

Africa–China Relations and the Issue of South–South Cooperation

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Abstract

Africa–China or Sino–African relations continue to grow stronger. Africa sees China as a partner in development in the context of global South–South Cooperation. As a measure of friendship, China constructed the African Union headquarters at Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, for free. There has been cooperation between China and African countries. Moreover, China’s role in Africa during the independence struggles is well noted and its development assistance to the continent has been phenomenal over the years. As Africa and China relations continue, several bottlenecks continue to mar the relationship. This paper highlights the bottlenecks of Africa–China relations by tracing the historical ties between China and African states. It delves into Africa–China relations in terms of South–South Cooperation and China’s foreign policy of non–interference in internal matters of other states. It uses 2019 data to analyze China–Africa trade, investments and revenues accruing to both partners. The paper contributes to knowledge not just in terms of bilateral and multilateral relations but in terms of infrastructure trade and investment in Sino–African relations. It concludes that there is a need for China–African relations to achieve mutual benefits.

Keywords: South–south cooperation, realism, non–interference, decolonization, Africa–China

Introduction

This study makes a meaningful contribution to the field of China–Africa relations from three lenses: historical, the contemporary and made some predictions for the future which looks bleak.

China projects itself as a leader in the developing world and aids developing nations. Even though China’s economic output in terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth is second to the US, China still sees itself as a developing nation. In this regard, Chinese investments, both official and private, keep growing in African states as in other developing nations around the world. To give meaning to its policy of non–interference in the internal affairs of other states, China gives loans to African Union (AU) members without preconditions as they are done by the Western countries and the Bretton Woods institutions; International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank. This has endeared many African nations, who are seeking an alternative to the Washington consensus as a precondition to economic assistance, to China. China continues to invest heavily in infrastructural projects in Africa which Western countries and investors shy away from Africa.¹

¹ Berthelemy, J.C., (2011), China’s Engagement and Aid Effectiveness in Africa, African Development Bank Group, Working Paper No. 129.

Trade relations between Africa and China keeps increasing for the past two decades. This has also increased the number of Chinese businesses on African soil and the Chinese setting their foot on African soil. The volume of goods coming from China keeps increasing whilst Chinese businesses and nationals keep coming to Africa in search of expansion and seeking new opportunities to grow. There are a lot of cultural exchanges between Africa and China as a lot of Confucius institutes keep springing up in African institutions of higher learning particularly tertiary institutions. As economic relations between Africa and China increase, experts believe that they are imbalanced and tilted in China's favour whilst at the same time depleting Africa's limited natural resources.² This paper looks at the history of Africa and China relations (historical lens), it looks at the South-South Cooperation between Africa and China and uses 2019 data provided by John Hopkins University on Africa-China trade, investments and revenues that accrued to Chinese engineers in Africa in 2019. It looks at the cooperation between Africa and China based on the available data is tilted heavily towards China's favour and for the prospects for Africa and China relations to look good, there must be a revision of the status quo to ensure equitable development. The data suggest inequity in relations in trade, investment and infrastructure development/revenue terms.

Theoretical Framework

The paper applies the International Relations (IR) theory of realism to Africa-China relations. According to realists, the international system functions in a "state of anarchy" where each state seeks to dominate the other.³ To (Mearsheimer 94-5), the international arena remains a self-help system, a brutal arena where states look for opportunities to take advantage of each other.⁴ To Waltz, survival depends on a state's material capabilities and its alliances with other states.⁵ As Hobbes said, due to the selfish and brutish nature of humans seeking to dominate others, there is a social contract between the state and individuals for the state to protect them.⁶ The same is seen in the international arena which is seen as anarchic as espoused by Machiavelli⁷. States, just as individuals, need to align themselves with others to protect their interests. This calls for a structured international community where authority can be exercised by a hegemon. A well-structured international community can function better where the hegemon ensures cooperation and discourages conflict. This is done through the creation of political and economic alliances by states. The result of such arrangements ensures the economic and political dominance of the hegemonic leadership. China, in its quest for global dominance, has created several alliances, one of which is the Forum of China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) which celebrated its twentieth-anniversary last year in Senegal. The membership of the FOCAC includes all the AU members except Eswatini. In 2006, China hosted the Year of Africa to celebrate diplomatic and economic engagement with Africa. Data showed at the time that Africa-China trading had increased fourfold with China importing more raw materials particularly crude oil from Africa whilst exporting manufactured goods. China's expansion of investments and loans in Africa is maximizing its economic might and security over other states, especially Western powers and this is realism at play. Places which were in the past dubbed as either British or French spheres of influence in Africa are now hotly contested by Chinese officials and private interests. Trade volumes between China and those countries have increased astronomically whilst Chinese contractors outbid their Western

2 Mlambo, C., et al., (2016), *China-Africa Relations; What Lies Beneath?*, The Chinese Economy (Taylor & Francis) vol 49.

3 Dougherty, J.E., & Pfaltzgraff, Jr, R.L., (1971), *Contending Theories of International Relations*, Johns Hopkins University, pg 66-70.

4 Dunne, T., et al., *International Relations Theories; Discipline and Diversity* (3rd edition), Oxford University Press, pg 61.

5 Waltz, K.N., (1997), *Theory of International Politics*, (Reading MA: Addison-Wesley) p103-104.

6 Hobbes, T., (1946), *Leviathan*, ed. and intro. Michael Oakeshott (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd.).

7 Machiavelli, N., (1940), *The Prince and The Discourses* (New York: Random House [Modern Library]).

counterparts for construction and other official contracts. Thus, the importance of realism in analyzing Sino-African relations in terms of trade, investments and infrastructure development.

Africa-China Relations from a Historical Perspective

A look at the literature on Africa-China relations reveals that, even though China had contact with East Africa during the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) until Chairman Mao's establishment of the Asian-African Institute in July 1961 to study the history, geography, and the prevailing situation in Africa⁸, much was not known about Africa by Chinese scholars and leaders. It is widely accepted by historians that the first direct contact between Africa and China was the voyages by Chinese court eunuchs and admiral Zheng He, emissary of the Ming court from 1405.⁹ Africa-China relations have not received much-dedicated research until recently when China's global expansion has become a matter of concern for Western political leaders. This according to Large, might be due to several factors including decolonization, Cold War competition (China's rivalry with the Soviet Union – and Taiwan, to an extent – tending to attract more attention than its actual conduct in Africa), followed by the structural adjustment period that coincided with a more inward-focused, modernizing China."¹⁰ Some foreign policy studies and textbooks on Chinese foreign policies even lacked portions on Chinese relations with Africa¹¹. The current attention of the world towards Africa-China relations is quite comparable to the tour in 1963–4 of Zhou Enlai in Africa during the decolonization period which was short-lived due to several factors as China was seen as a lesser threat to the communist world against Western interest in Africa.¹² Africa-China relations have not received much attention in IR studies until quite recently. However, there is ample evidence of Chinese involvement in the decolonization of Africa. For instance, Chinese assistance to freedom fighters in Zimbabwe, Zambia, Namibia, and Mozambique among others. Professor Yu¹³ outlines the various stages of Chinese interaction with Africa starting from the Bandung Conference in 1955. He gives a vivid description of China's quest to receive recognition from African states which started with Egypt establishing diplomatic ties with China. Then China used Africa as a stage to battle Soviet influence before the following stage where it engaged the United States for international influence in Africa. The fourth stage is what Yu termed as China's re-entry into Africa after the proletariat revolution in China which made the Chinese retreat due to internal struggles which had caused international outrage over its internal issues.

For the last three decades, the number of Chinese in Africa has risen exponentially. Attention has been drawn to the Chinese in Africa by Howard French who details how the Chinese are building a new empire in Africa.¹⁴ Scholars have debated and set to distinguish between official Chinese nationals sent by the state to Africa and individual Chinese who have over the past few decades moved to Africa either by state contractors or individual businesses seeking expansion in Africa.¹⁵

8 Anshan, L., 'African studies in China in the twentieth century: a historiographical survey', *African Studies Review* 48, 1 (2005), p. 62.

9 Li, A., (2012), *A History of Overseas Chinese in Africa to 1911*, New York; Diaspora Africa Press.

10 Large, D., (2008), *Beyond 'Dragon in The Bush': The Study of China-Africa Relations*, *African Affairs*, 107/426, 45–61.

11 Kim, S.S., (ed.), *China and the World: Chinese foreign policy in the post-Mao era* (Westview Press, Boulder, CO, 1984); and also Alastair Iain Johnston and Robert S. Ross (eds), *New Directions in the Study of China's Foreign Policy* (Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 2006).

12 Brezinski, Z., (1963), *Africa and the Communist world*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, pp 142–203.

13 Yu, G.T., (1977), *China's Role in Africa*, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 432, *Africa in Transition*, pp. 96–109.

14 French, H., (2014), *China's Second Continent. How a Million Chinese Are Building a New Empire in Africa*.

15 Park, Y.J., *Forever Foreign? Is there a future for Chinese people in Africa?* *Journal of Ethics and Migration Studies*, Routledge (Francis & Taylor Group) page 894.

Armstrong 1997¹⁶ argues that as many as a million Chinese has drawn attention all of a sudden, most of the Chinese in Africa were brought in the past by the Dutch East India Company to South Africa as migrant workers in the mines. Thus, China has long historical ties with Africa and China is most unlikely to leave African soil any time soon due to China's heavy investment in Africa.

Chinese Non-Interference Policy

One of the pillars of Chinese foreign policy in Africa and the world at large is that of non-interference in the internal matters of foreign states. This policy of non-interference seems embedded in Chinese relations with African states as stated in the 1955 Bandung Conference by Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai, 'We are against outside interference; how could we want to interfere in the internal affairs of others?'¹⁷ Even though this policy seems to align with international law and norms, it appears to have negative and positive effects. The non-interference policy can first be seen as a preventive measure of keeping foreign states, particularly Western democratic states from criticizing China on its internal human rights record. Second, with China offering itself as a model of development to the developing world, China wants to repudiate the Washington Consensus of democracy, deregulation of markets, human rights and other neoliberal policies that serve as conditionalities for economic assistance from the Bretton Woods institutions, IMF, World Bank, and the WTO.

The policy of non-interference has, however, been criticized by scholars and international relations practitioners as keeping dictators and undemocratic regimes in power in Africa as well as abetting leaders in keeping the people poorer. This is because there are countries where institutions are not well developed to keep political leaders accountable. When leaders of such countries take loans and misuse them, the loans are kept for future generations to pay. If they even pay the loans, they use the resources of the state to offset the loans leaving the people in poverty whilst the money is unaccounted for. A case in point is Sani Abacha of Nigeria who stole and kept billions of dollars in Swiss accounts whilst Nigerians wallowed in poverty and were highly indebted to foreign lenders and institutions.

According to Daniel Large, the Chinese policy of non-interference in its foreign relations cannot stand the litmus test in Chinese dealings in Sudan. To him, China's role in developing the oil sector of Sudan which was under the United States (US) and the UN sanctions as well as its sales and manufacture of arms to the Sudanese Armed Forces gave China leverage to influence the politics in Sudan. This, he says, helped established the ruling party which used to be National Islamist Front (NIF) to National Congress Party (NCP) by enriching officials. The relations between the NCP and the Communist Party of China (CPC) ensured state-to-state collaboration of policies and projects in Sudan particularly oil production during the war and human rights abuses in Darfur. He backs his assertions with Chinese claims of being a responsible partner. "More recently, however, the Chinese government has also claimed to be a 'responsible' power that exerted 'influence' on the Sudanese government to accept a United Nations-African Union peacekeeping force in Darfur and sought credit for its 'constructive' role in passing Security Council Resolution 1769 on 31 July 2007 that enabled this".¹⁸ Large, further in his article, "*From Non-Interference to Constructive Engagement? China's Evolving Relations with Sudan*"¹⁹ traces China's relations with

16 Armstrong, J., (1997), The Chinese at the Cape in the Dutch East Indian Company Period, 1652-1795, Slave Route Project Conference, Robben Island, Cape Town, South Africa, October 24-26.

17 China and the Asian-African Conference (documents), 1955:25, 15.

18 Large, D., (2008), China and the Contradictions of 'Non-Interference' in Sudan, Review of African Political Economy, 35:115, 93-106.

19 Large, D., *From Non-Interference to Constructive Engagement? China's Evolving Relations with Sudan*, Non-Interference, The Case of Sudan.

Sudan from 1959 when Sudan became the fourth African state to extend diplomatic relations to Beijing. This was after the Chinese president Hu Jintao visited Khartoum in February 2007 and told the Al Bashir government to accept the then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's proposal of a joint UN-AU peacekeeping force in Darfur. Reeling under US and UN sanctions made China exercise soft power in Sudanese affairs and that could be termed as political interference.

In many African countries, there have been occasions where Chinese nationals have committed crimes or engaged in illegal activities that, due to Chinese economic influence in Africa, were made to escape punishment. In Ghana, for example, a Chinese national who was noted for dealing in the illegal trading of rosewood and whose case aroused public interest escaped trial to the chagrin of the public. "Huang Yanfeng", aka Helena Huang, the Chinese woman who is standing trial for allegedly transporting a large quantity of Rosewood to Tema for export to China illegally has been deported."²⁰ This headline on the front page of Ghana's biggest daily newspaper brought attention to how some Chinese nationals keep operating illegally in the mining sectors and other banned operations in Ghana with impunity and whose acts go unpunished due to Chinese influence in Africa in general. Even as there are no official Chinese interventions in some of these illegal acts, the general mood is that the Chinese nationals who commit illegalities in Ghana and other African states escape punishment due to China's economic soft power.

The whole policy of non-interference has come under scrutiny among Chinese scholars and policymakers and has given China's ever-growing power in international relations. Zheng raises several debates among scholars centring on China's non-interference principle.²¹ Three major debates concern whether China abandons the principle that adheres strictly to it or allows considerable flexibility in practice whilst maintaining it. Zheng concludes by saying that "Beijing will be more active and flexible on relevant issues but bearing in mind its paramount concern of state security and deep-rooted distrust of the Western powers, for the time being, a dramatic shift towards an interventionist policy remains highly unlikely." Okolo however, considers China's non-interference to have outlived its usefulness and that China needs to shift to preponderance to protect its investments in Africa and the world at large.²² He proposes that China should use its economic and UN Security Council veto powers to ensure security in Africa whilst protecting its investments on the continent. Such a suggestion on the economic power of China may inure to the interest of China as well as to the benefits of African states in terms of maintaining peace and political stability among African states. Such a move if adopted by China will lead to a win-win.

The Issue of South-South Cooperation

South-South Cooperation (SSC) emanated from the Asian-African Conference at Bandung, Indonesia on April 18-24, 1955. It was agreed during the conference to promote self-determination in line with the UN charter, mutual respect for sovereignty, non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs, and equality of nations big or small according to UN principles. It was a response to the cold war between the Capitalist West and the Soviet Union, where countries belonging to the third world which geographically happen to fall on the southern part of the globe decided to collaborate to have sustainable development rather than always relying on the north. This further led to the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 1961. It is instructive to note that, almost all the advanced economies happen to fall in the northern hemisphere as shown in Figure 1.

20 The Daily Graphic, "Chinese woman in Rosewood saga deported" Date: Jul - 03 - 2019, 07:56. 20 The Daily Graphic, "Chinese woman in Rosewood saga deported" Date: Jul - 03 - 2019, 07:56.

21 Zheng, C., (2016), *China Debates the Non-Interference Principle*, The Chinese Journal of International Politics, 349-374.

22 Okolo, A.L., (2015), *China's Foreign Policy Shift in Africa: From Non-Interference to Preponderance*, *International Journal of African Renaissance Studies - Multi-, Inter- and Transdisciplinarity*, Roulledge (Francis & Taylor Group).



Figure 1: Advanced economies in the northern hemisphere

The quest by developing nations to place resources and ideas at each other's disposal to enhance mutual development came to be classified in International Relations (IR) studies as South-South Cooperation.

At the UN in the 1970s, attention was focused on having a framework for the members who fall on the global south to collaborate in finding solutions to their development needs. By 1974, a framework was adopted by the General Assembly of the UN called the Special Unit for Technical Cooperation for Developing Countries (TCDC) within the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) which was renamed in 2004 as Special Unit for South-South Cooperation. According to Bello, this was developed as an answer to the dependency theory and the recommendations made by the UN Economic Commission for Latin America.²³ As Simplicio puts it, "while Development Cooperation (DC) has so far been largely a North-South phenomenon—with donors being Northern countries and recipients, Southern countries—there is now an opportunity to modify this global paradigm through the addition of a complementary and growing South-South DC relationship." Simplicio observes that a lot of countries in the South have developed capabilities that are being put at the disposal of others on concessional and non-concessional terms to enhance cooperation in the south. Theodorson and Theodorson define cooperation as "social interaction in which individuals or groups engage in joint action to achieve a common goal."²⁴ By this definition, it is the objective of the third world countries to achieve a common goal of development. China projects itself as a leader of the developing world providing a model of development to other countries in the South and using its relations with the rest of the South as an example of South-South cooperation.

In Africa, as Asante notes, China's foreign policy towards the continent is supposedly hinged on "South-South Cooperation," underpinned by equality, common development, and a "partnership

²³ Bello, W., (2004), *Deglobalization; Ideas for New World Economy*, London: Zed Books.

²⁴ Theodorson A. & Theodorson A.S., (1969), *A Modern Dictionary of Sociology*. (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company), pp. 78-79.

of equals.”²⁵ He however asserts that data from United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) shows an asymmetrical relationship where Africa exports raw materials to China in exchange for finished goods leading to a trade imbalance and rising indebtedness of Africa to China. This situation he concludes is leading to neo-colonialism akin to Africa’s relationship with the North.

Using Nigeria’s relations with China as an example of South-South Cooperation, Udeala notes that “The original vision was for member countries to promote trade as well as to demonstrate, through practical examples, how commercially viable projects can be implemented using the technology, experience and capital from the South”.²⁶ He concluded that, instead of having a symmetrical relationship under South-South Cooperation different from the asymmetrical relations with the North, the trend in Nigeria’s relations with China is similar to that of the global North. In his view, the ideals of SSC, through the data from trading between Nigeria and China which is heavily tilted in China’s favour, are not as perceived by countries in the South who committed themselves to implement them.

SSC has, however, currently become topical in economic and developmental circles. There has been a debate about whether SSC is not being utilized by those rising powers in the global south to exploit the established development institutions of the global North whilst taking advantage of the less developed in the South. This is particularly, the case where deregulation of the production units of the world has led to the rise of China as an economic and industrial power whilst maintaining itself as a developing nation to exploit the less developed ones in the south. ²⁷ Some commentators have likened SSC to Polanyi’s quote, “Countries...which, for reasons of their own, are opposed to the status quo, would be quick to discover the weaknesses of the existing institutional order and to anticipate the creation of institutions better adapted to their interests. Such groups are pushing that which is falling and holding onto that which, under its own steam, is moving their way. It may seem as if they had originated the process of social change, while they were merely its beneficiaries, and may even be perverting the trend to make it serve their own aims.”²⁸

Findings

Trade issues dominate much of the literature on China-Africa relations.²⁹ In all the literature on Africa-China trade relations using individual African states, there are trade deficits in favour of China. A critical look at the data below for China-Africa trade, China’s Foreign Direct Investments (FDIs) in Africa and the Annual Revenues by Chinese engineering and construction firms in Africa for the year 2019 depict that, the cooperation between the two partners is tilted heavily in favour of Chinese interests.

The following figures illustrate China-Africa relations in terms of trade, FDI and gross annual revenue.

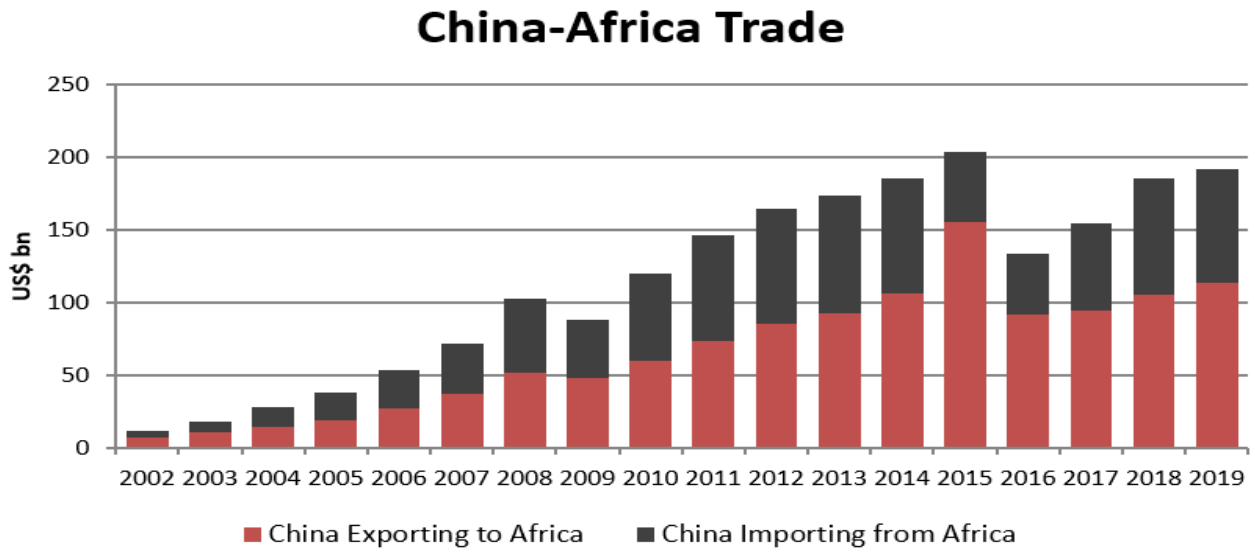
25 Asante, R., (2018), *China and Africa: Model of South-South Cooperation?*, World Century Publishing Corporation and Shanghai Institutes for International Studies China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies, Vol. 4, No. 2, 259–279.

26 Udeala, S.O., Nigeria-China Economic Relations Under the South-South Cooperation, African Journal of International Affairs, Volume 13, Numbers 1&2, 2010, pp. 61–88.

27 Gray, K & Gills B.K., (2016), South- South Cooperation and the rise of the Global South, Third World Quarterly, Vol 37; Rising Powers and South Cooperation, Pages 557–574.

28 Polanyi, K., (1944), *The Great Transformation*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

29 Andrea Goldstein, Nicolas Pinaud, and Helmut Reisen, with Michael Chen, ‘China and India: What’s in it for Africa?’ (OECD, Paris, 2006); David Hale, ‘China’s economic takeoff: implications for Africa’ (Discussion Paper 1/2006, Brenthurst Foundation, Johannesburg, 2006).

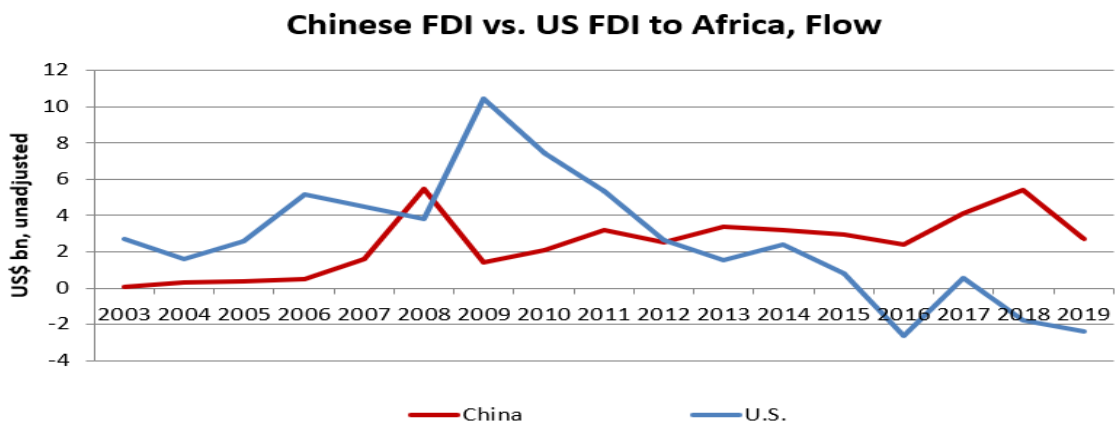


Jan 2021
Source: UN Comtrade

CHINA★AFRICA
RESEARCH INITIATIVE



Figure 2: China-Africa Trade



Jan 2021
Source: The Statistical Bulletin of China's Outward Foreign Direct Investment, U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis

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Figure 3: Chinese FDI vs. US FDI to Africa, Flow

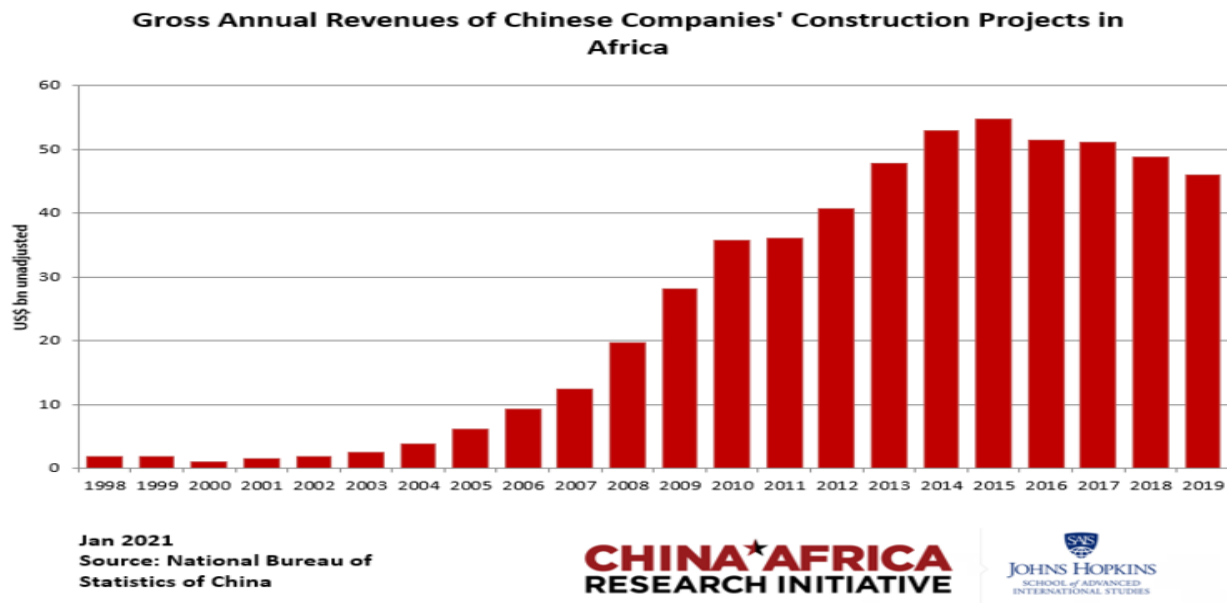


Figure 4: Gross Annual Revenue of Chinese Companies' Construction Projects in Africa³⁰

The above three figures are among others offered by the China–Africa Research Initiative, Johns Hopkins University, for this paper to analyze the economic relations between China and Africa in the context of South–South cooperation. A critical analysis of Figure 2 shows that, whilst China exports manufactured goods to Africa, it imports more of Africa's raw materials whose values keep declining whilst prices of manufactured goods keep stabilizing. This keeps the cycle of Africa's indebtedness to China perpetual as more raw materials are needed to offset loans and purchase manufactured goods from China. This results in trade deficits for Africa and in favour of China. It depicts that the quantum of trade volumes is not the same as the value of trade volumes between China and the African States.

Figure 3 shows that whilst Chinese FDIs in Africa have overtaken that of the US, they declined in 2019/2020 which can be seen as due to the COVID pandemic. However, looking at the US\$192 billion in trade volumes for 2019 and the US\$2.7 billion in FDI for 2019, the disparity is very huge. As China gains more from trade, its investment in Africa is comparatively small. Even as China is touted as investing heavily in Africa which other investors shy away from, the value of Chinese investments in Africa is nowhere near the value of its trade gains in Africa.

Thirdly, in Figure 4, the Annual Revenue for Chinese engineering and construction companies for 2019 totalled US\$46 billion which is 26.6% of their total revenue for the year. At its highest point in 2010, the revenues from Africa accounted for 39.6% of the revenues of Chinese construction and engineering firms. As compared to just US\$2.7 billion of FDIs in Africa for the same period in 2019, the three figures show a huge imbalance in economic benefits accruing to China at the expense of Africa in their relations. This situation has come under critical scrutiny.

As noted by Siitonen, “But co-operation is, as is well known, only the reverse, the positive side of the conflict, and ... what in the parlance of politicians is called “co-operation”, quite often is nothing but a euphemism for the new forms of power struggle or the dominance of richer and more powerful nations over poorer and weaker. Thus, the study of economic cooperation, through the facts which have been unearthed, has itself become a study of international economic

30 www.sais-cari.org/data-china-africa-trade (sourced on October 19, 2021).

power.”³¹ If South–South Cooperation is to be taken as achieving a common goal as Theodorson and Theodorson defined cooperation, then, Africa is taking its South–South Cooperation with China in its puerile meaning.

Future Prospects in Sino–Africa Relations

Projecting the Hobbesian principle of individuals seeking to protect their interests by aligning themselves with others on the international stage, which Machiavelli describes as anarchic, the basic requirement for cooperation should be striking a balance between competing national interests and not only seeking to dominate the other or seeking the national interests at the expense of the other. A relationship which is hinged on cooperation such as the South–South Cooperation should be seen as achieving common ends. For Africa–China relations to grow in the context of South–South Cooperation, the interest of both parties (China and Africa) should be paramount and should not be fashioned out with an exploitative effect on Africa.

Conclusion

The current posturing of Chinese nationals engaging in illegal mining businesses, illicit trade and export of banned products such as rosewood, and ivory, as well as destroying water bodies is worrying. Also, the activities of the Chinese in the environment due to illegal gold mining, all in China’s search of natural resources as evidenced in Ghana in particular, and Africa in general. These acts make the future of Africa–China relations look bleak unless serious introspection from both partners takes place to review the cooperation to achieve equitable mutual benefits. The paper concludes that China–Africa relations need to be for mutual benefits and not winner–loser affairs.

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