

Geopolitical Implications of the Sino-African Love Affair: A New Horizon or A New Imperialism in the Making?

Executive Summary

- China's engagement with Africa is growing fast and deepening, and its soft power is expanding. This move undoubtedly has significant geopolitical implications for competitors in the region, such as the US and the EU. Indeed, China has displaced the US since 2009 as Africa's major trading partner, and the EU's trade volume has been declining steadily.
- It should be noted that at the heart of China's engagement with Africa lies a long-term political goal, which goes well beyond the dominant narrative of economic partnership.
- By now it has become evident that China is a great power by all measures and a real competitor to the established great powers in Africa and elsewhere. However, it is not helpful to engage in the old debate about whether China is a status quo power or a revisionist state, as any rising power, by default, challenges the existing distribution of power and/or political order. Clearly, as things stand now, China has engaged in neither the quest for territorial expansion nor a civilizing mission, apart from building a modern-day economic empire, as witnessed by the case study of the Sino-Ethiopian love affair.
- China is mostly filling the gaps left by the great powers in Africa. Among other things, the strength of the Sino-African relationship can be attributed to China's 'no strings attached' policy, massive infrastructure loans, lack of colonial legacy, disentanglement of interests and values, its discourse and framing of 'the poor help the poor,' and its pragmatic foreign policy.
- At a strategic level, China has employed aggressive cultural diplomacy, mainly through its Confucius Institutes, multifaceted economic engagements, and effectively-utilized vaccine diplomacy, and it has garnered significant political solidarity from African states at the regional and international levels.
- Foreign aid has always been used as a pillar of foreign policy by great powers in order to maintain a sphere of influence and project soft power. In this regard, China's recent foreign aid policy should be understood within this broader context, and the EU's countermeasures, if any, will reflect this reality.
- Even though a trilateral forum for Africa, China, and the EU is commendable, a strategy founded on the unilateral socialization of China, especially when it comes to values and human rights norms, is flawed and will be counterproductive.
- Direct confrontation with China appears to be costly because of the complex nature of the current world order, with multiple regional actors, the relative receptiveness of China's actions in Africa, declining US hegemony, and the lack of a comprehensive EU policy towards Africa.

Introduction

The (peaceful) rise of China with its own ‘civilization package’ and assertive foreign policy has significantly challenged the end of history -- if there ever was one. One of the regions where China’s rise has been felt particularly strong is Africa, a continent in which the stakes are high and the geopolitical impacts are consequential. Although the relationship between Africa and China is not a new phenomenon -- with the launching of the Forum for China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2006 -- Sino-African engagement has taken on a new form and nature. This has come at a time when the decline of Western engagement with the continent has become increasingly apparent.¹ China’s ‘going global’ strategy cannot be ignored, given that its actions to safeguard its interests are increasingly affecting the interests of the international community, including European countries. It is true that “China is not the only show in the town.”² But with great power politics on the rise again in Africa, the primary concern for major actors such as the EU should be the geopolitical impacts of the Sino-African love affair. This paper examines why China has -- compared to other major powers – become so dominant in the continent.

1. Renewed Sino-African Engagement

Following the FOCAC Forum, “in 2009, China became Africa’s largest trading partner, surpassing the United States.”³ More importantly, it has been observed that “China has displaced European, American, and Japanese diplomatic and capitalistic soft power in many sub-Saharan African countries.”⁴ Even though it is difficult to tell whether China is a status quo power or not, the robust and assertive posture of Chinese foreign policy towards Africa is ubiquitous. The revamped engagement between Africa and China, which has taken many by surprise, is driven by China’s growth-oriented strategy of securing raw materials.⁵ In explaining the nature of this renewed engagement, many scholars have provided different perspectives, albeit with notable overlaps. For Guerrero and Manji, “China’s involvement in Africa has three main dimensions: *foreign direct investment, aid, and trade*,”⁶ whereas Alden formulated five images of China.

Accordingly, “the first image regards China as the new face of globalization; second its role in African development success; third as a mirror for the West; fourth as a pariah partner; and, finally as a responsible stakeholder.”⁷ All these perspectives exist in one form or another, be it on media platforms, in academic circles, in public discourse, or in policy responses from the West.

China’s engagement with Africa has evolved significantly over the last couple of decades, both widening and deepening, owing to various reasons. Among others, the legacy of Bandung laid the foundation for the norms around which China has forged its ties with Africa.⁸ From China’s perspective, the formulation of the relationship in terms of historical rhetoric serves an instrumental value in that “despite Chinese emerging superpower status, it has retained the outlook and interests of fellow developing countries.”⁹

As a beneficiary of globalization, China has taken advantage of the nascent African markets that have resulted from neoliberal economic policies enabled by international financial institutions.¹⁰ In this regard, one can safely argue that China has skillfully utilized the liberal world order to its advantage, without any need to reinvent the wheel. Furthermore, China has been (mostly) serving as a gap filler and has helped to fuel Africa’s infrastructural development. However, the perspective of China as a pariah state partner has been evident on many occasions. A case in point is Zimbabwe, where “at a time when he [Mugabe] is treated as a pariah in Europe and the US and by many international organizations, Mr Mugabe is keen to deepen diplomatic and economic relations with China (...) and China was more than willing to offer moral and financial support.”¹¹ However, the same hitherto mercantilist China was seen succumbing to the mounting international pressures regarding the Darfur crisis, such that the UN Security Council would go on to pass a resolution with China’s full assent -- showing Chinese *fleximology*.

That said, the current trend shows a ‘new scramble for Africa,’ within which China’s influence is evident. According to *The Economist*, “Governments and businesses from all around the world are rushing to strengthen diplomatic, strategic, and commercial ties. This creates vast opportunities. If Africa handles *the new scramble* wisely, the main winners will be Africans themselves.”¹² Unfortunately, the African Union (AU) currently lacks a comprehensive and coherent

policy to deal with superpower competition over its natural resources, which partially suggests Africa's lack of viable political agency.

The primary driver for the new scramble for Africa is demand for natural resources. China, as many other countries, needs to diversify its sources of supply and ensure energy security. Moreover, it should be noted that "Asian oil and natural gas production are not growing fast enough to meet Chinese demand, and a large portion of Middle Eastern oil and gas production is normally allotted to U.S. and European markets."¹³ This implies that China is acting out of an understandable geopolitical concern. In this regard, one common worry is that China will use its first-mover advantage in the oil industry to effectively choke off oil supplies. Nonetheless, there is currently no concrete evidence of pressures from Beijing to prevent oil supplies from reaching the global market.

Nevertheless, ever since China overtook the US as Africa's largest trading partner in 2009, the trade structure between Africa and China has remained asymmetrical. It is a classical imbalanced trading system, with raw materials flowing towards China and finished (cheap) products flooding African markets. China, with its neo-mercantilist trade policies, is manipulating faults in the neoliberal trade structure and using African markets as dumping sites. Henceforth, "the rapidly growing engagement between China and Africa requires a greater balance of the economic and strategic interests of both sides."¹⁴

China's engagement with Africa is not confined to the economic and political spheres, but also involves military cooperation. The rationale(s) for China's increasing military presence in Africa is stated as follows:

"With the opening of its first overseas base, located in Djibouti, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) appears to be laying the foundation for a more visible, more robust military posture on the continent, both for multilateral operations and to provide security along the new "One Belt, One Road" trade route. Beijing's evolving security strategy in Africa highlights how Sino-African relations are rapidly maturing beyond the initial economic engagement that shaped ties between the two regions over the past decade."¹⁵

The mammoth Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is probably one of the greatest geopolitical challenges of the 21st century; it reinforces the already dominant position of China in Africa, and the securitization of the project will undoubtedly pose a formidable challenge to the EU. In a similar vein, Shinn argues that China's strategies of protecting its interests in Africa are linked to its long-term security policy.¹⁶ But are China's interests in and engagement with Africa fundamentally different from other participants in the 'new scramble for Africa'? This and related issues are discussed in the following section.

2. China's Foreign Policy Modus Operandi vis-à-vis that of the EU

The *means* through which China pursues its foreign policy objectives in Africa are different from those of other competing great powers, such as the EU, in many ways. Commonly-discussed areas include foreign policy principles, the nature of aid and/or trade, and the human rights discourse.

A. China's Guiding Foreign Policy Principles

China's foreign policy is largely informed by its domestic politics and state identity. Put differently, according to Jisi, "the Chinese polity is peculiarly reliant upon ethics more than law, upon moral consensus more than judicial procedure, upon benevolent government more than checks and balances."¹⁷ This partly emanates from the teachings of Confucius and the long history of China as the Middle Kingdom (Zhongguo).

In the realm of international relations theories, China gives a special value for practice over formulation of theories. That is to say "...international relations theory, as understood by the Chinese, is not only an explanatory tool or a prism through which world affairs are observed but, more importantly, a guide for international action and foreign policy."¹⁸ More specifically, Beijing's foreign policy towards Africa is underpinned by the 'Five Nos.' President Xi, on the occasion of the 2018 FOCAC Forum, declared new principles of engagement with African states, arguably as a response to strong Western criticism about China's neo-colonialism in Africa. Accordingly, the 'Five Nos' stipulated the following: "No interference in the way other African countries pursue their development paths; no interference in a country's internal affairs; no imposition of China's will on African countries; no attachment of political strings to assistance to Africa; and no seeking of selfish political gains in investment and financial cooperation."¹⁹

It is worth mentioning that “the advantage that China has over Western capital is that it has no history of enslavement, colonization, financing or support for coups against unfriendly regimes, or the presence of military forces in support of its foreign policies.”²⁰ This ideational aspect of Sino-African engagement is manifest in common discourses used by Western powers and China. By way of illustration, Wenping pointed out that Western powers made use of rhetoric about “‘civil war’, ‘poverty’, ‘disease’, ‘corruption’ and ‘underdevelopment’, whilst the Chinese use such words as ‘peaceful coexistence’, ‘common development’, ‘win-win’, ‘friendship’, ‘sincerity’, ‘mutual respect’ and ‘mutual benefit.’”²¹ Thus, cognizant of this fact, China has deliberately propounded its ‘no strings’ policy to penetrate African markets by appealing to African leaders and elites. Even seen from the vantage of bureaucracy, China’s approach to African needs is simply better adapted than the lukewarm and misguided post-colonial approach of Western strategies, says Abdoulaye Wade, the former President of Senegal.

On the other hand, the EU is obsessed with prescriptions and conditionalities. To borrow Alden’s expression, “the West’s employment of conditionalities, merely the latest in the decades of humiliating experiences at the hands of former colonial powers and the United States, echoes the humiliations of the ‘unequal treaties’ foisted on China by the West in the nineteenth century.”²² In a nutshell, Beijing is outcompeting Western contractors on infrastructure projects and in terms of the volume of trade because Chinese policymakers are unhindered by domestic political pressures and an activist parliament of the EU...²³

B. The Nature of Chinese Aid and/or Trade to Africa

One of China’s common ideas in its cooperation with the Global South is the notion of ‘the poor help the poor.’ While Chinese ‘aid’ is used to further *geopolitical* claims, it is different due to its modus operandi. As Söderberg summarizes, the main characteristics of Chinese aid are: (1) absence of political conditionality, except support for the ‘One China’ policy; (2) lack of standard criteria to differentiate aid from other similar concepts; (3) a predominantly bilateral nature; and (4) lack of a centralized main agency dealing with foreign aid.²⁴ Arguably, no aid has ever been purely altruistic in nature. The same goes for Chinese aid to Africa. Consequently, it is plausible to conclude

that “much of Chinese financing to Africa is associated with securing the continent’s natural resources.”²⁵ With regard to investments and loans, it could be argued that China is simply filling the infrastructural investment void left by the West. At the heart of Chinese loans lies its attachment to infrastructural investments, a clear priority for China to focus on hardware while the EU and others prioritize software (rule of law, governance, human rights protections, etc.). Beyond conditionalities, the EU’s grants and loans are characterized by a complex web of bureaucracies, which is certainly not appealing to African leaders.

Apart from foreign aid or debt diplomacy, China’s growing soft power should be a great concern for the EU. Over the last decade alone, dozens of parliamentary buildings in Africa, including the AU headquarters, were fully funded by the Chinese government. On its inauguration, President Xi said the new building “symbolizes Sino-African ‘friendship and solidarity.’”²⁶ One element of China’s soft power is the Confucius Institutes, through which Chinese values, culture, and ideology are exported under the rubric of language training centers. While European countries have supported similar institutions in the past, it is the nature and structure of the Chinese approach that makes differentiates it. The Confucius Institutes integrate their teachings within the curriculum of host institutions. The source of China’s soft power in Africa has the ideational element of partnership based on equality and mutual trust -- rhetoric that seems to be absent from the EU’s approach towards Africa. China is even showing its muscle through ‘Covid diplomacy,’ and it has been observed that “it will be difficult, if not impossible, for US and European countries to compete in purely *geopolitical* terms.”²⁷

So much for China’s *comparative* advantage over the West. At this juncture, it is paramount to briefly highlight the EU’s engagement with Africa and its reaction to China’s growing presence in the continent.

Owing to their geographical proximity and the legacy of imperialism, Africa and Europe have a long history of encounters. However, the contemporary relationship between the two can be summarized as encompassing post-colonial discourse and European countries’ attempts to renew the troubled relationship. To this end, the watershed moment is the 1957 European Economic Community, which envisaged association agreements with foreign

countries, as enshrined in part IV of the treaty. This legal framework enabled the EU to sign the Lomé Partnership Agreement, later replaced by the Cotonou Agreement. To the dismay of many observers, however, the Cotonou Agreement “is [was] essentially the continuation of the past practice, i.e., the Lomé framework of engagement,”²⁸ although some changes have occurred during its lifespan. A close look at the preamble of the agreement shows the normatively prescriptive and politically intrusive nature of the agreement. Even worse, the Cotonou Agreement expired a year ago, and its future appears precarious.

In tandem with the Cotonou Agreement, the Joint Africa-EU Strategy (JAES) was crafted in 2007, setting out the intention of both continents to move beyond a *donor/recipient* relationship towards a relationship based on principles of ownership, partnership, and solidarity.²⁹ Merritt dubbed the JAES as *wishful thinking*, as Africa has moved from being considered as aid recipient poster child to a new source of security threats to Europe.³⁰ For Sepos, the failure of the JAES is due to the fact that the “deeply embedded Centre-Periphery relationship dimensions of imperialism strongly suggests that the EU relates to and behaves towards the ACP countries, as an imperial power Europe.”³¹ The EU has also tried to gradually replace the Cotonou Agreement with Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) on a regional basis and has successfully concluded EPAs with various sub-regional communities. Most recently, the EU-Africa summit that took place in February 2022 pointed out the need to forge a strong partnership and joint vision.

C. China and Human Rights Abuses in Africa

A common criticism levelled against China is its blatant support for despotic governments known for their massive human rights violations. There is some truth to this claim, simply because China certainly did -- and will probably continue to -- help pariah states, as evident, *inter alia*, in Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, and Sudan. But there are three fundamental problems with this line of argument.

First, a conflation of moral imperatives with legal obligations is problematic. If China is required to act as a responsible international actor, which I believe it should, then our assessment must be based on concrete international legal obligations incumbent on China. Second, it should be noted that China has a different philosophical approach or conception of human rights -- a view shared by many African countries. Similarly, the claim of peculiar Asian values still evokes popular support when it comes to the localization or implementation of human rights. To a

large extent, the European human rights doctrine of ‘margin of appreciation’ is an affirmation of local divergence in the implementation of human rights.

Third, China should not be expected to export to Africa what it does not exercise at home. Seen from a more practical point of view, following the Tiananmen Square incident, human rights advocacy is considered to be a camouflage used by Western governments to enhance their political leverage, which emboldened China’s resolve to mobilize the support of the Global South. Moreover, there is a need to keep business and normative values separate as much as possible, for doing so obscures the comparative advantage that China has over the West and EU member states in particular. Finally, one has to take into consideration the fact that, with the rise of China, fear of a ‘yellow peril’ has resurfaced, and Western countries have engaged in the persistent demonization of China with a view to legitimize -- albeit implicitly -- their own interests in Africa as more enlightened.³²

In any case, taking stock of past trends and looking ahead into the future, China has shown some impressive improvements over the last decades, and the process of China’s socialization should continue constructively. However, a unilateral socialization of China is hard to come by unless the EU and its allies recognize the fact that the process of socialization is a two-way street.

4. The Sino-Ethiopian Relationship: A Cause for Concern?

The diplomatic relationship between China and Ethiopia dates back to the 1960s, during the late years of the imperial regime in Ethiopia, when “Ethiopia sent a cultural delegation to the PRC in 1961, signed an agreement to exchange journalists in 1962 and permitted China’s official news agency, Xinhua, to open an office in Addis Ababa.”³³ After ten years of diplomatic efforts, Ethiopia finally recognized the PRC in 1970 on the condition that the latter renounce its support for the secessionist Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF). Following the 2005 disputed election that enraged the West (primarily the EU), China has become Ethiopia’s most important economic partner. This epitomizes China’s role as ‘a friend in need is a friend indeed’ for illegitimate and alienated governments across the board. As observed by Shinn (then-US Ambassador to Ethiopia): “China became involved in nearly every aspect of Ethiopia’s economy.”³⁴ Chinese soft power formally began when Ethiopia first received young Chinese volunteers -- the first African country to do so. By 2011, the Confucius Institute had already signed bilateral

agreements with three Ethiopian Universities -- namely, Addis Ababa University, Hawassa University, and Haramaya University -- to offer Chinese language courses, and the number is growing exponentially.

Economic cooperation between China and Ethiopia is highly asymmetrical, with the balance tilted significantly towards China -- as is the case with most African countries -- and the total domination of infrastructure projects by Chinese companies has made the trade imbalance even worse. In regard to the so-called Chinese Model, Cabestan notes that “more than Europe’s or America’s, it is Asia’s development model that constitutes a real attraction for the Ethiopian regime.”³⁵ This assertion was also confirmed by the late Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Meles Zenawi, who argued that “the free market has cost Africa decades of development. By siding with China, this will never happen again.”³⁶ A clear affirmation of Sino-optimism and the growing love affair!

Ethiopian infrastructure projects are dominated by Chinese companies owing to the low bid prices that they offer and the unique financing mechanisms put in place, according to Gemedo.³⁷ Without any exaggeration, the country’s roads, dams, industrial parks, electric installations, stadiums, and more are either made in China or built by China. The Addis Ababa city railways was built at a cheap cost, without a proper feasibility study, and proved to be largely out of order in less than 3 years of operation. Chinese companies manipulated the ‘cheap labor market’ with lax regulative frameworks and environmental protections, bringing in their own workers in the tens of thousands. Ethiopian markets have been flooded with cheap and low-quality Chinese products. A case-in-point is the oldest and hitherto productive footwear industry, which was driven out of the market due to unfair competition and a lack of legal protections for growing local businesses. As a result, China has successfully outcompeted the EU and other Western partners and crippled most of Ethiopia’s small domestic industries.

Regarding Chinese foreign aid to Ethiopia, it has been noted that “[t]he aids relationship between Ethiopia and China [was] extremely limited,”³⁸ even though, nowadays, both China’s trade and investment as well as its aid to Ethiopia have increased exponentially. Of paramount concern, China’s ‘debt-trap diplomacy’ is deeply concerning. With Ethiopia being China’s second largest debtor, there is a high risk of a takeover trap. Indeed, this has only been delayed due to the debt-restructuring scheme agreed between China and Ethiopia in 2018. Thus, even though China has

never pursued territorial acquisition in Africa in the traditional sense of the term, there will be a new method of imperialism in the form of takeovers underpinned by ‘deft trap diplomacy’ if China’s tactical moves are left unchecked.

Concluding Remarks

China’s renewed engagement with Africa, which has a multifaceted nature and has evolved over the past decades, has displaced the traditional major players, including the EU. Taken at face value, Chinese interests in Africa are not fundamentally different from those of other actors, but the means it employs to pursue those interests are, to a large extent, unique. In addition to the ideational factors and the Chinese way of doing business, one of the reasons why China has been so successful with its approach to Africa is because Western “reformers have not been very effective in selling their institutional reforms to African policymakers.”³⁹ Moreover, Western engagement with Africa in the aftermath of the Cold War has been reactive in nature -- as a response to China’s growing geopolitical presence in Africa. Concerns about labor standards, human rights, and environmental issues notwithstanding, China is filling the gaps left by the major powers and providing employment opportunities in Africa. As to Chinese soft power, the Pew Research Center found that most people in Africa still consider China a force for good⁴⁰ and, following the Covid pandemic, China’s expanding soft power has become even more overt.

Henceforth, the EU needs to be more proactive in its engagement with Africa by reducing excessive bureaucracy and its obsessive missionary zeal, acknowledging the fact that Chinese foreign policy emanates from its state identity, and constructively engaging China by considering it a competitor, as opposed to a threat. As for African states, a potent tool to avert the ‘new imperialism in the making’ from becoming real and benefit from the Sino-African love affair is to devise a comprehensive African policy, which may be under the auspices of the AU or through the new continental free trade agreement.

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