



NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL

Chinese-African Relations

By Laura Dean and Chris Miller

Introduction

The second half of the 20th century has witnessed a revolution in the realignment of international alliances and the division of global assets. The United States has long been watching a China-on-the-rise, as the Dragon economy grows, not only in Asian markets but into the long impregnable US markets as well. China has invested far and wide in recent years, and recently found its way into African markets. Long considered suicide markets for anyone seeking financial success—despite some of the biggest mineral reserves in the world—African economic scenes are making their way onto the global radar, thanks, largely, to confidence from Chinese investors. This growing economic coalition unites some of the world’s most populous markets and draws together an economic—and potentially political—force that the United States must watch carefully.

The Rise of China

Modern History

Asia’s power relative to the West reached its nadir in the 19th century. European technology and institutions were undeniably better than their Eastern counterparts, and the West reaped the benefits of its advances through wholly unequal relationships with Asian regimes, and especially China. The Opium Wars during the mid-19th century were a humiliating defeat for the dying Qing Empire at the hands of European imperialists. From then until World War II, China suffered through a humiliating period during which its sovereignty was restricted and its middle kingdom mentality was challenged by Western powers and the Japanese.

During this time the **Great Powers** sought to carve up China into spheres of influence, and for a while it appeared as if they would succeed in dismembering the once-great empire. Interestingly, the United States became the most outspoken defender of Chinese sovereignty. Around the turn of the 20th century, US Secretary of State John Hay articulated the “**Open Door Policy**,” a reaffirmation of liberal internationalist ideals in the face of a region increasingly dominated by imperial mercantilism. To be sure, Hay’s motivations were not all so ideologically pure: as the nation with the weakest reach in the Far East, America had no chance of obtaining its own sphere of influence and

Great Powers—*Western nations with the most significant imperial influence in Asia, led by Britain and France.*

Open Door Policy—*American policy designed to insert the US into the Chinese arena as it was not originally party to the Great Powers’ carving up of China into spheres of influence.*

therefore had the most to gain from the Open Door. Nevertheless, for the first half of the 20th century, Sino-American interests aligned closely, and relations were cordial.

The First World War signaled a great global shift in power. The 19th century had been greatly imbalanced, for Europeans controlled a vast share of economic production and military might, exported the era's dominant culture, and ruled a good portion of the world. By 1918, Asia had begun to learn from and emulate European advances, and used them to reduce Western influence in Asia. The first Asian state to become a modern power was Japan, and China was the object of their aggression. From 1931 to 1945, Japan controlled eastern China with a ruthlessness that had been unknown in the region. The Rape of Nanjing, in which Japanese soldiers pillaged the city and killed thousands of its inhabitants, is an event that has been seared into China's national memory. Even today, over two generations after the war, Sino-Japanese relations are soured by that experience. With the end of World War II in 1945, China was freed from foreign rule but was no better off than the rest of the third world that gained independence in the postwar years.

But there was one key difference that separated China from most other newly-independent countries: its history. The Chinese people, having known millennia of greatness, were hardly content with their backwater status, and they blamed their poverty on imperialism. After a brief flirtation with a Sino-Soviet alliance, Beijing soon realized that Moscow was simply an imperialist in Marxist garb. Throughout the Cold War, China remained skeptical of the international system that it believed had done it such horrible wrongs in the past. A so-called '**victim mentality**' guided Chinese foreign policy thought throughout much of the Cold War. Beijing remained strongly opposed to both of the Superpowers and in any international organizations that might legitimize the reduction of a state's sovereignty.

As the memory of the war was distanced by time, some Asian countries began to recover from their wounds. During the 1970s, Beijing watched states like South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore adopt market economies and engage the world, and in turn be rewarded with prosperity and admittance into the international community. In the 1980s, China began to open its markets to foreign investors and has since become an economic powerhouse. China's rise has been caused in large part by its spectacular economic growth.

Modern Policy

Today, China has all but abandoned the victim mentality, although some of its relics still linger. For the most part, though, Beijing has become a fully participating member of the international community. China's economic growth has in some ways undone the pain of imperialism and catapulted the Middle Kingdom to the center of the world

Victim mentality—the Chinese mindset held during the Cold War that asserted that the Chinese had been unfairly treated by the "Superpowers," the US and the USSR; it resulted in China largely removing itself from Cold War conflicts.

stage. Today, many Chinese strategists speak of a ‘da-guo’—Great Power—mentality. In other words, China now looks to reclaim its rightful place as a power in East Asia.

A distinct contradiction exists between the Middle Kingdom mentality and the **multipolarity** that is a fact of today’s international system. Indeed, the United States is in many ways the Middle Kingdom of the modern world, a necessary participant in any significant geopolitical dialogue. China certainly has a global reach, especially in trade: its businessmen are increasingly common in Africa and South America. But its political goals are generally confined to East Asia, and it makes no attempt to export any type of ideology. Chinese political thinking provides no ideological basis for world domination. Today, at least, China seeks to concentrate its political influence in East Asia, with the end goal of creating an Asian (not global) power structure centered on Beijing.

Multipolarity—*modern Chinese mentality that focuses on China’s interactions and relationships with other nations, rather than prioritizing the Middle Kingdom as the focus for world relations.*

East Asian Geopolitics

The strategic effects of China’s rise are twofold. First, China is beginning to articulate a positive vision for East Asia, rather than simply opposing the visions of the US and USSR. Second, other states in East Asia are reacting to China’s growth in ways that could potentially destabilize the region. Japan, Vietnam, and Taiwan are three states that greatly fear Chinese power and tend to see their relationships with China as a zero-sum game. If China wins, they lose. This has sparked increased talk of revising Japan’s no-war constitution and has led some strategists to suggest that Japan and Taiwan could eventually go nuclear. From the American perspective, China’s growing military might is a threat, but the potential destabilization of the whole region would have much more dire consequences.

American-Chinese Relations

In many ways, China and America should be natural allies. Their broad geopolitical interests, including an aversion to Russian imperialism, Japanese militarism, or destabilization in East Asia, generally align. Furthermore, the enormous trade between the countries makes cooperation very profitable. Yet many stumbling blocks in the relationship prevent it from being wholly cooperative. The Chinese bristle at perceived American arrogance in judging China on democracy and human rights; they worry American diplomacy is too combative; and the nations’ history of Cold-War animosity continues to divide us.

Some American strategists speak of building coalitions against China by allying with Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, and India. This is counterproductive and naïve: counterproductive because such a strategy would simply ensure that China became an opponent; naïve because it

neglects the opportunities inherent in China's rise. But, if China is not today's evil empire, neither will it be a close ally, at least not until some level of democratization occurs—and American policymakers should not expect democratic change to come soon. In the final analysis, China's rise is not a phenomenon to be welcomed or opposed as much as a changing condition that must be dealt with. The key, as ever, is balance: American strategy must be firm, but not harsh; flexible, but not permissive. Striking that balance will be a persistent challenge for American policymakers.

China's Emergence in African Affairs

China's global economic role has reached Africa in a significant way. Over the past few years, Chinese trade with the entire continent of Africa has been over \$55 billion and analysts predict that number to double by 2020 at the latest. This is a fast growing economic alliance that threatens US standing in global markets. Africa now stands as China's third-largest trading partner. The Chinese are interested in African oil and mineral wealth—which were both long exploited by colonial powers—while African nations benefit from infrastructure development—especially in transportation, medicine, and education—around a growing economy and Chinese aid dollars.

What African nations are not seeing much of is political support from the Chinese. China's questionable human-rights record has raised concern—ironically, in some cases—among African leaders who are worried about falling under the economic hegemony of an exploitative power, much like the colonial states that long-dominated the continent. The flood of Chinese workers and companies onto African soil has launched fears of an influx of Chinese political ideals. Furthermore, China has yet to take significant action in widespread social and political conflicts plaguing African nations, such as the ongoing violence in Darfur, Sudan. However, with the influx of cheap Chinese goods and necessary improvements in infrastructure, progress-focused leaders are keen on the trade-without-conditions situation in which they can cooperate in developing the conditions of trade.

History of Chinese-African Relations

Chinese-African ties first developed through the oil economy coming out of Sudan. And, in fact, the British were instrumental in fostering this connection. The key figure in this developing relationship was Major General Charles Gordon, affectionately known as “Chinese Gordon” or “Gordon of Khartoum,” a grand figure within the British armed forces stationed in Khartoum during the 1860s. Gordon was instrumental in securing British trading rights with China, progress that laid the way for Sudan to later assume this relationship **post-colonial**

Post-colonial—the period following that of European presence in many international colonies.

withdrawal. This is the man who proved to history veracity of, “The enemy of my enemy is my friend.” In Gordon, the Chinese encountered an unwanted intruder who sought to destroy the imperial rule and take China under British control. He oversaw the burning of the Emperor’s summer palace and led the British effort in the so-called Opium Wars to secure British trading rights in China. Gordon also fought against the Chinese in one of history’s bloodiest rebellions, which witnessed the death of tens of millions of Chinese.

The Sudanese were intent on bringing about the fall of British control. El Said Ahmed Abdulrahman Al Mahdi, now a Sudanese legend, raised an **anti-imperial** Islamist army that challenged British rule and sought to destroy the governance that Gordon had once led in Sudan. The **Madhists** soon had Gordon’s head on a stick and had undermined British colonial power throughout the Arab world. This thorn in the British side was of great interest to the offended and wounded Chinese, who, upon realizing Sudanese worth in oil, sought to pursue trading relations on that basis of a shared hatred for the British. Establishing a trading relationship behind the back—or rather mockingly under the nose of—the greatest empire in the world was certainly risky but has led to a long and prosperous relationship. Since the late 1800s, China has become Sudan’s top trading partner, and the Bank of Sudan estimates that more than 80% of the nation’s crude product exports to Beijing.

More recently, the Sudanese gratefully accepted Chinese aid in the 1970s, as Chairman Mao Zedong recognized the need to maintain a good relationship—as 7% of Chinese oil needs are met by Sudan. Chairman Mao sent aid in the form of doctors, engineers, construction workers, and interest-free loans: just what the Sudanese needed in the face of departing colonial infrastructure. Then, when the Americans turned away from the oil fields that they had once discovered, the Sudanese turned to China to peddle their goods.

Case Studies

While Chinese ties to Africa launched out of Sudanese history, there are a number of regions across the continent in which the Chinese are increasingly present and active. The following are case studies that demonstrate the who, where, and why of the developing relationship.

Sudan

While the Sudanese declare that their long-standing relationship with China is deeper than any oil well, the Chinese loyalty to Sudan has not been so ardently displayed. Out of a long history of trade relations, Sudan and China have developed a relationship that rests almost entirely on oil and infrastructure. The Chinese infrastructure support, however, does not extend to social or political help in the raging and devastating

Anti-imperial—groups or actions that targeted the imperial regime, which in this case was Britain.

Madhists—supporters of El Said Ahmed Abdulrahman Al Mahdi.

conflict in Darfur. China has a policy of avoiding moral issues in its relationship with African investment partners. This policy goes both ways. Not only is China reluctant to use its sway in major international organizations, like the United Nations, to seek support for Darfur, among other regions, the nation also avoids any intrusion into Sudanese governance, preferring to maintain a healthy—and purely economic—relationship. This oil-based relationship, which dictates the miniature Khartoum Stock Exchange, is also shared with Japan, Malaysia, and India. With more than \$9 billion in oil investments being sunk into Sudan by the Chinese, the Sudanese are grateful for the booming relationship.

Democratic Republic of Congo

With a thirst for African oil quenched by Sudan, China has turned to the **Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)** to satisfy its need for copper and cobalt—necessary materials for major construction projects. Like the Sudanese, the Congolese benefits in the form of infrastructure and the wherewithal to develop a transportation network. And for \$9 billion a year, who would complain? Well, only the Western powers nervous about China’s increasing presence in African nations. The transportation network, however, is the answer to the DRC’s dreams following the decades-long plunder of the nation by former leader Mobuto Sese Seko. With a 1,000 mile road set to reach across much of the country and a massive mining company, Socomin, coming out of joint Congo-China measures, many Congolese hail the attention and support coming from the East. Outside observers, however, worry that the DRC is being exploited yet again for its rich mineral deposits. All initiatives made possible by this relationship benefit the Chinese: Chinese companies build the necessary infrastructure; they get a stake in the valuable mines; and they have a substantial foothold in Africa. And Western nations complain that they face many more difficulties in accessing the mines. It seems as though the help in developing democracy pales in comparison to assistance that comes from a ready checkbook.

Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)—a central African nation, formerly known as Zaire, with significant mineral holdings of interest to China.

Zambia

China has its sights set on Zambia’s Copperbelt Province, in the nation’s northeast corner. While the government has welcomed Chinese investment with open arms, mine workers have rioted over the low pay and poor working conditions that stink of colonial exploitation. Again, Chinese-funded transportation was the way to the African nation’s heart. When South Africa’s **apartheid** government cut off landlocked Zambia’s route to South African seaports, the Chinese were there to help construct the Tazara Railway. The difference, the government notes, between Western “exploitation” and Chinese “investment,” is that the Chinese seem committed to helping Zambia move ahead. The line between “investor” and “invader,” however is one that many Zambians

Apartheid—a system of legal racial segregation enforced by the government of South Africa between 1948 and 1990.

fear the Chinese have crossed. The Chinese, however, claim that their provision of tax, employment opportunities, and industry development to the Zambians are invaluable to their movement into the more developed world. And China, it just keeps its eye on the prize: copper.

Senegal

More than just economic investment, the Senegalese receive personal investment from the Chinese. A sort of Chinatown has developed in the capital city of **Dakar**, the capital, where industrial Chinese have flooded in surprising numbers. The smalltime shop owners popping up in Dakar, and elsewhere, have helped laid the groundwork for major investors to come in and solidify the Chinese foothold in Africa. This so-called “new form of colonialism,” has entered Africa in a “softer” manner than the gruff Western colonizers of the past. In China, Senegalese and other Africans see a route to the future, to development, and to economic stability—finally able to take advantage of their immense natural fortune. With ears and eyes planted in Dakar in the form of Chinese shopkeepers, the nation’s larger investment firms were able to grasp how best to introduce themselves and their mission into the country. It is the joint personal and economic investment that has made China so success in securing its presence in Africa.

Dakar—the capital of Senegal .

Conclusion

Ghazi Suleiman, a Sudanese economist, says China became Sudan's most important trading partner, when the West turned away. "Chinese are exchanging with us kisses and the Americans are keeping their face away from us. It's very simple," he says. Following Sudanese support of Saddam Hussein in the 1991 Gulf War, the US backed out of oil-related relations with the nation. The American focus in Africa has long been on social and political support, with the aim of developing democracies in post-colonial nations that have struggled to progress since the departure of colonial imposition. While American dollars and moral support are well-intentioned, Africans are increasingly frustrated with the lack of progress and are inclined to warm to Chinese relations that seek purely to lift their sagging economies. As China’s star continues to rise in the economic sky, it is imperative that the US secure its trade relations and maintain its global trade dominance in the fight to keep China from surpassing US power. Furthermore, the threat of Communist China getting its financial foot in the door threatens that the social/political foot is not far behind. This threat to young democracies is one that the US cannot afford to ignore. In relations that have been growing increasingly warm, the US must manage its relations with China and African nations closely so as to keep the most favorable balance of power.

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