

# CHINA'S SOFT POWER STRATEGY IN AFRICA

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## The Problem

China is spearheading a remarkable diplomatic and economic push into Africa as worries mount that it pays little or no attention to human rights, democracy, labor standards, and environmental protection on the continent.

China-Africa bilateral trade increased from \$12 million in 1950 to \$114 billion in 2010. At the end of 2008, Chinese investment in Africa had reached \$26 billion. China has funded more than 900 infrastructure projects and dispatched some 16,000 medical personnel to the continent. Chinese President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao have visited more than 15 African countries since 2006. The Chinese have hosted several ministerial meetings attended by many African heads of state. Yet, China's move into Africa has been bumpy. Africans are beginning to complain to government officials about the operation of Chinese companies, including poor pay and low safety standards. What is motivating China's strategy in Africa?

## China's Engagement with the African Continent: Brief Summary

Contemporary China-African diplomacy began in the late 1950s with the normalization of diplomatic relations between China and several African countries (Algeria, Egypt, Guinea, Morocco, and Sudan). Premier Zhou Enlai conducted a 10-country tour of Africa from December 1963 to January 1964. During the Cold War, especially in the 1960s, Mao Zedong's China extended scholarships to African students to study Marxism in Beijing, even though China was still a poor country. Back home, many of these African students became members of the elite class of their country and remembered their visits to an economically poor but ideologically committed China. In 1971, China entered—as Taiwan exited—the United Nations (UN), which helped China increase its presence in Africa and secure allies for its global ambitions. In 1976, China completed building the famous TanZam railway linking Tanzania and Zambia and continued to grant scholarships to thousands of African students to study at Chinese universities.

An interesting turning point of China-Africa relations was the Tiananmen Democracy movement of 1989 in which the government brutally suppressed demonstrators. The crackdown came under orders from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership and was tacitly approved by former CCP leader Deng

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Xiaoping. The Party also persecuted former Chinese Premier Zhao Ziyang and other top leaders who favored reconciliation with the demonstrators. The demotion and eventual house arrest of Zhao Ziyang, then the General Secretary of the CCP, and the Party's use of military power in the crackdown were strongly condemned by the United States and many other nations, especially in Europe. Many African states, on the contrary, refused to condemn the CCP's actions, adopting China's own phrase of "non-interference in other countries' domestic affairs." Thus, China found in Africa a region of compatible views as it struggled to protect its standing in the international community (Taylor 2006a, 2). In the 1990s, China's rapidly progressing economic reforms and growth required that Chinese economic planners find new markets for Chinese goods and new sources of raw materials and energy. The African continent, with its under-cultivated consumer markets and vast mineral and timber wealth, offered both.

In 2000, China established the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) to promote long-term cooperation. The first FOCAC ministerial conference, held in Beijing in October 2000, was attended by President Jiang Zemin, Premier Zhu Rongji, and Vice President Hu Jintao. Ministers from China and 44 other countries and representatives from 17 international and regional organizations attended the meeting. The second ministerial conference was held in Addis Ababa in December 2003. At the third ministerial conference, held in Beijing in November 2006, President Hu Jintao announced China's grant of \$5 billion worth of concessionary loans to African countries. At the fourth ministerial meeting in the Egyptian resort

of Sharm el-Sheikh in November 2009, even more loans were announced, along with construction projects sponsored by China. The fifth ministerial meeting is scheduled in Beijing in 2012.

As of 2009, China was reportedly hosting 120,000 students from Africa, with several thousand more studying without scholarships in a kind of on-the-job training. Chinese foreign ministers, premiers, and presidents continue to make tours of various African countries to demonstrate China's continuing interest in building solid political and economic relationships. When Western critics argue that China's recent interest in Africa is only to secure oil and raw materials, China reminds them of the early Chinese commitment to build the famous \$455 million TanZam railway and China's subsequent track record of hosting students and making state visits to the continent. However, the genuine question remains: On balance, what is China getting from Africa and what benefits does China bring to Africa? Put another way, when it comes to the China-Africa partnership, who is working for whom? (Gowan 2009, 1-8)

## **China's Economic Interest in Africa**

China's national strategy is focused on its economy. Party General Secretary and President of China Hu Jintao made the following pledge at the Seventeenth Party Congress in October 2007: "We will quadruple the per capita GDP [Gross Domestic Product] of 2000 by the year 2020 by optimizing economic structure and improving economic returns while reducing consumption of resources and protecting the environment." To provide a "well-off" society to all citizens, the Party leadership will push economic growth

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and social development. China's rate of economic growth during the past two decades proves that the country is firmly set on a path to overcome poverty and underdevelopment. China is an economic giant and is expanding its reach worldwide, including into Africa. In terms of national GDP, the country surpassed second-ranked Japan in 2010.

Relentless economic and industrial development requires many resources. Africa, among other regions, has them, and China needs them. Oil best exemplifies this relationship. Since 2007, China has been the world's second largest consumer of oil behind the United States. China has been a net importer of oil since 1993. Oil use for transportation in 2010 was 3.4 million barrels per day (showing an annual increase of about 7 percent since 2004). As of 2010, China was consuming about 8 million barrels of oil a day. Three major state-owned enterprises (China National Petroleum Corporation, China Petroleum and Chemical Corporation, and China Offshore Oil Corporation) are working to secure ever more oil resources. It is projected that China will need 12 million barrels per day by the year 2020. (Zhang 2010, 1-3)

The Chinese seem willing to go anywhere to procure resources, without worrying about the "three Ds," a Western expression for a working environment that is "dirty, dangerous, and difficult." Chinese corporations, most of them still owned by the state, have few scruples about dealing with shady governments. Thus, China's "oil safari" has traveled to such corruptly led countries as Angola, Sudan, and Gabon (Taylor 2006b, 944-945). In the Chinese political dictionary, "There are no rogue states" (Taylor 2006b, 946).

Moral judgment and political values are not critical factors when it comes to Chinese business interests.

The length to which China is willing to go to secure trade opportunities is extraordinary. For example, China immediately offered Angola \$3 billion dollars in oil-backed credits to rebuild the country's infrastructure after its long and brutal civil war. Angola is the second largest oil producer (after Nigeria) in sub-Saharan Africa, and 30 percent of Angolan oil is now being shipped to China. Similarly, China has invested heavily in Sudan, and the China National Petroleum Corporation has a 40 percent stake in the Greater Nile Petroleum Company that dominates Sudan's oil fields. In 2009, China purchased more than half of Sudan's oil exports. (Jiang 2006, 6-7)

In the eyes of the economic and political elite class of many African countries, China is a desirable partner. China's "non-interference in other countries' domestic politics" (one of the five principles of external relations stipulated by the Chinese constitution) is very convenient for African political leaders who want a free hand to rule their countries. China tries to impress African countries with the idea that both China and Africa have suffered at the hands of Western imperialists and that China is not imperialistic. Chinese workers and businessmen are willing to work and settle in Africa to make the kind of profits and seek the kind of potential profits that cannot be made in developed countries. China offers loans on favorable terms to cash-poor African countries for long-term procurement projects. China's top leaders have been supportive of African states by making frequent state visits, giving the impression to Africans that rather than living in a two-dimensional Africa-West world,

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they live in a triangular China-Africa-West world.

China has poured billions of dollars into railways, bridges, roads, dams, and hospitals in Africa. China's health-care units, regularly dispatched to Africa, especially since the early 2000s, have impressed African leaders. As early as 1963, a Chinese medical team was dispatched to Algeria and soon word spread about good Chinese medical care. According to the Chinese Ministry of Health, nearly 20,000 Chinese medical personnel have worked in 47 African countries since 1963, treating 200 million patients. (Shinn 2006, 14–16) Chinese traditional medicine is also widely popular in Africa today because many African tribal communities have relied on traditional healers and herbal medicine. All in all, many Africans admire China.

### **Africans Express Concerns about Chinese Companies**

China has argued that its engagement in Africa is mutually beneficial for China and the continent because it provides two-way commercial trade, infrastructure investment, and aid grants. At least in the short term, it would certainly appear that China's trade and investment in Africa are good for the continent. China's investment in African infrastructure would seem especially welcome in a continent where so much of the infrastructure is substandard.

However, the long-term effects of China's engagement in Africa are worrisome to some Africans. At least three concerns have been voiced (Taylor 2006b, 951–954). First, they are wary of becoming heavily dependent on Chinese economic development, especially in the oil and commodities industries. Second, they are concerned

about China's ambivalence regarding norms for human rights and democracy. Third, they see a lack of environmental concern in Chinese-funded development projects.

For example, in April 2006 a car bomb exploded outside an oil refinery in Nigeria, a week after Chinese President Hu Jintao signed oil deals with the Nigerian government. A group calling itself the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta claimed responsibility for the blast, which it said was a warning to foreign companies working in Nigeria, specifically, Chinese companies: "We wish to warn the Chinese government and its oil companies to steer well clear of the Niger Delta." The group claims that the Nigerian government is not spending its billions in oil revenues for the benefit of its people. (CNN World 2006)

In Gabon, environmental activists have pressed corrupt local officials to stop allowing the exploitation of Gabon's park areas by the Chinese company Sinopec. When a Gabonese national government delegation visited one of the parks, it determined that Sinopec was guilty of environmental exploitation for prospecting for oil, dynamiting, and carving roads in the park without first receiving approval from the environmental impact statement that it submitted to the government (Taylor 2007).

In Zambia, 13 Zambian miners at the Chinese-owned Collum Coal Mine were injured in October 2010 when they were shot by two Chinese supervisors during a wage protest. Zambian prosecutors charged the supervisors with attempted murder but later dropped the case for undetermined reasons. The mine had been temporarily shut down the previous year for unsafe working conditions, and a Zambian provincial minister charged that

the mine workers were being employed under disadvantageous circumstances since they were classified as part-time laborers even though some of them had been with the company for up to nine years. (Chen 2010)

A Washington-based economist with personal experience in Africa has shared the following observation on China's image in Africa: "Only corrupt nations will accept China with open arms. In more successful African economies—for example, Ghana—members of the social and economic elite have demonstrated deep concern toward Chinese business practice and ethics."

### Concluding Remarks: Is China a Soft Power in Africa?

China has wielded its power more dramatically since President Hu Jintao mentioned at the Seventeenth Party Congress in 2007 that it needed to increase its soft power. The expression's

creator, Joe Nye, recently defined this concept to a group of Beijing University students as "the ability to use attraction and persuasion to get what you want without force or payment." However, calling China a soft power in Africa, misses important nuances. Not all Africans are impressed with China. African Countries are beginning to complain about Chinese companies' poor pay and low safety standards. The exercise of soft power is not always easy, as Americans well know. If Americans want to keep Africa open to Western influence, they need to pay closer attention to China's role in the continent.

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