

# CHINA IN AFRICA: RESOURCING ITS GLOBAL AMBITIONS

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For countries seeking to find a place on the global stage, Africa offers the potential to enlarge diplomatic influence, expand military capabilities and supply much needed resources. China's communist regime under Mao Zedong was quick to assess this potential and since 1949 when the Chinese Communist Party assumed power, maintaining good relations with Africa has been a long-term strategic goal for Beijing. For Mao the prospect of exporting Maoist ideology to African nations was an added incentive in his ambition to wrest leadership of the international communist movement from Moscow.

Africa came back into focus following Chinese Premier Zhao Ziyang's 11-nation tour in 1982. China's rapid rise since the 1980s has increased the importance of Africa for Beijing, which increasingly views it as a source of scarce minerals, oil and land. Today Africa ranks second after the Middle East as an exporter of oil to China. Africa – notably Angola, Equatorial Guinea, Nigeria, the Republic of Congo, and Sudan – supplies 28 per cent of China's oil requirements. Smaller suppliers include Algeria, Chad, Gabon, Kenya, Liberia, and Libya. Africa is also seen as potentially offering bases for an expanding People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) aiming to extend its operational reach into the Indian Ocean and beyond, and maintaining a permanent presence in these waters through which strategically vital sea lanes traverse. The PLAN is in advanced negotiations for naval bases with Djibouti and with Namibia for Walvis Bay. China has also received rights from the International Seabed Authority for undersea exploration in a bloc of the underwater seabed off Madagascar, mak-

ing it necessary for China to have at least ship berthing and re-victualling rights nearby. Senior PLAN officers have disclosed that China is exploring 14 bases around the Indian Ocean, mainly on the African continent.

As Beijing cultivated African countries it exhibited sensitivity in dealings with them by ensuring high-level and regular interactions at the Party and Ministerial levels. In addition, it dispatched thousands of teachers, doctors and medical aid teams to Africa and provided distance education to African students. Over the past decade China assiduously pursued expansion of its 'soft' power and established 38 Confucius Centres and numerous Confucius 'classrooms' in major African universities and educational institutes.

To step up interaction with Africa, since 2000, Beijing began organising China-Africa Summits at intervals of approximately three years. Five such summits have been held. All have been well attended usually by Heads of State or Ministers. Sensing competition and the need to step up engagement with these African countries, China has decided to hold the Sixth Summit in December this year in Africa and upgrade invitees to the level of Heads of State.

Realising that the U.S. and the West have sizeable influence in Africa, China sought to create positive sentiment for itself as a non-exploitative power by undertaking people-centric infrastructure projects and by disbursing financial assistance on easy terms. It extended assistance at low interest rates and without the stringent conditions concern-

ing corruption, human rights etc. imposed by the U.S., the West and the World Bank. China was additionally quite willing to deal with the leaders in these countries on a private basis. For instance between 2001-2010, China's Export-Import Bank extended \$67.2 billion in loans to sub-Saharan Africa - \$12.5 billion more than the World Bank. China soon emerged as the preferred aid partner and since 2009 has been Africa's largest trade partner for six consecutive years.

It additionally invested an estimated \$12 billion in infrastructure projects in 35 countries. Between 2000 and 2011 China invested in 1,673 developmental projects in 51 countries valued at an estimated \$75 billion. Till the end of 2013, China had built 3,530 kilometers of road in African countries in addition to 3,203 kilometers of railroad, with another 1,424 kilometers under construction. China has also built 34 power plants, 9 ports, 14 airports, 11 bridges and several sports stadiums capable of seating a total of 800,000 people in Africa.

In 2000, China established the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) to promote trade and the volume of trade between the two rose from \$10 billion in 2001 to \$130 billion in 2010. Presently more than 2000 Chinese companies operate in over 50 countries in Africa. In 2014, China-Africa trade reached \$221.9 billion. The China-Africa engagement is comprehensive and extensive and encompasses commercial exchange, medical assistance and aid, technical expertise, engineering projects, diplomacy and educational exchanges.

Military assistance and aid has been an important part of China's diplomacy and numerous Chinese military instructors and training teams went to African countries to impart training. China usually supplied small arms and ammunition. A number of officers from African nations receive training in Chinese military establishments. In 2014, China broke with its policy of not interfering directly and sent an infantry battalion to assist South Sudan. It also gave the African Union \$1 million

to tackle the fighting in Mali. There were more enduring military components as well. China built a small arms factory in Zimbabwe, an aircraft manufacturing facility in Egypt and between 1990 and 1993 the People's Liberation Army Air Force teams trained Sudanese pilots and technicians. China's cooperative agreements in the strategic nuclear field with some African countries also raised concerns about its proliferation activities. In 1981, China supplied 60 tons of enriched unsafeguarded uranium to South Africa's Valindoba facility. Later in 1983, China helped Algeria construct a large unsafeguarded plutonium production reactor.

There was an element of competitive diplomacy as well through the 1980s and 1990s when Beijing, intent on shrinking Taiwan's diplomatic space, enticed nations through 'cheque-book diplomacy' into severing diplomatic ties with Taiwan. Chinese assistance was dependent on the countries establishing formal diplomatic ties with the People's Republic of China - a policy from which China did not waver. For instance, despite its long-standing covert ties with the African National Congress since 1949, Beijing refused to establish diplomatic relations with South Africa till it severed ties with Taiwan.

Despite sustained criticism that China has been acquiring land cheaply in Africa, independent studies reveal that China's land holdings, whether by State owned Enterprises (SoE) or private entities, does not exceed 0.16 million hectares. China's largest holdings, facilitated by the enactment of the Zambia Land Act in 1995, are in Zambia where two farms are owned by Chinese SoEs and Chinese farmers have thirty private holdings. The largest is the Jouker Farm spread over 3500 hectares and owned by the China National Agricultural Development Group Corporation.

China today has considerable influence in Africa, which appears unshakeable. This is a result of decades-long assiduous, consistent cultivation of African leaders and their nations backed by steady investment. Regular visits

by high-ranking Chinese leaders additionally assure the leaders of these countries of their importance. The construction of high-quality public utility infrastructure projects has similarly helped project China in a positive light. Pro-Beijing lobbies presently exist within the political class, bureaucracy, the armed forces and journalists. An example of the latter is the failure of the West-led propaganda effort in the mid-2000s to highlight China's alleged exploitative policies and whip up anti-China sentiment. Such articles failed to create any worthwhile anti-China feeling. The very occasional eruption of racism in Chinese college campuses have also not dented China's image because of the alacrity with which the government moves to quell such disturbances.

For India to create a meaningful presence in Africa it is not enough to bank on old emotional links or vague ideas of non-alignment. It will need to identify specific areas of interest and focus on those countries. Its policies for operating in those countries would need to be appropriately flexible. An occasional conference is inadequate. It will be important to ensure that policies are constant for a considerable length of time and that promises are fulfilled within the specified time-line. The latter becomes more important when viewed in

the context of China's performance, including cost over-runs in projects resulting in higher interest payments by the recipient countries. While India will not be able to compete in terms of financial assistance, it can offer much needed assistance in the areas of education, health care and medicine and agriculture. Moreover, with Japan showing interest in Africa, collaboration with Japanese companies becomes a possibility.

The upcoming Africa Summit is an opportunity to make concrete, specific proposals and should convert into an ongoing process. India should target the decision-making intelligentsia in Africa and offer dozens of scholarships for disciplines in specialized institutes e.g. management, accounting, public administration, medicine and the military. Government-aided and private institutions must be involved. Instead of government involvement alone, it will be advantageous if private Indian entities -- especially in the medical, health-care and education sectors -- are incentivized to start operations in Africa. A good beginning will be to reduce the almost thirty Indian diplomatic missions scattered throughout Africa and, replace them with two or three large-sized missions in the larger African countries exercising broader jurisdictions.