

- **Excellencies,**
- **H.E. Dr. Alhaji Sarjoh Bah, Permanent Representative of the African Union to China,**
- **H.E. Mr. Martin Mpana, Dean of the African Diplomatic Corps in China,**
- **H.E. Mr. Cyprien Sylvestre Mamina, Co-Chair of FOCAC, Honourable Ambassadors,**
- **Distinguished representatives of the Government of the People’s Republic of China,**
- **Colleagues, friends, ladies and gentlemen,**

It is a great honour to join you today at this important retreat of the Group of African Ambassadors in China.

At the outset, allow me to express my sincere appreciation to H.E. Dr. Alhaji Sarjoh Bah for his leadership and foresight in convening this retreat at such a strategic moment in Africa–China relations.

He has created an important space for Africa to reflect collectively, engage candidly, and think more deliberately about how we respond to this evolving trade opportunity.

I also wish to acknowledge H.E. Mr. Martin Mpana, H.E. Mr. Cyprien Sylvestre Mamina, and the entire African diplomatic community in Beijing for your continued commitment to advancing Africa’s common voice and shared interests.

Excellencies,

We meet at an important moment. But we should also recognise that this moment sits within a much longer story. History offers a powerful lesson.

When China began its economic transformation in 1978, it did not rely on the goodwill of others. It positioned itself deliberately to seize opportunity, attract capital, and build productive power.

It looked to overseas Chinese networks in and used diaspora capital, competitive labour, and designed its regulations to attract manufacturing.

But critically, the United States provided the demand. American consumers absorbed what China produced.

China recognised that the American market could be used not merely as a destination for exports, but as an instrument of national transformation.

It leveraged that demand to build factories, accumulate capital, acquire know-how, strengthen state-backed industrial capacity, and climb steadily up the value chain.

What began as export access became strategic ascent: China used America's openness to build the productive power that would eventually allow it to rival America itself.

That history matters for Africa today because it reminds us of something essential: market access can be catalytic, but only when it is matched by production, strategy, discipline and institutional purpose.

Excellencies,

Africa's trade relationship with China has expanded dramatically over the last two decades.

In 2025, China–Africa trade reached a record **348 billion dollars**, with Chinese exports to Africa rising to **225 billion dollars** and imports from Africa reaching **123 billion dollars**.

That is a relationship of enormous scale.

But it is also a relationship marked by serious imbalance — because the deficit remains overwhelmingly on the African side, and because the structure of trade is still defined far more by raw material flows than by African industrial depth.

That is why FOCAC matters so much in this conversation.

Over time, FOCAC has helped move the Africa–China relationship beyond diplomacy alone and into a more practical discussion about infrastructure, industrialisation, investment, market access and value chains.

At the 2024 Beijing Summit, China set out ten partnership actions for the next three years, including trade prosperity and industrial chain cooperation.

That is significant, because it reflects a recognition — on both sides — that the next phase of this relationship cannot simply be about moving more goods.

It must increasingly be about **what Africa produces, what Africa processes, and how Africa captures more value from what it sells.**

And yet, if we are honest, trade on the ground still looks very familiar.

In 2024, Africa's exports to China rose to a record **99 billion dollars**, while imports from China reached **179 billion dollars**.

The largest African exporters to China remained countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Angola, South Africa, Guinea and Zambia — driven primarily by mineral and oil sales.

In other words, even where volumes are growing, the pattern remains largely intact: **Africa continues to export what it extracts, while China continues to export what it manufactures.**

So the issue before us is no longer whether Africa trades with China.

It clearly does — and at scale.

The real issue is **how** Africa trades with China, **in what form**, **at what level of value**, and **with what developmental outcome**.

That is why China's zero-tariff offer is important. But it is also why we must be precise about what it can — and cannot — do.

From **1 May 2026**, China will implement zero-tariff treatment for imports from the **53 African countries** with which it has diplomatic relations, while also expanding supporting mechanisms such as the upgraded green channel for African exports.

Politically, that is a major signal.

Commercially, it is a meaningful opening.

Strategically, it comes at a time when the global trading system is under stress and many economies are becoming more protectionist rather than more open.

But history has already taught us a clear lesson:

Tariff preferences, by themselves, do not industrialise economies.

They lower one barrier.
They do not build production systems.
They do not finance enterprise growth.
They do not fix logistics.
They do not create standards capacity.

And in fact, the evidence already tells us that tariffs were never the whole problem.

Even before this latest expansion, around **70 percent** of African exports to China were already entering duty free, while another **22 percent** faced tariffs below 5 percent.

That tells us something very important: **the central constraint has never been tariffs alone.**

The deeper constraint has been productive readiness — the ability to produce at scale, meet standards consistently, finance orders, move goods competitively, and supply markets with reliability.

So let me say this plainly:

China has opened a door. But a door is not a factory.

It is not a corridor.

It is not a testing laboratory.

It is not trade finance.
And it is not an industrial policy.

If Africa continues to send crude oil, copper, cobalt and iron ore into the Chinese market while importing machinery, electronics, solar equipment and other higher-value goods, then zero tariffs will alter the margin of trade without changing its structure.

The real opportunity lies in using this opening to move more African goods further up the value chain — in horticulture, textiles, cocoa derivatives, processed foods, selected light manufactures, and other semi-processed and finished products that allow the continent to retain more value before export.

This is precisely why Africa's response cannot be fragmented.

And it cannot be organised only at the level of individual national export ambition.

The real opportunity lies in **regional production** — because no single African economy, acting alone, will maximise this opening across multiple sectors at the scale required. This is where the AfCFTA becomes indispensable.

By 2035, the AfCFTA could increase Africa's total exports by almost **29 percent**, raise intra-African exports by more than **81 percent**, and increase exports to non-African countries by **19 percent**, with even greater gains coming from lower non-tariff barriers and better infrastructure.

That matters because Africa will not build durable export competitiveness for China — or for any other major market — without first building stronger regional value chains, larger integrated production systems, and more efficient continental logistics.

And this is where AUDA-NEPAD must sit — and sit visibly.

As the African Union's premier development agency, our role is not to observe this moment from the sidelines.

Our role is to help the continent organise around it.

We are the institution that can connect market access to productive readiness, productive readiness to regional value chains, value chains to infrastructure, and infrastructure to bankable investment.

Through our work on regional integration, on industrialisation, on corridor development, and through the Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa, AUDA-NEPAD is positioned to help translate an external trade opening into an internal development response.

That matters because the barriers that now matter most are practical, not rhetorical.

Can African firms meet Chinese standards?

Can they certify, trace and package goods in ways that are commercially acceptable?

Can they access the working capital required to fulfil orders?

Can they move goods through efficient logistics chains?

Can they aggregate supply across borders so that firms and countries are not simply too small to matter?

These are not technical side questions.

They are central economic questions.

And they will determine whether this opening changes outcomes — or merely changes headlines.

AUDA-NEPAD's mandate is especially relevant because competitiveness is inseparable from infrastructure.

Under **PIDA-PAP II**, there are **69 flagship regional infrastructure projects** valued at **160 billion dollars**, and AUDA-NEPAD has pointed to an annual financing need of about **16 billion** dollars for that pipeline.

This goes directly to the heart of whether producers can reach ports, whether industrial zones can access reliable power, whether corridors can link farms and factories to markets, and whether regional trade can become fast, predictable and cost-effective enough to support export competitiveness.

Excellencies,

Financing is equally central.

Afreximbank estimates that Africa still faces an annual trade finance gap of about **100 billion dollars**, and that gap falls especially heavily on SMEs, which are often the very firms that should be moving into processing, packaging and light manufacturing.

That means that even where market demand exists, many African producers remain unable to seize it because they cannot finance inputs, inventory, certification, shipment or scale.

So when we speak about making use of zero tariffs, we must speak not only about customs access, but also about project preparation, blended finance, enterprise upgrading, smart and harmonised policies and regulatory frameworks, warehouse receipt systems, export credit, guarantees, and payments infrastructure.

Excellencies,

The issue before us, then, is not whether the opportunity is real. It is.

The issue is whether Africa will respond to it with the **strategic clarity**, the **institutional discipline**, and the **economic ambition** required to convert access into transformation.

AUDA-NEPAD therefore proposes three strategic shifts. The first shift is from fragmented national responses to a coordinated African strategy.

The risk before us is not only that Africa may move too slowly. It is that Africa may move in pieces.

A market opening of this scale cannot be approached **through 53 disconnected export pushes, 53 separate market signals, and 53 competing attempts to secure the same buyers, the same quota space, and the same investment flows.**

That would not strengthen Africa's position. It would weaken it.

This moment calls for **coordination, not congestion.**

It calls for a common African commercial logic: shared market intelligence, disciplined quota monitoring, aligned engagement with Chinese institutions, and a continental view of where our competitive strengths truly lie.

For our capitals, it means aligning trade, industry, finance and export institutions behind a coherent strategy linked to the AfCFTA and Africa's long-term industrial ambitions.

And on the ground, it means that producers and firms must be connected to a deliberate system of support, so that opportunity is organised, not left to chance.

We call on our Chinese counterparts to support us in financing the pre-feasibility studies needed to develop a pipeline of bankable projects needed to scale up local production.

We also urge them to facilitate access to critical technologies required to improve the productivity and competitiveness of African firms.

And most importantly to ensure that the implementation of the zero-tariff policy is firmly anchored by their FOCAC commitments.

The second shift is from raw material dependence to value-added regional production.

The central weakness in Africa–China trade is not that Africa is absent from the relationship.

It is that Africa is still positioned too low within it. In far too many cases, we continue to export what we extract and import what others manufacture.

That pattern may generate volume, but it does not generate transformation.

So the real task before us is to change the **composition** of trade, not merely its **scale**.

We must move with intention into processing, beneficiation, agro-processing and light manufacturing.

We must retain more value before export. We must build production systems in which African labour, African enterprise and African industry capture a greater share of the value chain.

No single African economy will do this at scale on its own.

But regional production systems can.
Corridor-based value chains can.
The AfCFTA can.

This is why the answer is not a collection of isolated national export plans, but a continental production strategy in which countries specialise, complement one another, and build a common African offer with real industrial depth.

For Member States, that means choosing sectors strategically and backing them seriously.

On the ground, it means industrial parks that function, agro-processing facilities that can scale, logistics systems that can deliver, and enterprises that can produce reliably and competitively.

The third shift is from tariff access alone to full-spectrum trade enablement.

Because if we are honest, the real barriers now are not only at the border.

They lie in standards, certification, traceability, logistics, working capital, regulatory approval and institutional readiness.

Market access on paper is not the same as market access in practice.

A zero tariff does not move a shipment through a weak corridor.
It does not certify a facility.
It does not finance an SME.
It does not satisfy SPS requirements.
It does not secure GACC registration.

And it does not build trust with buyers who need quality, consistency and reliability.

That is why the next frontier of competitiveness is **implementation**.

It is quality infrastructure.

It is accredited laboratories.

It is inspection systems, facility registration, export readiness, trade finance and real-time market information.

For our capitals, it means supporting exporters not only with declarations of intent, but with institutions that make market entry possible.

And on the ground, it means certified facilities, functioning warehousing, packaging capacity, shipment readiness and the financing required to fulfil orders at scale.

Excellencies,

If Africa gets these three shifts right, then China's tariff-free offer will not be remembered merely as a policy announcement or a trade concession.

It will be remembered as a strategic inflection point — the moment Africa chose to organise itself differently, to produce more ambitiously, and to compete from a stronger place in the world.

But if we fail to coordinate, fail to add value, and fail to build the systems of execution, then we will simply move larger volumes through an old structure of dependency and mistake that movement for progress.

So, the real question before this esteemed gathering, is not whether opportunity exists. The speakers before have already indicated that it does.

The real question is whether Africa will now marshal the discipline, the alignment and the imagination to turn that opportunity into transformation.

That is the challenge. That is the responsibility.

And that, I submit, is the work now before us.

