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## Boiling 54 Eggs: China's Approach to Africa

Viewing China's relations with individual African states as a single unified policy is misleading both for China and for those watching from afar.

By **Peter Krasnopolsky**

A colloquial Chinese saying goes something like “boil one egg or boil 10 eggs – it takes the same amount of time.” Yet this wisdom is questionable when one considers that peeling 10 eggs adds a whole different dynamic to the process.

During the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) summit in September 2024, the Chinese government hosted 51 African

nations. While the event was presented as a story of success in China's relations with the whole continent, this idea of homogeneity disregards the notion that bilateral relations have been unpacked individually, through time, using different levers on different levels. Viewing China's relations with individual African states as a unified policy direction is misleading both for China and for those watching from afar.

When BRICS failed to issue a joint statement in support of the reform of the United Nations Security Council because two of its newest members, Egypt and Ethiopia, could not reach consensus, the impasse undermined more than the utility of BRICS. China's position as Africa's largest partner is being tested as two major African nations with regional power ambitions, cannot see eye to eye. China has to watch closely as tensions between Ethiopia and Egypt continue to escalate.

Ethiopia intends to recognize the statehood of Somaliland in exchange for sea access, while Egypt provided military assistance to Somalia, which claims sovereignty over Somaliland. That development followed a longer simmering dispute between the two northern African nations. The tensions arose from construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the Nile, stoking fears in Egypt over critical water supply.

Considering that China partially funded and supported construction of the dam, the rhetoric of Beijing's win-win harmonious engagement in Africa is under question. Yet, for decades China managed to work both with Ethiopia and its traditional adversary, Eritrea. The benefits of dealing with China evidently outweigh the political prices of dealing with a rival's friend, but the utility of befriending a great power without limitations is not so certain.

When the People's Republic of China was first recognized by the United Nations in 1971, 26 African countries placed their support behind the communist state – just over a half of some 40 independent African nations existing at the time. Fast-forward to 2024, and China maintains solid diplomatic relations with 53 out of 54 African states. Each relationship was forged through various

means, including trade relations, investment, concessional loans, security cooperation and “soft power,” including numerous cultural, educational and technical cooperation initiatives, and, more recently, ever-increasing presence of Chinese media on the continent.

The notion that China has a strong connection to African states because of the Global South’s shared post-colonial spirit is not inaccurate, but history only partially explains China’s interest and position on the continent. China’s long term orientation in Africa includes both access to natural resources and continuous diplomatic support.

During the Cold War, following the Sino-Soviet split, China often opposed Soviet influence, and on occasions sided with the United States. Presently, as China-Russia relations are flying high, China treads carefully not to undermine Russian engagement in Africa. China’s role as the largest supplier of military hardware in Africa is unlikely to have any significant impact on Russia’s adventurism on the continent. As Russian mercenaries are propping up rogue regimes in Sahel, China continues to import their oil.

China’s pragmatism in foreign policy is at play in Africa, as Beijing has not confronted Western interests in Africa directly either. China’s diplomatic presence on the continent is comparable to that of the United States. The construction of the only Chinese military base abroad in Djibouti, also the host to a U.S. naval base, is often viewed as a challenge to U.S. influence in the region. However, depending on the overall China-U.S. relations, the Chinese presence can be justified as a means of cooperation rather than confrontation – upholding security around the Horn of Africa, particularly in anti-piracy efforts. Similarly, China’s contemplation of building a base in Equatorial Guinea can hardly undermine the United States’ position in the Atlantic.

In turn, the U.S. has made a solid step in checking Chinese influence in Africa by taking a page from China’s foreign policy playbook and funding an infrastructure project connecting inland mining regions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Zambia with access to the sea. In August 2024 the first shipment of

copper dug up in the heartland of the continent in the DRC and shipped by rail to Angola's Atlantic port of Lobito left for the United States. A century-old railway was first rehabilitated by China in 2014, but deteriorated throughout the following decade due to poor maintenance.

Adoption of the Lobito rail corridor by Western firms with U.S. support was a double snub for China. The rail access to the Atlantic from the mineral-rich Congo River basin sidelined another Chinese signature project in the African hinterland. The Tanzania-Zambia Railway, which was constructed at a major expense to then-impooverished China in the 1970s, enabled landlocked Zambia to export copper and other minerals through Tanzania to the Indian Ocean ports, reducing reliance on British colonial routes through the White-minority ruled Rhodesia and South Africa. By 2015, the railway turned dysfunctional due to poor maintenance.

As China spreads its efforts in Africa thin, then, it appears to be less effective in competing with the United States on strategic railway corridors.

Even so, China well outpaces the U.S. as a trade partner with the continent as a whole. While disrupted during the COVID-19 pandemic, the total Africa-China trade reached \$262 billion by 2023, five times as much as the continent's trade with the United States. For the individual African states, however, these numbers do not necessarily translate to success, with China's trade surplus standing at \$64 billion. In terms of value, Africa's exports to China only amount to 60 percent of China's exports to the continent.

African largest importers of Chinese goods were South Africa, Nigeria, and Egypt, all among the top continent's economies, each with regional power ambitions in their geographic neighborhoods. Africa's largest exporters to China were Angola, the DRC, South Africa, and Congo, which accounted for nearly 70 percent of total exports, mostly natural resources, from Africa to China. The remaining nearly 50 African states received a significantly smaller share of the pie, deriving various degrees of benefits.

The fruits of Africa-China trade vary. Crude oil exports to China have significantly declined from most of the African oil producers,

while exports of minerals more than tripled in the past decade. A new industry of semi-processed natural resources and agricultural products is emerging as a new source of regional exports. The asymmetric nature of the trade is highly visible in multiple states, even though the continent's total trade deficit with China has been decreasing. That said, trade imbalances with China are not limited to Africa and are comparable to a various degree to numerous countries and regions worldwide.

Western criticism of Chinese engagement in Africa is usually one-sided and the negative perception of Chinese intentions is often derived from a lack of transparency rather than facts. Chinese dealings with African states may be opaque, but rather than predatory, they are pragmatic and interest-seeking – as are most interstate dealings in the international system. Because of this interest-seeking nature, however, China's track record is not always spotless, and often reflects a common English idiom: you cannot make an omelet without breaking some eggs.

China's diplomacy and soft power do not always focus on the same African states as the ones where Chinese firms are heavily involved in extraction of natural resources. Furthermore, while China's long-term orientation and elitist approach to relations sits well with African leaders, this does not always translate to global, and more importantly, local perceptions of China.

For instance, Chinese energy firms have complicated regional dynamics and jeopardized the safety of communities in oil-producing regions in South Sudan, Uganda, and Nigeria. The China-funded East African Crude Oil Pipeline has had a particularly damaging environmental and economic impact in Uganda. In the past, vocal concerns about the environmental impact caused by Chinese mining in Ghana were curbed through political channels, and in South Africa journalists faced censorship after exposing China's oppression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang, undermining democratic practices in both countries.

In Nigeria, the trade imbalance and debt both damaged public opinion of China. China's relationship with Angola had become somewhat strained as returns on Chinese projects declined and

Chinese infrastructural engagements became less consistent. Concurrently, as China is dealing with economic challenges domestically, the nature of Chinese engagement in Africa is becoming more decentralized. Considering this, China cannot succeed in Africa without maintaining a delicate balance between its own interests and the needs of African nations and local communities. In that context, both Chinese actors and anybody else involved on the continent would benefit from adhering to an African proverb: A person selling eggs does not start a fight in the market.

## The Author

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