



## In Malawi, perceptions of China's influence, though positive, are on the decline

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**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 406 | Maxton Tsoka**

### Summary

China's relationship with Africa, formalized in the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), has received considerable attention and debate. Critics consider it lopsided and exploitative, giving China access to natural resources, jobs for its labourers, and markets for its traders while undermining efforts to promote democracy and human rights on the continent, exacerbating corruption, and creating unsustainable debt (Green, 2019; Brautigam, 2010; Shinn & Brown, 2012; Albert, 2020). But others see it as more multifaceted with benefits for both sides (Mugabe, 2015; Brown, 2012).

Malawi's ties with China began only in 2008, when then-President Bingu wa Mutharika abandoned the country's long-standing diplomatic relations with Taiwan. In return, China began sponsoring a number of high-profile projects in Malawi, including the Parliament Building, Karonga-Chitipa Road, Bingu International Conference Centre, and the two five-star hotels and shopping mall at the heart of the Capital City. But in the past five years, the number of high-profile projects has declined, as have presidential references to China as a key friend.

How do average Malawians see their country's relations with China? Findings from Afrobarometer surveys since 2008 show that despite being a late entrant on the diplomatic scene, China is seen as an important economic player. But perceptions of its influence have declined since 2014, public awareness of its assistance is limited, and many Malawians think their country has borrowed too heavily from China. Still, among Malawians' preferred development models, China ties with the United States, just behind South Africa.

### Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Seven rounds of surveys were completed in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018. Round 8 surveys in 2019/2021 are planned in at least 35 countries. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Malawi, led by the Centre for Social Research at the University of Malawi, interviewed 1,200 adult Malawians in November-December 2019. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in 1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, and 2017.

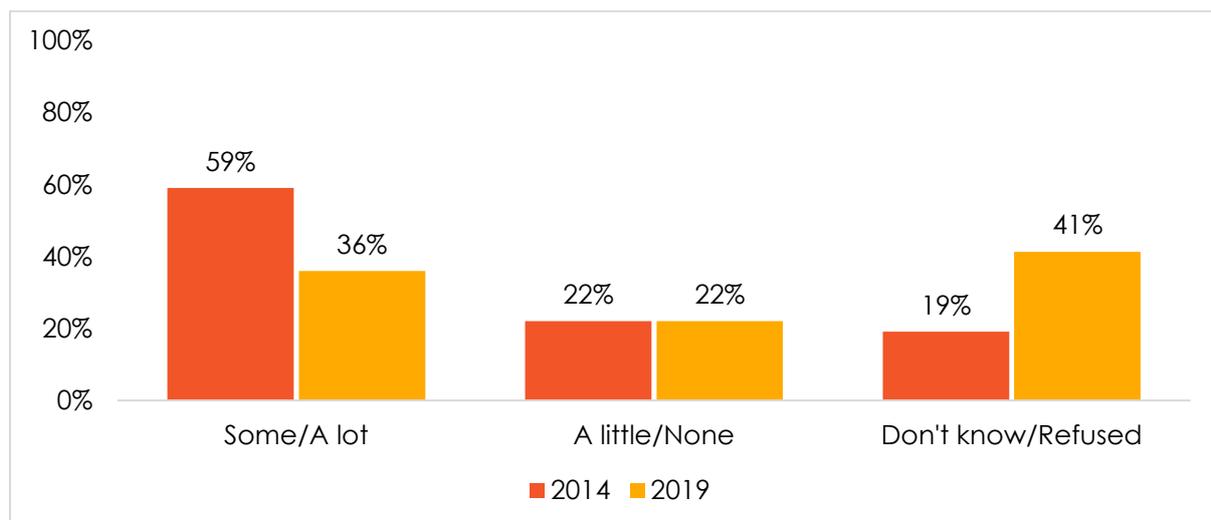
## Key findings

- Only about one-third (36%) of Malawians think that China's economic activities exert "some" or "a lot" of influence on Malawi's economy, a decline of 23 percentage points since 2014.
- Malawians have a more positive (50%) than negative (26%) perception of China's economic and political influence in their country. Positive views are fueled by China's low-cost products as well as its infrastructure and business investments, while negative views are based mainly on perceptions that its products are of poor quality.
- Fewer than half (46%) of Malawians are aware that their country receives loans or development assistance from China.
- Among those who are aware of China's assistance, a majority (56%) think Malawi has borrowed too much from China.
- In a comparison with other countries and organizations, China ranks fourth in perceived influence in Malawi and perceived helpfulness to the country.
- China ties with the United States as a development model preferred by Malawians, trailing only South Africa.

## Influence of China's economic activities

Overall, China's perceived influence on Malawi's economy has declined over the past five years. In 2019, about one-third (36%) of survey respondents said China's economic activities have "some" or "a lot" of influence on Malawi's economy, down from 59% in the 2014 survey. But the proportion who saw China as having just "a little" or "no" impact on Malawi's economy did not increase (22%). Instead, far more respondents said they "don't know" enough about the issue to offer an assessment (41% vs. 19% in 2014) (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Influence of China's economic activities | Malawi | 2014-2019**



**Respondents were asked:** How much influence do you think China's economic activities in Malawi have on our economy, or haven't you heard enough to say?

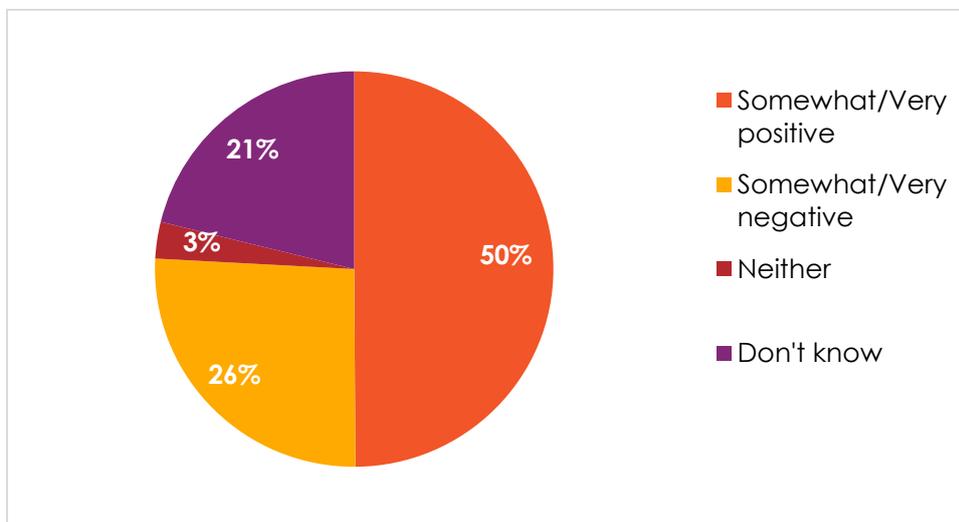
This shift may reflect changes in Malawi-China relations. In 2014, China enjoyed high visibility in Malawi after then-President Mutharika switched diplomatic relations from Taiwan to

mainland China in 2008 and China in return sponsored a number of high-profile projects in Malawi. Since then, the number of high-profile projects has declined, along with presidential references to China.

By a 2-to-1 margin (50% vs. 26%), Malawians said in 2014 that they considered China's economic and political influence positive rather than negative (Figure 2). This question was not asked in later surveys.

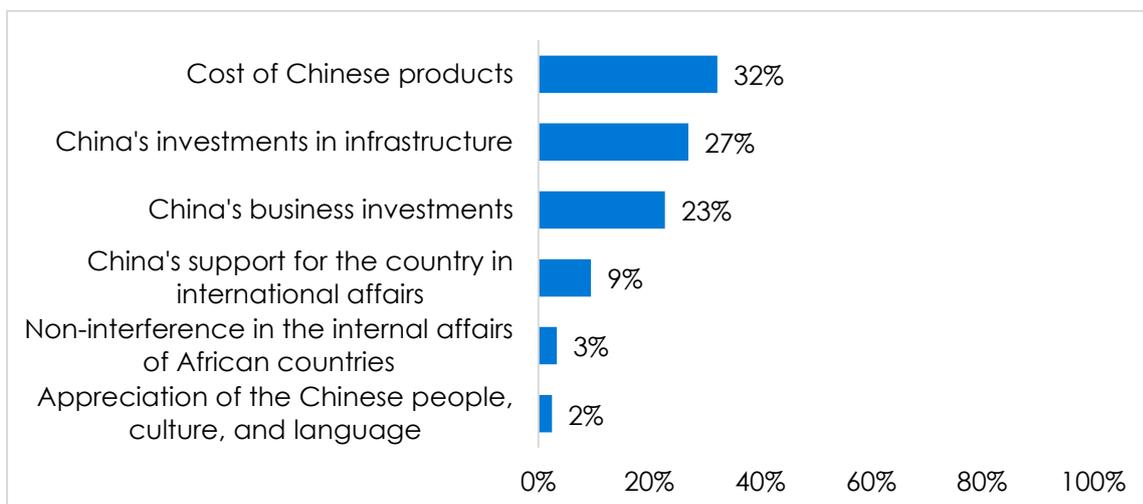
The main factors contributing to China's positive image were the cost of Chinese products (32%) and China's investments in infrastructure (27%) and businesses (23%) (Figure 3). By far the most commonly cited factor contributing to a negative image of China was the quality of its products (68%), while only about one in 10 respondents cited land grabbing (9%) or the idea that Chinese take jobs or business away from locals (9%) (Figure 4).

**Figure 2: China's economic and political influence: Positive or negative? | Malawi | 2014**



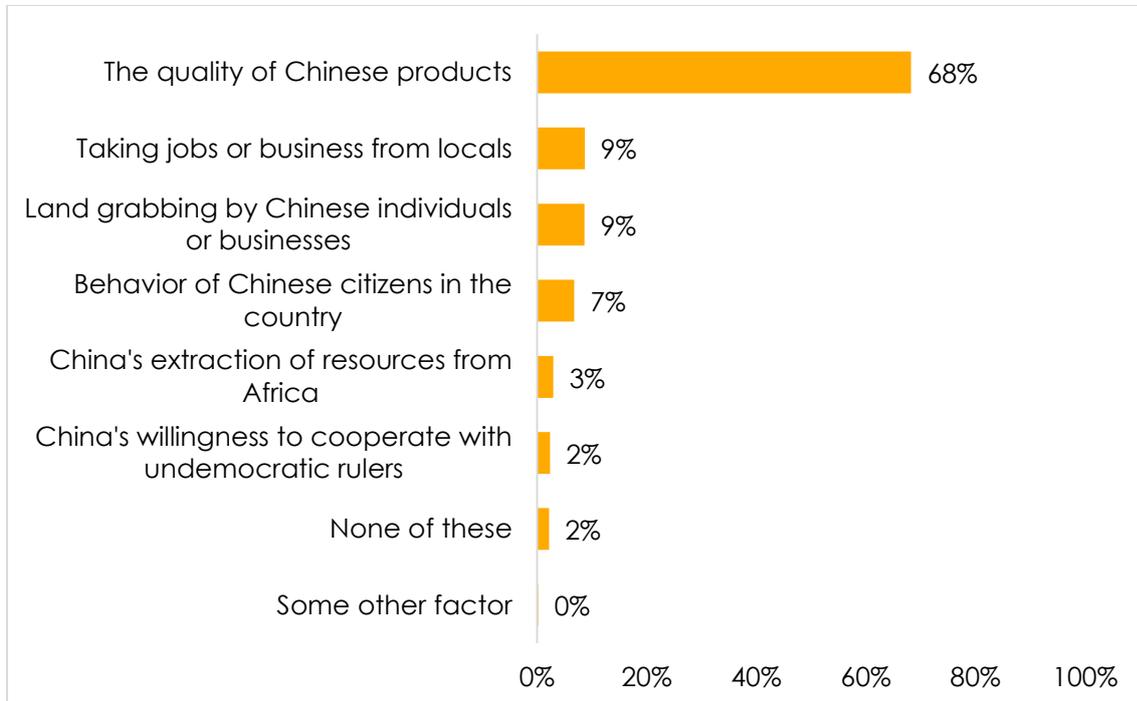
**Respondents were asked:** *In general, do you think that China's economic and political influence on Malawi is mostly positive, or mostly negative, or haven't you heard enough to say?*

**Figure 3: Basis for China's positive image | Malawi | 2014**



**Respondents were asked:** *Which of the following factors contributes most to a positive image of China in Malawi, or haven't you heard enough to say?*

**Figure 4: Basis for China's negative image | Malawi | 2014**

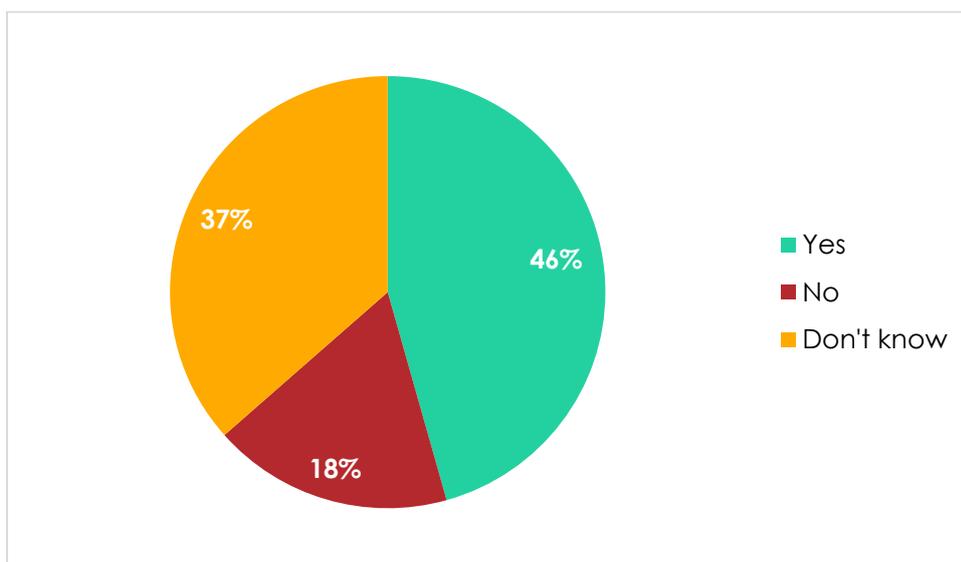


**Respondents in Round 6 were asked:** Which of the following factors contributes most to negative image of China in Malawi, or haven't you heard enough to say?

### Assessment of development assistance from China

China is not a well-known development partner in Malawi; in 2019, fewer than half (46%) of survey respondents were aware that Malawi gets loans or development assistance from China (Figure 5).

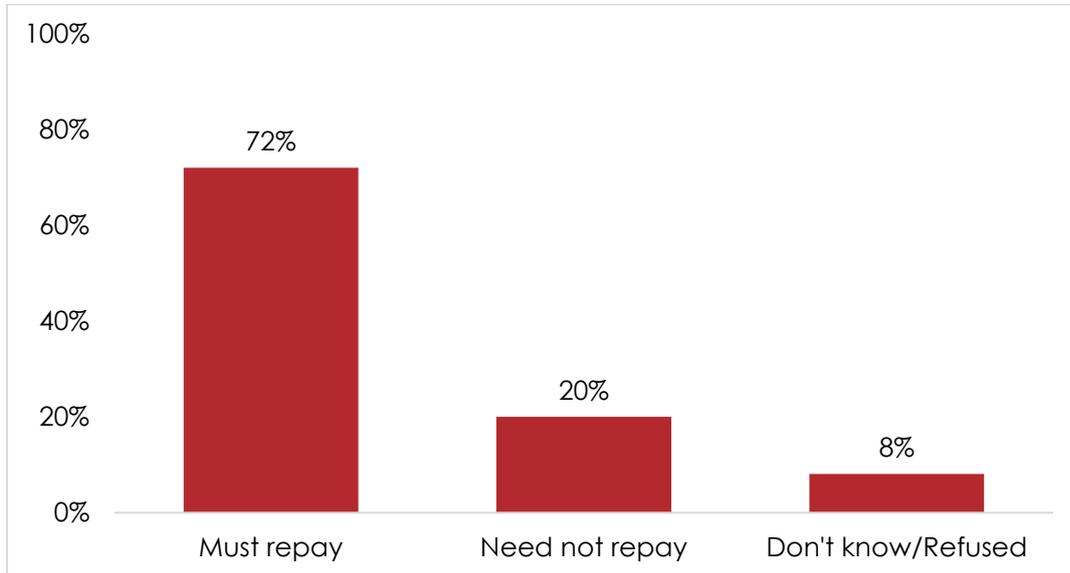
**Figure 5: Awareness of China's development assistance | Malawi | 2019**



**Respondents were asked:** To your knowledge, does China give loans or development assistance to our country's government, or haven't you had a chance to hear about this?

Among those who were aware that Malawi gets development assistance from China, more than seven in 10 also knew that the country generally has to repay loans (Figure 6).

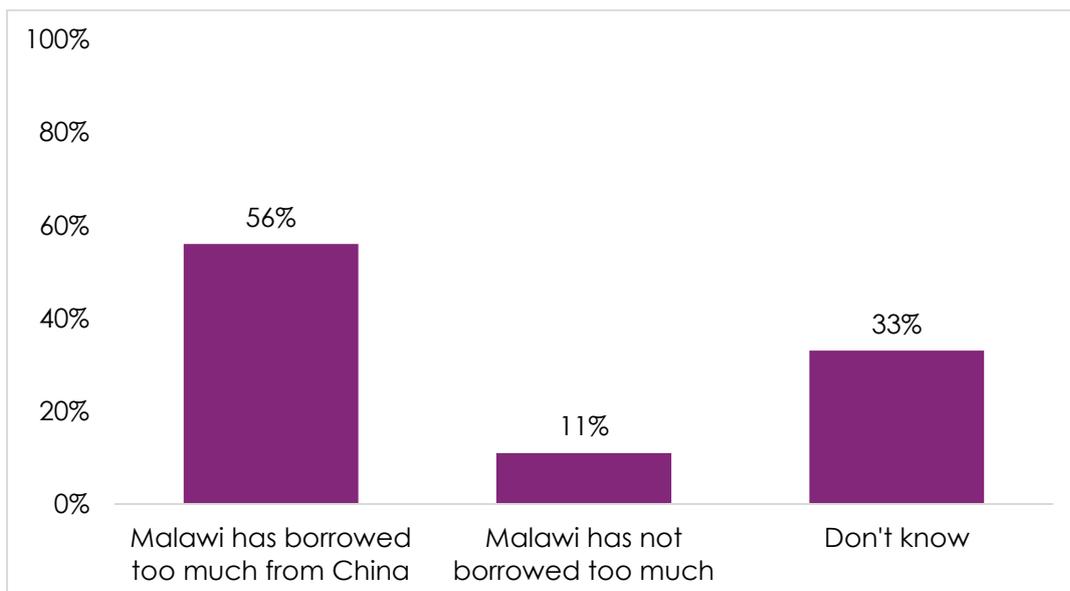
**Figure 6: Does Malawi have to repay Chinese loans? | Malawi | 2019**



**Respondents were asked:** Do you think that our government is required to repay China for the loans and development assistance it provides to Malawi, or haven't you heard enough to say? (Figure excludes respondents who did not know that China gives loans or development assistance to Malawi.)

And a majority (56%) of those who were aware of Chinese assistance said Malawi has borrowed too much from China. Only one in 10 (11%) affirmed that the country is not too heavily indebted to China, while one-third (33%) said they did not know (Figure 7).

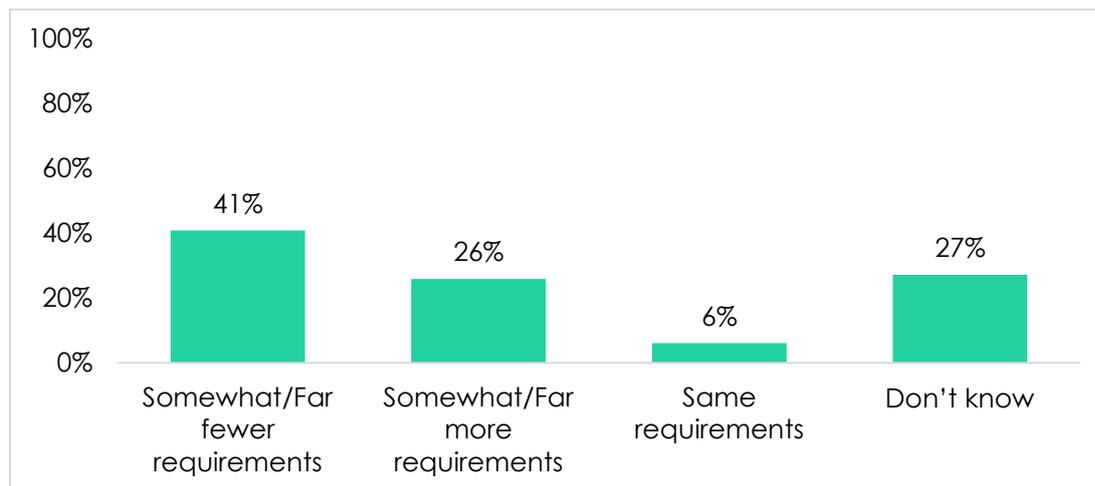
**Figure 7: Has Malawi borrowed too much from China? | Malawi | 2019**



**Respondents were asked:** Do you think our government has borrowed too much money from China, or haven't you heard enough to say? (Figure excludes respondents who did not know that China gives loans or development assistance to Malawi.)

As for strings attached to China's development assistance, a plurality (41%) of Malawians who were aware of such aid said China attaches fewer requirements to its loans and assistance than other development partners, while about one-fourth (26%) thought it attached more requirements (Figure 8).

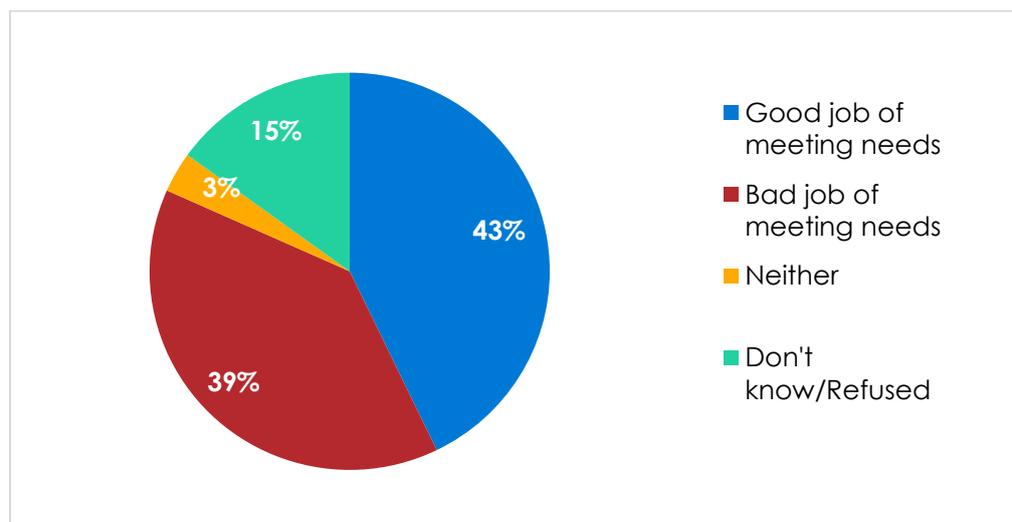
**Figure 8: Conditionality of development assistance: China vs. other development partners | Malawi | 2019**



**Respondents were asked:** When the government of China gives loans or development assistance to Malawi, do you think they put more requirements or fewer requirements on our government compared to other donor countries, or haven't you heard enough to say? (Figure excludes respondents who did not know that China gives loans or development assistance to Malawi.)

On whether China's development assistance is in line with the country's needs, Malawians were divided. More than four in 10 (43%) said China's development assistance does a good job of meeting Malawi's needs, while almost as many (39%) said the opposite (Figure 9).

**Figure 9: Does China's assistance meet Malawi's needs? | Malawi | 2014**



**Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, does China's economic development assistance to Malawi do a good job or a bad job of meeting the country's needs, or haven't you heard enough to say? (Figure excludes respondents who did not know that China gives loans or development assistance to Malawi.)

## China vs. other development partners in Malawi

When asked in 2014 which country or organization has the greatest influence on Malawi, citizens were most likely to cite the United States (32%), followed by South Africa (16%), the United Kingdom (13%), and then China (12%) (Figure 10). Considering that China had come onto the diplomatic scene in Malawi just six years earlier, the fact that it ranked about even with the former colonial power (UK) is remarkable.

**Figure 10: Greatest influence on Malawi | Malawi | 2014**



**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following do you think has the most influence on Malawi, or haven't you heard enough to say?

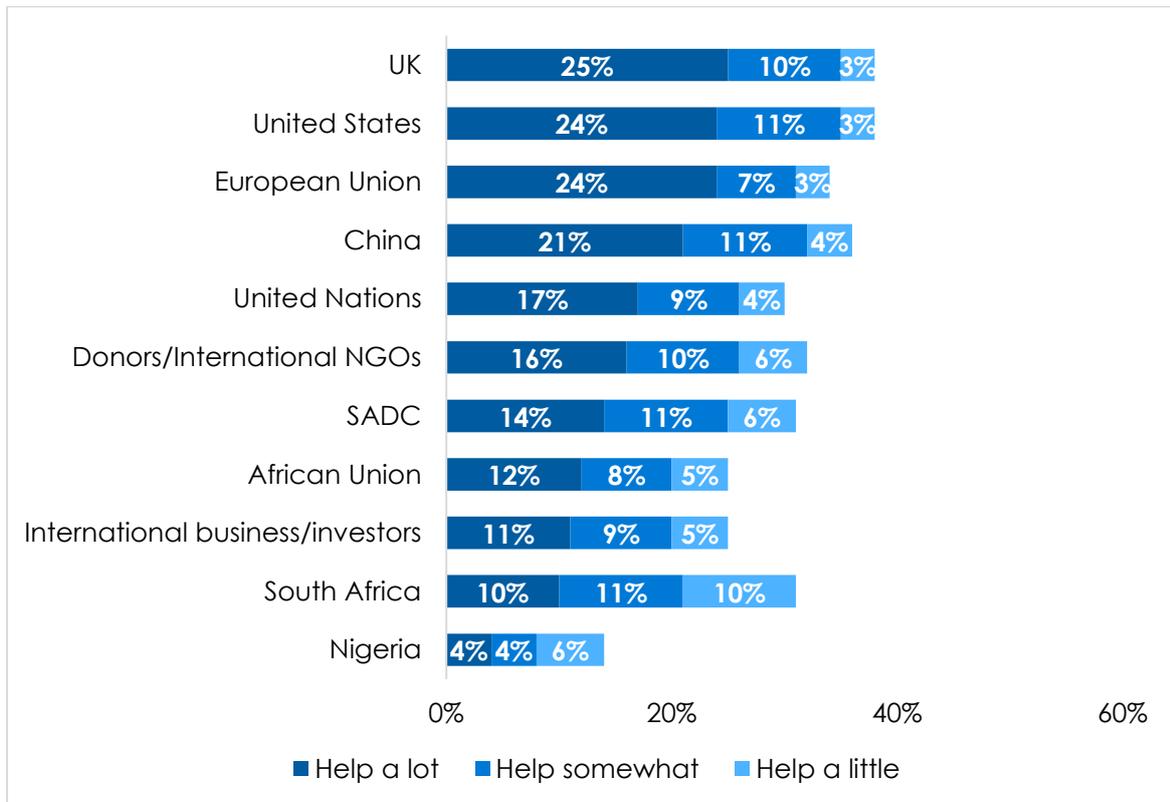
In terms of support to the country as a development partner, China ranks fourth among countries and organizations seen as helping Malawi “a lot” (by 21% of respondents), behind the UK (25%), the United States (24%), and the European Union (24%) (Figure 11).

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When respondents were asked to choose a country whose model Malawi should adopt for its future development, China tied with the United States (20% and 21%, respectively), trailing only South Africa (27%)

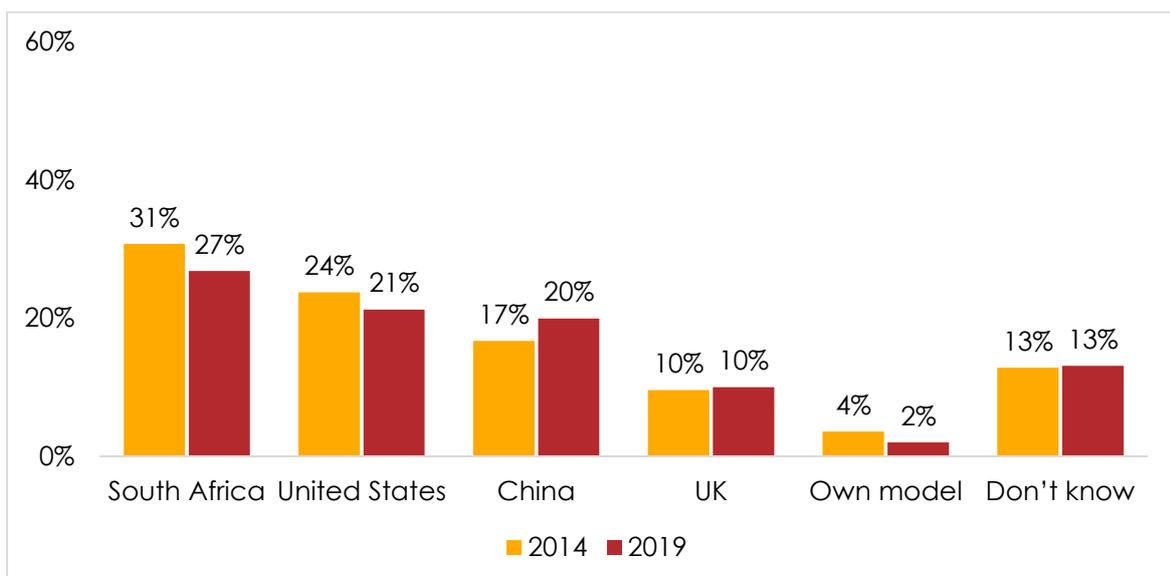
(Figure 12). But while South Africa and the United States both declined modestly in popularity compared to 2014, China gained 3 percentage points, from 17% to 20%.

**Figure 11: How much do they help Malawi? | Malawi | 2008**



**Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, how much do each of the following do to help your country, or haven't you heard enough to say?

**Figure 12: Best development model | Malawi | 2014-2019**



**Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, which of the following countries, if any, would be the best model for the future development of our country, or is there some other country in Africa or elsewhere that should be our model? (Note: In 2014, the phrase "or is there some other country in Africa or elsewhere that should be our model" was not included in the question.)

## Conclusion

Despite its relatively brief history as a development partner in Malawi, China has established itself in the public mind as an important influence and a development model matching the United States and surpassing the UK in popularity. Even so, its perceived influence has declined since 2014. Fewer than half of Malawians are aware of its development assistance to their country, and among those who do know about it, a majority say their country has borrowed too much from China.

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Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, non-partisan research network. Regional coordination of national partners in about 35 countries is provided by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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