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CHINA – AFRICA ALLIANCES

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Sino–African relations are the bedrock of Chinese Foreign Policy. China has supported various African liberation movements throughout the Cold War period. Since the end of the Chinese civil war in 1947, Africa has played a significant role in China’s foreign policy. The majority of Chinese foreign ministers have chosen an African country as their first visit each year since 1950.

In 1971, African nations played a crucial role in helping China gain control of its seat in the UN from Taiwan. Over the years, China shifted its focus in Africa toward eliminating recognition for Taiwan’s government, with most African countries switching allegiance to the PRC. The ‘Going Out’ strategy established in 1999 encouraged Chinese investment beyond the nation, particularly in Africa, creating employment opportunities for Chinese citizens. Later in 2003, The Forum on China – Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) was established to enhance collaboration between China and African countries, reflecting China’s increasing strategic interest in the continent.

In 2013, President Xi Jinping initiated the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), aiming to revive ancient trade routes, which saw significant Chinese investment in Africa. However, the BRI’s expansion led to concerns about the transparency and sustainability of Chinese loans to African nations, resulting in a decline in Chinese loans to Africa from 2016 to 2020 due to changing priorities in Chinese politics and repayment difficulties by African countries. Former foreign minister Wang Yi visited 48 African countries, while Premier Xi Jinping made 10 visits to Africa between 2014 and 2020. In January 2023, China’s new foreign minister Qin Gang visited five African nations and the African Union. These visits have strengthened bilateral ties between the nations.

CHINA'S INTEREST IN AFRICA

China is both a long-standing diplomatic partner as well as a new investor in Africa, as it's attracted by African export markets. Chinese interest in Africa consists of primary natural resources and minerals, trade and commerce, soft power, security, and diplomatic engagements. China's role as a significant aid donor is often misrepresented in the media due to a lack of understanding about the scope and methods of Chinese aid practices.

China has mainly four key strategic interests in Africa. First, it requires access to oil and natural gas resources to improve its energy sector. As a result, China is heavily dependent on and investing in other African nations such as Angola, Sudan, and Nigerian oil sectors to have a stable energy supply in the future. Secondly, China aims to tap into Africa's expansive market for its exports, facilitating the transition of its economy away from labor-intensive industries as labor costs rise. Thirdly, China to increase its credibility at a global level seeks political legitimacy. The Chinese government believes that gathering policy support from Africa and strengthening its bilateral ties would raise China's prominence and position at global level. Most of the African nations also support Beijing's "One China" policy, which is a prerequisite for attracting Chinese investment and aid. Finally, China aims to play a crucial role in creating regional stability in Africa by safeguarding its economic interests. In return, Africa considers China as a valuable partner in terms of economic development, trade, and infrastructure. Additionally, they see China's rapid economic growth as a model to emulate in their development efforts.

AFRICAN PERCEPTION OF CHINA

Many African leaders consider China as a significant partner in various dimensions as compared to Western powers. China has initiated infrastructure projects in Africa which increased economic growth, employment creation to the locals, and visible upgradation to the transportation networks like roads, rails, and construction of bridges. While some in Africa appreciate these contributions, others criticize Chinese firms for poor labor practices, harmful environmental policies, and frequent job displacement. Good- governance watchdogs caution against unfair deals that exploit African nations' vulnerabilities and encourage corruption. Here, China is being portrayed as a neo-colonial power dynamic, where Africa supplies raw materials to China and, in return receives Chinese manufacturing goods. Tensions have escalated in certain regions, resulting in protests and violence against Chinese individuals. As a result, Beijing has made significant efforts to address

African concerns and ways to balance the partnership between both nations. These efforts include sustainable practices in trade relations and economic development, people-to-people exchange and interaction, and promotion of Chinese soft power diplomacy followed by special emphasis on ways to ensure regional stability, peace, and security in African conflict-prone – regions.

DEBT TRAP DIPLOMACY

US commentators often characterize Chinese involvement in Africa as a ‘debt trap’ strategy, suggesting that China intentionally loans unsustainable amounts to African nations to increase its influence over them and impose unfair conditions. While some African countries do struggle with mounting Chinese debt, exacerbated by various factors, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and high interest rates, the blame cannot solely be placed on China. Mismanagement of debt by countries like Kenya and Zambia extends to all creditors, not just China.

On the other hand, certain African nations have established more reasonable and manageable debt agreements with China, avoiding the risks associated with major BRI projects. China itself is facing challenges due to the loans it extended during the BRI boom, facing difficulties in enforcing repayment while maintaining a positive image as a supporter of developing countries. Though there are suggestions that China could be leveraging debt strategically to enhance its influence and resource access in Africa, the notion of a coordinated ‘debt trap’ policy is not entirely supported. China’s interest in Africa aligns with its ambitions as a rising global power, competing with the US.

MILITARY BASES IN AFRICA

Regarding China’s military presence in Africa, the country has established its first military base outside China, which is Djibouti, followed by the Gulf of Aden and the Horn of Africa. Chinese established military base in Djibouti is only six miles away from the US military base within the same nation, which has escalated tension between the US and China. The Chinese base was established to combat piracy and address challenges like evacuating Chinese citizens post the Gadhafi regime (2011) collapse. While China has expanded its defense presence in Africa, with a notable increase in defense sales from 2012 to 2017 by 55 percent, claims about plans for

additional military bases in countries like Equatorial Guinea and Cape Verde lack substantial evidence for now. China may be seeking berthing rights for naval vessels in these nations, but concrete plans for new bases remain uncertain.

WAY FORWARD

China has historically been aggressive in seeking repayment of debts from African countries, requesting immediate payment which has damaged its reputation as a supporter of developing nations. To enhance its standing and find a mutually beneficial solution, China should consider collaborating with Western nations through multilateral organizations like the G20 to address debt issues more cooperatively. Although China's usual approach is based on bilateral agreements, working alongside the West through multilateral platforms could prove challenging. However, as a major player in global competition with the US and amidst tensions heightened by Russia's actions in Ukraine, China must find a solution that benefits all parties involved. To achieve this, it is suggested that African nations encourage China and the West to collaborate on debt distress, potentially through a unified voice in organizations like the African Union. Furthermore, if the African Union were to join the G20, it could pave the way for more equitable and coordinated efforts to address debt challenges between Africa, China, and Western nations.