



An Integrated, Prosperous
and Peaceful Africa

Permanent Mission of the AU to China

**Opening Statement
at the Annual Retreat of the Group of African Ambassadors
in China (GAAC)**

H.E. Ambassador Alhaji Sarjoh Bah, PhD
AU Permanent Representative to the People's Republic of China

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His Excellency Martin Mpana, Ambassador of the Republic of Cameroon to China and Dean of the African Diplomatic Corps in China

His Excellency Telesphore Irambona, Ambassador of the Republic of Burundi to China and Chairperson of African Union

Her Excellency Dr. Nardos Bekele-Thomas, Chief Executive Officer of the AU Development Agency (AUDA-NEPAD) and your formidable team

His Excellency Cyprien Mamina, Ambassador of the Republic of the Congo and Co-Chair of the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation

Distinguished and Esteemed Ambassadors of AU Member States in China and diplomats

His Excellency Han Yong, Director General, Department of the World Trade Organization of the Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China and Representatives of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Commerce, the General Administration of Customs of China and the China Development Bank.

His Excellency Dr. Stephen Jackson, the UN Resident Coordinator in China

Representatives of the Secretariat of the African Continental Free-Trade Area and the Department of Economic, Development, Trade, Tourism and Minerals

Invited Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good morning

It is a pleasure to welcome you to this year's Annual Retreat of the Group of African Ambassadors in China.

From the onset let me on behalf of His Excellency Mahmoud Ali Youssouf, Chairperson of the AU Commission commend President Xi Jinping and the people of China for the successful adoption of the 15th Five Year Plan. Please convey the compliments of the Chairperson of the Commission to the Chinese government and people on the new year of the Horse!

I would like to thank our able Dean H.E. Martin Mpana for co-convening this year's retreat with the AU Permanent Mission. Merci Infiniment, Excellence Doyen.

A special appreciation to Dr. Nardos Bekele-Thomas, the CEO of AUDA-NEPAD for joining for us for this year's retreat of the GAAC. Thank you most sincerely, Dear Sister.

I would also like to thank our guests from various departments of the Chinese government for joining us today.

Excellencies

We gather at a moment of genuine strategic opportunity for our continent. The theme that brings us together "leveraging China's 100% tariff-free offer to foster development and prosperity in Africa" goes to the very heart of Africa's long-standing ambition to transform the structure of its economies. It speaks directly to our collective aspiration, as articulated in Agenda 2063, to move decisively beyond the export of raw commodities toward value addition, industrialisation, and the development of competitive and resilient regional value chains.

This is therefore not simply a discussion about trade preferences or market access. It is a conversation about how Africa positions itself within the evolving global economy, and how we convert opportunity into structural transformation. The tariff-free offer presents us with a rare opening, but the extent to which it becomes transformative will depend on the clarity of our strategy, the coherence of our approach, and the effectiveness of our collective action.

In this context, we must be clear-eyed and deliberate in our approach. Through our actions, we must avoid the enduring trap of exporting unprocessed raw materials—an approach that has too often entrenched what is commonly described as the resource curse. Breaking this cycle requires the adoption of a new economic model, one that is anchored on the modernisation of production systems and processes that are efficient, competitive, and fully attuned to the dynamics of twenty-first-century global markets.

Excellencies,

Africa–China cooperation has matured significantly over the years, evolving from engagement centred largely on infrastructure and resource flows to a more diversified and forward-looking partnership. Today, we are called upon to take this partnership to the next level. One that is increasingly defined by production, value addition, innovation, and integration into global value chains.

We meet here today at an opportune moment in Sino-African ties, just days ahead of the entry into force, on 1 May 2026, of China’s 100 per cent tariff-free offer to eligible African countries. This retreat is therefore not incidental; it is deliberately timed to ensure that Africa is institutionally, strategically, and operationally prepared to translate this policy shift into tangible developmental outcomes. In doing so, we act squarely within our mandate to advance Agenda 2063 and to align our external partnerships with Africa’s continental priorities.

This moment requires us to move with intention. Critically, this requires that our engagement be firmly anchored on the African Continental Free Trade Area, so that national utilisation of the tariff-free offer reinforces, rather than fragments, Africa’s continental market integration efforts. Coherence between AfCFTA implementation, Agenda 2063 flagship programmes, and our external economic engagements must therefore remain a guiding principle of our work in Beijing. We therefore as a matter of strategic choice align efforts with continental frameworks.

This is precisely why this retreat is so important. Over the course of the next two days, we have an opportunity to engage in focused, practical, and forward-looking discussions. Our agenda challenges us to deepen our understanding of the tariff-free framework, to examine market access and standards, to explore pathways for production and value addition, and to identify financing and logistical mechanisms that can support African producers in accessing the Chinese market at scale.

These are critical issues. They go directly to the question of whether African economies can compete effectively, whether our producers can meet quality requirements, and whether we can build the necessary infrastructure, both physical and institutional, to sustain increased trade and investment flows.

Distinguished colleagues,

As we engage in these discussions, one principle must remain central: Africa must act with coherence and strategic unity.

Our strength lies not only in the diversity of our economies and resources, but in our ability to act collectively. As representatives of our respective Member States here in Beijing, we carry a dual responsibility - to advance national interests, and at the same time to contribute to a broader continental agenda that enhances Africa's collective bargaining power and developmental outcomes.

In this regard, the Group of African Ambassadors in China and the African Union Permanent Mission has a critical role to play. We must continue to serve as a platform for coordination, for knowledge exchange, and for the alignment of strategies. We must ensure that our engagement with China is not fragmented, but purposeful, coherent, and aligned with Africa's long-term priorities.

Excellencies,

The success of this partnership will ultimately be measured not by the ambition of our declarations, but by the consistency of delivery. Success will be reflected in concrete outcomes.

This calls for a shift - from dialogue to implementation, from opportunity to execution. It also calls for a renewed emphasis on practical solutions. We must identify how to support our producers to meet standards, how to mobilise financing that is accessible and responsive, and how to develop efficient logistics and supply chains that connect African production to global demand in a cost-effective manner.

Distinguished Ambassadors and Guests

As we move into our deliberations, allow me to frame our discussions around four interlinked priority areas that are reflected in our programme:

First, we should aim to translate opportunity into strategy. The tariff-free offer will only be transformative if it is matched by a clear understanding of priority sectors, products, and markets where Africa can compete and scale effectively.

Second, we must place strong emphasis on value addition and production capacity. Increasing exports alone is not sufficient; what matters is the extent to which those exports reflect higher levels of processing, industrialisation, and integration into regional value chains.

Third, there is a need to strengthen coordination among ourselves. Our effectiveness as a continent will depend on how well we align national priorities with continental frameworks, and how consistently we engage our partners from a position of coherence.

Fourth, we should focus on implementation pathways. This includes identifying practical solutions to challenges related to standards, financing, and logistics - areas that will ultimately determine whether our producers can access and sustain presence in the Chinese market.

Finally, we must commit to continuity beyond this retreat. The value of our discussions will be measured by the follow-up and by the extent to which we are able to translate our deliberations into concrete actions, partnerships, and measurable outcomes.

Excellencies,

If we are able to anchor our discussions around these priorities, and to sustain momentum beyond this retreat through structured follow-up and coordination, I am confident that we will significantly strengthen Africa's capacity to seize this opportunity.

Let us therefore engage not only with openness and candour, but with a shared determination to translate policy space into practical gains for our economies and our people in line with vision of Agenda 2063: *a peaceful and prosperous Africa driven by its people*.

I thank you and wish us all productive and fruitful deliberations.