

China's growing influence in Africa: Lessons for India

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Date: 01 March 2018

On December 04, 2015, while delivering a speech at the opening ceremony of the Johannesburg Summit of the Sixth Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, the Chinese President Xi Jinping asserted, “In conducting China’s relations with Africa, we adhere to the principles of sincerity, practical results, affinity and good faith and uphold the values of friendship, justice and shared interests, and we will work with our African friends to embrace a new era of win-win cooperation and common development.”¹ He went on to recommend that “the new type of China-Africa strategic partnership be upgraded to a comprehensive strategic and cooperative partnership.”² Xi’s statement reflected China’s quest to develop an enduring relationship with Africa, especially at a time when obtaining long-term energy supplies has become vital for the Asian giant to sustain its industrialisation by securing access to oil supplies and other raw materials. Similarly, for Africa, Chinese aid and investments are of significant value since the continent happens to be one of the poorest and least developed in the world. Despite these complementarities, relations between the two giant geographical entities are not without their complications, and China’s activities in Africa have been the subject of strong criticism, albeit mostly from the West, for failing on good governance standards and human rights.³ These complications notwithstanding, the nature and pace of Chinese activities in Africa clearly demonstrate the coherence between Chinese geoeconomic goals and the geostrategy that Beijing has adopted in order to attain those goals. This geostrategy of China quite clearly involves the dextrous use of all three major instruments available to Beijing in the execution of its foreign policy, namely, vigorous diplomatic and economic exchanges, strongly supported, insured, and assured, by the Chinese military machine operating at the strategic level. On the other hand, India, which is often perceived as a regional alternative to China, has been unable to make much headway in Africa, either, despite sharing historical

commonalities with several countries of that continent, partly due to its own capacity constraints, but largely thanks to its lackadaisical bureaucracy. It is true that with the year-on-year increase in India's economic and political heft, its engagement in Africa is gradually increasing. However, the pace of Chinese inroads in the region far outweighs that of India's. This situation needs remedying based upon careful analysis, as Africa is not only strategically located in the middle of important maritime trade corridors but also constitutes a significant part of India's extended maritime neighbourhood.

This paper attempts to analyse China's increasing presence in Africa, with the aim of identifying the challenges, opportunities and imperatives for India.

Overview of Historical to Contemporary China-Africa Relations

In dealing with Africa's historical links with China, scholars frequently point to Admiral Zheng He's expedition to the east coast of Africa during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) of imperial China, as the starting point for China-Africa relations.⁴ However, available evidence points to a much earlier commencement. The admiral undertook his maritime voyages in the Fifteenth Century, while economic and cultural exchanges between China and Africa are believed to have been ongoing since China's Han Dynasty (206 BCE- 220 CE), when trade through the "Silk Road" connected China with much of the rest of the world.⁵

Following Zheng's voyages, however, two significant developments brought about a significant decline in the exchanges between China and Africa. The first was the discontinuation of maritime expeditions by both the Ming and the Qing Dynasties, probably for fear of strategic overreach.⁶ The second was the launch, in the same century, of the European 'Age of Discovery', spearheaded by Portugal and typified by the arrival of the Portuguese adventurer, Vasco da Gama, on the coast of East Africa in 1498, which opened up the region to trade with the West, and eventually, to over 450 years of colonial rule by European maritime powers.⁷

In the contemporary era, China got off to a slow start in Africa, with Egypt being the first African country to establish diplomatic ties with China, in May 1956.

Beijing's approach to Africa was initially guided by two key drivers. The first was to enhance its own legitimacy and establish global recognition as the only true representative of China, along with the concomitant discrediting of Taiwan's claim to represent China in the United Nations. The second was to counter the influence of the West and the Soviet Union in the African continent.⁸ From the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s Beijing pumped in about US\$ 2.5 billion in aid to 36 African countries and provided the assistance of thousands of its engineers, doctors and technicians for a variety of development and infrastructure projects in these countries.⁹ The 1860 kilometre Tazara Railway Project (1970-75) between Tanzania and Zambia, which had been jointly requested by the then President of Zambia, Kenneth Kaunda, and his Tanzanian counterpart, Julius Nyerere, remains one of China's most celebrated assistance projects in Africa.¹⁰

China's Increasing Forays in Africa

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990-s, Beijing began to accelerate its engagement of Africa. China's remarkable ability to capitalise upon opportunities that presented themselves was in stark evidence when, in 1995, following the imposition of sanctions by the USA on Sudan, the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) took an immediate decision to invest in that country's oil sector.¹¹ China is now the largest investor in Sudan controlling 75 per cent of Sudan's oil industry, and this near-monopoly has been aided greatly by the absence of any competition from the USA.¹² This was followed by the establishment of the 'Forum on China-Africa Cooperation' (FOCAC) in Beijing, in October 2000, with its stated objective being to strengthen multidimensional cooperation between China and Africa.¹³

There has been little let up since then. The year 2006 was a particularly defining one for Sino-African relations. Beginning with the release of the first White Paper on China's Africa Policy on January 12, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of China's formal diplomatic ties with Africa, the year also witnessed visits to Africa by China's top three leaders, namely, President Hu Jintao, Premier Wen Jiabao and Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing.¹⁴ The first Heads of State Summit of FOCAC was also

hosted by Beijing in November 2006, the closing statement of which declared a “new strategic partnership” between China and Africa.¹⁵

Moreover, as part of the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ (BRI), China seeks to link several African countries such as Kenya, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Uganda, Rwanda, South Sudan, Burundi, Congo, Angola, Tanzania, etc., through railway lines, to ports such as Alexandria (Egypt) and Mombasa (Kenya), which are nodes of the Maritime Silk Road.¹⁶ Beijing is also creating an industrial economic belt alongside these connectivity corridors, underscoring the significance of Africa in what is usually referred to as a Eurasian infrastructure network initiative.¹⁷

China’s rising profile in Africa reflects the growing importance of the region to China’s growth and development. The continent has become the second largest source of China’s crude imports after the Persian Gulf.¹⁸ In addition, China is Africa’s largest trade partner and the destination as well as the source of most of Africa’s exports and imports.¹⁹ While Chinese state-owned enterprises are involved in the extraction of natural resources in Africa, private Chinese investments are mostly in the services and manufacturing sectors, and are welcomed by African states.²⁰ Beijing is also eager to utilise the enormous numerically-driven diplomatic heft that Africa has, to bring about its desired changes in the thus-far Western-dominated world order. China had already had a foretaste of success in this regard, when it secured a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, replacing Taiwan, with the support of 26 Africa states (34% of the General Assembly votes).²¹ In short, China is heavily reliant on Africa for trade, natural resources, great power ambitions as well as for legitimacy purposes, especially over Taiwan and for support at multinational institutions. And yet, as has already been mentioned, despite the rising cooperation, Chinese activities in Africa have been subject to criticism by the West and by some segments of African civil society, too, for issues relating to poor quality of products, the disregard or abuse of human rights, ‘white elephant’ projects, environment degradation, etc. Reports suggest that there are roughly a million Chinese workers in Africa, which is disproportionately high compared to the amount of financing provided by China and also in comparison with migrants from other continents.²² There are also allegations that infrastructure programs funded by China overwhelmingly benefit Chinese corporations.²³ Several uncomfortable questions have also been raised on the quality of the infrastructure built by China. A

case in point is the Luanda General Hospital in Angola, which had to be shut down, a mere four years after its opening in 2006, due to serious structural problems.²⁴ Likewise, several infrastructure projects are poorly maintained and underutilised, and have turned out to be ‘white elephants’. The Kilamba City project, once again in Angola, which had been undertaken by the ‘China International Trust and Investment Corporation’ at a cost of US\$ 3.5 billion, is one such example.²⁵ Chinese firms also stand accused of unfair labour practices (which, for example, led to violent protests in Zambia), a lack of resource transparency, and very superficial efforts to ensure animal and environment protection.²⁶ However, despite the high level of Western scrutiny, China’s engagement of Africa has also had positive effects, especially by way of job creation, economic growth, the availability of critically required infrastructure and developing assistance, investments in services and manufacturing, as well as in saving mines from catastrophic deterioration.²⁷ Moreover, some scholars opine that much of the criticism of China is unwarranted since “*many African countries are worse off than China as they attach low priority to environment protection, have understaffed environment bureaucracies and even worse records for countering corruption*”.²⁸ Recent reports also suggest that China is becoming more sensitive to such criticism and is working to addressing these concerns. Wang Yi, China’s Foreign Minister, while on a 2015 tour of Kenya, asserted that “[China] absolutely will not take the old path of Western colonists, and we absolutely will not sacrifice Africa’s ecological environment and long term interests.”²⁹ State-owned Chinese corporations are also required to publish annual Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) reports. For instance, after having been flayed for poor environmental standards, CNPC is now working with the Gabonese government to ensure environmentally sensitive practices in future.³⁰ All in all, it may be reasonably concluded that

China is executing a fairly successful and multi-pronged geostrategy to attain its geoeconomic goals and objectives.

Implications for India’s Policy in Africa

What does all this mean for India? India’s engagement with Africa is small when compared to that of China, but it nevertheless holds a position of significance for

almost all African States. This is partly attributable to the shared colonial history of India and Africa, as well as to millennia-old historical ties that India and Africa share with one other.³¹

While the recent financial crisis in the West and growing interest in South-South cooperation has led to declining trade and investments between Africa and its traditional partners, namely, Europe and the USA, several African countries are keen to build trade and economic partnerships with emerging powers like China and India.³² Although China is involved in manufacturing, construction and infrastructure projects in more than 50 African countries, of particular concern to India is the military-strategic moves that increasingly underpin China's involvement in Africa. In 2016, Beijing established its first overseas naval base at Djibouti, which is situated at the mouth of the strategic Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb, in the Horn of Africa.³³ There are unconfirmed reports that China plans to construct as many as 18-19 overseas strategic supply-bases in (amongst others) Seychelles, Maldives, Madagascar, Kenya, Tunisia, Mozambique etc.³⁴ India often perceives these naval activities as being part of a larger strategy of China that is — whether consciously or inadvertently — is encircling India. This is what is known as China's "string of pearls" strategy in the IOR.³⁵

However, India, too, is playing the game, competing vigorously with China, and, gradually making inroads in the region. This is particularly by way of its strong pharmaceutical companies, software firms and back-office outsourcing businesses.³⁶ India's contemporary engagement of Africa took a new turn when, like China, the South Asian giant also established cooperation-forum mechanisms with Africa, in 2008, under the framework of 'India-Africa Forum Summits'. Since that year, there is much evidence of increased cooperation, in multi-dimensional fields and disciplines, between India and Africa. In fact, India and China are also encouraging their respective enterprises to collaborate in Africa. A prominent early example of such collaboration is the joint venture that was established as early as 2004, between China National Petroleum Corporation and Oil and Natural Gas Corporation, to explore oil reserves in Sudan.³⁷

Comparative Analysis

Fortunately, for the most part, China and India engage with Africa in complementary sectors. As a result, there is relatively little competition and no real economic conflict between the two Asian giants, at least at present. However, as both the rising powers get further involved with Africa, competition and occasional disputes are bound to occur. The challenge will lie in managing such occurrences.

Africa has emerged as a vital geostrategic arena in the evolving new great game for power, competition and influence in the Indo-Pacific region. The resource rich continent's strategic location gives it numerous tactical advantages in terms of maritime trade and connectivity within the IOR. As a consequence, Africa is witnessing renewed interest from a host of maritime powers such as Japan, India, China, France, and the USA, all jostling for influence in the region.

In analysing China's engagement of the region, a clear shift is noticeable today from Beijing's traditional (and much touted) policy of non-interference in the various countries in the region. This follows from Beijing's old-style approaches to developmental deals and investments, which has always been guided by instrumental motivations, unlike the West which make their ties conditional upon certain parameters like human rights, democracy etc. This "no strings-attached" policy makes it convenient for Beijing to invest in countries with significant political and security risks. China's recent foray in Africa is also guided by its "Great Power" ambitions — to be globally recognised as a 'great power' is something that Beijing has always longed for. Towards this end, China has been quite successful in wooing back almost all important African countries from Taiwan's fold, thus giving it greater recognition and legitimacy in the international arena.

In view of this emerging 'Great Game' in Africa, India needs to step up its efforts and promote greater private sector participation and investments in the region. New Delhi needs to be far more proactive in its efforts to cultivate and maintain better relations with African countries, so that New Delhi's interests are not adversely affected by China's own geopolitical game moves in the continent. While India and China have both shown political maturity by cooperating and jointly bidding for oil blocks in the continent, New Delhi must take a more realistic approach towards such joint projects, since China has not been willing to

demonstrate the same level of cooperation in areas where it finds itself in an advantageous position, such as in Central Asia.³⁸ Nevertheless, as a country with limited resources, it is imperative for India to work with like-minded states such as the USA, Taiwan, etc., to safeguard its interests in Africa. Towards that goal, India is already working with Japan to give form and substance to the 'Asia-Africa Growth Corridor' (AAGC) to provide a viable regional alternative to Beijing's 'Belt and Road Initiative'. However, reports indicate mounting Japanese frustration with the inability of the Indian bureaucracy to respond to Prime Ministerial initiatives such as the AAGC, reducing the visionary statements of both Prime Ministers (Modi and Abe) to rhetoric that can easily be derided. Indeed, in dealing with Africa, India and Japan might do well to take a cue from China!

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