

# MP-IDSA *Commentary*

## Tariff-Free but Not Barrier-Free: Africa's Challenge in the Chinese Market

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### **S***ummary*

China's zero-tariff offer on imports from African countries removes a visible barrier while leaving the deeper trade imbalance untouched.

## Introduction

China’s decision to extend zero-tariff access to imports from 53 African countries marks an important development in China–Africa economic relations. President Xi Jinping announced the policy during the African Union Summit in Addis Ababa on 14 February 2026,<sup>1</sup> and it came into effect on 1 May 2026.<sup>2</sup> The decision excludes only Eswatini, which continues to maintain diplomatic relations with Taiwan. Earlier, China’s tariff-free treatment was largely available to 33 African Least Developed Countries. The new policy therefore expands the benefit to Africa’s 20 largest economies, including Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa, Egypt, Morocco, Ghana, Ethiopia, Algeria and Côte d’Ivoire.<sup>3</sup>

The announcement should be treated with caution rather than celebrated as a breakthrough for Africa. Tariff removal may improve market access, but it does not address deeper constraints such as weak infrastructure, limited processing capacity, high logistics costs and compliance barriers.

The total value of goods exchanged between China and African countries reached a new high of US\$ 348 billion in 2025. China remained Africa’s main trade partner for the 16th year in a row. Africa sold nearly US\$ 123 billion in goods to China, mainly crude oil, minerals, and other natural resources. At the same time, African countries purchased about US\$ 225 billion in Chinese goods, especially factory-made products, electronic equipment, cars and machinery. This created a trade gap of around US\$ 102 billion for Africa, compared with about US\$ 62 billion in 2024.<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, the zero-tariff offer must be seen within the wider context of unequal trade, China’s search for new markets, and Africa’s continued dependence on raw-material exports. The real test is whether African countries can convert this opening into value addition, industrial growth and stronger production capacity.

## Market Access without Structural Transformation

China’s zero-tariff offer is economically useful, but it is not automatically transformative. Tariff elimination can improve African access to the Chinese market, but market access alone does not create export capacity. African exporters must still meet customs procedures, sanitary and phytosanitary standards,

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<sup>1</sup> [“China to Implement Zero Tariffs on Imports from 53 African Countries”](#), *Reuters*, 14 February 2026.

<sup>2</sup> [“China Implements Historic Zero Tariffs for All African Nations with Diplomatic Ties”](#), The State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 8 June 2026.

<sup>3</sup> Gerald Imray, [“China Has Now Dropped Tariffs on Imports from Every African Country Except 1”](#), *The Associated Press*, 1 May 2026.

<sup>4</sup> Chrispin Mwakideu, [“China’s Africa Trade Push: Partnership or Power Grab?”](#), *DW*, 19 May 2026.

certification rules, packaging requirements, logistics demands and consumer preferences. For agricultural and processed goods, these non-tariff barriers can be more difficult than tariffs themselves. Without cold chains, storage facilities, testing laboratories, port connectivity and export promotion systems, tariff-free access may remain underused.

The deeper problem is structural. Africa continues to export mainly raw materials such as oil, minerals, copper, cobalt, lithium, chrome ore and agricultural commodities, while China exports machinery, electronics, textiles, vehicles, batteries and consumer goods. This pattern limits the value captured by African economies and sustains trade imbalances.<sup>5</sup>

The experience of earlier trade preference regimes shows that tariff-free market access alone does not necessarily generate structural transformation. The Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) are trade agreements negotiated between the European Union and African, Caribbean and Pacific countries under the Cotonou framework. They replaced the earlier system of one-way trade preferences under the Lomé Conventions with reciprocal trade liberalisation, in which the EU offered duty-free and quota-free access to its market. At the same time, ACP countries agreed to gradually open large parts of their own markets to European goods.

The purpose of the EPAs was officially presented as promoting trade, development and regional integration. However, early evidence shows that these agreements have not significantly increased ACP exports to the EU. Instead, in some African cases, they increased imports from the EU, especially agricultural imports, while manufactures exports from Eastern and Southern Africa and Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries to the EU declined. This suggests that tariff-free access alone is insufficient to produce structural transformation. Without domestic productive capacity, industrial policy, infrastructure and the ability to meet standards, preferential access may preserve existing trade asymmetries rather than transform them.<sup>6</sup>

A similar lesson can be drawn from the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA). AGOA demonstrates that tariff-free market access alone does not produce structural transformation. While it supported selected export sectors such as apparel, its benefits remained narrow, country-specific and weakly connected to deeper industrial upgrading. African economies largely continued to export raw

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<sup>5</sup> [“African Economic Outlook 2026”](#), African Development Bank, 26 May 2026.

<sup>6</sup> Frederik Stender, Axel Berger, Clara Brandi and Jakob Schwab, [“The Trade Effects of the Economic Partnership Agreements between the European Union and the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States: Early Empirical Insights from Panel Data”](#), *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 59, No. 6, 2021, pp. 1495–1515.

materials or low-value manufactured goods, with limited movement towards processing, regional value chains, and higher-value-added production.<sup>7</sup>

## Assessment

China’s zero-tariff policy is significant, but its impact should be assessed cautiously. It expands preferential access from African Least Developed Countries to almost all African countries that recognise Beijing, including several middle-income economies. Politically, this strengthens China’s image as a Global South partner and comes at a time of rising protectionism, tariff wars and growing China–US tensions. For African countries, it creates an opportunity to diversify export destinations beyond traditional Western markets.<sup>8</sup>

However, diplomatic value should not be confused with structural transformation. Africa’s trade deficit with China reportedly exceeded US\$ 100 billion in 2025, and reached US\$ 29.07 billion in the first quarter of 2026 alone, compared with US\$ 19.23 billion a year earlier.<sup>9</sup> This shows that Chinese exports to Africa are rising faster than African exports to China. If Africa mainly exports raw materials and agricultural goods while importing Chinese machinery, electronics, textiles, vehicles, batteries and consumer goods, total trade may grow without improving Africa’s structural position.

The WTO’s 2024 Trade Policy Review of China also shows that tariffs are only one part of China’s market access regime. In 2024, China’s average applied MFN tariff was 7.0 per cent, but agricultural products faced a higher average tariff of 12.6 per cent. China also maintained automatic and non-automatic import licensing, Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) notifications, Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) measures, certification rules, quarantine requirements and inspection procedures. Therefore, even with zero tariffs, African exporters must still meet China’s regulatory and quality standards.<sup>10</sup>

The real opportunity lies in using the offer as leverage for industrialisation. African countries should link market access with local processing, mineral beneficiation, agro-processing, industrial parks, technology transfer, skills development and logistics infrastructure. This is especially important in critical minerals, where China has strong interests in African copper, cobalt, lithium, chrome ore, tungsten

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<sup>7</sup> [“African Growth and Opportunity Act \(AGOA\): Program Usage, Trends, and Sectoral Highlights”](#), United States International Trade Commission, 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Alix Lavoué, [“Trade and Tariffs: Why Chinese Exports are Accelerating in Africa”](#), *Africa Report*, 14 May 2026.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> [“Report by the Secretariat”](#), Trade Policy Review: China 2024, World Trade Organization, July 2024, pp. 1–173.

and other strategic minerals. If these minerals continue to be exported in raw form, China will capture most of the value through refining, manufacturing and technology production.

China’s zero-tariff initiative will contribute to Africa’s structural transformation only if African countries can convert improved market access into higher-value exports. Tariff removal alone cannot overcome weak processing capacity, limited infrastructure, high logistics costs, inadequate compliance with standards, and dependence on primary commodities. More fundamentally, tariff-free access does not automatically produce industrialisation, as countries become internationally competitive by developing domestic industries through state support, technological learning, finance and strategic industrial policies.<sup>11</sup>

African governments must therefore develop sector-specific export strategies, strengthen certification and customs systems, invest in regional value chains and use the African Union and AfCFTA to coordinate policies and negotiate collectively. The policy’s long-term significance will depend less on Beijing’s announcement than on Africa’s ability to build competitive industries and use preferential access to change the terms of its economic engagement with China.

## **Conclusion**

China’s zero-tariff policy creates a valuable opportunity for African exporters, but its significance should not be overstated. The measure may improve access to the Chinese market. Yet, its wider impact will depend on whether African countries can expand production, improve export competitiveness and move beyond dependence on raw materials. The policy should therefore be treated as an opening rather than an outcome. Its success will ultimately be judged by whether it helps African economies secure a stronger and more balanced position in their trade relations with China.

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<sup>11</sup> Ha-Joon Chang, “[Kicking Away the Ladder: Infant Industry Promotion in Historical Perspective](#)”, *Oxford Development Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 1, 2003, pp. 21–32.

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