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CHINA – MAURITIUS FTA IN 2019: A PERSPECTIVE FROM ECONOMIC MOTIVES

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Abstract

This article aims to explore China's economic motives in China – Mauritius FTA which was signed in 2019 and implemented in 2021. China – Mauritius FTA is the first China's FTA with an African country. This article tries to answer the research question which is why did China make an FTA with Mauritius despite of insignificant trade between both countries. This article uses Mireya Solís' and Saori N. Katada's Cross-Regionalism theory, specifically economic motives that consist of two indicators which are open a new market and/or expand market and avoid trade diversion, to answer the research question. This research uses qualitative method and literature study. The result shows that China's economic motives in China – Mauritius FTA are to expand market to Africa through Mauritius and to avoid trade diversion from China to other countries such as India as one of a biggest trade partner of Mauritius. Moreover, this article also links the economic motives to China's ambition as a global economic power through its big project named Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Keywords: *China, Cross-Regionalism, FTA, Mauritius, Trade*

Introduction

China is one of the countries that currently has several free trade agreements (FTAs) with other countries or regions, either within its regional or cross-regional, as a strategy for its global expansion agenda. Although China needs a longer time than other countries to do its first FTA, China has had increasing FTAs since 2000 (Zeng, 2016, p. 277). One of the study cases of China's FTA is the China - Mauritius FTA which was signed in 2019 and implemented in 2021.

Mauritius is the first African country which is China's FTA partner. Nevertheless, it is important to note that there is an insignificant trade value between China and Mauritius compared to other China partners such as South Africa or Angola. Based on data from the Johns Hopkins China - Africa Research Initiative, the average export value from China to Mauritius from 2009 to 2019 is approximately 652 million USD. Meanwhile, the average export from China to South Africa in the same years reach 14,16 billion USD (John Hopkins China - Africa Research Initiative, 2023).

The same thing appears in China's import value from several countries in Africa. China's import value from Mauritius from 2009 to 2019 is approximately 18 million USD,

meanwhile, China's import value from another African country partner such as Angola is reaching 23.5 billion USD (John Hopkins China - Africa Research Initiative, 2023).

Furthermore, China is using FTA as a strategy to solve its energy problem. This can be seen when China trades with countries that produce energy such as oil, gas, and many more (Zweig & Jianhai, 2005, p. 26). Meanwhile, most products that China imports from Mauritius are dominated by non-energy natural resources (The Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC), n.d.).

Based on the formulation of the problem stated above, this research raised a research question, why China signed an FTA with Mauritius? This paper sees that China's economic motives behind the FTA with Mauritius rely on China's ambition to access a broader market in Africa by using Mauritius as a hub between China and Africa. Furthermore, through the FTA, China could also avoid trade diversion from Mauritius, especially to India. This article thus aims to analyze China's economic motives behind the China - Mauritius FTA and provide some knowledge about China's FTA strategy, especially with smaller countries. This article is divided into six parts, which are introduction, literature review, theoretical

framework, research method, discussion, and conclusion.

Literature Review

Some literature researched trade relations between China and Mauritius. Research said that trade between both countries is affected positively by GDP growth, while exchange rate and foreign direct investment affect trade negatively (Guan, Zhang, & Fat, 2021). Furthermore, another paper said that China and Mauritius have the same export structure, thus it is quite hard for Mauritius to compete with China because China has more resources than Mauritius (Nowbutsing & Ramsohok, 2012). From Revealed Comparative Advantage (RCA), China also has a broader range of products compared to Mauritius, so it can be said that Mauritian companies have a bleaker prospect of exporting to China (Ancharaz & Tandrayen-Ragoobur, 2013). This is also seen in the textile industry which is one of Mauritius' advantages (Ancharaz & Kasseeah, 2016).

Some papers researched China's FTA characteristics in general. Regarding China's agenda in FTAs, some said that China's FTA objection is dominated by its political agenda, which is strengthening its geographical position and political influence on its trading partner and

fulfilling its security agenda. Furthermore, Beijing also has some motivations to pursue the same political and economic advantages as its FTA partner and use FTA as a strategy to secure energy resources and a means of unification (Jiang, 2010; Wang, 2011; Zeng, 2016). In return, the FTA can also help Chinese companies to get raw materials and tools at minimum prices, and Chinese consumers have a choice to get goods or services at cheaper prices but good quality (Zhang, Zhang, & Fung, 2007).

Some papers also conducted some research on China's FTAs with other countries. First, China has a closer relationship with New Zealand rather than Canada because there is a rejection from Canada's political party about an FTA with China, thus it is not surprising that China chose to do an FTA with New Zealand instead of Canada (Burton & Noakes, 2016). Serrano Moreno *et al.* (2020) explored the relationship between China's FTA and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Chile and found that both programs could help with Chile's development.

This literature review shows that not enough study has been done to explore China's economic motives behind FTA partner choice, especially with Mauritius. Moreover, it is said that political motives

are a bigger driver in China's FTAs. Meanwhile, this research sees that economic motives are also important because those motives are also a driving factor for China's cross-regional FTA. This paper also notices that the study case of the China - Mauritius FTA is an important case that shows an increasing relationship between China and Africa and China's growing engagement in Africa. This research thus aims to fill the research gap and bring novelty to literature about China's economic motives and patterns in free trade agreements.

Research Method

This paper is qualitative and descriptive research because it tries to explain the reasons why China created an FTA with Mauritius using qualitative data. This article is also categorized as case-study research which is a kind of research that focuses on a single case and its detailed and context around the case. This research uses two kinds of data, which are primary and secondary data using a literature study. Primary data is taken from government data such as official websites or official statements related to the case. Meanwhile, secondary data is taken from related books, journals, reports, and official websites which will support the analysis.

Theoretical Framework

In analyzing the China - Mauritius FTA to study how China is using FTA, this article uses one of the variables from the cross-regionalism theory that is introduced by Saori N. Katada and Mireya Solis. In their book named 'Cross Regional Trade Agreements: Understanding Permeated Regionalism in East Asia' in 2008, Solis and Katada tried to explore the pattern of cross-regional FTA or cross-regional trade agreement (CRTA) from East Asia countries. One of the motives that drive East Asian countries to choose their CRTA partner is economic motives.

According to Solis and Katada, an FTA could act as an institutional tool to create trade opportunities with other economies as a form of cooperation to eliminate trade tariffs (Katada & Solís, 2008, p. 18). Specifically, there are two variables in economic motives that influence a country to choose its CRTA partner. The first variable is to expand the market from other countries by opening a new access market and/or expanding market reach by preferential trade and investment liberalization (Katada & Solís, 2008, p. 19). This in return could expand exports and imports, and more importantly, get more investments from its partner (Katada & Solís, 2008, p. 13).

The second factor would be to avoid trade diversion. When an East Asian country's chosen partner is integrated into other bilateral or regional FTAs, that country's partner would likely prioritize trading with fellow member countries compared to non-member countries. Therefore, FTAs are then formed so that non-member countries can enjoy the benefits obtained by their partners who are integrated into other FTAs (Katada & Solís, 2008, p. 19). In other words, this factor explores how another FTA followed by the chosen partner of an East Asian country could benefit the trade of that East Asian country itself.

This study focuses on the economic motives given by Solis and Katada to assess China's economic motives for its FTA with Mauritius, as well as why China chose Mauritius as the first African country to have an FTA with China. This research seeks to investigate China's economic objectives since China, as a large trading nation, is likely to be motivated by economic considerations, particularly when integrating FTA with its partner.

Results and Discussions

The China-Mauritius FTA is the most recent economic cooperation between the two countries, signed in 2019 and set

to go into effect in January 2021. Following four rounds of negotiation and many rounds of consultation, the countries reached an agreement in Beijing (Qingqing, 2018). Following the FTA's implementation, both nations conducted the inaugural China-Mauritius FTA Joint Commission Meeting in August 2023 in Port Louis, Mauritius (Mauritius Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 2023). This FTA is China's first FTA with an African country and the 17th FTA signed by China (Xinhua, 2019). This FTA is also a form of continued cooperation from former cooperation named Bilateral Investment Treaties (BIT) in 1996 (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2016).

There are some things regulated in the FTA, including trade in goods and services, investment, economic cooperation, dispute resolution, intellectual property rights, technical trade barriers, and many others (Mauritius Chamber of Commerce and Industry, n.d.). This FTA regulates about 8,537 products from China and 6,375 products from Mauritius. Some of the products covered by the FTA that included in immediately liberalization include frozen meat, fish products, dairy products, sugar, textiles and clothing, and many more (Mauritius Chamber of Commerce and Industry, n.d.). In the

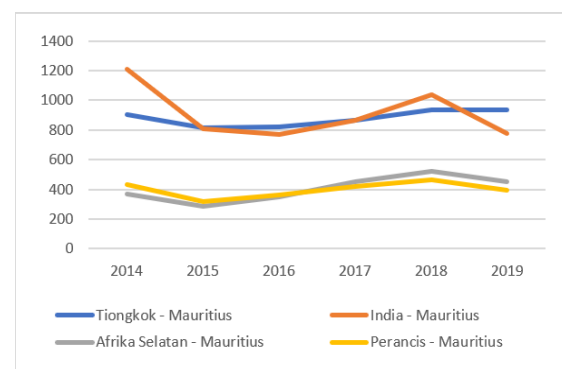
Trade in Goods, the comparison of tax-free tariff schemes between China and Mauritius will be 96.3% and 94.2%, respectively, and will open up more than 100 sectors in the Trade in Services (Ministry of Commerce People's Republic of China, 2021).

Based on the Cross-Regionalism theory from Solis and Katada, an East Asian country is establishing a CRTA because that country wants to open new market access and/or expand its market overseas. According to the data on Mauritius' total population (or market potential), it can be said that Mauritius is not a big country compared to other African countries. The approximate total population of Mauritius from 2009 to 2019 is 1.25 million, while its population growth is 0.1% to 0.2% per year (World Bank, n.d.).

Even though Mauritius does not have a big market, Mauritius remains one of China's target export countries, and China has become Mauritius' main partner, especially in terms of China's product import. According to a report from the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA), China remains one of the largest suppliers for the Mauritius market where Mauritius imports more from China rather than from Europe (Ancharaz & Nathoo, 2022, p. 4). Furthermore, based on

data from the World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS) of the World Bank from 2014 to 2019, China is a country import destination to Mauritius. Graphic 1 below shows that Mauritius' main partners in importing are China and India.

Graphic 1. A Comparison of Exports of Some Countries to Mauritius in 2014 – 2019 (in million USD)



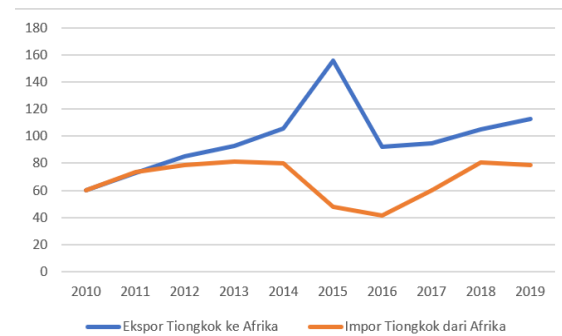
Source: World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS) World Bank

Meanwhile, even though China's exports to Mauritius have been increasing in some years, Mauritius' market is too small for China to invade its local products. Therefore, this paper argues that China's motivation in expanding the market to Mauritius is not the dominant motive to do an FTA with Mauritius. Instead, China's economic motive behind the China - Mauritius FTA is driven by China's goal to expand its market to Africa as a market for its products through importing to Mauritius.

In essence, trade between China and Africa is unique because it develops new trade that has not been performed by Western countries, and it does not compete directly with Western countries such as the United States but rather engages in trade across industries (Thrall, 2015, p. 22). Because the traded industries are diverse, reducing China's competitiveness with other nations such as Western countries, it might be argued that if China improves its economic relations with Africa, for example through FTAs, it will be simpler for China to flood the African market with its products.

When the trade barriers are significantly decreased within the trade liberalization agreement and a Rule of Origin (ROO) is made between China and Mauritius, then it is advantageous for China to expand its export of goods and services to the African market. According to the SAIIA report, access to African markets is one of China's strategic objectives to serve as a testing ground for new Chinese products, increase the use of Chinese domestic products by African populations, and relocate value chains from Chinese products because doing so would be more expensive if done within domestic Chinese companies (Ancharaz & Nathoo, 2022, p. 8).

Graphic 2. Trade of China – Africa in 2010 – 2019 (in billion USD)



Source: UN Comtrade, retrieved from John Hopkins China – Africa Research Initiative

Furthermore, based on Graphic 2 above, it is said that there is a growing number of Chinese exports to African countries, even though from 2014 to 2016 there was an increasing and decreasing value in both exports and imports. By reducing or removing trade barriers from tariff to non-tariff, then it would be advantageous for Chinese products to sell at lower prices to African market. This is also supported by the fact that China is an important partner for Africa and the second largest partner after the European Union, followed by the US (Emerging Africa, n.d.). More importantly, Africa is also an important trade partner for China. Several industries in Africa have Chinese companies' involvement, including extractive industries, agriculture,

construction, manufacturing, and many more (Bbaala, 2015, p. 99).

One of the reasons why China chose Mauritius as its first FTA partner in Africa was that the FTA negotiation between China and another African partner, such as the South African Customs Union (SACU), was not going as expected and did not have any significant development. SACU is an African economic integration (one level above FTA) consisting of Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, South Africa, and Eswatini. Before the FTA negotiation with Mauritius, China planned to do its FTA with SACU in 2004.

According to the Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China's website, in 2004, Vice President of PRC Zeng Qinghong visited South Africa to discuss the negotiation of China - SACU FTA, which was already in the substantial stage (Ministry of Commerce People's Republic of China, n.d.). However, this article does not find a development in their negotiation either from China's government or SACU members. One possible reason might be Eswatini's recognition of Taiwan. Because of this reason, it is concluded that China's approach to Africa through SACU as one of the largest economies in Africa is not

going well, so China decided to cooperate with another African country, Mauritius.

How does China – Mauritius FTA facilitate China's exports and imports to dominate African market? China can utilize Mauritius' membership in some trade liberalization regional organizations such as the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) and Common Market of Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) to increase exports to African countries with a hub-and-spokes scheme. One said that one of the motives that underlies China in choosing its FTA partner is that China should use its FTA to increase trade with third parties that are members of the same FTA as China's partner (Bi Yujiang in Hoadley & Yang, 2007, p. 333). Through the China - Mauritius FTA, China could export its products to Mauritius which appears to be one of the members of some African integrations, and Mauritius could distribute China's products at lower prices to African countries so that it will increase the demand for China's products.

Meanwhile, the FDI data from Mauritius and China at the moment shows that there is little to no FDI that China received from Mauritius. Data from Ancharaz and Nowbutsing shows that Mauritius was one of the sources of FDI for China, where there is an increasing

number of FDI from Mauritius to China from 119.000 USD in 1994 to 1,5 million USD in 2008. In 2008, the FDI that China received from Mauritius contributed to 1,62% of the total FDI that China received (Ancharaz & Nowbutsing, 2010, p. 19). However, there is no data found after 2008 about FDI from Mauritius to China. It can be said then that according to the first variable of the theory, China's economic motives behind the China - Mauritius FTA is to expand market access to Africa through Mauritius, especially to export Chinese products to Africa, and not as a source of getting investment from Mauritius.

Based on the second variable from the Cross-Regionalism theory, an East Asian country is also driven by another economic motive when doing a cross-regional FTA, which is to avoid trade diversion as a result of its FTA partners' trade with other countries. In other words, according to Solis and Katada, an East Asian country does not want to be discriminated against for its products by its partner choice, and to avoid discrimination, a cross-regional FTA could act as a guarantee.

First, before the China - Mauritius FTA was signed in 2019, Mauritius had already been a member of some trade liberalization agreements, intra-regional or

cross-regional. Some of the regional blocs are the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC) (1984), the Common Market for Southern and Eastern Africa (COMESA) FTA (2000), the Southern African Development Community (SADC) (2008), the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) (2019) and bilateral FTAs such as Mauritius - Pakistan PTA (2007) and Mauritius - Turkey FTA (2013). Furthermore, after the China - Mauritius FTA was signed, Mauritius also ratified an agreement with India called the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation and Partnership Agreement (CECPA) in 2021 (Mauritius Chamber of Commerce and Industry, n.d.).

Several trade agreements that Mauritius has joined could result in trade diversion for China because Mauritius will prefer to trade with other member countries in the same organization(s). Data from a think-tank in Africa called Trade Law Center NPC (Tralac) said that 21% of the total exports of Mauritius are from intra-African. Meanwhile, the total imports of Mauritius from intra-African are 14%, where 97% are from SADC and COMESA (Trade Law Center, 2018). Furthermore, in the African region, South Africa is a primary trading partner of Mauritius, and both countries are members of the same trade liberalization agreements that could

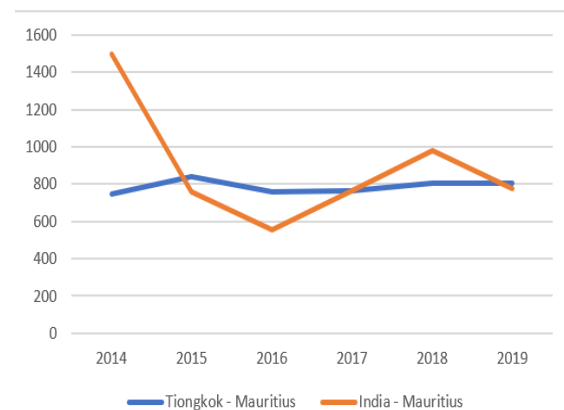
lead to trade diversion for China. Therefore, to avoid trade diversion and not just be an 'outsider', China could use FTA through China - Mauritius FTA so that China can utilize several trade agreements that Mauritius joined to facilitate China's trade, particularly with the African mainland.

One of Mauritius' trade agreements is AfCFTA. AfCFTA is the largest trade area in the world, consisting of 55 African countries and 8 Regional Economic Communities (RECs). One of the main objectives of forming AfCFTA is to establish a single market in the region with a total population reach of 1,3 billion and a total GDP reach of 3,4 trillion USD (African Continental Free Trade Area, n.d.). AfCFTA started trading in 2021 after some negotiations from 2012, along with the China - Mauritius FTA in 2021. After 'failing' to agree on an FTA with SACU as one of the RECs that joined the AfCFTA, an FTA with Mauritius could guarantee China not be excluded from the region and still become a major player in Africa so that China could avoid trade diversion.

This article also studies that rivalry between China and India in Mauritius is one of China's driven economic motives behind the China - Mauritius FTA. India is China's rival country in almost all aspects, including trading with Mauritius.

According to data in Graph 3, India's total exports to Mauritius and China's total exports to Mauritius are significantly different in some years.

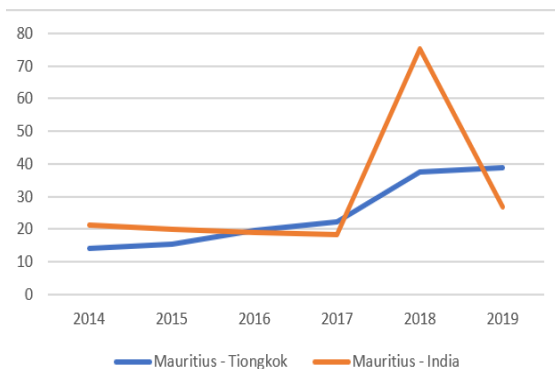
Graphic 3. A Comparison of China's Exports to Mauritius and India's Exports to Mauritius in 2014 – 2019 (in million USD)



Source: Trading Economics

Based on the data from 2014 - 2019 above, India's export value to Mauritius and China's export value to Mauritius are significantly different, where the latter is more stable in value. In certain years, India's export value is more significant than China's export value to Mauritius. Meanwhile, from Graph 4 below, India's import value from Mauritius and China's import value are also significantly different.

Graphic 4. A Comparison of China’s Imports from Mauritius and India’s Imports from Mauritius in 2014 – 2019 (in million USD)



Source: Trading Economic

However, this article finds that China's rivalry with India in export-import with Mauritius is not the main reason for Mauritius' trade diversion from China to India. Goods and services traded differ between China - Mauritius and India - Mauritius. China's exports to Mauritius are mostly machinery and electronic devices, cotton, iron and steel, and furniture. China imports sea products like fish and crustacea, clothes, clothes accessories, sugar, and refined copper from Mauritius (Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC), 2022). Meanwhile, India's exported goods to Mauritius are refined petroleum pure cotton, and India imports scrap steel and medical equipment (Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC), 2022).

Trade diversion in the sense of investment would more likely be done by Mauritius from China to India because Mauritius' investment in India is much more than Mauritius' investment in China. Center for Budget and Governance Accountability, a think-tank from India, said that from 2000 - 2017, 34% of the total FDI that India received was FDI from Mauritius (Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability, 2020). Meanwhile, Mauritius' investment in China is little to none (Ancharaz & Nathoo, 2022, p. 2). This can eventually lead to trade diversion from China to India. But, with the formation of the China - Mauritius FTA, China could get Mauritius investors' confidence to increase FDI to China because the agreement also manages investment protection.

Besides the two economic motives above, this article also examines the uniqueness of China's FTA strategy in Africa. This article analyzes that the China - Mauritius FTA study case needs to be seen as a part of China's global strategy to be a global economic power, specifically through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

First, according to the official website of the Ministry of Commerce of China, the FTA not only increases trade and investment relations between both countries but would also be China's

strategy to transform China and Africa relations and promote BRI in Africa (Ministry of Commerce People's Republic of China, 2017). First, according to the official website of the Ministry of Commerce of China, the FTA not only increases trade and investment relations between both countries but would also be China's strategy to transform China and Africa relations and promote BRI in Africa (Ministry of Commerce People's Republic of China, 2021).

This article analyzes that China could utilize the FTA as a stepping stone for China to expand its power in Africa by promoting the BRI project. This eventually could strengthen China's status as a global economic power because China has a dominant position in most regions, including Africa.

Moreover, if we connect this to Solis and Katada's theory, for example in market access, on one side the FTA would benefit China by minimizing the power of Western countries' influence in Africa. On the other side, the FTA could also benefit China as a way to make African countries more dependent on China, from 'Made in China' products, investments, aid, infrastructure development, and many more.

Furthermore, based on the article from Hu *et al.* (2022), China's FTA could

affect the percentage of failure of infrastructure investment projects in countries involved in BRI projects. China's investment in the FTAs could also affect the implementation of the BRI projects in other countries, in which FTAs could increase the assurance of host countries to invest in BRI projects (Hu *et al.*, 2022). Stuchlíková *et al.* also said that even though FTAs ratified by China after BRI in 2013 were going slow, those FTAs could surprisingly influence the sustainability of BRI (Stuchlíková *et al.*, 2021, p. 24).

Then, it can be said that the China - Mauritius FTA that was signed after the BRI is becoming a pivotal point along the BRI projects, where Mauritius is an important part of the projects since the geographic location of Mauritius is in the Indian Ocean and the Indian Ocean is intersect with the country maps of China's Maritime Silk Road. However, it is important to note that Mauritius is one of the African countries that has not signed the document of BRI because Mauritius also has a close relationship with India. India is one of the countries that disapprove of the BRI projects. Mauritius would not harm its relation with India, so Mauritius will not sign the documents of BRI even though Mauritius openly agreed

to intensify its economic relation with China through FTA (Tiezzi, 2018).

Although Mauritius did not sign the BRI cooperation treaty, the establishment of the China-Mauritius FTA allows China to "bind" Mauritius to remain a part of the BRI. Mauritius' strategic geographic location as one of China's trade routes, connecting with the BRI map, makes Mauritius a key site for China to fulfill its economic objectives. This article believes that establishing an FTA with Mauritius, as one of the African countries, can boost African market confidence in the BRI project, particularly in light of concerns that the BRI is extending China's debt trap for several African countries.

Furthermore, Mauritius portrays itself as a tech hub, having developed the information and communication technology (ICT) business and enabling it to compete with other African countries such as South Africa and Botswana. This was then used by China to increase the influence of the Digital Silk Road in Africa. One example is the Chinese-owned Huawei corporation that established a facility in Mauritius. Another example of China's Digital Silk Road program in other countries is the implementation of the project in Indonesia, where the program is in line with the Indonesian government and local businesses due to the need for

digital transformation in Indonesia (Abdurrohim & Tayibnapis, 2022, p. 226).

Conclusion

The signing of China's FTA with Mauritius, the first African country to have a higher level of trade agreement with China, indicates an escalation in China's engagement in Africa. Even though Mauritius is seen as a trading partner that is not very significant to China compared to other African partners of China, an FTA with Mauritius could create a win-win situation for China. For example, the FTA could facilitate China in increasing its goods exports to Africa by maximizing Mauritius' position in the region. Moreover, the expansion of market access to the African market could benefit China as it will experience an increasing number of demands for 'Made in China' products from the African market through Mauritius.

Moreover, China could also avoid the trade diversion from Mauritius, specifically because Mauritius is a member of some regional blocs in Africa and has a close partnership with India. China - Mauritius FTA could also be China's way to strengthen its status as a global economic power through BRI projects, because Mauritius is crucial for China since the FTA could ensure the smooth

operation of the BRI, particularly under the Maritime Silk Road. China used the China - Mauritius FTA as a strategic scheme in its larger strategy to become a global economic power. This study case then also shows that China was driven by economic motives to establish an FTA with the smaller countries and not only political motives.

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