
The Sino-African Cooperation: A Critical Perspective



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Introduction

In the contemporary global context, emergence of new powers exacerbates global demand for natural resources and forms the foundations for Africa's development. This development trajectory owes itself to China, which has achieved a remarkable breakthrough on the African continent. As an economic superpower, China provides development assistance, foreign investment and trade opportunities to many developing countries. It has become a key partner for African countries, rivaling former colonial powers and the United States. In fact, the relationship among the countries of the South does not start from today. The Chinese, Indian, African and Latin American people have lived in a nearly identical history of that is to say, 'colonisation', a mechanism through which the Western States were able to form settlements in foreign land. Colonisation allowed these powers to establish their global position to attain economic and political dominance over geographical regions beyond their national borders. It is in this perspective that China and Africa have shown a kind of solidarity in misfortune, and have had the will to fight against imperialism. This solidarity was formally expressed at the Bandung Conference of April 1955 in Indonesia; and marked the first platform wherein China made efforts to restore its relations with Africa. It was indeed the way dreamed by Beijing to support countries in their struggles against colonial rule and at the same time to establish its nascent diplomacy.

For an emerging power without a distinct colonial past, China in Africa is sealing reunion around founding principles which have derived their legitimacy from history. Since 1953, China

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has based its external relations on five principles of peaceful coexistence which are: respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity; mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference in internal affairs; equality and reciprocity of benefits and peaceful coexistence; effectiveness of an all-out presence; and low costs of its services and products. Further, the lack of conditionality attracts a Chinese model to the African continent. The areas of Sino-African cooperation, after a period of relative decline between the beginning of 1980s and mid-1990s, are today witnessing intensification in the socio-economic fields, energy, and in science, military and cultural policy.

Therefore, the question arises regarding the selected areas, the legal-institutional framework and the criticisms of the Sino-African cooperation. To this end, this paper will first study areas of Sino-African cooperation before highlighting in its second part the legal-institutional framework. Furthermore, as commentators have asserted that Sino-African cooperation is a bag of mixed blessings, the final section provides a critical reflection and analysis of the Sino-African cooperation. The article conclusively asserts that African countries need to take ownership of their own development trajectories based on their own needs. This approach can then be complemented by external assistance, provided it is based on the demands of Africa.

Cooperation in Socio-economic, Energy and Scientific Fields

Economic engagement between China and the African Continent got a boost with the first conference for Sino-African economic exchanges organised in 2003 at Addis Ababa, with the initiative of

the China Council for the Promotion of Foreign Trade. Subsequently, first Sino-African Chamber of Commerce was opened in Cameroon. China now has trade delegations in forty-nine African countries. Sino-African trade is based on a traditional model that sees Africa export energy and raw materials including ores, precious stones, wood, cotton and import consumer products, machine tools and textile products as well as capital goods, vehicles, food products, and clothing.

In 2013, trade reached USD 210 billion. By 2014, the volume of bilateral trade exceeded USD 220 billion, and Chinese investment in Africa exceeded USD 100 billion. Strengthened mutual political trust has provided a good basis for deepening economic and trade cooperation between the two parties in all areas. On 29 July 2016, the meeting of coordinators for the implementation of the follow-up actions of the Johannesburg Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation was held in Beijing. This led to the signing of 63 cooperation agreements for an amount of USD 18.3 billion. Statistics show that since the Johannesburg Summit, the two sides have signed at least 245 agreements worth USD 50.8 billion.

China cooperates with Africa for humanitarian and social development purposes. Along with sending emergency food aid to Africa, since 2008, China has built 68 hospitals, 30 malaria prevention centres and has trained 65,000 people in Africa. Being a two-way cooperation, in 2008 after an earthquake that had hit the district of Weich Yuan in China, the African people through the African Union collectively donated ten million US dollars to the Chinese people. In 2015, Equatorial Guinea helped build a China-Equatorial Guinea Friendship Primary School in

Jinping with a donation of 4.9 million Yuan.

The development of China and recurring tensions in the Middle East, which push up the price of oil, have pushed Chinese leaders in search of new sources of energy supply. They turned to Africa and its resources, which remained largely untapped due to lack of proper infrastructure.

Related to energy, the first item of Chinese imports from Africa (over 25 per cent) is oil. Since 2004, China has been the second largest importer of African oil after the United States. China's presence is prominent in Sudan, Angola and Niger through the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC). In Nigeria, China has invested USD 4 billion for the modernisation of the Kaduna refinery and built 68 power plants. China has also built the largest wind farm in East Africa in Ethiopia. Beijing is also interested in uranium in Niger and increased cooperation through the China National Nuclear Corporation (CNNC).

Scientific and capacity building engagements have been in respect of over 200 schools in Africa, which have been built and funded by China. Since 2000, the Chinese government has funded 55,000 African scholars. Currently, more than 40,000 Africans study in China. By 2016, China had trained approximately 135,000 Africans. Further, to enhance technical and scientific cooperation, in February 2015, the Government of China through a loan via the Inspur Group of China installed a 36-teraflop supercomputer in Zimbabwe, making it the fifth African country to possess a super computer enhancing its ability to compute raw data (Munzwa, 2015). China has also

built three communication satellites for Nigeria, to support technical and scientific development cooperation.

Cooperation in Political, Military and Cultural Fields

China always expressed its need for political support from the African continent in multiple international forums, primarily regarding the demands of the G4 countries¹ towards the reforms of the United Nations Security Council. China is also alleged to use all her external relations to maintain her national interest to confirm the Chinese position as the Asian flagship. Until 1971 China was represented by Taiwan at the United Nations (UN). It was in 1971 following a vote held on October 5, 1971 as part of the 26th General Assembly of the UN, that Beijing reversed the trend. This is primarily due to the vote of 26 African countries that supported Beijing's claims. It is in this sense that President Mao Zedong said, "It was our African brothers who took us to our rightful seat."

China also cooperates with African countries in the geostrategic field on the following issues, such as, terrorism, information exchange, organised crime, drug trafficking and small arms. Africa is becoming a new field of action for China's participation in United Nations peacekeeping operations. Today, 2,700 Chinese soldiers are deployed in Africa as a part of UN peacekeeping operations in seven areas of Africa. The Chinese President announced at the 70th General Assembly of the United Nations that China would send a peacekeeping force composed of 8,000 Chinese soldiers and give the African Union a grant of USD 100,000,000 to support the construction of the African Permanent Force and the

African Union Rapid Response Force.

China and Africa are two continents geographically at a long distance, but are close in terms of cultural exchanges for over half a century. Cultural exchanges and cooperation between China and African countries began in mid-1950s. In May 1955, the first Sino-African cultural agreement was signed in Beijing with Egypt. In the transition to the year 2000, China signed bilateral cultural cooperation agreements and annual plans with all African countries that already had diplomatic relations with China.

The Framework of Cooperation

It should be noted that Sino-African cooperation was materialised through a legal-institutional framework. As part of this cooperation, several agreements have been concluded in the framework of bilateral cooperation between China and African countries individually and having diplomatic relations with China and between the African Union and China in the context of multilateral cooperation.

As an example, two economic and technical cooperation agreements concerning a non-repayable aid of 13.5 billion FCFA² and an interest-free loan of 9 billion FCFA were signed in 2015 between China and Niger.

Regarding multilateral cooperation between China and the African Union, several agreements have emerged. Memorandum of Understanding was signed between the African Union and China to cooperate on large infrastructure networks and in the process of industrialisation in Africa on the sidelines of the 24th African Union summit in Addis Ababa. As far as the institutional framework is concerned, it is made up of

all the diplomatic missions that African countries and China exchange among themselves

Several fora of cooperation have been established to maintain a lasting partnership with Africa, and to promote South-South Cooperation, under the model of the Franco-African summits or regular meetings of the Commonwealth. But it should be noted that notwithstanding the intensity of Sino-African relations, we have noted several criticisms over this cooperation.

Analysis of the Sino-African Cooperation

The implications of Sino-African cooperation, are, however not considered an unmixed blessing. While Africa has experienced a long history of colonisation, many analysts see China-Africa cooperation as a trend of neocolonialism. In terms of cooperation, China's unconditional and preferential loans to African countries underscores the adage that the hand that gives is above that which receives. This allows the African continent to continue on its effective strategy towards development while continue to manage its relations with the emerging Asian economic giant, China. However, there are grave concerns about China's commercial competition with low-cost but short-lived manufacturers in Africa, which has led to bankruptcy for many local companies because of cost of producing their products and import of Chinese labour.

Africa's relations with China are based on cooperation, but at the same time need to bear in mind that in cooperation, each of the parties aims at their own interest owing to a relationship of mutual interest towards mutual development. It would

then be illusory to expect that China's main goal for cooperation in Africa is purely altruistic.

China's respect for the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of countries and their sovereignty holds ground. However, under the pretext of a win-win cooperation factors on the low side of trade and business, ethics, human rights and self-determination of the African people by themselves should not be alienated. At a time when the Western powers seem to be moving away from the African continent or maintaining only a minimal threshold of presence, China has demonstrated its ability to assume its role as an emerging power. Showing an impressive dynamism, China has implemented a global strategy to find new frontiers for the Chinese people and economy.

As a full-fledged actor in a globalised world, Beijing understood the benefits it could derive from Africa by using one of the most formidable weapons of the post-cold war era, i.e. economic power. China does not hesitate to assiduously make her case by constantly recalling their common past of externally dominated entities and their historical solidarity with a militant third world, characterised by mutual support in the struggles against oppression. Both China and Africa were underdeveloped yesterday; today China has come a long way, making its economy one of the most dynamic.

Africa needs to posit herself proactively in order to assert a demand-driven approach to development partnerships along with embracing the role of her Chinese partner. As it is through the strength of Africa's political, economic, social and security proposals that it would

be able to gauge the usefulness of the 'win-win' partnership proposed by China. According to Edem Kodjo, Africa needs to empower itself making its people believe in their own assets and abilities to take ownership of the development process, with or without external cooperation. The focus is to make the most of the African resources and wealth for the development of Africa, with tailor-made initiatives according to its own needs.

By way of conclusion, we may argue that the future of Sino-African relations depends partly on how Africa will manage these clashes between emerging and traditional powers which have actively participated in the development process of the continent. But the true question is how would Africa be able to meet the double challenge of internal change and development along with adaptation to a new global economic order.

Endnotes

- 1 Brazil, India, Japan and Germany
- 2 Franc Communauté Financière Africaine

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