

UDC: 327.8(44)(6)
DOI: 10.59214/ua.fa/6.2025.107

Tetiana Stoian*

*Doctor of Historical Sciences, Professor
Mykhailo Drahomanov Ukrainian State University
02000, 9 Pyrohov Str., Kyiv, Ukraine
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9769-6192>*

Nataliia Zhabinets

*PhD in Political Sciences, Associate Professor
Mykhailo Drahomanov Ukrainian State University
02000, 9 Pyrohov Str., Kyiv, Ukraine
<https://orcid.org/0009-0002-8054-4202>*

Postcolonial images of the “other” in French and Chinese foreign policy rhetoric in Africa

Abstract. The research relevance is determined by the influence of the rhetoric of leading global actors on the formation of postcolonial stereotypes in approaches to interaction with African countries. The study aimed to identify common features in the construction of the image of Africa as “other” in the rhetorical strategies of France and China, as well as to analyse their impact on political and economic strategies for cooperation with African states. Content analysis, comparative analysis and a historical and cultural approach were used, which enabled a systematic and comprehensive study of the characteristic features of foreign policy strategies towards Africa. The study showed that despite different rhetorical strategies, France and China maintain paternalistic views of Africa, reproducing stereotypes about the continent as “immature” or “underdeveloped”, requiring external management and supervision. France, relying on its historical responsibility, continues to influence political processes in Africa through security and diplomatic interventions, using the concept of “la Françafrique” (“French Africa”) as a basis for continuing its presence in the region. China, on the other hand, is implementing a “win-win cooperation” strategy, emphasising economic partnership, but in fact maintaining the economic dependence of African countries through its investments and infrastructure projects. Most of the benefits from these projects go to China, since Chinese companies mostly control the infrastructure, tech processes, and labour resources, while African countries often see limited economic benefits from the cooperation. The results emphasised that both discourses, although formally rejecting the colonial legacy, continue to treat Africa as an object of external influence in practice. This confirmed the existence of post-colonial structures in contemporary international relations. The practical significance of the study is determined by the possibility of using its results in the activities of state bodies of African countries, international organisations and analytical centres to analyse and refine approaches to cooperation with leading global actors, in particular France and China, to reduce asymmetry in interaction and limit post-colonial influences

Keywords: asymmetric relations; technocratic approach; economic interests; joint development; international relations

Introduction

The research relevance is determined by the need for a further analysis of contemporary processes in Africa, including the influence of external actors on the political situation on the continent. The African continent has long been shaped by colonial rule and subsequent decolonisation processes, which have had a significant impact on the characteristics of its contemporary political and economic development. In the context of globalisation transformations,

there has been an intensification of interaction between African states and external actors, among which China and France occupy a special place. Their presence in the region is accompanied by a rethinking of established models of international cooperation and generates scientific discussions about possible manifestations of neocolonial practices. An analysis of the interaction between leading states and African countries reveals how postcolonial

Received: 25.06.2025, Revised: 13.11.2025, Accepted: 26.12.2025

Suggested Citation:

Stoian, T., & Zhabinets, N., (2025). Postcolonial images of the “other” in French and Chinese foreign policy rhetoric in Africa. *Foreign Affairs*, 35(6), 107-115. doi: 10.59214/ua.fa/6.2025.107.

*Corresponding author



Copyright © The Author(s). This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

narratives, geopolitical interests, and mechanisms of economic engagement influence the degree of political autonomy and the trajectory of socio-economic development in African countries. One substantial aspect is the analysis of linguistic and political constructs used to shape the image of Africa as “other” in the rhetoric of these countries. France, with its history of colonial influence on many African countries, and China, as a new geopolitical actor that actively uses economic instruments to strengthen its influence in Africa, employ different strategies that interact with local political realities. The image of Africa as “other” emphasises the difference and alienation from these countries, placing it in a hierarchically inferior position. Africa is portrayed as a continent in need of external intervention, assistance or “tutelage” from more developed states. In the context of potential long-term consequences of these strategies for African countries, their analysis is relevant for contemporary research in the field of international relations. V.V. Vakhrushev (2024) emphasised analysis of regional differences in the political vocabulary of Arab countries, outlining the peculiarities of the functioning of political terms in the context of foreign policy discourse and interregional interaction. The findings of V.V. Vakhrushev specified the role of political rhetoric in shaping perceptions of external actors, particularly France and China, in the Arab political space. The stages of decolonisation in Africa and the influence of ethnic and cultural aspects on the current political situation on the continent are examined by O.M. Maiboroda (2023). The study examined the use of ethnic and sociocultural factors by external actors, in particular France, in shaping strategies for interaction with African states, which made it possible to identify the influence of historically formed, in particular colonial, ties on contemporary foreign policy approaches. U.V. Ugonna (2020) analysed China’s foreign policy strategy in Africa, focusing on the instruments used to strengthen its economic and political influence, in particular through investment activities, technical assistance and the implementation of infrastructure projects. According to conclusions by U.V. Ugonna, Chinese policy in Africa is based on the principles of “mutual benefit”, but in practice, these strategies often lead to a new form of economic dependence of African countries on China.

The concept of “special relations” to justify French military interventions in Mali and the Central African Republic was addressed by J. Auerbach (2022). The study emphasised that France, relying on historical responsibility towards former colonies, legitimises intervention by highlighting the significance of stability and security in these countries. A. Hastie (2023) revealed how cinema reflects post-colonial geopolitics and France’s interaction with its former colonies in the Maghreb, as well as the role of the media in shaping public opinion on French foreign policy. The role of youth activism in Africa, which has become a substantial factor in countering French influence in the Sahel, was examined by D.M. Ndjerareou (2024). The study emphasised how new generations of Africans are actively changing the political landscape and striving for more equitable and equal relations with Western states. J. Tenzin (2022) conducted a postcolonial analysis of China’s rise as a global actor, focusing on the specifics of its interaction with African countries. The study determined

that Chinese policy in Africa can be interpreted through the prism of neocolonial approaches, given the use of economic instruments of influence and the formation of asymmetrical dependencies in relations with individual African states. The neocolonial aspects of China’s presence in Africa and Latin America were analysed in a publication by J. Dever & J. Dever (2021), which, in particular, emphasised the growing role of modern technologies and information resources as instruments of geopolitical influence. At the same time, M.B. Rapanyane (2021) systematised the key features of Chinese influence in Africa using the examples of Angola, Kenya and Zambia, demonstrating how investment activities and economic cooperation can contribute to the formation of asymmetrical dependencies in relations with African states. An analysis of previous publications has revealed a significant body of research focusing on specific aspects of the economic, political and cultural influence of the above-mentioned states on African countries. At the same time, there is still a need in scientific discourse for a comprehensive comparative analysis of foreign policy strategies towards the African continent, incorporating the post-colonial context. The study aimed to identify common structural features in the construction of the image of Africa as “other” in the foreign policy strategies of France and China, in particular through the prism of postcolonial images and new forms of neocolonialism. The research objectives included analysis of the rhetorical strategies of France and China in the context of African countries; investigation of post-colonial relations and their impact on the political situation in Africa; assessment of how new geopolitical actors are changing traditional forms of cooperation with African countries while maintaining asymmetry in relations.

Materials and Methods

The study was conducted using content analysis, comparative analysis and a historical and cultural approach, which was used for a comprehensive examination of the characteristics of France’s foreign policy strategies towards Africa. Content analysis was used to systematically review official documents and policy materials reflecting the key directions of French policy in the areas of security, development, and cultural interaction. The source base of the study consisted of official documents published in 2022–2024, in particular materials from the Republic of France (2022), which made it possible to assess the security and economic priorities of French policy towards the African continent. Official documents of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs containing strategic plans for cooperation with African countries within the framework of the China-Africa Forum, in particular the Beijing Declaration on Jointly Building... (2024) and the Beijing Declaration of the Conference... (2024), were used to assess China’s strategic initiatives in Africa. The study was also based on postcolonial theory, in particular the concepts of E.W. Said (1977), G.C. Spivak (2004) and H.K. Bhabha (1994). All materials were selected based on their relevance, as well as incorporating the influence of other states, in particular Turkey, on the formation of French and Chinese rhetoric on Africa.

Comparative analysis was used to correlate the declared goals and practical instruments of foreign policy

implementation of the above-mentioned countries regarding the African continent, while the historical and cultural approach addressed the influence of colonial heritage and long-standing socio-cultural ties on contemporary political decisions. The combination of the above methods and approaches identified the main rhetorical constructs used by France and China in their relations with African countries. The concepts identified, such as “special relations”, “joint development”, “mutual benefit”, “civilisational mission”, “technocratic approach”, “stability”, “security”, “democratic transition”, “state building”, “fight against corruption”, “terrorism”, “migration pressure”, “white man’s burden”, “instability”, “win-win cooperation”, and “empty space” were classified and analysed in terms of their impact on the political situation in Africa. Emphasis was placed on the role of language as an instrument of power and cultural hegemony in the foreign policy discourses of France and China. A comparative analysis of rhetorical strategies involved studying the linguistic constructions used to construct the image of the African “other” and to support the cultural domination of these states. This was used to assess how linguistic practices were used to legitimise political and economic strategies that reproduced post-colonial and neo-colonial models of interaction.

Results

France: Civilisation mission and non-paternalism in foreign policy. A study of France’s official rhetoric and diplomatic documents revealed a persistent postcolonial framework within which the image of the African “other” was constructed. The central element of this discourse was the rhetoric of “special relations” and indirect references to the concept of “la Françafrique” (“French Africa”). Constant references to these concepts created an image of Africa not as a collection of sovereign states, but as a special space of historical responsibility and constant care on the part of the former metropolis. This rhetoric contributed to the reproduction of ideas about Africa as an integral, controllable part of France’s foreign policy orbit. Speeches by representatives of the French elite repeatedly emphasised the special nature of these ties, which was presented as justification for continued interference in the internal affairs of African countries (Chafer, 2002; 2005). A substantial aspect of this rhetoric is the use of terms that function as instruments of ideological control. In particular, the concept of “co-development”, which formally meant partnership, often contributed to the reproduction of asymmetrical relations in practice. The term “co-development” masked France’s dominant role, as development goals and priorities were largely determined by the French side (Audino, 2018). Similarly, the concepts of “stability” and “security” often acquired meanings that corresponded to French geopolitical interests rather than the objective needs of African countries. As noted by S. Boeke & B. Schuurman (2015), this maintained French influence in Africa, even while declaring rhetoric of aid and support. Diplomatic documents, in particular the Republic of France (2022), reproduce the image of Africa as an “immature” partner. An analysis of official documents from France and China revealed numerous references to the need for African states to be taught the principles of

democracy, good governance and human rights by France. This wording directly reflected the colonial legacy, transformed into modernised rhetoric, which nevertheless retained the core of the concept of the “white man’s burden”. Therefore, France was considered a “mentor”, responsible for guiding and managing Africa’s development, setting the directions and standards that the continent had to follow. This construct justified interference in political processes and the imposition of certain models of governance, maintaining paternalistic relations that identified Africa as “immature” or “underdeveloped”, requiring constant care from more developed states. Compared to other global actors, particularly China, French rhetoric differed in its emphasis on cultural and civilisational proximity. While Chinese discourse was built around economic partnership and a technocratic approach, as confirmed by an analysis of the Beijing Declaration of the Conference... (2024), French rhetoric exploited ideas of shared historical destiny and moral obligations, which made it resistant to criticism. France emphasised that it had a special mission in Africa, defined not only by economic but also by civilisational ties. In contrast to the United States of America (USA), which often used the rhetoric of democratisation in a more open and universalist manner, promoting the spread of democratic values as universal for all countries (including Africa), the French approach focused on bilateral relations and historical responsibility for former colonies (Republic of France, 2022). France was perceived as a country with a moral responsibility for the stability and development of its former colonies, which made its rhetoric less susceptible to criticism from African countries.

The security component was substantial in French discourse. The results of the analysis emphasised that Africa was predominantly presented as a source of threats such as terrorism, organised crime and uncontrolled migration. Through this perspective of instability and chaos, the goals and objectives of French foreign policy on the continent were presented. This representation served as a key justification for the continued military presence, particularly in the context of Operation Barkhane in the Sahel, as well as for France’s positioning as the region’s “gendarme”. The French army’s operations in the Sahel, aimed at combating terrorist groups, have in fact become a tool for supporting French interests on the continent. Instead of responding to external threats, France institutionalised them within its security discourse as a basis for maintaining a long-term presence in Africa, which helped it to preserve its leading position in the field of regional security (Cohen, 2022). Since 2020, there has been a certain evolution in this discourse under the influence of external factors. The influence of other countries, such as Turkey, on the rhetoric of France and China regarding Africa is notable. Growing competition from this country creates new challenges for traditional post-colonial relations. For example, Turkey’s increased activity through private military companies and diplomatic initiatives in the Central African Republic and Mali could lead to a shift in the balance of power, which in turn would influence the rhetorical strategies of France and China in these regions (Gumrukcu, 2024). According to L. Chen & J. Cash (2024), China may begin to shift its rhetoric towards corporate social responsibility and environmental issues to reduce criticism from the

international community. France, in turn, may strengthen its appeal to European identity as a counter-strategy to new challenges. France has begun to appeal to European identity by presenting itself as part of the broader European Union (EU) project in Africa. Despite these changes, the basic structures of the discourse remained intact: the image of Africa as a space in need of leadership remained relevant, only taking on new rhetorical forms. For example, new initiatives aimed at “joint development” with the EU still retain the foundations of a paternalistic approach, with France central in economic and political reforms (Republic of France, 2022). In practice, France’s neo-paternalism is manifested through specific initiatives that continue to justify the French presence in Africa. This includes

military operations, economic aid, and diplomatic initiatives through which France determines the strategic directions of African countries’ development. Military operations, such as Barkhane, have demonstrated how France uses security as a tool to maintain control, presenting itself as an essential actor for stability in the region (Cohen, 2022). In addition, France’s continued involvement in financing infrastructure projects and natural resource development in Africa helps to maintain economic influence, even though formally it is presented as cooperation. The term “co-development” serves as a cover for maintaining French hegemony in African countries. To visualise the key images identified in French discourse, the results of the analysis are systematised in Table 1.

Table 1. Key images of Africa in French foreign policy discourse and their function

Key image category	Specific rhetorical constructions and terms	The function of image in discourse	Examples of real projects
Special relationships and care	“la Francafrique”, “special relations”, “historical ties”, “common space”	Justification for continuing intervention and maintaining asymmetrical relations	Operation Barkhane in the Sahel, French peacekeeping missions in the Central African Republic
Immaturity and need for guidance	“democratic transition”, “strengthening of institutions”, “state building”, “fight against corruption”	Legitimation of the French role as mentor and imposition of political models	Supporting reforms in Mali and Chad through French diplomatic initiatives
Source of threat	“terrorism territory”, “migration pressure”, “instability”, “security threat”	Justification for military presence and interventionist policy	France’s military presence in Mali as part of Operation Serval

Source: compiled by the authors based on C. Cohen (2022), Republic of France (2022)

Table 1 shows how key images of Africa in French foreign policy discourse are used to support asymmetrical relations and prolong French influence. The image of “special relations and tutelage”, which includes terms such as “la Francafrique”, “historical ties” and “shared space”, serves as a justification for France’s continued intervention in African countries, such as through Operation Barkhane in the Sahel or French peacekeeping missions in the Central African Republic. The image of “immaturity and need for guidance”, expressed through terms such as “democratic transition” and “fight against corruption”, legitimises France’s role as a mentor that defines political models, particularly through its support for reforms in Mali and Chad. The image of a “source of threat”, including “terrorist territory” and “migration pressure”, justifies France’s military presence and interventionist policy, as evidenced by Operation Serval in Mali. These rhetorical strategies support France’s post-colonial influence in Africa through various military and diplomatic initiatives. Thus, France’s foreign policy discourse on Africa remains steeped in neo-paternalism. Despite formal recognition of the sovereignty of African countries, through the rhetoric of “special relations”, mentorship, and security, the image of Africa as a space in need of external guidance, control, and civilisational influence from the former metropolis continues to be constructed. These findings confirm that contemporary French rhetoric continues to exploit post-colonial notions with deep historical roots, even in the context of changes in the global architecture of power.

China: Technocratic paternalism and the rhetoric of “win-win cooperation”. An analysis of Chinese official discourse revealed the formation of a clear rhetorical

strategy which, while formally distancing itself from Western colonial models, created new forms of asymmetrical perceptions of the African continent. A key feature of the Chinese approach was the consistent rejection of colonial heritage and an emphasis on the principles of sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs. However, this depoliticised rhetoric, prioritising economic interaction, shaped the image of Africa as a politically neutral space for the realisation of Chinese economic interests. The concept of “win-win cooperation” became central to this approach, presenting the relationship as entirely mutually beneficial. In practice, however, Chinese investments were structured in such a way that the real benefits remained in China, in particular through control over projects and the use of Chinese resources such as labour and technology, which further strengthened the economic dependence of African countries (Abegunrin & Manyeruke, 2020). Economic determinism became the main framework through which Chinese discourse constructed the image of Africa. The African continent was presented through the prism of its economic needs and resource potential. The concept of “empty space” in this context did not mean uselessness or lack of value, but rather the creation of an image of a territory with unrealised economic potential that needed Chinese investment, technology and management approaches to be fully implemented. This rhetoric emphasised aspects such as infrastructure development, industrial potential and the need for investment, creating a technocratic image of Africa as a place for large investment projects, where China was ready to apply its development tools to realise the continent’s potential (Obeng-Odoom, 2022).

A substantial element of Chinese discourse was the construction of China’s image as a successful model of development that African countries should emulate. China’s path to economic growth was a model for African states. This created a hierarchical model of “teacher-student” relations, where African countries were positioned as passive recipients of Chinese experience and knowledge. Although China emphasised the mutual benefits of cooperation, the image of Africa as an active recipient of Chinese aid with little influence on decision-making processes persisted within this rhetoric. Despite formal recognition of the equality of partners, this rhetoric reproduced traditional paternalistic ideas about the distribution of roles in international relations, in which China acts as a leading actor capable of providing Africa with the economic models it needs for development (Beijing Declaration on Jointly

Building..., 2024). Since 2020, there has been an evolution in Chinese discourse under the influence of growing international competition in Africa. The emergence of new actors, such as Russia and Turkey, as well as changes in Chinese domestic priorities, have led to a certain rethinking of rhetoric. China began to emphasise the social responsibility of its companies and the environmental aspects of cooperation more often, which indicated an adaptation to international criticism. However, the basic principles of technocratic paternalism remained unchanged, and the changes in rhetoric did not lead to a change in the essence of Chinese policy in Africa. For example, in new economic agreements, China is still positioned as the main supplier of technology and capital, while African countries remain consumers of these resources (Chen & Cash, 2024). The characteristics of Chinese discourse are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Key characteristics of Chinese discourse on Africa

Key characteristic of discourse	Specific rhetorical constructions	Implementation examples
Win-win cooperation	“mutual benefit”, “joint development”, “mutual assistance”	Agreements on infrastructure projects, trade agreements
Technocratic approach	“infrastructure construction”, “technological modernisation”	Railway, power plant and port projects, such as the Mombasa-Nairobi railway (Kenya), the Kafue Gorge hydroelectric power plant and the Chisamba solar power plant (Zambia)
Development model	“Chinese path”, “modernisation experience”	Educational programmes, internships for African specialists, and Chinese investment in agriculture

Source: compiled by the authors based on The Export-Import Bank of China (2022), Zambia Kafue Gorge... (2023), Beijing Declaration on Jointly Building... (2024), Zambia launches largest grid-connected... (2025)

Table 2 outlines the main characteristics of Chinese discourse on Africa, which determine the country’s main rhetorical strategies. The concept of “win-win cooperation” emphasised mutual benefit and joint development, which is implemented through agreements on infrastructure projects and trade treaties, although in practice these agreements are often asymmetrical. The technocratic approach was implemented through specific infrastructure projects, which became the hallmark of China’s presence in Africa. Chinese infrastructure projects in Africa, in particular the standard-gauge Mombasa-Nairobi railway in Kenya, the Kafue Gorge hydroelectric power station and the Chisamba solar power station in Zambia, have become key elements of China’s strategy on the continent, combining financing, technology and labour to implement large-scale infrastructure initiatives. These projects have improved transport and energy infrastructure and serve as symbols of development and progress, but at the same time, they provide limited knowledge transfer to local workers and reinforce economic dependence on China, demonstrating its technocratic approach and role as the main actor in the implementation of the New Silk Road. The development model proposed by China through the concepts of the “Chinese way” and “modernisation experience” includes educational programmes, internships for African specialists and Chinese investment in agriculture, which reinforce the technocratic approach but maintain control over Africa’s development. Thus, analysis of Chinese discourse has shown that technocratic paternalism has become the basis for constructing the image of Africa in Chinese foreign policy rhetoric. Despite a different conceptual basis compared to the French approach,

Chinese discourse also reproduced asymmetrical perceptions of the African continent, presenting it as a space for the realisation of economic interests and an object for the application of technocratic development models. These findings confirm that different foreign policy approaches can reproduce similar structures of the “other” through different rhetorical strategies.

Comparative analysis of rhetorical strategies used by France and China in shaping the image of “the other”. A comparative analysis of French and Chinese foreign policy discourses reveals significant structural similarities in the construction of the image of the African “other”, despite differences in historical context and rhetorical strategies, such as the emphasis on “special relations” and “civilisational mission” of France and “common development” and “mutual benefit” of China. Both discourses demonstrate the reproduction of basic binary oppositions that form the basis for asymmetrical perceptions of Africa. For example, French rhetoric uses terms such as “civilising mission” (especially in the context of Franco-African relations), which creates an image of Africa as an uncivilised space in need of civilising assistance. Diplomatic statements often cite examples of “unstable” countries that demonstrate a lack of development compared to civilised Western states (Said, 1977). On the Chinese side, the image of Africa is framed in the context of an “economically backward” continent in need of investment for development. For example, Chinese representatives emphasise the need for support through infrastructure projects within the framework of the “win-win cooperation” concept, highlighting the economic needs of African countries, which appear to be economically backward.

According to A. Amtenbrink (2024), in French discourse, this is manifested in the opposition between “civilised leadership” and “an unstable space in need of guidance”, while Chinese discourse is based on the opposition between “technocratically developed” and “economically backward”. These oppositions form the basis for the formation of hierarchies and power structures in global relations between Africa and its external partners. Africa is presented as “other”, different from Western or Eastern standards, confirming the reproduction of colonial models of thinking in the postcolonial era. One substantial aspect of comparative analysis is the role of language as an instrument of power and cultural hegemony. French, as a cultural and administrative legacy of the colonial period, continued to function as a symbol of status and access to resources in many African countries. The Chinese language, in turn, has become an instrument of economic integration and learning, gradually acquiring a similar role in new spheres of influence. Both languages mark the linguistic space of Africa and reproduce cultural hegemony, creating additional barriers to the participation of African actors in international dialogue on equal terms. French retains its dominant position in many African countries due to its colonial heritage, while Chinese, supported through projects and study programmes, is also becoming substantial for African countries in their cooperation with China (Amtenbrink, 2024). The study showed that both discourses minimised the agency of African states. Africa was presented not as a collection of sovereign entities with internal political will, but as an object of external projections, interventions and various forms of “aid”. In the French case, this manifested itself through the rhetoric of security intervention and civilisational tutelage, while the Chinese approach emphasised economic interaction and technocratic

leadership. Despite the difference in terminology, both approaches reinforced the asymmetrical relationship between African countries and their external partners. In Chinese discourse, technocratic paternalism emphasises the economic benefits of technology and investment, but these are implemented without genuine involvement of local actors, confirming the asymmetry between African countries and China (Chen & Cash, 2024).

Despite the overall asymmetrical structure of the discourses, the analysis revealed moments of hybridity and ambivalence. African countries demonstrated an ability to actively manipulate the rhetorical strategies of both partners for domestic purposes. For example, during negotiations with France, some African leaders actively manipulated the French “sense of historical guilt” by highlighting the injustices of the colonial past, which provided additional economic and military benefits. In their discourse with China, African states used the rhetoric of “win-win cooperation” to obtain more benefits from Chinese investments, for example, by increasing the share of local companies in infrastructure projects or demanding greater economic benefits from agreements (Amtenbrink, 2024). Nevertheless, these manifestations of strategic agency did not undermine the basic asymmetrical structure of relations, but only slightly modified its external forms. African countries manipulated rhetoric to gain benefits, but this did not change the structural inequalities that remained relevant to both Chinese and French relations with Africa. The rhetoric of “win-win cooperation” remained a way to conceal China’s economic interests and, in practice, led to the continuation of asymmetry. To visualise the common structural features in the rhetorical strategies of France and China, the results of the comparative analysis are systematised in Table 3.

Table 3. Comparative analysis of French and Chinese rhetoric on Africa

Structural characteristics	French discourse	Chinese discourse	Shared effect
Binary positions	Civilised/uncivilised	Developed/underdeveloped	Reconstruction of hierarchy
Language as a government tool	French (cultural heritage)	Chinese (economic integration)	Cultural hegemony
Denial of agency	Safety intervention, mentoring	Technocratic leadership	Objectification of Africa
Hybridity	Manipulation of historical guilt	Use of “win-win cooperation” rhetoric	Partial adaptation

Source: compiled by the authors based on A. Amtenbrink (2024)

The rhetorical strategies of France and China towards Africa share structural similarities despite their different approaches. Both discourses use binary oppositions, creating hierarchies where Africa is presented as the “other” in need of external guidance, with France appealing to civilisation and China to economic development. In both cases, language becomes an instrument of power: French supports cultural hegemony, while Chinese supports economic integration. Both discourses deny Africa’s agency, with France emphasising security intervention and mentorship, and China emphasising technocratic leadership. The rhetoric of hybridity in France manipulates historical guilt, while China uses the concept of “win-win cooperation”, but both approaches continue to support asymmetrical relations, partially adapting to new conditions. A comparative analysis revealed that, despite differences in historical context and rhetorical framing, the foreign policy discourses of France and China reproduced

similar structures of “otherness” regarding Africa. Both cases demonstrated the preservation of asymmetrical perceptions, which, although assuming different forms depending on the specific actor, continued to be based on the fundamental opposition between the “developed” West or East and “backward” Africa. These results confirmed the main hypothesis of the study about the structural similarity of postcolonial discourses of different actors in foreign policy towards the African continent.

Discussion

A comparison of the results of this study revealed significant parallels in the rhetorical strategies of France and China towards Africa, particularly in terms of stability, security and economic development. In particular, the study by Y. Kaneko (2020) analysed peacebuilding practices in post-conflict Timor-Leste, with an emphasis on the role of the concept of sustainability as a tool for legitimising

foreign policy strategies. In this context, France and China take a similar approach, using their strategies in Africa to support stability in the region. However, in contrast to peacebuilding, their strategies emphasise only security but also domestic economic interests, maintaining dominant positions in the economic and political processes on the continent. Such strategies reflect the current geopolitical conditions, within which the concept of stability is used as a discursive tool to justify the pursuit of internal interests. M.R. Sundström *et al.* (2021), analysing Sweden's foreign policy, also addressed the role of rhetoric in the process of spreading political norms at the international level. At the same time, a comparative analysis demonstrates that, in contrast to the Swedish approach, which emphasises the declaration of partnership relations, the rhetorical practices of France and China regarding Africa were characterised by a distinct asymmetry. France uses the concept of "special relations" with former colonies, which conceals its dominance in shaping political and economic priorities on the continent. China, on the other hand, offers a strategy of "mutual benefit", which often leads to economic dependence of African countries, as the benefits of such relations largely remain in China's favour.

The study by O. Tella (2021) on African soft power also highlighted the continent's potential to develop its soft power through cultural and political values. However, the strategies of France and China focus on economic domination, leaving Africa as an object of external influence rather than an equal participant in international relations. This is confirmed by the results of a study, which states that, despite the official rhetoric of "joint development" and "mutual benefit", the real policies of both countries contribute to the preservation of asymmetry in relations with Africa. F. Ostermann & B. Stahl (2022) emphasised that France often uses the concept of "special relations" to legitimise its military interventions in Mali and the Central African Republic. This is consistent with the findings of this study, where France also legitimises its intervention in Africa through the idea of historical responsibility and stability, which maintains a military and political presence on the continent. Diplomacy, as a foreign policy tool, is a substantial instrument for France and China in their interaction with Africa. Both countries use diplomatic means to strengthen their economic and political positions on the continent. In the context of the historical responsibility and economic dependence of African countries, the data from V.K. Kombo (2021) confirmed the results obtained, as it analyses the political consequences of the Napoleonic legacy for African states, particularly in Mali. B.K. Kombo emphasised that French strategies are combined with ideas of historical responsibility, which is used by France to employ the rhetoric of "non-intervention", although in practice this conceals real interference in the internal affairs of African states. This study identified a similar mechanism, whereby France justifies its military interventions by the need to maintain stability, which is also reinforced by the idea of "special relations" with its former colonies. The study by S.A. Kpetsu (2025) on the influence of the French Revolution on contemporary political processes in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso revealed the theoretical complexity of France's relations with these countries. This correlates

with the results obtained, where France uses historical ties to legitimise interventions, even while formally promoting the principles of self-determination and sovereignty of African states. Within the framework of French strategy, Africa remains an object of influence, where countries on the continent often lack sufficient autonomy in political decision-making. According to the findings of D. Che & A. Bodomo (2023), China actively promotes the idea of "win-win cooperation" in Africa, which strengthens economic influence through investments and infrastructure projects. At the same time, this leads to economic dependence of African countries on China. In this study, a similar trend was noted in China's rhetorical strategies, where China presents its policy as mutually beneficial, but in practice, the economic benefits remain largely in China's favour, creating a new form of dependence.

The study by L. Dong (2025) on the theoretical foundations of socialism with Chinese characteristics determined that China uses their governance model as a tool to influence other countries, particularly through economic and political strategies. The study noted that China emphasises infrastructure and technology development but does not always ensure the proper involvement of local actors in the decision-making process. This correlates with the findings that China, while offering benefits to Africa, often retains control over key processes on the continent. An analysis by J. Zhang *et al.* (2022) on the role of Chinese urban strategy also confirmed the findings, as China actively promotes its technocratic approach to development, which includes designing "smart" cities and using technological tools to strengthen its economic influence on African countries. This approach is consistent with China's rhetoric of "mutual benefit", but in practice creates a situation where control remains in China's hands. A comparison with the study by O. Hodzi & J.H. Åberg (2020) on the strategic application of the Chinese model in Africa also shows how China pursues its interests through economic investment, creating new forms of dependency. China is actively developing its infrastructure and financial presence in Africa, but this process does not include the active involvement of local communities in key processes. The significance of the principles and concepts used by China to gain Africa's support within its national interests is highlighted in a study by D.H. Shinn & J. Eisenman (2020). The study determined that China uses its principles of cooperation with Africa to achieve strategic goals, which is consistent with the findings of this study on China's "mutual benefit" strategy, which in practice often leads to economic dependence of African countries. Similarly, X. Ding *et al.* (2020) examined China-Africa economic and trade cooperation, focusing on the concept of "mutual benefit". The study emphasised that China actively uses this concept to create favourable economic conditions while assisting African countries. This is consistent with the findings of this study, which states that although China offers economic cooperation, it retains control over key economic processes in Africa, leading to new forms of dependence. Thus, the results of the study showed that, despite the diversity of France's and China's rhetorical strategies towards Africa, both countries use similar mechanisms to maintain and strengthen their influence on the continent. Such strategies, implemented in particular

through economic cooperation, investment and diplomatic measures, keep African countries dependent on external actors. At the same time, the rhetoric of “shared development” and “mutual benefit” actively used by France and China conceals real asymmetries in relations, where one side (France or China) determines strategic priorities. Thus, despite formal declarations of partnership, African countries remain subject to external influences, reflecting deep post-colonial structures in international relations.

Conclusions

The study determined that France and China’s foreign policy discourses on Africa reproduce postcolonial perceptions and asymmetrical models of African states, despite differences in the rhetorical strategies used. The French approach, based on a narrative of historical responsibility, retains elements of the concept of “la Françafrique”, which is used for maintaining political and security influence in the region, through military presence and diplomatic mechanisms. The analysis has demonstrated the persistence of postcolonial discourse, within which Africa is represented as an area of “special responsibility” used to legitimise foreign policy intervention. Despite rhetorical modifications, the hierarchical structure of relations and the limited recognition of the agency of African states remain unchanged. China’s discursive practices regarding Africa, despite their declared mutual benefit, reproduce a persistent asymmetry in political and economic relations. China positions its presence in Africa in terms of economic partnership and the principle of “win-win cooperation”.

At the same time, China’s investment practices are often accompanied by maintaining control over project implementation and the use of domestic resources, which contributes to the formation of economic dependencies and limits the involvement of local actors in decision-making processes. In the rhetorical strategies of both states, Africa appears as an object of external orientation and management that requires support and guidance. The French model is characterised by an emphasis on mentoring and regulatory reform, while the Chinese approach focuses on infrastructure and technology without creating inclusive mechanisms for participation. In general, both models of interaction contribute to the reproduction of economic dependence of African states and do not create the preconditions for an equal partnership, masking asymmetry with discursive constructions of “joint development” and “mutual benefit”. Prospects for further research are related to the analysis of the influence of other external actors, in particular Russia and Turkey, as well as the study of the reactions and strategies of African states, including their use of foreign policy rhetoric to pursue domestic interests.

Acknowledgements

None.

Funding

None.

Conflict of Interest

None.

References

- [1] Abegunrin, O., & Manyeruke, C. (2020). *China’s power in Africa. A new global order*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- [2] Amtenbrink, A. (2024). *Neo-colonial dynamics in Africa: A comparative study of China, Russia, and France: An assessment of economic, political, cultural, and military engagement as a form of neo-colonialism*. (Bachelor thesis, Malmö University, Malmö, Sweden).
- [3] Audino, A. (2018). *Comparing U.S. and French approaches to counterterrorism in Africa*. (Bachelor thesis, University of San Diego, San Diego, USA).
- [4] Auerbach, J. (2022). *Between postcolonialism and equal partnership: The legitimization strategies of French military interventions in Mali and the Central African Republic*. Havertown, PA: Casemate Group.
- [5] Beijing Declaration of the Conference Marking the 70th Anniversary of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. (2024, June). Retrieved from https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zy/gb/202406/t20240629_11444342.html.
- [6] Beijing Declaration on Jointly Building an All-Weather China-Africa Community with a Shared Future for the New Era. (2024, September). Retrieved from https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/zyxw/202409/t20240905_11485993.html.
- [7] Bhabha, H.K. (1994). *The location of culture* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge. doi: 10.4324/9780203820551.
- [8] Boeke, S., & Schuurman, B. (2015). Operation “Serval”: A strategic analysis of the French intervention in Mali, 2013-2014. *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 38(6), 801-825. doi: 10.1080/01402390.2015.1045494.
- [9] Chafer, T. (2002). *The end of empire in French West Africa: France’s successful decolonization?* New York: Berg.
- [10] Chafer, T. (2005). Chirac and “la Françafrique”: No longer a family affair. *Modern & Contemporary France*, 13(1), 7-23. doi: 10.1080/0963948052000341196.
- [11] Che, D., & Bodomo, A. (2023). China and the European Union in Africa: Win-win-lose or win-win-win? *Asia Europe Journal*, 21(2), 119-136. doi: 10.1007/s10308-023-00656-y.
- [12] Chen, L., & Cash, J. (2024). *China offers Africa \$51 billion in fresh funding, promises a million job*. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/world/china-deepen-industrial-agricultural-trade-investment-ties-with-africa-2024-09-05>.
- [13] Cohen, C. (2022). *Will France’s Africa policy hold up?* Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
- [14] Dever, J., & Dever, J. (2021). *Information age imperialism: China, race, and neo-colonialism in Africa and Latin America*. *University of Miami Inter-American Law Review*, 52(2), article number 3.
- [15] Ding, X., Chai, Q., & Chen, C. (2020). China-Africa Economic and trade cooperation from the perspective of the community with shared benefits: Achievements, challenges, and prospects. *World Review of Political Economy*, 11(2), 208-231. doi: 10.13169/worldrevipoliecon.11.2.0208.

- [16] Dong, L. (2025). The theoretical framework and ideological foundations of Xi Jinping's socialism with Chinese characteristics. In *China's path to global status: Governance, sovereignty, and development in the 21st century* (pp. 87-98). Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan. doi: [10.1007/978-981-96-6921-9_7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-96-6921-9_7).
- [17] Gumrukcu, T. (2024). Turkey to seek improved Africa cooperation in Djibouti talks, officials say. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-seek-improved-africa-cooperation-djibouti-talks-officials-say-2024-10-25/>.
- [18] Hastie, A. (2023). Postcolonial geopolitics: Reading contemporary geopolitics in Maghrebi-French war films. *Geopolitics*, 28(1), 239-256. doi: [10.1080/14650045.2021.1882426](https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2021.1882426).
- [19] Hodzi, O., & Åberg, J.H. (2020). Introduction to the special issue: Strategic deployment of the China model in Africa. *Politics & Policy*, 48(5), 804-814. doi: [10.1111/polp.12378](https://doi.org/10.1111/polp.12378).
- [20] Kaneko, Y. (2020). *The new international paradigm of resilience approaches in peacebuilding in the post-conflict Timor-Leste*. (Doctoral thesis, University of Nottingham, Nottingham, United Kingdom).
- [21] Kombo, B.K. (2021). Napoleonic legacies, postcolonial state legitimation, and the perpetual myth of non-intervention: Family code reform and gender equality in Mali. *Social & Legal Studies*, 30(5), 704-725. doi: [10.1177/0964663920962552](https://doi.org/10.1177/0964663920962552).
- [22] Kpetsu, S.A. (2025). *The specter of the French Revolution in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso*. (Master's thesis, Purdue University Graduate School, West Lafayette, IN, USA). doi: [10.25394/PGS.29082701](https://doi.org/10.25394/PGS.29082701).
- [23] Maiboroda, O.M. (2023). *Ethnic traps of decolonization: African experience*. Kyiv: Kuras Institute of Political and Ethnic Studies of the NAS of Ukraine.
- [24] Ndjereou, D.M. (2024). *African youth activism and the disruption of French foreign policy in the Sahel region*. *Journal of Peace and Diplomacy*, 5(1).
- [25] Obeng-Odoom, F. (2022). China-Africa relations in the economist, 2019-2021. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 59(3), 1000-1017. doi: [10.1177/00219096221125423](https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096221125423).
- [26] Ostermann, F., & Stahl, B. (2022). Theorizing populist radical-right foreign policy: Ideology and party positioning in France and Germany. *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 18(3), article number orac006. doi: [10.1093/fpa/orac006](https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/orac006).
- [27] Rapanyane, M.B. (2021). Neocolonialism and new imperialism: Unpacking the real story of China's Africa engagement in Angola, Kenya, and Zambia. *Journal of African Foreign Affairs*, 8(3), 89-112. doi: [10.31920/2056-5658/2021/v8n3a5](https://doi.org/10.31920/2056-5658/2021/v8n3a5).
- [28] Republic of France. (2022). *National strategic review 2022*. Retrieved from <https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/files/files/rns-uk-20221202.pdf>.
- [29] Said, E.W. (1977). *Orientalism*. *The Georgia Review*, 31(1), 162-206.
- [30] Shinn, D.H., & Eisenman, J. (2020). Evolving principles and guiding concepts: How China gains African support for its core national interests. *Orbis*, 64(2), 271-288. doi: [10.1016/j.orbis.2020.02.009](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2020.02.009).
- [31] Spivak, G.C. (2004). *Can the subaltern speak?* In *Imperialism* (pp. 171-219). London: Routledge.
- [32] Sundström, M.R., Zhukova, E., & Elgström, O. (2021). Spreading a norm-based policy? Sweden's feminist foreign policy in international media. *Contemporary Politics*, 27(4), 439-460. doi: [10.1080/13569775.2021.1902629](https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2021.1902629).
- [33] Tella, O. (2021). *Africa's soft power: Philosophies, political values, foreign policies and cultural exports*. London: Taylor & Francis. doi: [10.4324/9781003176022](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003176022).
- [34] Tenzin, J. (2022). Rethinking the rise of China: A postcolonial critique of China and a Chinese critique of the postcolonial. *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 35(1), 83-106. doi: [10.1111/johs.12361](https://doi.org/10.1111/johs.12361).
- [35] The Export-Import Bank of China. (2022). *Mombasa-Nairobi standard gauge railway project*. Retrieved from http://english.eximbank.gov.cn/News/NewsR/202209/t20220908_43088.html.
- [36] Ugonna, U.V. (2020). *China's strategy towards African countries*. (Doctoral dissertation, Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Kyiv, Ukraine).
- [37] Vakhrushev, V.V. (2024). *Modern Arabic political vocabulary: Regional variation*. Kyiv: National Linguistic University.
- [38] Zambia Kafue Gorge lower hydropower station. (2023). Retrieved from https://en.powerchina.cn/2023-10/20/c_828534.htm.
- [39] Zambia launches largest grid-connected solar power project. (2025). Retrieved from <https://english.news.cn/africa/20250701/1c3265f9d0c14099ade186461ce20b4a/c.html>.
- [40] Zhang, J., Bates, J., & Abbott, P. (2022). State-steered smart mentality in Chinese smart urbanism. *Urban Studies*, 59(14), 2933-2950. doi: [10.1177/00420980211062888](https://doi.org/10.1177/00420980211062888).