chs. 6–7, pp. 155–208).

From an analytical perspective, the book's emphasis on party-to-party relations between the Chinese Communist Party and African political parties represents a particularly valuable contribution. Drawing on a unique database of exchanges and official visits, the authors show that party diplomacy constitutes an autonomous and systematically employed instrument of Chinese influence that complements conventional state-to-state diplomacy and fosters long-term ties with political elites in target countries (Shinn & Eisenman, 2023, ch. 4, pp. 85–114).

This insight is methodologically significant, as it enables the operationalisation of 'political-diplomatic engagement' as a distinct condition within a configurational fsQCA framework, analytically separable from purely economic or military variables. Although the authors occasionally acknowledge the role of African elites and institutions, African agency remains largely subordinated to the perspective of China's strategic interests within the book's analytical framework and is treated more as a reactive variable than as an autonomous force shaping the dynamics of China–Africa relations.

The security dimension of China's presence in Africa is likewise addressed in a comprehensive manner. The authors provide a detailed analysis of the combination of military cooperation, participation in United Nations peacekeeping operations, maritime activities, and the development of capabilities aimed at protecting Chinese citizens and investments abroad. These activities are interpreted as integral components of a broader strategy of 'overseas interests protection' (Shinn & Eisenman, 2023, chs. 7–9, pp. 179–282).

From the perspective of fsQCA, this approach allows for the identification and coding of different types of security engagement, ranging from 'soft' security instruments (such as peacekeeping and training) to more 'hard' forms of military presence, and for tracing their interaction with economic and diplomatic tools of influence.

The main analytical limitation of the monograph lies in the absence of an explicit comparative framework vis-à-vis

other key actors operating in Sub-Saharan Africa. While the authors repeatedly refer to geopolitical rivalry with the United States and to China's efforts to counter U.S. hegemony through cooperation with the Global South (Shinn & Eisenman, 2023, ch. 1, pp. 5-7; ch. 2), other power centres remain analytically marginalised. In particular, France, as a long-standing security, military, and institutional actor in a number of Sub-Saharan African states, is not treated as a distinct analytical unit, which limits the book's capacity to capture the genuinely multipolar dynamics of the region.

Moreover, the publication does not employ configurational methods that would allow for a systematic comparison of combinations of influence instruments across states and over time. Although the authors offer a detailed account of individual dimensions of China's engagement, they do not examine under what conditions and in which combinations these dimensions produce different outcomes in terms of political influence or China's strategic position in specific African states. Consequently, the book does not provide a systematic explanation of the configurations under which particular forms of engagement lead to the dominance of a single actor, to balanced competition, or to the marginalisation of other power centres in concrete state contexts. This methodological space, namely, the analysis of configurations of economic, security, and diplomatic engagement within a triangulatory framework involving China, the United States, and France, thus remains open for further research, including through configurational approaches such as fsQCA.

Building directly on the analytical strengths and limitations identified in the preceding section, the monograph by Shinn and Eisenman constitutes an important empirical and conceptual reference point for further research on strategic triangulatory diplomacy and great-power competition in Sub-Saharan Africa. While the book provides a highly detailed and systematic account of China's political, security, and institutional engagement in Africa, its predominantly bilateral analytical framework simultaneously delineates the boundaries of existing scholarship and highlights the need for additional conceptual and methodological development.

In particular, the book's in-depth treatment of diplomatic relations, party-to-party ties, security strategy, and the protection of overseas interests offers a solid empirical basis for identifying core dimensions of Chinese engagement that can be analytically operationalised. As discussed above, these dimensions, examined separately throughout the monograph, lend themselves to being translated into conditions of economic, security, and diplomatic engagement within a configurational research design (Shinn & Eisenman, 2023, chs. 2, 4, 6-8). The analytical value of the book thus lies not only in its substantive findings, but also in its capacity to inform a more systematic and comparative approach to external engagement in the region.

At the same time, the absence of an explicit triangulatory perspective and the lack of a configurational approach, identified as key limitations in the critical analysis above, create a clear research space for future inquiry. Although the

authors repeatedly situate China's engagement within the context of global power competition and acknowledge rivalry with the United States (Shinn & Eisenman, 2023, chs. 1-2), other major actors, most notably France, remain analytically marginal, and the interactive effects of multiple external powers are not systematically examined.

Addressing these limitations would allow future research to move beyond a bilateral perspective and to analyse how different combinations of economic, security, and diplomatic engagement by multiple external actors shape power dynamics in Sub-Saharan Africa. In this sense, the monograph by Shinn and Eisenman serves both as a robust empirical foundation for the study of China's role in Africa and as a clear indication of the analytical directions in which the existing literature can be further developed through triangulatory and configurational approaches.

4. Conclusion

China's Relations with Africa: A New Era of Strategic Engagement constitutes a major reference point for contemporary scholarship on China-Africa relations and for broader debates on the geopolitics of the Global South. On the basis of extensive empirical material, the authors convincingly demonstrate that China's engagement in Africa is structurally embedded in a long-term geostrategic approach that integrates diplomatic, security, party-political, and institu-

tional instruments of power (Shinn & Eisenman, 2023, ch. 1; chs. 6-9, pp. 1-14; 155-282).

The publication can be strongly recommended to scholars of international relations, African studies, and security policy, as it offers a systematic and analytically grounded account of the evolving role of Africa in Chinese strategic thinking. Its particular strength lies in the detailed treatment of areas that are often marginalised in the existing literature, notably party-to-party relations, security diplomacy, and the protection of China's overseas interests (Shinn & Eisenman, 2023, ch. 4; chs. 7-8, pp. 85-114; 179-254).

Despite certain analytical limitations, most notably the predominance of a bilateral analytical framework, the monograph represents an exceptionally valuable contribution that significantly advances scholarly debate on China's role in Africa while clearly delineating the boundaries of existing knowledge. The book is primarily intended for an academic audience in international relations, security studies, and African studies, but it also constitutes a valuable resource for the analytical and strategic community concerned with Global South politics.

It is precisely these limitations, particularly the absence of a systematic triangulatory perspective and configurational analysis, that make the book a solid point of departure for further comparative and methodologically innovative research on great-power competition in Sub-Saharan Africa.