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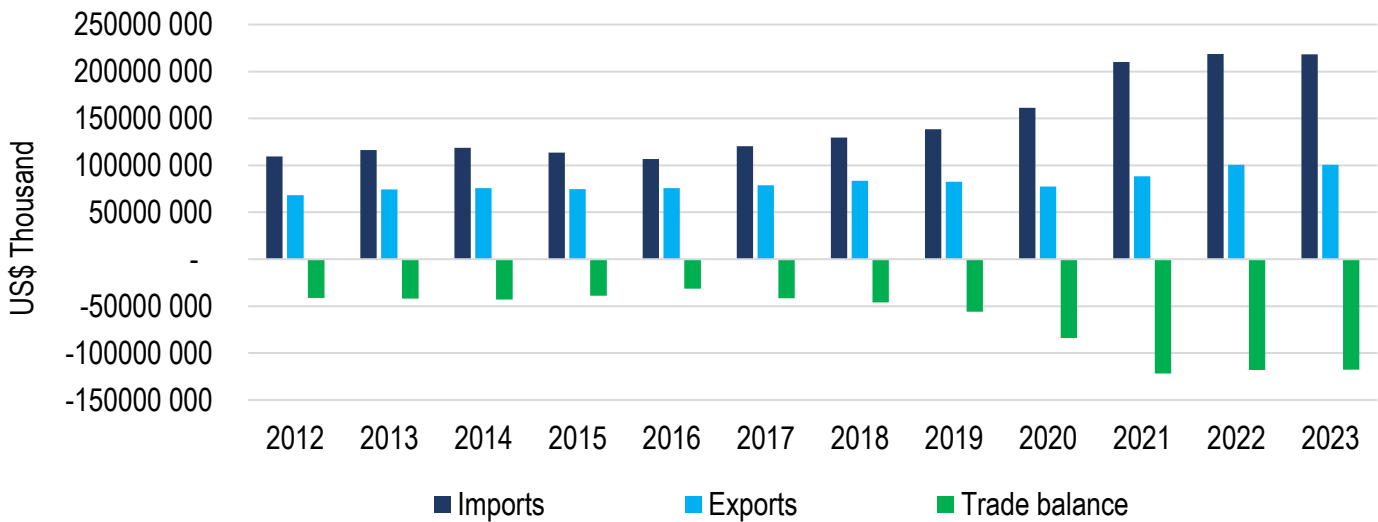
01 September 2024

## What agricultural message should the African leaders take to the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation?

- It is hard to discuss global agriculture without mentioning China. The country is a dominant player in exports and imports of agricultural products. In 2023, China was a leading agricultural importer, [accounting for 11% of global agricultural imports](#). Trailing China was the [US, Germany, Netherlands, the UK, France and Japan](#). Similarly, China played a notable role in exports, and it was the fifth-largest agricultural exporter in the world in 2023. The leading countries ahead of China were the US, Brazil, Netherlands, and Germany.
- Commentary on China trade is under spotlight again in the wake of the [Forum on China–Africa Cooperation \(FOCAC\) taking place in early September](#). Some African countries will likely use this opportunity to advocate for deeper trade, especially in agriculture. This is understandable in view of China's dominant role in global agriculture. According to Trade Map data, China spends just over US\$200 billion a year on the imports of agricultural products. Few African countries benefit from these imports due to low productivity. The leading suppliers are Brazil, the US, Thailand, Australia, New Zealand, Indonesia, Canada, Vietnam, France, Russia, Argentina, Chile, Ukraine, the Netherlands, and Malaysia.
- The only African country that features in China's top 30 agricultural suppliers is South Africa, ranked 28 in 2023. Accounting for a mere 0,4% (US\$979 million) in China's agricultural imports of US\$218 billion in 2023, South Africa remains a negligible player in the Chinese agricultural market. Sudan and Zimbabwe are other African agricultural suppliers to China, and are ranked 33 and 34, respectively.
- The African continent has weak productivity and low agricultural output, which explains its underperformance in agricultural exports to China. The exceptions are South Africa and, to some extent, the Maghreb region. In light of this concerning picture, African leaders must prioritise agriculture trade in their deliberations with their Chinese counterparts at FOCAC. Crucially, technology cooperation and transfer must be uppermost in those conversations as Africa's future productivity lies in deployment of technologies that can boost productivity. Examples of the use of such technologies include on-farm solutions like irrigation technologies, better seed cultivars, and significant infrastructure challenges such as roads and rail that much of the continent still needs. The absence of functioning infrastructure will always remain a headache, even if China were to open its agricultural markets for imports from most African countries. These interventions and possible deals would essentially entail loans for developing the African continent's infrastructure.

- We know a lot has been done in the past, and reviews of such engagements are mixed, but the problem remains – Africa needs better improvement in the network industries to support agriculture. Aside from this, African leaders must do their part to formalize land rights in their countries and minimise arbitrary policy interventions, such as occasional blockage of exports by countries like Zambia. Such actions drive away private sector participation in Africa's agricultural market.
- However, the South African message must be different from that of many African countries. South Africa has an agricultural surplus each year, exporting about half of the country's yearly production. South Africa's agricultural exports amounted to a record US\$13,2 billion in 2023. Indeed, this is nowhere close to the amount of money China spends annually importing agricultural products from the world, a staggering US\$218 billion in 2023.
- China is already one of South Africa's major agricultural markets for a range of fruits, wine, red meat, nuts, maize, soybeans and wool, amongst other products. But there is room for more ambitious export efforts. The South African agricultural sector consistently points out the need for a broader lowering of import tariffs in China and removing phytosanitary constraints in various products. Indeed, the FOCAC is a high-level engagement and may not deal with the specifics of each value chain of agriculture or any product. However, a message of support and direction to the relevant departments of Chinese and South African government to work on lowering import tariffs and promoting agricultural trade would go a long way. The agricultural industry in South Africa wants to boost all fruit exports, as some currently do not enjoy full access to China, and also wine, red meat, and wool, amongst other products.
- Indeed, if one looks at China's agricultural imports, the top products include oilseeds, meat, grains, fruits and nuts, cotton, beverages and spirits, sugar, wool, and vegetables. These are all the categories of products South Africa wants to boost to China.
- In essence, the African leaders' message in agriculture should focus on agricultural productivity and technology partnerships. Meanwhile, for South Africa, the message must centre on boosting agricultural exports on a broad basis to China.

**Exhibit I: China’s agricultural trade**



Source: Trade Map and Agbiz Research