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NATIONAL SECURITY RESEARCH DIVISION

Chinese Engagement in Africa

Drivers, Reactions, and Implications for U.S. Policy

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Cover image: China's President Xi Jinping (left) walks with his Tanzanian counterpart Jakaya Kikwete upon his arrival in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, March 2013 (Reuters/Thomas Mukoya).

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Summary

China's role in Africa defies conventional stereotypes and punchy news headlines. China is both a long-established diplomatic partner and a new investor in Africa. Chinese interests on the continent encompass not only natural resources but also issues of trade, security, diplomacy, and soft power. China is a major donor of aid to Africa, but the scope, scale, and mode of Chinese aid practices are poorly understood and often misquoted in the press.

China portrays its principle of non-interference and friendly relations as an altogether new and positive model for external engagement with Africa. Drawing clear distinctions with the European colonial past and Western policies that China believes are based on a paternalistic interference in political affairs, China promotes its presence in Africa as based on equality, mutual respect, and mutual benefit.[1] China chafes at criticisms that its role in Africa supports authoritarian despots and erodes efforts at improving human rights. The fundamental needs of food, security, and economic development, according to Chinese officials, are themselves forms of human rights, which China helps to promote through robust economic development and trade with Africa.[2]

Few non-Chinese experts accept the notion that Chinese-African relations represent interactions among equals, pointing out the inherent imbalance between a large, wealthy, powerful state and a grouping of 54 nations that rarely, if ever, coordinate on economic or foreign policy issues.[3] Instead, Western observers tend to depict China as a "spoiler" in Africa, whose "insatiable" and "voracious" appetite for mineral resources is nothing more than a neo-colonial grab for raw materials that perpetuates African countries' underdevelopment.[4] China's willingness to engage autocratic regimes in Sudan

1 "Chinese Envoy Briefs UN on China-Africa Relations," Xinhua, September 11, 2007. See also Fumbuka Ng'wanakilala and George Obulutsa, "China's Xi Tells Africa He Seeks Relationship of Equals," Reuters, March 25, 2013.

2 Ian Taylor, "Sino-African Relations and the Problem of Human Rights," *African Affairs*, Vol. 107, No. 426, 2008, p. 67.

3 Ross Anthony, "Should China Keep Its 'Africa Dreams' to Itself?" *The Diplomat*, April 3, 2013.

4 Peter Marton and Tamas Matura, "The 'Voracious Dragon', the 'Scramble' and the 'Honey Pot': Conceptions of Conflict over Africa's Natural Resources," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 2, April 2011, p. 155.

and Zimbabwe are highlighted as examples of China's willingness to circumvent, or even completely ignore, international efforts to curtail violence, human rights abuses, and corruption.[5] China's policy of tying economic development aid to government loans is often portrayed as a challenge to the prevailing aid regime among international financial institutions and an effort to foster long-term African dependence on China.

African perceptions of China include a mix of approval, apathy, and contempt. Overall, African citizens and governments hold positive views of Chinese engagement in Africa. African officials overwhelmingly view China's role in Africa as a positive development, welcoming China's heavy emphasis on government-to-government contracts with few, if any, strings attached. Many Africans praise China's contributions to their nations' infrastructure, highlighting visible improvements that contribute to expanded economic activity, job creation for local workers, and tangible improvements to roads, rails, bridges, and other transportation networks—all things that benefit ordinary citizens, albeit indirectly. Most accept Chinese engagement on the continent as a positive development for African economic growth and are seeking ways to leverage the opportunity to their advantage.

Some in Africa, however, are critical of Chinese engagement. Labor unions, civil society groups, and other segments of African society criticize Chinese enterprises for their poor labor conditions, unsustainable environmental practices, and job displacement. Good governance watchdogs warn that China negotiates unfair deals that take advantage of African governments' relative weaknesses, fosters corruption and wasteful decisionmaking, and perpetuates a neo-colonial relationship in which Africa exports raw materials in exchange for manufactured goods. In some countries, resentment at Chinese business practices has led to popular protests and violence against Chinese businessmen and migrants.

China has not maintained a static policy in the face of such obstacles; rather, Beijing has responded to both foreign and local pressures by modifying its approach to the continent. In an effort to make Chinese trade and investment appear less one-sided, Beijing has promoted "sustainable" economic development through "win-win" commercial deals that generate tangible, long-term economic benefits for African nations in the form of jobs, training, and technology. It has also increasingly worked to shape broader Sino-African relations through people-to-people ties, cultural and educational exchanges, Mandarin language training, and a robust public diplomacy campaign. Beijing's policy adjustment has the potential to benefit both China and its African partners. Closer cultural ties and aggressive outreach will likely foster broader public support for China; the resulting favorable climate will enable Chinese investments

[5] Philippe D. Rogers, "Dragon with a Heart of Darkness? Countering Chinese Influence in Africa," *Joint Forces Quarterly*, No. 47, 4th Quarter 2007, pp. 22–27. Last Moyo, "From Sudan to Zimbabwe, China Is Part of the Problem," newzimbabwe.com, November 12, 2009.

to continue securing natural resources and generating profits while also contributing increasingly to local job creation and economic development.

China's activities in Africa present both challenges and opportunities for the United States. Chinese engagement in the region is primarily concerned with natural resource extraction, infrastructure development, and manufacturing. U.S. engagement, in contrast, concentrates on higher-technology trade and services as well as aid policies aimed at promoting democracy, good governance, and human development. While China's "no strings attached" approach to investment enables, and perhaps even fosters, inefficient decisionmaking and official corruption, Chinese engagement does not fundamentally undermine U.S. economic and political goals on the continent. On the contrary, Chinese-built infrastructure helps to reduce businesses' operating costs and to expand the size of regional markets, increasing opportunities for profitable ventures by African and U.S. investors. U.S. and Chinese approaches and interests do not inherently contradict each other, and U.S. officials—including Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama—have denied that Washington and Beijing are engaged in a "zero-sum" competition for influence and access in Africa. In short, China is not necessarily a strategic "threat" to U.S. interests in Africa.

While the U.S. and Chinese governments may not be strategic rivals in Africa, the two countries could increasingly compete commercially if American businesses become more engaged in African markets—something that President Obama clearly hopes to foster through the multiple trade- and infrastructure-related initiatives he announced during his summer 2013 trip to Senegal, South Africa, and Tanzania. Such business competition would both benefit African countries and advance U.S. interests. African governments might be able to negotiate more favorable commercial terms if they are not beholden to Chinese financing. African communities would benefit, as American companies are more likely than their Chinese counterparts to hire local laborers for both skilled and unskilled positions, transfer industrial technologies in order to work with local partners, require humane working conditions, and contribute to initiatives that promote the health and welfare of their workforce. Such business practices would likely encourage Chinese enterprises to do the same so as to secure deals, compete in local labor and consumer markets, and enhance China's image in Africa.

To effectively engage both China and Africa, however, the U.S. government needs to devote more time and effort to understand the benefits that African countries seek from Chinese engagement, the motivations behind China's policies, the ways in which Africans have reacted, and the ways in which China is positioned to adjust. An examination of Chinese experiences in Africa could prove useful to the U.S. government and to American companies if they, too, should find themselves criticized for fostering one-way relationships despite the optimism that economic cooperation will generate mutually beneficial rewards.