

Africa-China Relations

Fēizhōu hé Zhōngguó de wàijiāo guānxi 非洲和中国的外交关系

Chinese trade, investment, and aid contribute to growth in Africa, but China's growing presence on the continent has caused rising international concern as observers debate China's strategic motivations.

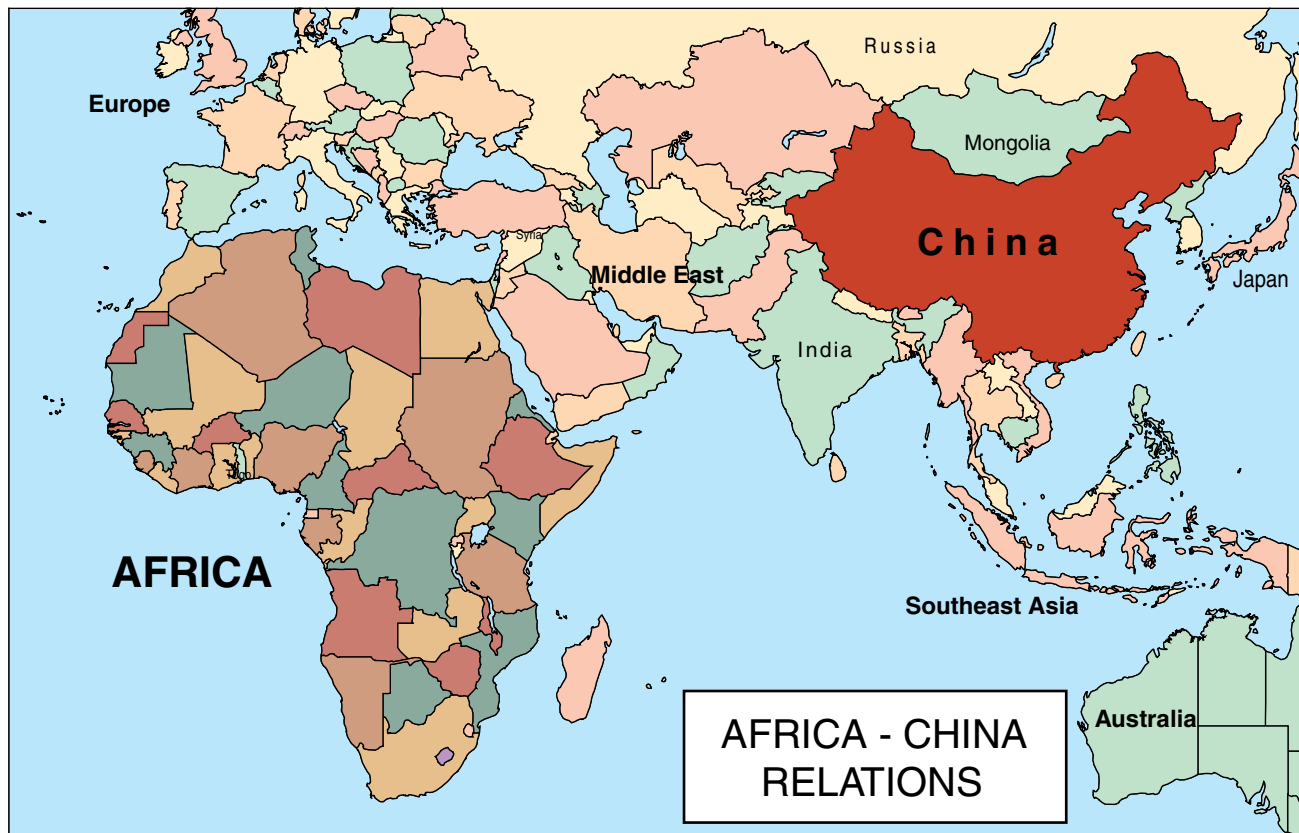
China's presence in Africa is expanding, increasingly complex, and the object of growing controversy both among African nations and countries around the world. Chinese accounts of contemporary China-Africa relations often begin with stories of Tang dynasty (618–907 CE) explorer Du Huan, said to have visited Egypt, Sudan, and other areas of Africa, or the multiple voyages to eastern Africa by Ming dynasty (1368–1644) Admiral Zheng He, and end with the observation that China's contacts with Africa from the earliest times have been friendly, mutually beneficial exchanges.

Although Chinese isolationism during the late Ming dynasty and Qing dynasty (1644–1912) brought an end to officially sponsored trade missions by China's imperial government, beginning in the 1950s the People's Republic of China pursued relations with the newly independent countries on the continent, frequently making commitments of foreign aid, such as financing for the massive Tanzania–Zambia railway project. Beijing's African diplomacy had many aims at the time, including asserting solidarity with the Third World as its relationship with Moscow deteriorated and limiting the number of countries granting diplomatic recognition to the Nationalist (Kuomintang) government in Taipei, Taiwan. In

addition, prior to the 1990s China provided material and organizational support, including arms and training programs, to revolutionary movements in Africa. As China's liberalizing economic reforms took hold in the 1980s, the impetus and nature of Chinese ties with Africa began to change, and relations with the continent came to be seen by China in the context of safeguarding its economic security and related strategic goals of enhancing global influence and international prestige.

Expanding Chinese Presence

Today China is Africa's second-most important trading partner after the United States, having recently surpassed France, and is poised to become its most important as early as 2010. Since the mid-1990s China's trade with countries on the continent has expanded rapidly along with its rising demand for raw materials and imported oil, supported by the country's official "go out" (*zou chuqu*) policy, which encourages Chinese firms to invest abroad and includes a commitment by China's top leadership to use state resources to ensure the country's energy security. In 2000 two-way trade between China and Africa stood at less than \$1 billion a year; it had reached \$73 billion by 2007, and China's Customs Administration predicted that trade will have exceeded \$100 billion by the end of 2008. African countries are importing increasing quantities of China-produced apparel and machinery. And imports from Africa have become increasingly important to China. For example, Angola became China's greatest single source of foreign oil in 2006; Burkina-Faso



and Mali now supply 20 percent of China's cotton imports; and mineral-producing countries like the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Zambia, and South Africa are meeting a growing share of Chinese demand. Africa now accounts for around 30 percent of China's oil imports, 80 percent of its cobalt imports, and 40 percent of its manganese imports. China's most important trading partners on the continent are Angola (19 percent), South Africa (19 percent), Sudan (8 percent), Egypt (6 percent), and Nigeria (6 percent). In 2007, looked at in aggregate, African countries ran a small (\$1.1 billion) trade surplus with China.

Along with trade, countries on the continent are seeing an unprecedented flow of Chinese investment dollars into their economies. In the early 1990s Chinese foreign direct investment in Africa was less than \$10 million; estimates suggest it may have reached \$6 billion by 2006. Chinese firms have seized opportunities where those of other countries have been deterred by perceptions of risk. For example, in the 1990s, when civil war held back other investors, China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) developed oil fields in Sudan; after

conflict broke out in Ivory Coast in 2002, and its traditional economic partners, such as France, distanced themselves, China increased its investment in its cocoa sector. Although Chinese foreign direct investment in Africa stands at only about 3 percent of total Chinese overseas investment, its share is expected to rise as it diversifies. In 2007 China's Industrial & Commercial Bank took a 20 percent stake in South Africa's Standard Bank, and China's textile manufacturers, seeking both to lower costs and to find a way around U.S. and European quotas, are building factories in Africa.

Today Chinese businesses can be found in forty-nine African countries, with approximately eight hundred Chinese state companies operating on the continent. Increasing numbers of individual Chinese are also pursuing economic opportunities in Africa, with the overwhelming majority in South Africa, followed by Zambia, where one of three planned Chinese-developed special economic zones will be located. According to some estimates, Chinese nationals in Africa now total about 550,000—more than the number of U.S. (70,000) or French citizens (100,000). Chinese tourists to Africa have also been

growing by double digits in recent years. Increasing numbers of Africans also live in China as people from the forty-eight countries in Africa with which China has diplomatic relations, seeing opportunity in China's growing exports to their countries, move to China. A reported ten thousand people from the continent now live in Guangzhou (Canton) alone, many engaged in buying low-end textiles and other finished goods for resale in Africa. Most African businesspeople come to China on short-term visas but find ways to extend their stays, with the result that cities like Guangzhou are developing African neighborhoods where representatives from the continent's myriad cultures interact with the Chinese way of life. African merchants, mostly from Nigeria, Mali, and Ghana, have been arriving in such large numbers to do business in Guangzhou's clothing and textile trade centers that in November 2008 Kenya Airways instituted mainland China's first a nonstop route from Africa, between Nairobi and Guangzhou. Some reports suggest that Chinese authorities have sought to limit migration from African nations to China by tightening already-restrictive visa requirements in early 2008, although others indicate that this development can be attributed to general changes in Chinese immigration requirements in preparation for the 2008 Olympics.

Alongside the expansion of Chinese commercial interests in Africa, many African nations have been the beneficiaries of Chinese foreign aid, both from the Chinese Export-Import Bank and from humanitarian projects. According to official Chinese figures, China had given \$5.74 billion in aid to Africa by 2006, contributing to eight hundred projects, with many more in the pipeline. This aid figure does not include debt relief, which added up to nearly \$1.4 billion to thirty-one heavily indebted and least-developed African countries. By official count, China had provided more than eighteen thousand scholarships to Africans and had sent more than fifteen thousand medical personnel to countries on the continent. China's Export-Import Bank plans to spend \$20 billion in Africa in the next three years—about the same expenditure planned by the World Bank during that period. A World Bank study estimated that through mid-2006, Export-Import Bank loans to Africa totaled over \$12.5 billion in infrastructural development alone, directed at projects concentrated in Angola, Mozambique, Nigeria, Sudan, and Zimbabwe.

Complex Relationship

China's relationship with Africa is becoming increasingly complex. Along with development assistance and growing commercial linkages to the continent, China has cultivated deeper political, military, and cultural relationships with African nations, aimed to support its economic interests but also aimed toward other international objectives. Having abandoned policies of the era of Chinese Communist Party leader Mao Zedong that championed revolutionary and national liberation movements in Africa, Beijing's political relationships with African countries are conducted government to government. China's adamant defense of the inviolability of the sovereignty of African states, going back to principles asserted at the 1955 Bandung conference of developing nations, has been rewarded by backing from African countries in international forums where China has been the object of Western-led international criticism. This support and the tendency by African states toward bloc voting in multilateral organizations have proved highly beneficial to China, resulting in the repeated defeat of human rights proposals directed against China at the United Nations and contributing critically to the International Olympic Committee's decision to award the 2008 Olympics to Beijing, for example. China also expects to draw on support from countries on the continent for its positions on multilateral trade issues and revisions to international economic rules. In addition, expanding relationships with African countries have benefited China in its ongoing efforts to reduce Taiwan's international space, not only by weakening the appeal of Taiwan's attempts to court African states for diplomatic recognition but also by drawing on African support to keep Taiwan out of international organizations.

China has also made military cooperation and arms sales an important facet of its relationship with African countries. China has military-to-military contacts with more than forty countries on the continent. Fourteen of China's military attaché offices are in African countries; and seven African countries (Algeria, Egypt, Namibia, Nigeria, Sudan, Zambia, and Zimbabwe) have reciprocal offices in Beijing, with another twelve African countries maintaining resident military offices in their embassies to China. Although only 6 to 7 percent of all arms supplied to Africa currently come from China, Chinese weapons

have found eager buyers in Sudan and Zimbabwe—both countries under a Western arms embargo. Ethiopia is another leading destination for Chinese arms. Nigeria has also become one of China's best African customers; after efforts by the U.S. Congress to block or delay patrol boats for use in Nigeria's troubled delta region, Nigeria has chosen to procure Chinese military supplies, including missiles and fighter jets. China has also agreed to train Nigerian specialists in satellite operations.

Africa has been an important focus of China's growing participation in international peacekeeping operations, with the majority of its peacekeeping troops engaged in operations on the continent. It has participated in peacekeeping operations in Liberia and has contributed troops to U.N. missions in Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia and Eritrea, the Ivory Coast, and the U.N. Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara. In addition, China committed three hundred engineers and several million dollars in support of U.N.–African Union peacekeeping operations in Sudan.

Along with political and military relations, Beijing has significantly expanded cultural and educational exchanges with Africa in the last few years, and in the framework established at the November 2006 Beijing Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) is committed to doing even more. The Chinese government is establishing Confucius Institutes offering Chinese language training at universities in several countries, with three already under way in Kenya, Rwanda, and South Africa and five more in the planning stages. In addition, at the FOCAC China agreed to send Chinese agricultural experts to Africa and to establish demonstration sites, committed to train fifteen thousand African professionals in three years beginning in 2007—double the number of scholarships for African students—and to send several hundred Chinese young people to Africa by 2010, through the program Chinese Young Volunteers Serving Africa, to volunteer in fields from education to sports to health and agriculture.

China's African Presence and International Concerns

China's growing presence in Africa has met with rising international controversy as international observers,

including human rights groups, other countries with interests in Africa, and Africans themselves debate China's strategic motivations and conduct on the continent. China's development aid and economic engagement are associated with unprecedented economic growth in Africa—5.8 percent in 2007. Chinese-financed transportation and communications infrastructure projects have helped some countries overcome seemingly intractable bottlenecks and leapfrog technologically in some sectors. Chinese money linked to commercial deals has helped finance new public buildings from presidential palaces to sports stadiums. Further, as part of its stated "win-win" Africa policy, China has promised duty-free treatment for African goods to help diversify Africa's export market. To date, China's trade with Africa has followed patterns established by its other main trading partners.

Others see China's deepening role in Africa in a different light. Generally, African governments and elites have welcomed the largesse and debt relief from the world's biggest developing country as an alternative to Western aid and see Chinese trade and investment as a much-needed source of growth. But China's expanding economic presence is also generating new concerns and tensions. Some people opposed to China's growing footprint in Africa argue that China is just the latest power to exploit African resources, and they complain about many Chinese corporate practices. Others contend that Chinese infrastructure agreements underbid local firms and include stipulations requiring the use of Chinese labor and therefore contribute inadequately to skills and technology transfer and to generating potential local employment. In Mauritius complaints have centered on the employment of Chinese rather than local workers in Chinese-constructed factories. Elsewhere local workers in Chinese-owned mines and factories report harsh and unsafe working conditions. The flood of cheap Chinese-made goods into local markets is another area of concern. Some calculations attribute the loss of 250,000 textile-related jobs in Nigeria to Chinese imports. The impact of Chinese-led development on the environment is another source of concern amid evidence of Chinese companies violating local environmental and conservation regulations, including reports that a major Chinese oil company prospected for oil in a nature reserve in Gabon, and that Chinese companies have been engaged in illegal logging in several African countries.

Because many of the Chinese businesses operating in Africa are state owned, the behavior of Chinese firms is generally ascribed to Chinese government policies. But anti-Chinese sentiment has also taken the form of deliberate attacks on Chinese nationals, including kidnappings and arson directed at Chinese-owned businesses. What China's presence means for the continent is beginning to influence national political debate as well. In Zambia's 2006 elections opposition leader Michael Sata ran for president on an anti-Chinese platform, nearly unseating the incumbent.

Chinese lending practices have also raised concerns on the part of traditional donors who have decried the opacity of some of China's loan agreements and the extension of new loans by China to countries pursuing debt forgiveness under the Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative. Some, such as Transparency International, worry that the absence of conditions tied to Chinese

aid also undermines international efforts to encourage improved political and economic governance. Some observers also are concerned that the politically illiberal Chinese development model is thwarting international hopes for more open and democratic governance in African countries. Beijing's willingness to do business with regimes with a record of human rights violations, such as Khartoum and Harare, has been criticized as helping to shield those regimes from critical international censure and worsening threats to human security. Also criticized has been the willingness of Chinese to pay bribes overseas to facilitate commercial agreements, a practice that reinforces the corrupt and opaque practices linked to political instability across the continent.

Currently, however, China-African relations appear to be entering a new phase. On the one hand, as African countries recognize they can play one resource-hungry buyer off against the other, they appear increasingly

An international delegation from Africa tours the Forbidden City with friendly Chinese cadres. PHOTO BY JOAN LEBOLD COHEN.



willing to risk losing deals with China for better terms and conditions. For example, pressure from South African trade unions resulted in quotas on Chinese textiles to that country beginning in early 2007; Ghana's government has sought to create conditions for its private sector to take the lead in building economic relationships with Chinese partners in recent years; and in May 2008 Nigeria's government rejected Chinese offers of a nonconcessionary loan for a high-speed rail project that it wishes to develop under private-sector management. On the other hand, not all African countries have the capacities of South Africa, Ghana, or Nigeria, and some African leaders have begun to push for collaboration across the continent to develop an Africa-wide strategy for relations with China.

At the same time China has appeared increasingly concerned about the impact of its role in Africa on its international image and prestige. Chinese leaders have left meetings with Zimbabwe's dictatorial president Robert Mugabe off their itineraries during recent visits to the continent, for example. In addition, after years of international pressure to leverage its economic ties with Sudan to bring an end to the atrocities in the Darfur region, China has moved away from its strict policy of "non-interference" toward more public efforts to persuade Khartoum to agree to international cooperation in crafting a peace settlement. In 2007 Beijing appointed a special envoy on Darfur, and Chinese president Hu Jintao began to speak publicly about the need for the Sudanese government to do more to end the crisis. In the months ahead of the Beijing Olympics, China went on the diplomatic offensive, explaining its opposition to sanctions and highlighting its pivotal role in Khartoum's agreement to allow U.N. and African Union peacekeepers into the country, as well as its contribution of several hundred Chinese engineers to this deployment. China's continued role as the major buyer of Sudanese oil and its ongoing arms sales to Khartoum remain the target of international protest; but even as its oil interests in the country have been threatened by attacks by rebel groups, China has stood firm in its position that the government in Khartoum rather than the international community must drive the process of restoring stability in Darfur.

China's government has made it clear that it recognizes the need to distinguish its approach to the continent from that of the West and to show that its stated commitment

to "South-South cooperation" is more than rhetorical. During the 2006 FOCAC summit China acknowledged problems with its corporate practices and environmental impact in Africa. The Chinese premier pledged that Chinese firms would implement projects in an "open, fair, just and transparent" way, and the summit's action plan committed Chinese assistance in building the capacities of African countries in the areas of environmental and biodiversity protection, such as by funding a United Nations Environmental Programme China-Africa Environment Centre. Other steps toward this commitment include the introduction of new procedures by China's customs services to verify that timber imported to China is logged legally and the preparation by China's State Forestry Administration (SFA) of guidelines for the establishment of sustainable forest plantations by Chinese enterprises overseas.

China's galloping economic growth and surging demand for energy and raw materials assure its continued interest in deepening its role in Africa in the coming years. With the emergence of alternatives to both Western and Chinese investment, including India and oil-rich states from the Middle East to Russia, African countries will have the opportunity to manage their relations with their Chinese counterparts increasingly strategically. China's role in Africa should therefore be seen as an evolving one, shaped not only by Chinese economic and security objectives but also by international competition and the capacity of African countries to assert their own interests.

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Further Reading

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Distant water won't put out a fire close at hand.

远水救不了近火

Yuǎn shuǐ jiù bù liǎo jìn huǒ.