
CHINA'S INTEREST IN AFRICA: AN ASSESSMENT

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Abstract

Over the past few decades, China's rapid economic growth and expanding middle class have fueled an unprecedented need for resources. The economic powerhouse has focused on securing the long-term energy supplies needed to sustain its industrialization, searching for secure access to oil supplies and other raw materials around the globe. As part of this effort, China has turned to Africa through significant investment in a continent known for political and security risks, China has boosted African oil and mining sectors in exchange for advantageous trade deals. Chinese companies are also diversifying their business pursuits in Africa, in infrastructure, manufacturing, telecommunications, and agricultural sectors. However, China's activity in Africa has faced criticism from Western and African civil society over its controversial business practices, as well as its failure to promote good governance and human rights. Yet a number of African governments appear to be content with China's policy. At the same time, Beijing's complex relationship with the continent has challenged its policy of noninterference in the affairs of African governments. To understand the China's interest in Africa, this paper aims at exposing, analyzing and providing the necessary prospects on China's activities in Africa. Expository and analytic methods are adopted for this study. Thus the method of exposition is to uncover the China's interest while analytic method serves to offer China-Africa relations drawing its impacts and implications. The implication of this study shows that adequate understanding of China's interest in Africa would offer prospects towards caution and mitigation of the extremism of China's activities in Africa. This paper is divided into three sections. The first section discusses the Chinese immigration and investments in Africa, and its loan as debt trap to Africa countries. The second section assesses China's political and military activities in Africa. Finally, the last section highlights the current African challenges and examines the China's interest in Africa and then the conclusion.

Keywords: Relations, Investments, Interest, Trade, Relationship, Policy, Political, Resources, Partnership, Develop, Economy.

Introduction

It is more than two decades; China has reinvigorated its longstanding ties to African countries, placing the continent squarely at the center of its ambitions to become a global leader. In its official policy documents, Beijing claims to assist African countries in choosing their own development path while upholding its principle of “noninterference” in African domestic politics (Alden, 2007). In practice, however, the Chinese government exports its model of state-led economic growth under one-party, authoritarian rule (Taylor, 2009). Economically, Beijing contends it seeks to help Africa industrialize and promote “win-win” cooperation (Brautigam, 2009). Its trade and investment, however, are characterized by increasing control over key African commodities and infrastructure. Opaque loans from China are pushing some African countries deeper into debt (Bräutigam & Hwang, 2016). To some, these patterns are reminiscent of Africa's colonial past and have led to concerns among African citizens and leaders that China's economic presence is not mutually beneficial, but rather an example of Beijing's “debt trap diplomacy” (Carmody, 2013). As Chinese activity actively continues in African countries, this paper is set to uncover and examine its interest in the continent.

A Brief History of China-Africa Relations

China and Africa have a long history of mutual political support in the global anti-colonial movement in the early 20th century, the Non-Aligned Movement during the Cold War era, and the Global South agenda at the UN General Assembly (Shinn & Eisenman, 2012). China supported several African liberation movements during the Cold War, and for every year since 1950 bar one, the foreign minister of the People's Republic of China (PRC) has first visited an African country (Alden, 2007). China's new foreign minister Qin Gang visited five African countries and the African Union in January 2023. Wang Yi, the former foreign minister, visited 48 African countries, and premier Xi Jinping undertook 10 visits to Africa between 2014 and 2020 (Yu, 2023).

However, a comprehensive framework outlining China's strategic relationship with Africa had not been institutionalized by China until the beginning of the 21st century (Taylor, 2009). According to Dr. Shirley Yu, Senior Fellow and Director of the China-Africa Initiative at the London School of Economics, “major transformations” in their relationship were ushered in with the establishment of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000 (Yu, 2023). FOCAC has been instrumental in developing comprehensive Africa-China relations and enabling multilateral relationships between China and African states. In the early 2000s, the China-Africa economic relationship was primarily driven by the trade of low-value-added goods (Taylor, 2009).

Starting from 2006, and accelerated after the global financial crisis, “we begin to see the relationship add dimensions of Chinese financing, direct investment, and state-led lending programs,” (Shirley Yu, 2023). The change led to China becoming Africa's largest sovereign creditor and FDI originator by 2020 (Brautigam, 2009). From a marginal actor and the least developed country to the largest economy in the world in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms, China's path to relevance and Great Power status is an irreversible reality (Carmody, 2013). Throughout this period, China's presence in Africa has grown from minor relevance to the continent's largest trading partner, with expectations of more, mainly due to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Shinn & Eisenman, 2012). Thousands of Chinese companies have settled and are operational in African countries, with entrepreneurship growing in China and in Africa (Alden, 2007).

The growing Chinese presence in Africa is not unnoticed. Africa has also become a territory where the clash between the Great Powers, particularly the United States and China, is observed (Taylor, 2009). There is much negative campaigning against China without considering the possibilities the China-Africa Partnership has already generated. Such allegations repeat the usual criticisms against China: neocolonialism, debt trapping, corruption, employment of Chinese workers, and disregard for local human rights violations (Carmody, 2013). To address such issues, China has embraced several programs to counteract anti-China sentiment and stimulate Chinese firms into positive action (Yu, 2023).

The China-Africa relationship shows how the developing world is forging greater connections within itself. In a world characterized by shifting power dynamics and economic imperatives, both regions will need to navigate the nuanced complexities and opportunities inherent in this partnership (Brautigam, 2009).

Chinese migration to Africa

Due to the incredibly fast and successful development of the China-African relations, the number of Chinese immigrants in Africa has increased dramatically (Shinn & Eisenman, 2012). The Annual Report on Overseas Chinese Study published by the Social Sciences Academic Press, showed that in 1996, the African continent only had 16,000 Chinese immigrants, whilst in 2012, the report showed there were over 1.1 million Chinese immigrants, 90% of which had arrived after 1970 (Alden, 2007). This one million Chinese are spread over 54 countries, and these large numbers of Chinese migrants have followed the similar amounts of Chinese goods and capital to Africa (Taylor, 2009). They include both educated and uneducated, professionals and farmers, rural and urban citizens. Initially, it was mainly men that were migrating to Africa, and although they still make up the majority of the migrants, the number of single women and families that are migrating is increasing (Shinn & Eisenman, 2012).

The first-ever Chinese citizens to migrate to Africa were laborers working for Chinese retail or catering companies, however, more and more Chinese intellectuals and skilled professionals are moving to Africa (Brautigam, 2009). Most of these immigrants saw Africa as a place full of employment and economic opportunities, especially because the continent is a huge market available for a great variety of goods (Carmody, 2013). They also find more opportunities for personal growth, where they can learn about a new culture and try to become part of a different society (Shinn & Eisenman, 2012). Most of these immigrants are trying to save large amounts of money in a short period of time, so that they can then retire and move back to China or other developed countries (Alden, 2007). For over 10 years, the Chinese government has been investing considerably in Africa (Yu, 2023). The partnership between the two started in 1996 when Chinese President Jiang Zemin suggested the development of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) during a speech at the Organization of African Unity headquarters in Addis Ababa (Taylor, 2009). In 2000, the first successful convention of the FOCAC occurred in Beijing, gathering leaders from 44 African countries (Yu, 2023).

These Chinese traders and laborers are hired by Chinese state-owned enterprises and independent companies, but there is a small percentage that migrate independently and choose to start their own businesses (Alden, 2007). Some consider the Chinese population in Africa as a threat to their economy, as Chinese companies have been accused of only hiring Chinese workers and these workers have taken up jobs in low-skilled fields that are normally given to the locals (Taylor, 2009). To tackle this problem, both the Chinese and African governments are creating policies to ensure that Chinese companies are hiring local workers (Shinn & Eisenman, 2012). Some countries, such as Zambia, have specific immigration policies aimed at preserving the job opportunities for the locals whilst admitting highly educated and skilled professionals into the country, to cope with the lack of certain skills in the local population (Brautigam, 2009).

Meanwhile, it is incredibly difficult to find accurate and reliable data on Chinese migrants in Africa (Alden, 2007). Accurate migration data in general can be elusive, but in countries that lack the infrastructure to generate any reliable statistics, such as many countries in Africa, it is even harder to obtain this type of important information (Carmody, 2013). For example, in Zambia, the estimate of the Chinese presence was 80,000. Recent data obtained by the Zambian Deputy Minister of Home Affairs suggests that the actual number of Chinese nationals present in Zambia is roughly 20,000 (Taylor, 2009). This enormous discrepancy between figures is extremely important, as these inaccurate numbers of Chinese nationals have led to xenophobic election rhetoric and occasional outbreaks of violence and protests (Shinn & Eisenman, 2012).

However, despite the increasingly growing anti-immigration movements in a lot of Western countries, the majority of the literature relevant to migration points out that migration greatly contributes to the economic and social development of a country and that it is essential for rapid and sustained growth and development, as migrants support local economies, create more job opportunities, and expand the tax base (Yu, 2023).

China's investment in Africa

China has taken a position contrary to Western governments in its African investment. It characterizes its loans as mutually beneficial cooperation between developing countries, promising not to interfere in the internal politics of those it loans to. In this respect, it presents itself in contrast to Western countries, which are accused by China and some African governments of arrogant, democratic posturing—often by former colonial powers that looted African resources during the 18th and 19th centuries (Mlambo et al., 2016).

China has cooperated actively with several African countries, particularly on infrastructure, investment, trade, and aid. China has been responsible for developing several significant African infrastructure projects, particularly ports, airports, roads, and power plants. Such projects address Africa's most pressing challenge: connectivity within the continent (Brautigam, 2009). China has engaged actively with African countries on technology transfer and capacity-building projects in telecommunications, renewable energy, information technology, mobile networks, and enhanced communication infrastructure (Tan-Mullins et al., 2010).

China has helped build much-needed infrastructure in Africa, positively impacting the output of goods and services, despite some countries still facing domestic governance and corruption challenges (Corkin, 2011). China has invested heavily in the continent to expand the reach of its soft power, diplomatic influence, and infrastructure initiatives to consolidate its interests and presence (Sun, 2014).

However, China is Africa's biggest and strongest ally and, in recent years, has pumped millions of dollars into the continent, funding one mega project after another. At the close of the 2018 China-Africa Forum for Cooperation (FOCAC) summit held in Beijing, the world's second biggest economy announced that it had set up a new R900 billion (\$60 billion) kitty meant for Africa's development as part of a raft of new measures to strengthen Sino-Africa ties (Alden & Large, 2018). The fund, which is broken down into several parts, will be channeled to projects aligned to the Chinese government's Belt and Road Initiative covering telecommunications, construction of roads, bridges and sea ports, energy, and human capacity development (Zeng, 2020).

Examples of China's projects in Africa:

1. **Railway projects:** At least five African countries have had their railway systems funded by China: Kenya, Ethiopia, Angola, Djibouti, and Nigeria. Kenya's largest infrastructure project since independence, Mombasa-Nairobi Standard Gauge Railway, was funded by China at an estimated cost of R57.2 billion (Liu, 2020). In Ethiopia, China has funded two railways projects: Addis Ababa Light Rail Transit and Ethiopia-Djibouti Railway (Moss & Rose, 2021). Lobito-Luau Railway in Angola and Abuja-Kaduna Railway in Nigeria were also funded by China.
2. **AU Headquarters:** The R3 billion African Union headquarters located in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, was fully funded and built by China (Shinn & Eisenman, 2012).
3. **ECOWAS Headquarters:** In March 2018, West African regional bloc ECOWAS signed a deal with China to build their headquarters in Abuja at a cost of R475.7 million (\$31.6 million) (Zeng, 2020).
4. **Ghana's Bauxite Exploration:** In 2017, Ghana agreed to a R150 million bauxite exploration deal with the government of China aimed at further exploiting the West African country's vast solid mineral deposits (Amoah, 2022).
5. **Angola's Caculo Cabaca Hydropower Plant:** In 2017, Angola signed a deal with China for the construction of the Caculo Cabaca Hydropower project in Dondo, Angola, worth R67.7 billion, which is set to produce 2,172 megawatts of electricity. The project will take about seven years to complete (Corkin, 2011). A similar project is ongoing at the Kaleta hydroelectric facility in Guinea, worth R3.8 billion, with China funding 75% of the project.
6. **Congo's Special Economic Zone:** China will be investing in the Republic of Congo's Special Economic Zone. The zone will be built in Pointe Noire as what China calls a "direct investment" and not a loan or gift (Shinn & Eisenman, 2012).
7. **Nigeria's Edo State Oil Refinery:** Nigeria and China signed a deal to build an oil refinery in Edo State at a cost of R30.1 billion (Zeng, 2020).
8. **Zambia's Cement Factory:** China is responsible for a number of projects in Zambia, including the China National Building Material, which was recently launched by President Lungu. The project is worth R7.5 billion (\$500 million) and will be completed in two phases (Mlambo et al., 2016).
9. **Egypt's New City:** Shanghai-listed developer China Fortune Land Development is set to invest up to R301.1 billion to build an upmarket residential district, an industrial zone, schools, a university, and recreational centers in a new city in Egypt (Sun, 2014).
10. **Zimbabwe's New Parliament:** Before President Robert Mugabe was ousted, China presented the former head of state with a million-dollar gift: a new parliament. The new parliament building, a donation from the Chinese government, was expected to be built in Mount Hampden, about 17 km from the capital, Harare, at an expected cost of R2.1 billion (Alden & Large, 2018).

Africans' debt to China

In the past, China has aggressively pursued repayment of its debts from African countries, demanding first payment (Brautigam, 2009). But this approach creates real problems for China's international standing as a champion of developing nations. China's best hope for protecting its reputation in Africa while reaching a reasonable financial settlement is to work with the West through multilateral organizations like the G20 (Corkin, 2011).

Contrary to the argument of Chinese debt-trapping, the BRI, an economic project with a financing mechanism, has been recipient-driven since its inception, with countries selecting the projects to be built under its umbrella (Zeng, 2020). However, because of high levels of indebtedness and financial vulnerability in some countries, debt-trapping in Africa has been an accusation levelled against Chinese investments (Moss & Rose, 2021).

While the idea of a deliberate Chinese 'debt trap' strategy remains controversial, China continues to exert influence on the continent through significant loans and infrastructure projects, which has led to concerns regarding economic dependence and sovereignty (Shinn & Eisenman, 2012).

China's African Neocolonialism

Another argument against the Chinese presence in Africa is that it may be implementing a new form of neocolonialism. Accusations against China also allege domination over African natural resources. Neocolonialism is an indirect form of control exerted by powerful countries that use cultural, economic, and political power for their benefit to exploit the labour and resources of the 'colonised countries' (Shinn & Eisenman, 2012). This may include control through financial agreements, investment strategies, debt-trapping, and unfair investment policies, mostly leading to an increased dependency due to unequal trade and exploration of resources, including biodiversity. Political pressure is exercised by interfering in domestic affairs to promote the coloniser's security interests and needs. Additionally, neocolonialism may include imposing cultural values or political ideologies onto the colonised nation, thus undermining indigenous culture, values, and identity (Shinn & Eisenman, 2012). China has faced increasing accusations about its intentions in Africa. These focus particularly on Chinese interests in securing access to resources, trade, and military alliances and bases. China's involvement in countries with weak governance has fostered anti-Chinese sentiment and opposition. Backlashes have erupted, provoking accusations of neocolonialism and resource exploration (Shinn & Eisenman, 2012). To both claims, China has reaffirmed its commitment to never monopolise land and access to economic growth opportunities, and to modernisation as a means to secure common prosperity to reach development.

China, however, has not imposed its governance model on any of the countries in Africa with which it has maintained an active relationship. Based on the current understanding of neocolonialism and the painful Chinese experience with European colonialism, historical memory has been a guiding principle for the Chinese to pursue a different path of relationship, in which Africa is not a backyard of China's development, subject to its interference in domestic affairs (Shinn & Eisenman, 2012). In this sense, Western countries have attached more political strings and exercised greater political influence than China over the domestic affairs of Africa's diplomacy (Shinn & Eisenman, 2012).

China has learned by doing, and the reality of large-scale investments taught Chinese investors the limits of their approach. For instance, during the South Sudanese civil war, China had to deal with representatives of various forces opposed to the government to maintain the Greater Nile Oil Pipeline, operated by the China National Petroleum Corporation (Shinn & Eisenman, 2012). China has not made significant efforts to export communist ideology in Africa since the Cold War ended, claiming that Chinese communism could not be replicated outside of China (Shinn & Eisenman, 2012).

However, ideological links exist between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the rulers of a state like Ethiopia, whose Prosperity Party has origins in 'revolutionary democracy' and Marxist-Leninism. China's National People's Congress has formal relations with 35 African parliaments and the CCP International Liaison Department (ILD) has relations with 110 political parties in 51 African countries (Shinn & Eisenman, 2012). Western politicians have increasingly voiced fears that China's intentions in Africa are predatory, intended to create a network of African states that are obliged to service their debts by offering China access to resources, trade opportunities, and locations for military bases (Shinn & Eisenman, 2012).

Chinese Military Bases in Africa

When it comes to its military bases, China places significant strategic focus on countries around the Horn of Africa and Gulf of Aden, including Djibouti, where it opened its first military facility outside China. This choice has received significant comment, as the base will only be six miles from a US military base in the same country (Shinn & Eisenman, 2012). The Chinese wanted a base on Africa to combat piracy. Also, following the collapse of the Gadhafi regime in 2011, China experienced significant difficulties evacuating its citizens, which was a shock domestically (Shinn & Eisenman, 2012). China has also expanded its network of defence attaches in Africa, while increasing defence sales in the continent, which experienced 55 per cent growth between 2012 and 2017 (Shinn & Eisenman, 2012).

China and the European Union in Africa

China and the EU are both active in Africa with different motivations and approaches. However, European ties are much older than Chinese. Africa's historical relationship with European countries derives from a past of exploitation of the continent, and divisions that have been difficult for African countries to overcome. The European colonial history in Africa has led to requests for reparations, mainly arising from slavery and exploitation of the continent (Shinn & Eisenman, 2012).

Over the last decades, the relationship between the EU and Africa has focused more on development aid and cooperation in governance, sustainable development, trade and development through various Economic Partnership Agreements (Shinn & Eisenman, 2012). China's engagement in Africa does not share the negative legacy and background of the European countries. Chinese engagement has been driven primarily by infrastructure investment and resource extraction (Shinn & Eisenman, 2012). However, it should be emphasized that China considers infrastructure investment as the essential source for more secure economic growth, based on a Chinese proverb which states, "if you want to get rich, build roads first" (Shinn & Eisenman, 2012). This adage reaffirms the Chinese perspective that infrastructure building is essential for growth and for building a positive legacy from the Chinese presence in Africa (Shinn & Eisenman, 2012).

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