

Africa-China Relations: New Imperialism or Progressive Partnership?

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Abstract

China's link with Africa has been on the increase in the last two decades. This relationship covers virtually every aspect of human endeavour. But this relationship is generating mixed reactions from the academia and policy makers across the globe. While some argue that Africa has a lot to gain in terms of 'favourable' loan deals and infrastructural development opportunities, others argue that the relationship would bring further underdevelopment and de industrialization of Africa. They point to Chinese poor human rights records, illegal mining activities, substandard goods and support to controversial regimes in Africa. These activities constitute a problem because they undermine Africa's quest for sustainable development. Therefore, this study investigates the meteoric growth of Africa-China relationship in the last two decades, despite concerns from the West and a good number of Africans. The objectives are to examine the political, economic, socio-cultural challenges of this emerging relationship. The study establishes that Africa-China relationship is beneficial to both actors and that China is the bigger investor and derives more benefits than Africa in this relationship. The study recommends that Africa should not rely entirely on China and other foreigners for the development of her vital infrastructural architecture. Rather, Africa needs to invest more in technological education and good governance.

Keywords: Africa, China, Development, Underdevelopment, Relationship

Introduction

It is a known fact the contemporary international system is characterized by high level interdependence, especially in the economic terrain (Osondu-Oti, 2016). This is unlike 19th century when states tried to be self-sufficient and impermeable entities. Today, it is almost impossible for any state to embark on policy of economic impermeability. Arising from interdependence of states in international system, it is not surprising to witness a sudden increase in relations between China and Africa (Mlambo, Kushamba and Simawu, 2016).

Of the fifty-four Countries in Africa, China maintains official diplomatic relations with all but Burkina Faso, Sao Tome and Principe, Gambia and Swaziland which maintain official relations with Taiwan. Except for the four above, China has an embassy and ambassador in each of the African countries but Somalia (due to security issues) and all except Comoros maintain embassies in Beijing (Hofstedt, 2009).

This increased visibility of China in Africa ensured that China was able to displace the U.S. in 2009 to become Africa's second largest trading partner (Stahl, 2016). The emergence of China in Africa complicated the supremacy battle between E.U and the USA over the 'ownership' of Africa (Campbell, 2008).

The volume of Chinese trade with Africa has risen from \$81.7million in 1979 to \$6.84billion in 1989 to \$39.75billion in 2005 (Campbell, 2008). This rapid change in China's trade with Africa is an indication of the enormity of Chinese economy. China's soft power approach is closely tied towards trade, investment, aid, grants, loans and debt relief unlike the West's insistence on democracy and human rights without credible financial aid (Liang, 2012).

Arising from the divergent views concerning Africa-China relations, this paper attempts to explain the questions listed below and attempt to proffer an objective analysis of this emerging relationship. Who is driving the relationships? Is the relationship beneficial to both actors? Is it an asymmetrical relationship in favour of China?

Is China colonizing Africa through deceptive aid and loans? And lastly, what does Africa contribute to this relationship? The above questions are the major inquiry this paper attempts to unravel.

Africa- China Political and Diplomatic Link: Historical Perspective

Official Chinese record talks about the links between China and Africa as far back as the Han dynasty (206 BC to 220 AD) and that Chinese trade with Africa grew tremendously in the period of 960-1279 during the Tang dynasty (Campbell, 2008). These links were quite different from European contacts of 16th-19th centuries which were characterized by plunder, wars, slave trading and eventual colonization of Africa. According to Adams Bodomo, the maritime travels of Admiral of Yunnan in the Ming dynasty in the fifteenth century could be regarded as the official onset of political and diplomatic contacts between China and Africa (Bodomo, 2009). As a result of the maritime exploits of Zheng He, the Peoples' Republic of China celebrated the 600th anniversary of the first of seven voyages (between 1405 & 1433) in 2005 (Lysa & Jianli, 2009, 288). These voyages took Admiral Zheng to the Pacific and Indian Oceans reaching far as the east coast of Africa. It must be noted that Zheng He exploits preceded the exploit of 1488 voyage of Bartholomew Diaz's discovery of Cape of Good Hope and 1498 voyage of Vasco da Gama which opened the Indian subcontinent to Europe (Lysa & Jianli, 2009).

On the sixth voyage of Zheng He (1421-1422), and with 41 vessels, Zheng visited most of the countries of South East Asia, the Spice Islands, India, Ceylon, Aden, Zanzibar off the East African coast and Mogadishu (Peterson 1994). These travels were accompanied with envoys that were brought back to China carrying gifts of tribute from visited regions. On each travel to a new destination, commissioners from China were stationed in the new regions and ambassadors from the new regions were received in China. (Large 2008) The above account illustrates the beginning of diplomatic relation between China and the coast of East Africa. But it must be stressed that places covered by the travels were made to pay tributes to China's emperor. This is an indication that demonstrated China's upper hand in her diplomatic relations with Africa and other places covered by her maritime exploits.

Echoing this sentiment of China's supremacy over the regions visited by the fifteenth century voyages, Peterson writes:

In exchange for the country's or region's subservience to the Chinese emperor as shown by annual gifts of tribute, the Chinese ruler conveyed the status of vassal state with an imperial letter of patent, a seal of rank and the Chinese calendar, important symbols of legitimacy and acceptance into the civilized Sinocentric world order. Though these activities, China had established and perpetuated itself as the middle kingdom in both domestic and foreign policies (Peterson 1994).

It was not until the Bandung conference in 1955 that China reconnected with Africa (Beule and Buicke, 2009). The conference held at Bandung Indonesia, in April 1955 was a significant event in Sino-Africa diplomatic relations (Pradhan, 1979). Though it was Afro-Asian conference, it gave impetus to Afro-China relations of 1980s, 1990s and 2000s. The Bandung conference fostered a close tie between China and Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser. No wonder, Egypt became the first African country to establish diplomatic relation with China in 1956 (Alden and Alves 2008). China is also drawing from the long relationships that were developed out of the struggles of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the linkages that were fostered during the Bandung conference to foster a closer relationship with Africa (Campbell, 2008). The conference communiqué emphasized the value of economic cooperation among the participants and a better representation of Asian and African States in the United Nations (Ahmed, 1955). This conference sets the stage for the formation of Non-Align Movement and much more importantly, brought African and Asian nations together on the international stage for the first time (Pradhan, 1979). China and Africa have a shared history of anti-colonialism, of which the iconic moment was the Afro-Asian Bandung Conference of 1965 in which China participated actively. One of the gains of that conference was the international recognition of China's People's Republic which galvanized China to seek global friendship in which Africa was given a major priority (Ho, 2014).

Though, China remained Africa's ally in the 1970s and 1980s, but the relationship was lukewarm because Africa's economics were not competitive enough to meet China's global yearnings (Mlambo et al, 2016). But the shootings at Tiananmen Square of pro-democracy activists by the Chinese government strained the relationship with the West. The persistent condemnation of China by the West led China to seek greater cooperation with Africa (Mlambo et al, 2016).

The greater cooperation between China and Africa climaxed in 2000 in Beijing where more than 40 African Heads of State gathered with Chinese authority to establish the Forums on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) (Bodomo, 2009).

Africa-China Economic Relation: Trade and Investments Opportunities

Sino-African relations have focused more on economic activities in recent times. China is expanding its economic investment in Africa because of the huge economic potential of Africa and increasing China's economic needs (Toogood, 2016). China intends to be a major global economic power in the mould of U.S. In the words of Etyang and Payanko: "China seeks to position itself as a hegemony in the international arena and to position itself as an alternative economic power to America that has largely dominated international relations for decades". (Etyang & Panyako, 2016 cited in Toogood, 2016).

Following the economic reform that started in 1978, China has emerged as one of the fastest growing economies in the world with a gross domestic product (GDP) growth of about 10 percent since 1990 (Osondu-Oti, 2016). As a result, China is expanding her economy and seeking cooperation with the world. This is a radical change from China's closed economy position espoused by the Communist Party since 1949 when it came to power. Therefore, it is not surprising to see China emerging as one of the major sources of finance and investments in Africa (Mlambo et al, 2016). China's economic policies in Africa include: preferential finance, debt cancellation, establishing economic and trade cooperation zones and opening China's market to Africa.

According to Mlambo et al, China has entered into aid accord with at least 48 African States and loan agreement with 22 African States in 2013 (Mlambo et al, 2016). Also, in 2009, China pledged \$10 billion in low interest loans over three years to African states and offered a \$1 billion loan facility for small and medium size firms. These efforts are geared primarily on infrastructure related schemes. For example, China's trade value with Africa grew from \$6 billion to \$107 billion annually (Toogood, 2016). Nigeria, Angola, South Africa and Egypt are the major beneficiaries of the trade.

Sudan is territorially the largest African State and China is its largest investor, with \$8 billion in 14 energy sector projects (Soutman and Hairong, 2009). China's National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) claims to have provided jobs to more than 100,000 Sudanese and that 50 percent of Sudanese revenue goes back to her government. Similarly, the autonomous government of South Sudan continues to engage China despite the expected hostility towards China because of China's arms deals with Sudan during the Civil War that ended in 2005 (Soutman and Hairong, 2009). Instead of hostility, China and South Sudan relation has blossomed. In 2007, it agreed that China would construct hydro-electric facilities, housing, roads, refineries, stadia, cultural centers and in 2008, China opened a consulate in southern Sudan. China has been a major investor in Africa, and her investments in several sectors appear to be on the increase. However, it should be noted that trade activities between China and Africa are unbalanced. The scale is tilted in China's favour (Mlambo et al, 2016). The magnitude of extraction of natural resources by different Chinese firms from Africa is bigger than the Chinese investments. In fact, some critics argue that the aggressive mining activities of the Chinese firms are becoming detrimental to the health of many Africans.

In Angola, the activities of China in the country's post war economy are worthy of note. Angola needed a lot of investments and infrastructure to rebuild its damaged economy occasioned by the prolonged civil war. It was in this context that China offered Angola a series of oil-backed credit lines with little conditionality (Mohan &

Lampert, 2013). China’s construction Bank offered the first fund in 2002 and in 2004. Exim Bank provided additional loans of \$500 million and \$2 billion in 2007 with the repayment terms increased to 15years and interest rate revised downward. Similarly, China’s Development Bank granted \$1.5 billion primarily for Angola’s agricultural sector (Mohan & Lampert, 2013). A working arrangement that allowed Angolan officials to work closely with the Chinese donor agencies resulted in building key infrastructure for the Angolan economy.

While China is the most populous nation on the planet earth, Nigeria is the most populous nation in Africa. Therefore, relation between China and Nigeria presents a unique phenomenon in China-Africa relation. Their relationship is unique because China is the biggest economy in Asia while Nigeria is the biggest economy in Africa.

China has a broad African foreign policy and it is quite unique that Nigeria offers China almost her strategic interests in Africa. According to Mathew Page, China has four strategic interests in Nigeria. These are: trade and market, access to energy resources, security of Chinese nationals and investments and non opposition to China at U.N. (Page, 2018).

The undermentioned projects are being undertaken by different Chinese firms in Nigeria with different completion dates. Nnamdi Azikwe International Airport in Abuja was built by CECC at \$200 million in 2012 and this project was financed by Exim Bank (Oyebade, 2018) Ajaokuta-Kadam-Kano gas pipeline being constructed by a consortium of China Petroleum Pipeline Bureau and a Nigerian company, Brentex at \$2.8 billion (Okafor, 2018). Sagamu Independent Power Plant by China Energy Engineering Corporation and a private Nigerian electricity provider at \$550 million. The project is expected to be completed by 2020 (Alike, 2018) and Lekki Port to be built by China Harbour Engineering Company at \$1.5 billion to relieve congestion at the nearby port of Lagos.

In the telecom sector in Nigeria, Chinese telecom giant Huawei Technologies have played significant role in the development of the sector (Odeh and Akinade, 2017). From 2000-2015, the Chinese firm has introduced high tech ICT expertise to the sector and has strengthened local content with technical transfer of Chinese technology to Nigerians (Odeh and Akinade, 2017).

Apart from African governments turning to China for their infrastructural needs and development, many Africans and Chinese nationals are also engaged at private levels for trade and investments opportunities. For example, many Africans most especially Nigerians have been traveling to Guangzhou since mid 1990s to buy Chinese consumer goods for export to Africa (Mohan & Lampert, 2013). Though, a good member of Africans and Chinese have benefited from these trade relations, a sour point of this engagement is the production of substandard goods being dumped in Africa at the instance of African traders and Chinese nationals. This is undermining fair trade and causing hardship for African consumers.

Table 1: Major Infrastructure Deals Signed by China and Several African States in 2012

Country	Type of Deal
Zambia	Chinese firm Guotai Iron and Stell invested US \$4.1 million to expand its steelmaking facilities in Zambia.
Liberia	The Liberia broadcasting system signed a US \$1.4 million agreement with China for technical services related to the operation and maintenance of broadcasting and related facilities.
Nigeria	The Nigerian communications satellite rebuilt by the China Great Wall industry corporation is estimated to have provided more than 150,000 Nigerian employment opportunities.
Mozambique	China offered US \$2 million to help develop Mozambique’s agricultural research capabilities. Technology and skills will be shared and transferred when a group of 10

	Chinese visit to train local technical staff.
Uganda	China continues to invest in Uganda’s infrastructure by funding a US \$350 million toll road construction project. The road will link Entebbe International airport to the capital city of Kampala.
Zimbabwe	China pledge US \$300 million to construct a convention centre and additional infrastructure in Zambia and Zimbabwe. China funded the project on the condition that Chinese companies be awarded construction tenders.
Ethiopia	Ethiopian railways corporation (ERC) signed a US \$1.5 billion railway construction deal with china Communications Construction Company to develop a railway line between Ethiopia and Tadjourah seaport in neighboring Djibouti. The railway will enable an increase in exports, specifically potash exports.
South Sudan	South Sudan announced China would help build a long delayed new airport in the capital Juba, which includes a US \$158 million loan.
Malawi	Huawei donated US \$76,000 for medical infrastructure development in the Southern Region of Malawi.
Ghana	Ghana signed a US \$1 billion loan agreement with China Development Bank to develop pipelines and surveillance technology of oil and gas processing plants.

Source: Adapted from C. Mlambo et al, 2016

Table 1 above shows the infrastructural development programmes being anchored by Chinese loans and assistance in Africa. These projects are vital to Africa’s quest for development. If this momentum is achieved, Africa’s dilapidated infrastructure would witness a new life. This might be the beginning of her economic growth and development. But it must also be stressed that Africa should equally look inwards for her infrastructural development. Relying only on China for this would ultimately spell doom for Africa. Though China is investing a lot of resources in developing Africa’s infrastructure at the moment, but it must be seen as a long term ambition to make Africa a dependant region to China. Arica must not fall into this trap by relying solely on China’s dollars for her developmental programmes.

China’s exports to Africa were US\$99.28 billion, up 30.8%, the surplus was US\$5.63 billion, down 70.0% year on year. In 2018, the growth rate of China’s trade with Africa was the highest in the world. In fact, China’s Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) to Africa rose by 11% to US\$46 billion in 2018 (McGregor 2019). Besides training more than 40,000 African officials and technicians in China, the country also established a good number of regional vocational educational centres and capacity building institutes in Africa and cultivated more than 200,000 professional and technical personnel for African countries (Liubing, 2018).

Challenges of Africa–China Relation

Despite the ‘success story’ of Africa–China relations, challenges exist. This involves political, economic, socio-cultural, security and many other issues. On political issues, Adams Bodomo argues that China with a population of 1.3 billion people is likely to have complicated political relations with Africa that is fragmented into over 50 nations (Bodomo, 2009). At the FOCAC summits, China continues to dominate these summits because of divergent interests of African Countries. But despite divergent interests of Africa states, Africa has spoken with one voice on several occasions to support China’s aspirations at International fora. For example, Beijing Olympics was made possible because of an “en bloc” vote by Africa during the IOC final selection. Similarly, Africa has spoken with one voice on several occasions on Taiwan from getting a U.N seat (Bodomo, 2009).

The above shows that China benefits more politically than Africa in international fora. But it must also be stated need here that Africa has equally benefitted from China in one way or the other. For example, during the liberation struggle in the 1950s and 1960s, countries such as Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and South Africa gained a lot of support from China. The support came in form of arms donation to freedom fighters, cash

support, military trainings, and political education to many African fighters. This explains why many African leaders welcome Africa-China relation with a lot of enthusiastic feelings. In the words of Sautman or Hairong:

In contrast to Western aid, China is not politically conditioned and contrary to the prevailing discoveries, its non-intervention policy may make China more, rather less, popular among common Africans, as it obviates political obstacles to the speedy delivery of infrastructure. China has no history of colonialism and has not recently invaded other states. It has supported developing country attempts to redress grievances such as subsidies that impair their exports (Sautman & Hairong 2009, p.759)

China has been accused of selling arms to countries like Sudan and Zimbabwe despite the ban on arms sales to such states (Osondu-Oti, 2016). It has been alleged that Omar Al- Bashir's government has used illicit fund and arms to perpetuate ethnic cleansing in Darfur. Also, arms from China were used by Zimbabwean government in 2005 in civilian repression. Over 600,000 people lost their houses and sources of livelihood (Osondu-Oti, 2016). China has also been accused of gross human rights abuses in Africa. For example, Zambian Copper Mine and Nigerian Dura pack workers have complained of poor working environment and lack of safety in the working environment of these Chinese firms. These adverse factory environmental conditions have resulted in loss of lives and permanent disabilities of workers (Osondu-Oti, 2016). Felix M. Edoho argues that China continues to purchase oil from the pariah regime in Sudan, supports the dictatorial regime of Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe, built industrial infrastructure in dictatorship regime in Gabon and develops mine in Zambia with attendant human rights abuses of Africans (Edoho, 2011).

For example, in Nigeria, the environmental investigation Agency accused China of colluding with corrupt Nigerians to illegally export rosewood timber to China. These Chinese activities inflict severe environmental degradation of rural communities of Taraba, Kogi, Kaduna and Adamawa. Ironically, these are communities that are prone to communal conflicts over land matters (Page 2018). Similarly, the Osun State Government said its Joint Task Force has apprehended 27 illegal miners in the state. The government said those arrested were 17 Chinese nationals, nine locals and a village head. Ironically, one of the arrested Chinese, May Zam, said she was not aware they were engaged in illegal mining (Bamigbola, 2020).

Another challenge is the influx of substandard Chinese goods into Africa. It has been alleged that Africans often collude with Chinese firms to bring substandard products to Africa (Mohan and Lampert, 2013). These substandard goods are sold at cheaper prices thereby suffocating the local industries. Also, substandard products in Pharmaceutical, building, and electrical sectors have caused avoidable deaths and loss of property. Another challenge is the steady influx of Chinese citizens into Africa and their attendant land grabbing phenomenon. Estimates vary, but probably more than three quarters of a million Chinese migrants are living in Africa (Edoho, 2011). But it must also be stressed that a good number of African migrants are also living in China. But what is curious is the routine molestation of Africans by the Chinese security agents even though Chinese nationals are rarely molested by African security agencies.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that China is the main actor and, perhaps, the captain driving the relationship between her and Africa. On the diplomatic and political front, the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) is providing a maximum engagement for this relationship. The alternating idea of hosting the summit between African countries and China provides ample opportunities to review areas of strength and challenges facing the relationship. On the economic side of this relationship, it is also obvious that China dictates the pace. According to Adaora Osondu-Oti, China's outward economic policy is driving her across the world, particularly Africa. Why? Given Africa's great economic potentials in natural resources and market advantage (the second largest continent after Asia), China continues to engage Africa in an aggressive economic relationship (Osondu-Oti, 2016). On the part of Africa, China's aids and investments targeting Africa's dilapidated infrastructure occasioned by civil wars and corruption is a major attraction to Chinese relationships.

Therefore, Africa should face the reality that a genuine development of her infrastructure lays with Africans and not with any foreigner. China has two broad objectives in Africa. First is to supplant the West particularly the U.S. from their dominant economic position in Africa. Second is to make Africa economically dependent on China. Slowly but steadily, China has achieved her first goal by displacing the U.S. in 2009 and became Africa's second largest trading partner. But today, China is Africa's largest trading partner. The first goal has been achieved with sheer determination and careful planning. China is determined to achieve her second objective in Africa. Therefore, it becomes imperative for Africa and the Western nations to engage China in a more constructive ways devoid of Western media hype and propaganda if China is to be prevented from achieving her goals in Africa.

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