OPINION

MARCO BOUWER: Recent China-Africa Trade Expo was a tale of two contrasting approaches

While US leaders have resorted to threatening rhetoric, China has focused on building partnerships

16 JULY 2025 - 05:00

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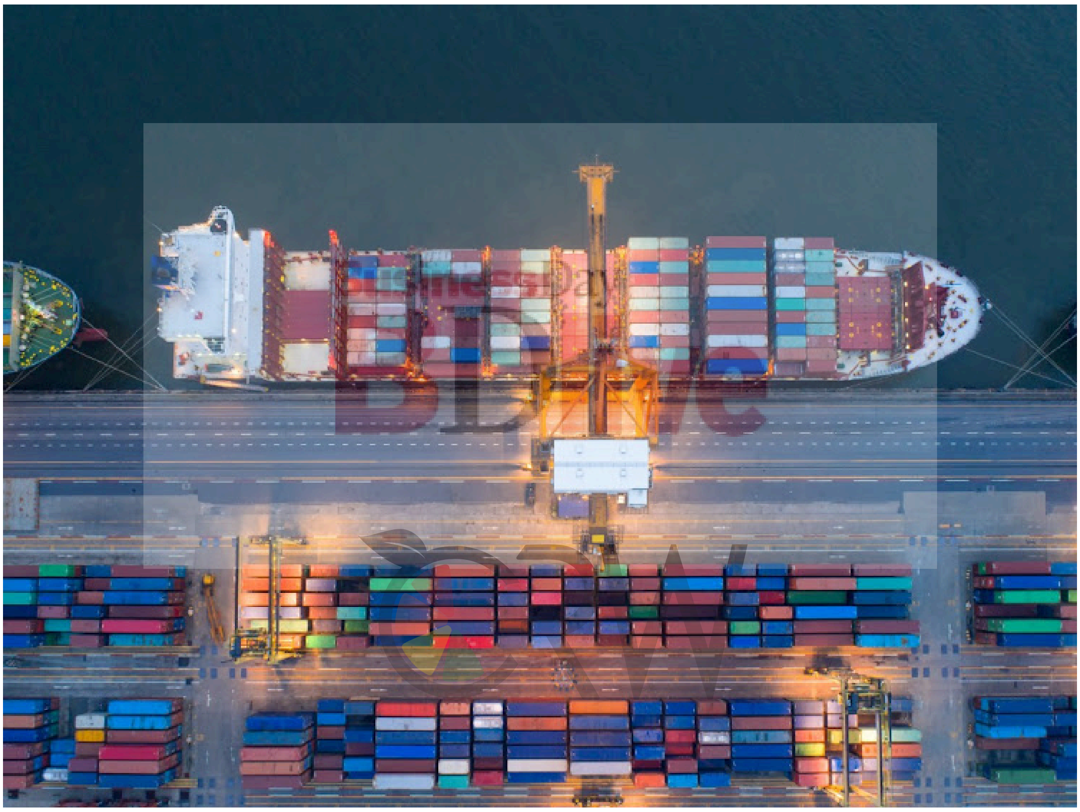

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The 4th China-Africa Trade Expo (CAETE), recently held in the city of Changsha in China's Hunan province, brilliantly encapsulated the growing economic ties and deeper co-operation between China and our continent.

Representatives from 53 African countries showed up to participate, each eager to explore new channels for trade and co-operation, and experience first-hand the vast Chinese opportunities available.

In the aftermath of the expo China announced zero tariffs on all products from African countries, a clear signal of intent to foster trade relationships and focus on economic growth.

Jeremy Stevens, Asia economist at Standard Bank Group, says “the zero tariff policy announcement reflects China’s eagerness to address the growing trade deficit with its partners in the Global South. It recognises that the trade imbalance potentially undermines its sincerity as a development partner, and the move should be seen as a measure to build goodwill.

This is in stark contrast to the current US administration’s “America First” policy, the alienation of its trade partners, and the escalation of tensions in the Middle East.

Amid the noise of US rhetoric surrounding Iran and Israel, and Russia and Ukraine, it is interesting to reflect on how these two superpowers, both crucial African trade partners, are navigating their relationships with developing regions.

While US leaders have resorted to military intervention and threatening rhetoric, China has focused on building partnerships through trade and infrastructure development.

During the past 20 years, trade volumes between China and Africa have grown from $14bn to nearly $300bn, according to data released by China customs.

China has become the dominant trade partner for most African nations. While the West draws lines, China draws trade routes. Not surprisingly, there seems to be an increased preference among African leaders for the China model.

It is true that China also needs partnerships. Beijing is tasked with feeding 1.4-billion people, and making good on the unwritten contract with the people that they’ll ensure modern China continues to grow and prosper, in exchange for power. There’s also the huge China-Africa trade deficit, but theirs is still a strategy emphasising economic development, with definite benefits for the continent.

SA participation

As at previous editions of the expo, there was strong SA representation at CAETE 2025. Standard Advisory (China), a subsidiary of Standard Bank Group in China, hosted an impressive delegation of 50 clients from SA and various other African countries, including Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda, Tanzania, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Malawi and Angola.

Standard Advisory (China) CEO André du Plessis said the group's 400m² stand was one of the largest in the Africa Hall, showcasing olive oil, citrus, sesame, soybeans, coffee, tea, wine and nonalcoholic beverages, and other products produced by established and emerging agribusinesses.

Apart from SA's country pavilion displaying food, cosmetics and agro-processed goods, SA fashion brands were showcased at the expo through an innovative collaboration between Brand SA and Development Re-imagined.

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Tshepiso Malele, country head: China for Brand SA, said the level of enthusiasm with which SA brands were received contributed towards changing perceptions about what SA and the continent can offer China and the rest of the world.

This speaks to another crucial outcome of events like the annual expo. Trade fosters human relations and mutual cultural understanding. It lifts the veil on China for Africans, and on Africa for the Chinese.

While SA still struggles with traditional perceptions related to safety and other travel and investment concerns, the increased interaction helps.

According to the Rooibos Ltd company representative for Greater China, Kieran van Zyl, the Chinese government has put substantial emphasis on nurturing its relationship with its SA counterparts.

Talking about Rooibos, Van Zyl said there's been a steady increase in awareness of this multifunctional, uniquely SA herb among Chinese consumers.

The China opportunity

The scale at which China has approached its own internal economic and infrastructure challenges during the past 30 years should be a case study for SA.

Due to rigorous planning, strong vision and intentional government backing, China has transformed itself into a global manufacturing leader. In short, increased interaction is good, and there's much we can learn from the Chinese.

Simultaneously, increased contact will further unveil the beauty and richness of SA and its people.

There is no reason SA leaders cannot also aspire to sustainable modernisation, and increased industrial output. Chinese investment in the continent equates to economic growth opportunities. Local authorities need to negotiate for the localisation of Chinese investment in SA, and work harder to create favourable conditions to attract Chinese offshoring of production. This integration could be a huge boost for local job growth, while allowing more profit to stay in the country.

Stevens says the key goal for Africa is to develop its own economy in a way that absorbs labour, boosts incomes and generates wealth, and the best route to this when partnering with China is to attract inward investment, technology, capital and skills. Chinese firms are willing if the economics justify the move.

With US-China relations at their lowest point in decades, and the reshaping of the global economic order well advanced, the future of global growth and national welfare may well depend on African countries choosing inter-connectivity and partnership over protectionism and ideology.

SA has membership or access to several economic platforms — Brics, the Forum on China-Africa Co-operation and China's Belt & Road Initiative.

Malele argues that China holds significant promise for SA's economic advancement and global repositioning in the new world order, not just for multinationals but for SMEs and businesses at grassroots level.

As SA leaders look at economic growth, prioritising trade with China does not have to be viewed as an "either, or" in relation to existing economic relations with the US and Europe, but rather as an "and, also".

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