

## China's Strategy in Africa An Overview<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract:

China's increasing presence on the African continent is today a widely known fact, welcomed by some, and warned against by others. There are those who say China brings a new, fairer approach to economic relations and a new outlook for the ex-colonial region, and then there are those who call China's endeavours on the continent a new way of colonisation in the second scramble of Africa. What's certain, however, is that China is there to stay.

Sino-African relations, albeit sporadically and significantly less intensively as today, date back way before the average person would think, and China is also more important to Africa than some realise. China today is Africa's largest trade partner and relies significantly on Chinese investment and loans. Africa, on the other hand, although not as significant for China when it comes to dependence on trade, is still a very lucrative market for Chinese privately-owned firms, especially the weapons market, and also a potentially useful diplomatic tool for Beijing in the UN and on the world stage in general. There are, however, questions raised regarding some things: the current public opinion of Africans on China is ambivalent due to bad first-hand experiences with Chinese businesses. The real reason behind and the purpose of the Djibouti naval base is also drawn into question by some, and the suspicion perhaps is not all that unwarranted, given the base's strategic position, Chinese President Xi Jinping's insistence on the importance of China playing a bigger role in the world, and an albeit slow but still perceivable overall change from a peaceful and hands-off China into a more assertive one, along with current tension-filled events surrounding the Asian country.

### Keywords:

China; Africa; strategy;  
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### ***The History of Sino-African Relations***

The history of the relations between Africa and China goes back a long time. Although we cannot speak for the African continent in its entirety, some countries knew of and/or were known in China for a long time. Ptolemy's Egypt under the rule of Rome in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD provably knew of Qin China through trade along the silk road as well as the maritime trade route on the Indian Ocean. (Berggren, 2000, p. 176) The first unofficial mention in Chinese texts of Berbera, Somaliland dates back to the 9<sup>th</sup> century in the *Miscellaneous Morsels from Youyang* by Duan Chengshi, (Chittick and Rotberg, 1975, p. 109) and the first official mention of the envoys of an unknown East African kingdom (probably Zanj) visiting the Chinese imperial court in 1071 was recorded in the *History of Song* (Wheatley, 1964, pp. 156-157). In 1226, Zanzibar and Somalia were discussed in Chao Jukua's *Description of Barbarous Peoples* (Freeman-Grenville, 1975). Chinese coins were found in Mogadishu and Kilwa from the Song, Ming, and Qing dynasties (Pankhurst, 1961, p. 268). In 1415, Chinese admiral Zheng He reached the Horn of Africa, and even brought giraffes back to China (Snow, 1988, p. 23). Part of He's crew ended up shipwrecked on Lamu Island near Kenya in 1415, and then married with the locals and converted to Islam. (Brautigam, 2011, p. 28)

As these examples show, China's presence in Africa is not a novelty, and albeit its extent is sporadic and mostly superficial, it can still be a good tool to be utilised, especially for China who often tends to employ history as an instrument of diplomacy.

### ***Diplomacy and Economic Presence***

From its establishment in 1949 up until the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Africa policy of the People's Republic of China was influenced by Cold War politics and the rhetoric moved along the lines of its communist ideology, namely decolonisation, independence movements, and the figurative unification of the Third World under the guidance of communist China.

In the 1970's, China profited from souring relations between African countries and its new ideological enemy, the Soviet Union. When Egypt and Sudan expelled Soviet military advisors, China signed multiple arms deals with them. (O'Balance, 2000, p. 111; The New York Times, 1976; Lippman, 1979) Beijing also covertly provided aid to the FNLA and later UNITA against the MPLA in a bid to counter Soviet (and in this case, Cuban) influence in the Angolan war for independence together with Zaire (Immerman, 2013, p. 276), whose regime China also supported in the first Shaba conflict in 1977. (Time, 1977) During the 1977-1978 Ogaden War between Somalia and Ethiopia, the Soviet Union backed Somalia, however, Moscow's support shifted over time to Ethiopia. Beijing then started to support Somalia with symbolic military aid. (CIA, 1980)

The birth of contemporary Sino-African relations could be viewed as to have started in 1996 when Chinese President Jiang Zemin laid the groundwork for the principles regarding



21<sup>st</sup> century relations between Africa and China, them being “sincere friendship, equality, solidarity and cooperation, common development, and being oriented to the future”. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, n.d.)

In 2000, the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) held its first meeting. The ministerial conference is held every three years ever since, and it serves as a platform of consultation and improving relations between Africa and China. (FOCAC, n.d.) The People’s Republic is also supporting Nigeria in acquiring a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. (GlobalMarkets, 2004)

As for economic relations, trade volume between China and Africa has been increasing drastically over the last few decades. In 1980, the total amount reached 1 billion USD, which by 2000 increased tenfold, and by 2010 it grew to 114 billion. (Wonacott, 2011) In 2019, this number soared to 192 billion. (SAIS-CARI, n.d.) More than three-quarters of this amount is Chinese export to Africa. For comparison, this constitutes only 4.4% of China’s total exports, while almost half (47%) of it goes to other Asian countries, 20% to Europe and 20% to North America. (Wokrman, n.d.) On the other hand, the largest trade partner of Africa is China. However, if we regard the European Union as one entity, then the EU leads with 28% (31% with the United Kingdom) of both imports and exports, with China on the second place with 8% exports and 16% imports as of 2020. (Eurostat, n.d.) This shows that Africa relies way more on China economically than the other way around. This, however, does not mean that Africa is of little economic importance to it. Africa is home to 16 oil-rich countries, (Al-Jazeera, 2018) six of which are in the top 30 oil producing countries in the world. (Trading Economics, 2021) China’s fourth largest oil supplier with 7.9% of China’s total oil imports is Angola as of 2020. (Workman, n.d.) Apart from oil, Africa is also home to about 30% of the world’s resources. (Al-Jazeera, 2018) South Africa is the largest producer of manganese – which is used in steel-making and batteries – with one third of the world’s total output with more than 70% of global reserves, (NS Energy, 2020) and the Democratic Republic of the Congo produces 70% of the world’s cobalt – necessary for batteries as well as superalloys in jet engines and other machinery –, (NS Energy, 2021) along with 80% of global reserves of coltan, an ore used in cell phones, laptops, and other electronics. (Feick, n.d.) Incidentally, the People’s Republic is one of the largest manufacturers of such appliances.

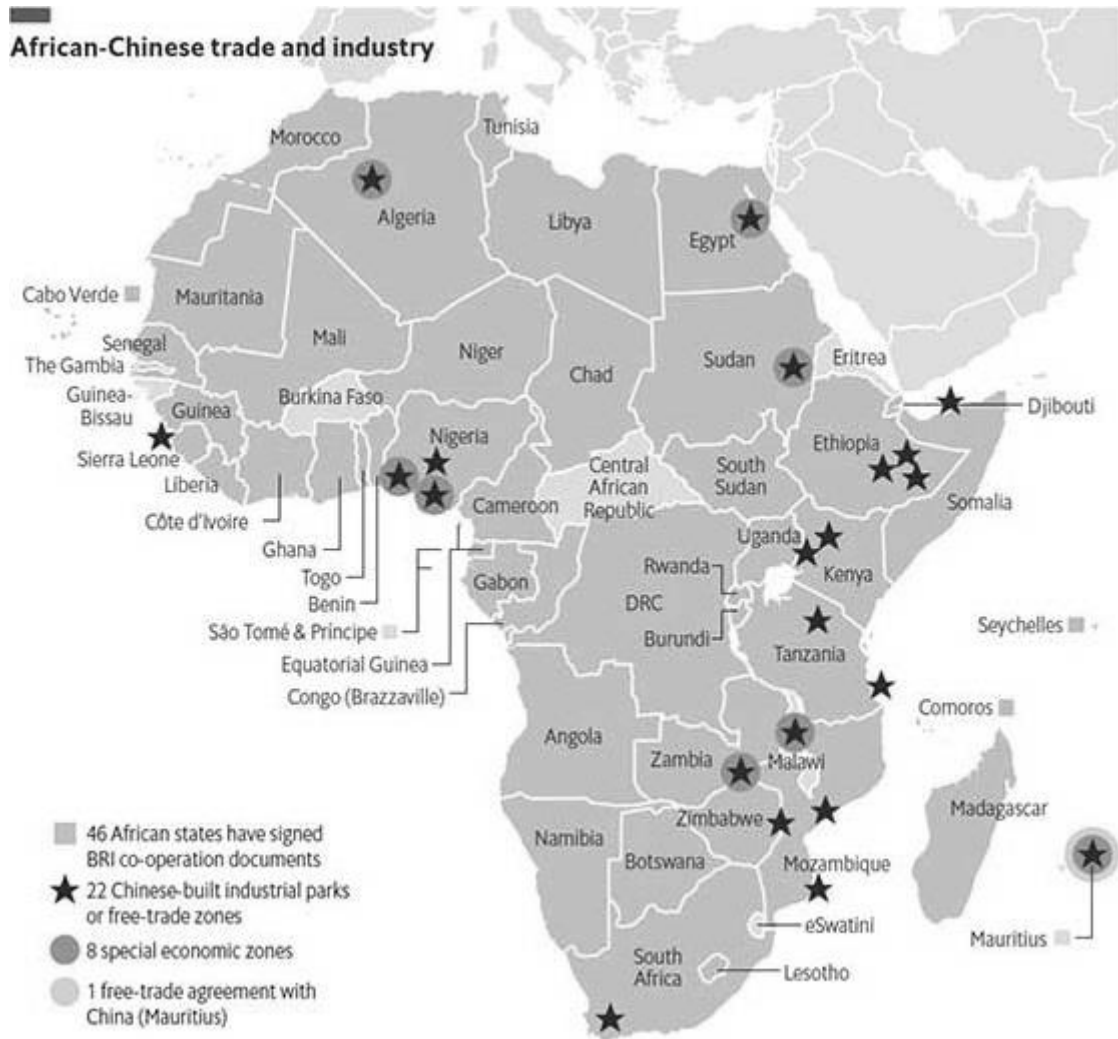


Figure 1. African-Chinese trade and industry. Source: Economist Intelligence, 3 March 2021.

The above map shows the countries that have trade agreements with and industrial parks built by China, and those that have signed China's Belt and Road Initiative. There are more than 10,000 Chinese firms operating in Africa, most of them privately owned corporations, that invest in African countries' infrastructure, banking, and energy sectors. (Jayaram, 2017) Additionally, in return for investment capital and infrastructural development, some countries grant China resource concessions, secure loans against natural resources as collateral, or give stakes in the infrastructure projects. These countries include Angola, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan, and Zambia. Most of them are foreseen to default on their loans. (Kwasi, 2018) As of 2021, at least 21% of all African government external debt is held by the People's Republic. (Acker, 2021) Below is a map of African countries by debt as well as ports and power stations invested into by Chinese capital.

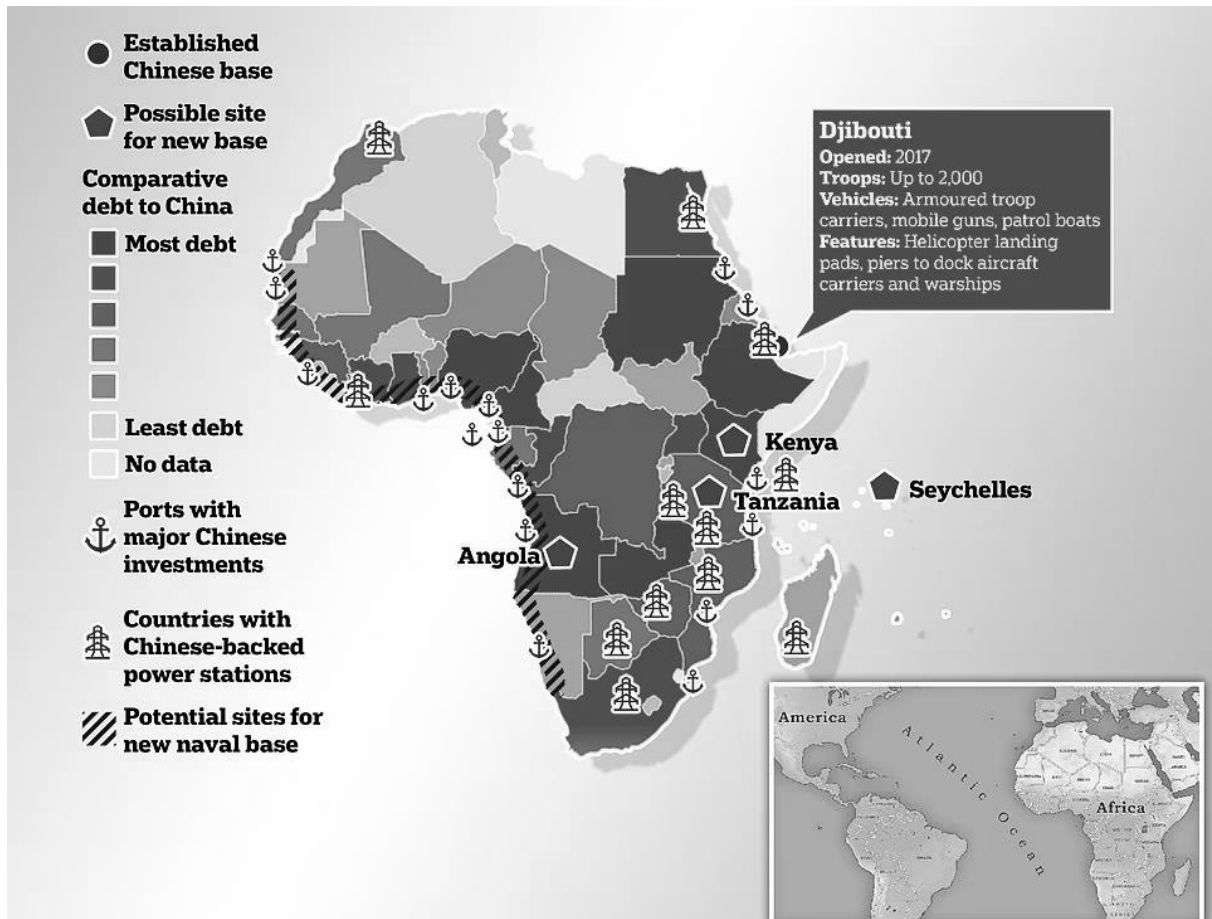


Figure 2. Debt to China, Chinese-backed ports and power stations. Source: Daily Mail, 8 May 2021.

Africa needs China just as much as China wants Africa. The main drive of interest for China is twofold: on the one hand, it is the ever-increasing economic presence through investments, trade, and loans. On the other hand, however, there are also 54 countries in Africa, which translates to 54 potential votes in the UN General Assembly – which accounts for roughly one quarter of it – that China could gain for itself by maintaining close relations with them. And it could in fact work out for China: for instance, after the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, no African countries have officially denounced China for its response to the demonstrations. It could come in handy especially now that China under President Xi Jinping is trying to create a new, non-Western world governance model. (Pairault, 2021) Russia has, for a long time, also been vying for African countries' support in the UN General Assembly and in other official forums of the world organisation in a similar manner to the Chinese (Besenyő, 2019), giving credence to this strategy and warning of this form of diplomatic warfare to possibly play a more pronounced role in the future.

### ***Military Presence and Peacekeeping Missions***

China is increasingly taking part in UN peacekeeping missions worldwide. Not only is the People's Republic the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest financial contributor to UN peacekeeping missions, but it is the largest contributor of peacekeepers as well among the permanent members of the UN Security Council. (Xinhuanet, 2020) As of the 31<sup>st</sup> of August 2021, China is contributing 1742 troops, 39 staff officers, 10 police personnel, and 24 experts across 5 out of the 6 peacekeeping operations in Africa, namely in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali, South Sudan, the disputed area of Abyei between Sudan and South Sudan, and Western Sahara. (UNP, 2021) The reason behind China's interest in peacekeeping is highly likely a form of protecting the investment and keeping the region stable, in addition to improving relations by showing the country's commitment to Africa.

As mentioned above, China had provided military support to multiple countries during the Cold War. However, after 1991, China took a less military-oriented approach, and started focusing on peacekeeping instead. Despite this, China is increasingly more involved in arms trade on the continent, and African countries are shifting away from other sources such as Russia, Europe, or the United States in favour of China due to more affordable prices, without additional requirements regarding, for instance, human rights. However, China is still only relevant in the low-cost low-tech sector of the arms market in Sub-Saharan Africa, while also not being able to establish themselves in the continent's biggest arms market, the North African market. It is also important to point out that there appears to be no Chinese strategy involving the arms trade, and that it solely seems to be profit-oriented. (Encarnation, 2021) That being said, it may very well change in the future.

Regarding military bases, we can only speak of one: a naval base in Djibouti. China has engaged in negotiations with Djibouti in 2015 concerning a Chinese naval base, (Al-Jazeera, 2015) and established it in 2017 along with US, French, and Japanese naval bases, with its official purpose being a logistics facility – that is a refuelling station – for patrolling the Indian Ocean near the Somalian and Yemeni coastlines. The People's Republic has been accused of using the Djibouti naval base as part of its “string of pearls” containment strategy employed against India. These claims were dismissed by Beijing as untrue. (Reuters, 2017) However, there is a real possibility that China has more plans in store for this naval base, not necessarily against India, but given its advantageous position in the Bab-el-Mandeb – a narrow strait between the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula –, it could be utilised to secure the maritime trade route going through the Suez Canal and the Red Sea between Europe and China. Not only that, but it may also serve as a precedent that could facilitate future military expansion into the continent in the form of other bases first along the coastline, then inland as well, citing the good intentions with no strings attached of Beijing's foreign policy and a “win-win deal” of increased stability around investments such as ports and power plants to protect and facilitate further investment.



## ***Cultural Presence and Reactions***

It can be noted that China is also present in Africa culturally, increasingly so. Cultural exchanges have been happening ever since the foundation of the People's Republic. (China.org.cn, 2003) The first Chinese cultural centre on the African continent was opened in 1988 in Mauritius, and ever since then, new ones have been opened. (SCIO, 2017) As of 2018, there are currently 54 Confucius Institutes in Africa, in addition to 27 Confucius Classrooms. (Freuda-Kwarteng, 2020) There are also several scholarship programmes for African students to learn in China, making up 40% of all university scholarships for Sub-Saharan African students. (Kigoto, 2020)

China also created a television channel called CGTN Africa in 2012 in Kenya. (Lim, 2018) As part of China's infrastructural investment in Africa, several stadiums have been built as a form of sports diplomacy, however, in many cases the condition or the actual utilisation of these stadiums questionable. (Dubinsky, 2021)

Perceptions of China are ambivalent on the African continent, ranking below the US on average as of 2020. On the one hand, China is viewed favourably when it comes to the economic benefits investment and trade brings to the continent. On the other hand, there are several negative factors as well: resentment towards the poor quality of products (Sanny, 2020), and there are also cases of mistreatment and discrimination of black African workers (Goldstein, 2018), as well as accounts of traders being displaced by their Chinese counterparts (Dankwah, 2019).

## ***Conclusion***

It is evident that we cannot really talk about an apparent, comprehensive, and established strategy of China in Africa, but rather the early stages and conception thereof, with some parts being more developed and utilised intentionally than the rest. The two main drives of Chinese interest in the continent are firstly economic – trade, mainly exports to Africa; investment; and loans –, and secondly political with regards to the possible future of Xi Jinping's global governance ideas. Everything economy-related that happens seems to do so to gain Chinese firms money, rather than it being closely monitored and managed by Beijing. It could be interpreted as a result of the Chinese internal policy of economic prosperity above all else – which incidentally is the main factor in the party's legitimacy and therefore the country's stability – which results in a hands-off approach; or as Beijing simply not caring enough about formulating a comprehensive strategy involving economic means yet, or even both. On the other hand, when it comes to diplomacy and politics, China's approach appears way more organised and forethoughtful, especially considering the People's Republic's endeavours of gathering support from African countries that can directly translate to potentially as many as 54 extra votes in the official forums of the United Nations. As for military and cultural presence, it is by comparison way less impactful, but still not at all

negligible. Currently, Chinese military efforts in Africa revolve around peacekeeping, which serves to further improve the stability of the continent for the sake of protecting trade and investments as well as relations and the view on China; and arms trade, which appears to serve a purely profit-oriented purpose. The Djibouti naval logistics base in particular, however, raises some questions about the intentions and future plans of China, given Beijing's rhetoric and the base's strategically important position in the Bab-el-Mandeb. It is obvious, however, that it gives China the ability and the precedent to further expand into the African continent in the future.

### **Conflict of interest**

The author hereby declares that no competing financial interest exist for this manuscript.

### **Notes on contributor**

Marcell György Pintér is a PhD student at Óbuda University Doctoral School on Safety and Security Sciences and is a junior researcher at the doctoral school's Africa Research Institute. His research foci include China and its presence on the African continent.

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