

## The People's Republic of China's Presence in Africa

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“China-Africa ties have not grown overnight,  
nor is it a gift from someone else,  
but have been forged and sealed in adversity,  
built on one concrete step after another.”<sup>1</sup>  
Xi Jinping



michal812/Shutterstock.com

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<sup>1</sup> China.org.cn, “Forging a new chapter in China-Africa friendship and cooperation,” [http://www.china.org.cn/world/2020-07/26/content\\_76313226.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/world/2020-07/26/content_76313226.htm).

Relations between China<sup>2</sup> and African states are very often presented in a simplified way and do not reflect the complexity of reality. Furthermore, predominantly non-African and non-Chinese interpretations and narratives are used. Sources by the main protagonists are rather rarely found in the bibliographies of many texts. One can only speculate what the reasons are: They may range from simple ignorance to lack of linguistic and cultural knowledge to systematic racism, depending on the background of the author. However, no matter what the reasons for the respective narratives are and whether they can be empirically proven at all – if they are believed, they become politically powerful and have an influence on how the future is shaped. The following text is an attempt to look at Chinese involvement in Africa and will try to draw principally on African and Chinese sources. Due to the size of the continent and its diversity in every respect, only a very limited overview can be given, which will not be representative in all aspects, but attempts to summarize current developments.

The description of China's engagement will be roughly divided into the areas of military, economic, political and cultural-political engagement, even though these often overlap.

### **Military engagement**

China's military engagement seems to be quite recent, although during the last decade several authors have mentioned that China is increasing its forces in Africa.<sup>3</sup> An important military base for China is Djibouti, which was set up in 2017<sup>4</sup>, with a ten-year lease arrangement at \$ 20 million per year.<sup>5</sup> A spokesperson of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs commented on this step as follows:

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<sup>2</sup> Whenever China is mentioned in the following text, it refers to the People's Republic of China and not to the Republic of China (Taiwan).

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. Sean J. Li, "Why China Tripled Its Military Presence in Africa," <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2014/12/why-china-tripled-its-military-presence-africa/100364/>.

<sup>4</sup> You Yang and Li Jingyi, "Djibouti: Chinese military's first overseas support base," <https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d3d514d7859544d34457a6333566d54/index.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Mail & Guardian, "China's expanding military footprint in Africa," <https://mg.co.za/article/2018-10-24-chinas-expanding-military-footprint-in-africa/>.

Setting up the support base in Djibouti was a joint decision of the two countries. It will better let China fulfil its responsibilities in the international community.<sup>6</sup>

The base houses approximately 400 Chinese soldiers.<sup>7</sup> China joined several other non-African countries that already use facilities in Djibouti. Almost more interesting than the fact that China is present is that there are apparently joint exercises of Chinese and Western forces in Djibouti. According to a spokesperson of the Chinese Djibouti Support Base, medical rescue drills take place with other nations:

We have held joint medical rescue drills with foreign troops stationed in Djibouti and the 465 Formation of the European Union. We have also commanded our escort helicopter to take off and land at the base. All of these have improved our logistic support capability.<sup>8</sup>

According to the US Department of Defense, China considered to set up military logistics facilities in Kenya, Tanzania, Angola and the Seychelles as well.<sup>9</sup>

Besides the above-mentioned engagement, China's participation in UN-led peace keeping operations has grown since 1989, when the country joined the United Nations Transition Assistance Group (UNTAG) in Namibia. In 2019, China already contributed more than 15% or around seven billion US-Dollars of the global peacekeeping budget. Half of the missions and two thirds of the budget are located in/allocated to Africa. China's contribution in military and police personnel amounts to more than that of the other four

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<sup>6</sup> Yang, Jingyi, "Djibouti: Chinese military's first overseas support base."

<sup>7</sup> Steven Li, "China's Military Seeks to Establish Base on African Coast: Warning from US General," <https://www.visiontimes.com/2021/05/13/china-military-base-africa.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Yang, Jingyi, "Djibouti: Chinese military's first overseas support base."

<sup>9</sup> Annual Report to Congress from the United States Department of Defense. Department Of Defense, "Military And Security Developments Involving The People's Republic Of China," 2020, <https://china.usc.edu/departments-defense-military-and-security-developments-involving-peoples-republic-china-2020>.

permanent members of the UN Security Council and since 1989, over 40,000 Chinese peacekeepers have served in 24 missions.<sup>10</sup>

Apart from permanent presence and participation in international peace missions, China's strategy is shifting to foster military ties as well. While the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is mainly seen in economic terms, securing the BRI calls out for military backup. For this reason, the China-Africa Peace and Security Forum was held in 2019 for the first time in order to deepen the military and security cooperation approved by the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2018<sup>11</sup>, where "China pledged to set up a peace and security fund, provide free military aid to the African Union and extend some 50 security assistance programs."<sup>12</sup>

## **Economic engagement**

Far too often, economic engagement in Africa is seen from a Eurocentric and colonial perspective. The focus is on raw materials and unhindered access to them, as well as fear of migration and terror. It is this perspective that shapes the thinking about China's economic engagement.<sup>13</sup> It goes without saying that China joined the international competition for commodities when it became a major producer of everyday products like mobile phones, computers, and the like. But China sees African countries as a market for exactly these products and itself as an "important market for African exports"<sup>14</sup>. The next wave of engagement will be interlocking trade, digital money, and communications. Chinese companies invested a lot in

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<sup>10</sup> Steven C Y Kuo, "China's approach to peace in Africa is different. How and why," <https://theconversation.com/chinas-approach-to-peace-in-africa-is-different-how-and-why-129467>.

<sup>11</sup> Mail & Guardian, "China's expanding military footprint in Africa."

<sup>12</sup> Han Bin, "China-Africa military officials step up cooperation at forum," <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2019-07-15/China-strengthens-security-ties-with-African-nations-IIGBKBQere/index.html>.

<sup>13</sup> See e.g. "China's metals import hunger shifts towards raw materials," <https://www.mining.com/web/chinas-metals-import-hunger-shifts-towards-raw-materials-andy-home/>.

<sup>14</sup> China.org.cn, "Forging a new chapter in China-Africa friendship and cooperation."

understanding the market and researching the needs of the prospective customers, “such as long-life batteries for basic phones for rural areas.”<sup>15</sup>

By 2023, China will complete a submarine cable around Africa, which “has the equivalent of all the current cables connecting the continent combined” and telecom companies and internet service providers are very active as well. Of course, with the hardware come software and apps, which can even allow secure transactions in Chinese cryptocurrencies.<sup>16</sup> With the arrival of other international actors, a battleground for digital dominance seems to have already opened.

Not everything is going as well as China wants it to; there are several drawbacks. In mid-May 2021, the president of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Felix Tshisekedi, mentioned several times that he wants to renegotiate the country’s mining contracts, including those with China. Noting that the DRC is “the world capital of strategic minerals”, the country is a major exporter of copper, uranium and cobalt, a new self-confidence seems to emerge. While Tshisekedi’s predecessor Joseph Kabila was said to be more China-friendly, Tshisekedi is leaning more to the West, especially the United States of America.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> the africa report, “China-Africa: The growing battlefield for digital dominance,” <https://www.theafricareport.com/65139/china-africa-the-growing-battlefield-for-digital-dominance/>.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> The citizen, “DR Congo’s president says he will renegotiate mining contracts,” <https://www.thecitizen.co.tz/tanzania/news/africa/dr-congo-s-president-says-he-will-renegotiate-mining-contracts-3401160>.

## Major railway projects built by China in Africa



<https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/29278322>

China's economic assistance to African countries dates back to the times of their independence. In the first half of the 1970s, for example, the Chinese government helped to build the Tanzania-Zambia Railway, which links the seaport of Dar es Salaam with Kapiri Mposhi in Central Zambia. China not only has provided an interest-free loan but also shipped about one million

tons of equipment and materials, making it one of the largest projects China has ever undertaken in its overseas aid program.<sup>18</sup>

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) forms the core of China's economic engagement from a Chinese or Sinocentric perspective. Despite the fact that the BRI seems to develop into the umbrella or main narrative of Chinese policy thinking, most of the projects with African countries, even those that involve more than one are negotiated on a bilateral basis: "However, BRI projects that have a clear regional nature have so far been negotiated at the national level."<sup>19</sup>

Although the economic engagement of China in Africa is widely seen positively by African political elites, it comes with a downside. The US State Department's Trafficking in Persons Report 2020 mentions several cases of human trafficking from China to African countries. Not only cases of forced labour are found, but "PRC national traffickers operating abroad also subject local populations to sex trafficking in several countries in Africa." While African women tricked to travel to China are forced into commercial sex or sold to Chinese men for marriage, Chinese women are coerced into commercial sex in Chinese-owned bars and restaurants.<sup>20</sup>

Another negative impact felt by many African countries is the trade in endangered species or parts of them. The demand from China and other Asian countries has a deep impact on poaching all over the continent. Especially the demand for rhino horns, elephant tusks, and pangolins used in traditional medicine brings some of the species to the edge of extinction. While it is supposed that illegal international trade networks account for most of the trade, officials are sometimes involved as well, most probably tempted by the high profits.<sup>21</sup> The broader picture shows that wildlife trade

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<sup>18</sup> China.org.cn, "Priceless Friendship ChinAfrica," [http://www.chinafrica.cn/Homepage/201910/t20191025\\_800182802.html](http://www.chinafrica.cn/Homepage/201910/t20191025_800182802.html).

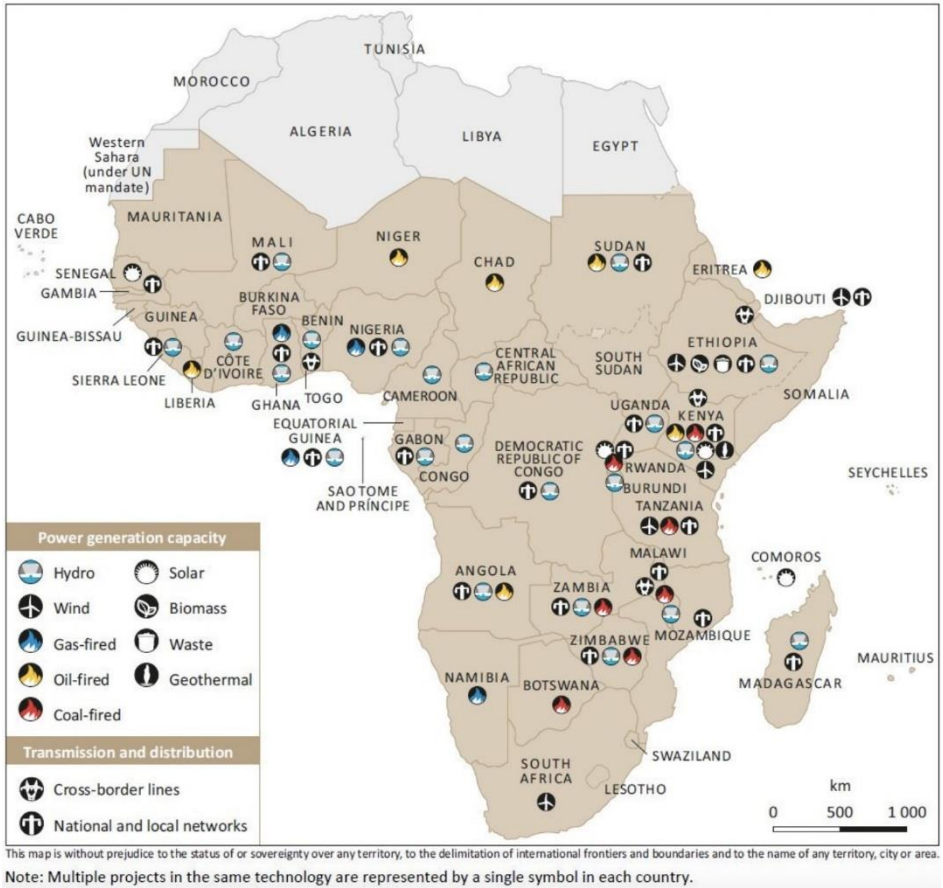
<sup>19</sup> Linda Calabrese, "Making the Belt and Road Initiative work for Africa," <https://odi.org/en/insights/making-the-belt-and-road-initiative-work-for-africa/>.

<sup>20</sup> Office to monitor and combat trafficking in persons, "2020 Trafficking in Persons Report: China," <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-trafficking-in-persons-report/china/>.

<sup>21</sup> See e.g. Oscar Nkala, "Zambian poaching crisis fuelled by Chinese military," <https://africageographic.com/stories/zambian-poaching-crisis-fuelled-by-chinese-military/>.

in general became a highly profitable business for Chinese traders, illegal but legal as well.<sup>22</sup>

Chinese energy presence in Africa



<https://medium.com/@timothydissegna/africa-looks-to-china-and-beyond-for-its-energydevelopment-829b9a1aa331>, Credits: Mundo y Entorno Internacional/Facebook

<sup>22</sup> Africa Geographic, “Wildlife trade between South Africa and China exposed – legal and illegal,” <https://africageographic.com/stories/wildlife-trade-between-south-africa-and-china-legal-and-illegal/>.



## Political engagement

China's Africa ties in modern history date back to the times of the conference of Bandung in 1955, when Asian and almost all African countries were in search for freedom from their colonial masters. China and Chinese authors still emphasize the importance of that conference as the beginning of cooperation and friendship.<sup>23</sup> While this narrative is obviously still powerful today, the policy changed around the new millennium, when China entered the stage as a global player, in self- and alien perception. Before that, China concentrated its efforts on states in Africa that had severe political issues with the rest of the world like Sudan or Zimbabwe. But since the first China-Africa summit in 2000 China's strategy has changed dramatically and up to date 80% of African countries signed Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) to become part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Political engagement belongs to and can hardly be separated from the other fields of engagement. China was one of the first global actors who engaged with the whole continent by organizing Africa summits. The first China-Africa summit, the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), took place in 2000 and has since then become an important, if not **THE** pillar of the Chinese Africa policy.<sup>24</sup> FOCAC became an important conference where Chinese and African leaders can share their ideas. While maintaining its original goal to cooperate in infrastructure development and agriculture, the cooperation became more pragmatic over the years. Constantly, new fields of cooperation are added:

For example, in political cooperation, in addition to high-level exchanges, political parties, legislatures, local governments, and exchanges of experience in state governance are gradually increased. Increased maritime economic cooperation, food safety cooperation, traditional Chinese medicine, African traditional medical cooperation, and China-Africa cultural industry cooperation.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> See e.g. Liu Haifang, "Bring back the 'Bandung Spirit' in China-Africa relationship," <https://pandapawdragonclaw.blog/2020/05/02/bring-back-the-bandung-spirit-in-china-africa-relationship/>.

<sup>24</sup> Hanane Thamik, "FOCAC: 20 years of shared destiny and success," <https://africa.cgtn.com/2020/11/06/focac-20-years-of-shared-destiny-and-success/>.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

The Covid-19 pandemic is also used as a political tool. The Chinese perspective reads as follows:

Facing challenges brought by the sudden Covid-19 outbreak, China and Africa have offered mutual support, fought shoulder to shoulder with each other, jointly held the Extraordinary China-Africa Summit on Solidarity against Covid-19, setting a new benchmark in the international cooperation against Covid-19.<sup>26</sup>

In African countries with long-established ties to China, the Sinovac vaccine was already used at an early stage. At the time of writing this article, Sudan, Zimbabwe, Guinea, Benin, Equatorial Guinea, Somalia, Egypt and Tunisia<sup>27</sup> are the beneficiaries. It has to be mentioned as well, however, that the problem for many African countries is not only the lack of vaccine. Storage, distribution and the lack of will of people to be vaccinated create challenges as well. Several African countries had to dispose of vaccines because of these reasons.<sup>28</sup>

### **Cultural policy engagement**

The Chinese approach not only seems to involve the construction of buildings and the mostly one-way exchange of students. China eyes on young African leaders as well and invites Africans for education and training to China<sup>29</sup> and pushes for exchange programs between educational institutions for many years.<sup>30</sup>

The cultural exchange between China and African countries started as early as the 1950s to benefit both sides. The knowledge of each other still seems to be quite limited, although it improved over the years. One way of promoting China and Chinese culture in Africa are the Confucius Institutes,

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<sup>26</sup> China.org.cn, "Forging a new chapter in China-Africa friendship and cooperation."

<sup>27</sup> Bloomberg News. "China Sinovac Shot Seen Highly Effective in Real World Study," <https://www.bloomberg.com/europe>.

<sup>28</sup> See e.g. Michael Oduor, "South Sudan joins Malawi in destroying thousands of expired Covid jabs," <https://www.africanews.com/2021/04/19/south-sudan-joins-malawi-in-destroying-thousands-of-expired-covid-jabs/>.

<sup>29</sup> Esther Nakkazi, "China ramps up support for African higher education," <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20180907083412817>.

<sup>30</sup> Xin-lin Mei, "Road of China-Africa educational cooperation and exchange with its own characteristics, US-China Education Review," March 2007, Volume 4, No. 3 (Serial No. 28), <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED497387.pdf>.

which were set up in almost all African countries.<sup>31</sup> Maurice Gountin argues that during the last two decades the “Chinese have become more concerned about the value of traditional culture and its promotion, rather than simply stressing political ideology.”<sup>32</sup>

During the last years programs started in many African countries to teach Mandarin. One of the latest states to make it part of its Competency Based Curriculum was Kenya in 2020. It will be taught alongside French, Arabic and German on a voluntary basis. The African arguments center around the following: Mandarin can no longer be ignored since it is one of the most-spoken languages on earth and it is necessary to have Mandarin-speaking citizens in order to attract a growing number of Chinese-speaking tourists.<sup>33</sup>

China is eyeing local media in order to promote itself. According to Eric Claude Olander, “Chinese propaganda and highly partisan pro-Chinese columns are now being published with more regularity on the website of Kenya’s state-run broadcaster KBC.”<sup>34</sup> These articles frame stories more or less with the language of Chinese official propaganda.<sup>35</sup>

In 2016, the African research institution Afrobarometer conducted a study on how the engagement of African governments with China is perceived. 63% per cent of the citizens of 36 countries had a positive attitude towards it. Especially investment, infrastructure and development projects were judged favourably, while the quality of Chinese products was seen critically.<sup>36</sup> Unfortunately, there are no later data from Afrobarometer available.

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<sup>31</sup> Maurice Gountin, “China’s cultural interest in Sino-African cultural exchanges,” <https://www.pambazuka.org/global-south/china’s-cultural-interest-sino-african-cultural-exchanges>.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Mu Xuequan, “Kenya plans to introduce Mandarin in schools in 2020,” [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/africa/2019-01/07/c\\_137726758.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/africa/2019-01/07/c_137726758.htm).

<sup>34</sup> Eric Claude Olander, “Kenya’s State-Run Broadcaster Looks More and More Like an Outlet of Chinese Propaganda,” <https://chinaafricaproject.com/2021/05/11/kenyas-state-run-broadcaster-looks-more-and-more-like-an-outlet-for-chinese-propaganda/>.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Afrobarometer, “Here’s what Africans think about China’s influence in their countries,” <https://afrobarometer.org/blogs/heres-what-africans-think-about-chinas-influence-their-countries>.

## Conclusions

Although the Chinese engagement in African countries started already at the time of their independence, the relationships became more dynamic during the last two decades. China is an important partner for African countries and pursues its interests as every external actor does. Depending on the security-political climate, it is sometimes easier and sometimes less easy to gain influence and access to the markets and commodities.

While the EU and the USA seem to have reduced their interest in Africa during the Covid-19 pandemic, at least in public perception, China is using the pandemic to continue to pursue its political goals. A form of “vaccination diplomacy” is used to attempt to bind states more closely to China. The extent to which this strategy will work largely depends on how China deals with countries that are struggling with financial problems due to the pandemic.

The interest of European countries and others to take back production formerly outsourced to China is changing the whole setup for the continent. African countries are set to become a new geopolitical playground. Especially those, which have abundant resources needed for the production of batteries, computer screens and the like.

In the military field, it seems to be quite similar. When the USA and European countries scaled back their African operation, China stepped in, following a strategy already observed in former times in Zimbabwe and Sudan, where China took over when the others left. Although China’s role grew significantly over the last ten to fifteen years, the military sector is still far behind the economic one.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, in the near future Chinese efforts are likely to increase.

Will loans be rescheduled, debt payments suspended to help languishing states or will China insist on agreements to be fulfilled? In the second case, the pendulum could swing to China’s disadvantage, namely if other lenders step in.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Bin, “China-Africa military officials step up cooperation at forum.”

<sup>38</sup> A very recent example is the engagement of France for Sudan. According to *Deutsche Welle* on May 17, 2021, “France offered crisis-stricken Sudan a bridging loan worth \$1.5 billion (€1.25 billion) on Monday to help pay its arrears to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), while Germany is also keen to participate in Sudan’s debt relief.”

In joining other nations in Djibouti, China underlines the importance of the Bab al Mandeb, the Red Sea and the Suez Canal for international trade. Since the container ship “Ever Given” blocked the shipping traffic for several days, it became visible on the one hand how vulnerable this sea area is and how essential it is for a smoothly running world economy on the other, for China as well as for Europe.

If the information concerning China’s possible military bases is true, China’s focus is clearly on the Indian Ocean. Except Angola, where China has strong economic interests, all other countries in question are part of the Indian Ocean rim or islands. While there are not many African concerns raised about the Chinese military presence, the USA is worried about Chinese bases on the Atlantic coast, be it a base in Angola or the Gulf of Guinea.<sup>39</sup>

But China is not just a benevolent actor trying to develop other countries. As a geopolitical actor, it merely pursues its interests with a different political approach that is perceived more positively in the countries concerned. The outcome might tell other stories. Especially the externalization of environmental damage, the trade in wildlife and especially in endangered species are the downside of the cooperations.

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<sup>39</sup> Li, “China’s Military Seeks to Establish Base on African Coast.”