

# China in Africa: A Form of Neo-Colonialism?

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The renewed engagement of China with African states and China's growing assertiveness on the global stage have spurred a polarising debate on the conceptualisation of China's involvement in Africa within the wider academic literature (Chen 2016, p. 100; Swedlund 2017, p. 389). Indeed, the African policy, as part of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) foreign policy of the "Going Global Strategy", poses some serious questions about the role of China as a rising power and its impacts on the current international system order- as a status quo or revisionist power (Chen 2016, p. 101; Chen 2016, p. 178; Reeves 2018; p. 990). Traditionally, China's presence in Africa has been viewed through three different strands of thought: as a development partner, an economic competitor or as a coloniser (Alden 2007, pp. 5-6). What has been coined as the "Dragon Slayers" versus "Panda Huggers" debate – on whether China represents a threat or an opportunity for the African continent – presents valid arguments on both sides (Balasubramanyam 2015, p. 25). In this light, this essay argues that this polarising debate on China as a neo-colonial power (threat) or as a genuine development partner (opportunity) highlights the growing uncertainty about China's rise as a great power and its implications for the conception of international relations. In addition, it is too early to make any decisive conclusion on the neo-colonialist nature of the People's Republic of China. Clearly, China's foreign policies demonstrate some form of neo-colonial tendencies with imperialistic undertones. However, abiding completely by this perspective might hurt African states' interests in the long-run. First, an account of the ideological, political and economic underpinnings of China's African Policy will be explored. Second, the heart of the debate of China as a threat or opportunity for Africa will be discussed by exposing arguments from both camps. And lastly, the essay will conclude on the need for a cautious approach in understanding Chinese foreign policy in Africa.

### **Sino-African Relations: The Underpinnings of China's African Policy**

China's African Policy is founded on a mix of historical narratives, win-win relationships and South-South Solidarity discourse, undergirded by the Chinese Communist Party's fierce adherence to the advancement of its core national interests under the national rhetoric of "Great Rejuvenation" (Langan 2017, p. 90; Reeves 2018, p. 978). Indeed, Sino-African relations are not new and have been figured prominently in the Chinese foreign policy discourse as a continuous pattern of South-South development cooperation and the shared identity with African people on the account of imperialism, and socio-economic developmental struggles (Okolo & Akwu 2016, p. 46; Swedlund 2017, p. 390; Reeves 2018, p. 91). Building on this seemingly shared identity, the CCP has constructed its African approach upon the "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence" which emphasises mutual respect for states' sovereignty, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference, equality and mutual benefits, and peaceful coexistence (Chen 2016, p. 112). In 2006, China has released its first African Policy Paper characterising Chinese engagement with Africa as enshrining the concepts of equality, non-interference and mutual benefits (Ncube 2012; p. 22; Chen 2016, p. 113; Zhu 2017, p. 32). In practice, this policy of "rayonnement" has been translated into effective diplomacy, comprehensive financial incentives in the form of development assistance, trade and investments, and limited military cooperation as well as peacekeeping operations (Alden 2007, pp. 34-35). Such holistic approach to African relations has elevated China as a major player in shifting the global balance of power, marking its inevitable rise as an influential state.

Since President Xi Jinping has taken office in 2012, the CCP has pursued more aggressive policies abroad which legitimately raised questions about China's role in the international system as a revisionist or status quo power. Xi Jinping's ideological drive for greater international ambitions is enshrined in the ideals of China's "Great

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Rejuvenation” and the “Chinese Dream”. According to Zheng Wang (2013, p. 9), the concept of “Chinese Dream” and “Great Rejuvenation” represent the national endeavour for China to claim back its rightful place as a great power within the international system. This international blueprint is in fact of crucial importance for China’s core national interest. Indeed, as argued by Aoyama (2016, p. 3), the “Great Rejuvenation” discourse serves important functions such as domestic political legitimacy for the CCP leadership, mobilisation of citizens around a cohesive national identity and as a national strategy goal advising foreign policy-making. Hence, in order to understand China’s growing assertiveness in Africa, it is essential to grasp the linkages between its national and international policy strategies. Thus, the motivations behind Chinese investment in Africa have been driven by three motivations. Firstly, with its leadership legitimacy resting upon the fragile pillars of economic performance, Africa’s abundance of natural resources in terms of oil and minerals represent an absolute priority for China’s continued economic growth (Ncube 2012, p. 22; Chen 2016, pp. 102-103; Zhu 2017, p. 23). Secondly, Africa represents an expanding market to which China can export its cheap manufactured goods and represent long-term financial investment (Okolo & Akwu 2016, p. 47). And third, China’s development aid assistance to Africa represents an effort to enhance its soft power and influence abroad by providing an alternative development model to the Washington Consensus, and securing support of African states within international institutions (Zhu 2017, p. 26; p. 29; p. 32). Hence, as concisely summarised by Mark Beeson (2018, p. 245), “Africa is providing an important testing ground for China’s evolving resource diplomacy and its efforts to ensure long-term economic security and influence”.

### **China in Africa: Threat or Opportunity?**

Scholars who view China’s involvement in Africa as negative have generally described such relations in terms of power asymmetry between the economic giant and the politically vulnerable African governments. Indeed, the concepts of neo-colonialism or neo-imperialism have been often used to describe Chinese interest in Africa. In his critique of the under-theorisation of Sino-African relations, A’Zami (2015, p. 725) exposes the contradictions in the concept of equal partnership propagandised by the CCP (unequal equal). Clearly, such rhetoric contrasts starkly with the power asymmetry between China and African states, calling for attention on the ability of African governments to maintain their sovereignty upon domestic and foreign policies. In this light, Mark Langan (2017) offers a convincing and enlightening analysis of China in Africa through the neo-colonialist approach of Nkrumah. According to Nkrumah, neo-colonialism can be interpreted as the diminution of African states’ sovereignty through asymmetric economic relations and inequitable trade and investment between the parties (Langan 2017, p. 89). Hence, according to Langan (2017, pp. 94-95), China has effectively used trade to co-opt African elites and governments into abiding to and advancing Chinese mercantilist interests and for the protection of Chinese businesses at the expense of African people’s social and environmental concerns. Zambia under the presidency of Michael Sata represents a compelling case in point which illustrates the dangers of economic dependency for state sovereignty as decried by Nkrumah. After winning the 2011 presidential elections upon the labelling of Chinese businesses as neo-colonialists and the promise of stricter regulations of trade practices, Michael Sata has been left powerless in face of increasing Chinese firms lobbying and threat of closing down crucial economic operations. This effectively resulted in the Sata government backing down on major tax reforms (Langan 2017, pp. 95-96). Another neo-colonialist argument draws upon the parallels between Chinese economic activities within African states and past activities of Western colonial powers. Balasubramanyam (2015, p. 21) highlights the combination of trade, financial investment, and aid to facilitate export of raw materials to China as resembling the extractive and exploitive colonial systems of the Old Powers. Hence, Chinese economic pragmatism dogma coupled with low concerns for welfare of African population and human rights abuses, and its closeness to political elites do raise some legitimate questions upon the neo-colonialist nature of Sino-African relations.

On the international stage, China is ingloriously known for its systematic opposition to international criticisms of its human rights records. The repeated blockings of UN resolutions in condemning China on violations of Tibetan’s rights have been actively supported by African states which effectively enabled the deflection of sanctions (Waetherley 2014, p. 157; Chen 2016, p. 112). In return, China has been a consistent enabler of illiberal African regimes. The “no strings attached” principle in view of Chinese aid programmes gave the CCP an economic and political advantage vis-à-vis Western powers by investing, hence gaining leverage, over pariah regimes (Alden 2007, p. 42; Zhu 2017, p. 38). For instance, China has been a major factor in sustaining the Darfur crisis in Sudan through the illicit sale of military weapons and threats to block any UN resolutions directed towards Sudan on the basis of self-

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interest in the Sudanese oil industries (Chen 2016, p. 105; 107; Zhu 2017, p. 38). Another case in point is the support China provided to Francois Bozize's dictatorial regime in Central African Republic in 2003 through financial investment in building mining and telecommunications infrastructures, hence keeping the economy, and by extension the regime, afloat (Halper 2010, p. 81). The growing appeal of the Beijing Consensus among African states and the effective use of economic leverages as diplomatic instruments can best be illustrated on China's resounding success in isolating Taiwan through the imposition of the "One-China Policy" embedded within official bilateral relations and agreements (Halper 2010, pp. 108-110; Chen 2016, p. 103; Langan 2017, p. 91; Zhu 2017, p. 28; Reeves 2018, pp. 982-983). As a result, there are only three African States (Burkina Faso, Sao Tome and Principe and Swaziland) out of 56 African states that still maintain official diplomatic ties with Taiwan (Chen 2016, p. 104). The cases presented clearly illustrate China's ability to influence or even direct African states' foreign policies, denoting a diminution of African states' sovereignty.

Proponents of Sino-African relations tend to view these relations through a more optimistic lens. Far from denying the potential threat that China represents toward Africa, the "Panda Huggers" emphasise on the practical benefits that African states can reap from a Chinese state willing to invest in developing the continent's infrastructure. The sway of African governments toward Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) and official development assistance (ODA) programmes is the result of a general disillusionment after decades of Western developmental aid projects which resulted in the entrenched "underdevelopment" of Africa (Campbell 2008, p. 99). Indeed, Chinese economic activities are more practical with less red tape due to its lack of concern for good governance and good practices (Swedlund 2017, pp. 404-405). Hence, Chinese investors are quick to get things done and deliver projects that would have taken much more time for Western investors to deliver. Pragmatism is of rigour when considering the African context. In this vein, Ehizuelen (2017, p. 342) sheds light on Africa's staggering need for infrastructure with an estimated \$ 93 billion dollar per year for the next decade in order to seal Africa's infrastructure gap. Under these circumstances, pragmatic, quick and generous Chinese foreign direct investments have been gladly welcomed by various African governments. In the long-run, these infrastructural development projects will contribute to improved regional economic integration of the African continent through transports connecting states and enabling swift exchange of goods and labour (Balasubramanyam 2015, p. 26). Moreover, according to Horace Campbell (2008, p. 100), African states and populations in general could greatly benefit from knowledge spill-overs from China leading to a technological revolution.

Another powerful argument brought forward by scholars who view Sino-African relations in a favourable light is the perceived increased agency of African states. China's alternative model of development and its combination of investment, aid and trade has been argued to provide African states with the ability to choose their own path for development and hence, increasing their independence in face of Western powers (Swedlund 2017, p. 392). Moreover, some scholars like Corkin have advanced the idea that the exploitative relationship need not be one way only. Through the Angolan case study, Corkin argues that African governments can make use of their sovereignty over natural resources extraction such as oil for export and use the proceeds towards reinforcing their regime legitimacy (A'Zami 2015, p. 730). Such view displaces the idea of power asymmetry resulting in unequal trade relations to a more win-win relation where both parties mutually benefit from the transaction. Other scholars have advanced a more speculative argument on China's sincere sympathy for African states developmental struggles. In this vein, Deborah Brautigam (2009, p. 21) argues that China is simply repeating patterns of development that it experienced under Western and Japanese investment policies during Deng Xiaoping's Open Door Policy. Hence, China is promoting a developmental model that the CCP believes has worked for the Chinese nation. In addition, in refuting Chinese exclusive investment focused on extractive resources, some scholars have pointed to China's debt relief activities (up to 10 billion yuan of loans to African states) and investment in non-resource rich states such as Guinea-Bissau (Chen 2016, p. 113; Zhu 2017, p. 31).

### **Sitting on the Fence: Cautious Approach to China in Africa**

Despite the polarising debate about China's impacts on African societies, there is a general consensus among scholars and observers that China cannot be fully trusted (Lumumba-Kasongo 2011, p. 237). Indeed, one will be utterly misguided to conceive of Sino-African relations as purely an opportunity to be seized (Langan 2017, p. 94). Conversely, viewing China as only a predatory neo-colonial state will only generate unproductive relations and

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undermine African states' interests in the long-term (Chen 2016, p. 111; Okolo & Akwu 2016, p. 56). Some scholars have attributed the labelling of China as a neo-colonialist state due to Western anxiety over China's growing global affluence (Chen 2016, p. 106; 109; Okolo & Akwu 2016, p. 51; Langan 2017, p. 91). Hence, arguably, it is valid to consider that the labelling of China as a neo-colonialist or imperialist power is symptomatic of a shift in global balance of power, and hence the growing uncertainty on how to engage or contain China. Nonetheless, it is too early to succumb to apprehension and hastily categorise China-Africa relations as neo-colonialist. As argued by Beeson (2018, p. 241), our current modern world has only experienced one major international transition (American Hegemony) and hence, it is difficult to ascertain on the meaning of China's economic and strategic expansion, including its activities in Africa. In addition, Chen's (2016) study of the polarising debate on China as a threat to Africa revealed that the stance of each side depends on the choice of unit for analysis. This observation sheds light on the contradiction between the CCP's official African policy and the misconduct of Chinese businesses on the ground. If following this line of thought, greater responsibility is then attributed to African states to implement better governance and regulation on Chinese businesses. In this regard, Campbell (2008, p. 101) and Alden (2007, p. 82) placed their hope within the growing African civil society in keeping Chinese deeds in check and enforcing compliance from their respective governments. Indeed, one feature of colonialism that China cruelly lacks in Africa is cultural hegemony where language, culture and bureaucratic institutions remain highly influenced by previous Western colonial powers (Campbell 2008, p. 102; Lumumba-Kasongo 2011, p. 258; Balasubramanyam 2015, p. 25).

## Conclusion

Sino-African relations are complex and multi-layered. A cautious approach is needed when evaluating the polarising debate on China as a neo-colonial power devoted to resource-grabbing and exploitation. The peculiar preference of Beijing for bilateral agreements with other states is legitimately seen as a showdown of power politics where China ensures its economic leverage over less powerful states. China does exhibit some neo-colonial tendencies and has the potential to undermine African states' sovereignty. However, African states have also enjoyed some degree of agency and have, to some extent, benefitted from economic and infrastructural development. Nevertheless, China's growing influence on the African continent seems inevitable and it is safe to advance that China will always play by the geopolitical game of maximizing its own national interests, defying other states. In this regard, China is acting like any other emerging power would act.

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