



Relations between a Country and a Continent: China and Africa. A first and not a simple matter.....

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Abstract

Through this contribution of a geopolitical approach, the author intends to propose an updated and accurate framework on the relations between China and Africa as well as some critical reflections on various geopolitical and geo-economic aspects concerning the intense development of the diversified economic relations between China and the different African States.

China's foreign economic policy in Africa has laid solid foundations through the implementation of the various Sino-African Cooperation Forums that have taken place since 2000 and that have seen an increasing involvement of the Chinese government in the process.

This paper intends to make a brief reflection on China's visible economic and geopolitical interest in the African Continent as a whole. The analysis that follows traces the main stages in the history of relations between China and Africa, emphasizing the increased importance of the Sino-African forums that led to what is now known as Chinese neo-colonization. In addition, the case studies of the Silk Road and the Rare Lands are highlighted. Finally, some of the social impacts of the Chinese presence in Africa are also examined such as the construction of new cities for the Chinese migrant population and the teaching of the Chinese language (Mandarin) in schools in some African Countries.

Key words: Africa, China, geopolitics, business relation, primary resources, policy.

"We must try to trust each other. Be together and cooperate".

Jomo Kenyatta

(former President of Kenya: from 1964 to 1979)

1. Foreword

Major Chinese companies have long established solid activities on the African Continent, with over a thousand structural and infrastructure projects such as airports, ports, hospitals, schools, dams, water and electricity networks.

Over the last twenty years, China has made substantial investments in Africa, gradually removing it from the traditional influence of the West and Europe in particular.

The 1996 can be considered as the year when this interest in Africa by China started. In that year, the Chinese President, Jiang Zemin, paid an official visit to six African Countries and gave a major speech at the headquarters of the African Union in

Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) and proposed the foundation of the Forum on Cooperation between China and Africa (acronym: FoCAC), (French,2015).

China's massive presence in Africa has long attracted the attention of international observers and has often been denounced by Western countries (but recently also by some African leaders) as a new form of "colonialism" pushed only by Chinese hegemony. In fact, the great majority of the resources allocated are concentrated in sectors that are considered strategic, especially in the area of natural resources, without any positive impact on the African population. In fact, the numerous infrastructures built by Beijing are often designed to benefit Chinese activities and not to promote internal development in African Countries.

The *African Continental Free Trade Agreement* (AfCFTA), the world's largest trade agreement in terms of the number of countries involved (54 in total), came into force on 1 January 2021 and aims to increase domestic consumer and business spending to \$6.7 trillion by 2030. China will be one of the outsiders to benefit the most. Based on recently developed scenarios, Chinese exports to AfCFTA Countries will increase by 50% despite the Covid -19 pandemic impasse (Colarizi, 2021).

At present, thirteen African Countries (Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, Uganda, Nigeria, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, South Africa, Seychelles and Mauritius) have already signed bilateral investment agreements that can be transformed into more substantial trade agreements.

The agreement aims to develop new investments through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China's huge infrastructure plan involving more than 60 countries in Asia, Africa and Europe, which was initially called One Belt, One Road (OBOR). Belt and Road is the shorter form of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road (see par 5.1).

2. One Country and one Continent (China and Africa)

Relations between China and Africa have become increasingly intense and multifaceted in recent years, including economic, diplomatic and political ties. Development assistance from China has been the subject of debate about its objectives and the impact it can have on African beneficiaries.

To increase its global influence, China engages with politically important states across Africa: Ethiopia, Kenya, South Africa and Nigeria are among the largest recipients of Chinese aid due to their regional and sub-regional influence. In return, these Countries support China and its political ambitions at the United Nations and vis-à-vis other Countries on the Continent (Mthembu, Mabera, 2021).



THE POPULAR REPUBLIC OF CHINA	THE AFRICAN CONTINENT
<p>Surface area: 9,596,960 sq km Population: 1,443,615,491 inh. (2021) Density: 153 inh./ sq km</p>	<p>Surface area: 30,221,532 sq km Population: 1.314 billion (2019) Density: 36.40 inh./sq km</p>
<p>Regions and Provinces: 23 provinces: Anhui, Fujian, Gansu, Guangdong, Guizhou, Hainan, Hebei, Heilongjiang, Henan, Hubei, Hunan, Jiangsu, Jiangxi, Jilin, Liaoning, Qinghai, Shaanxi, Shandong, Shanxi, Sichuan, Yunnan, Zhejiang. Note: The PRC also claims to be the sole legitimate representative of all of China, but does not administer Taiwan as the 23rd province. 5 autonomous regions: Guangxi, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia Hui, Xinjiang Uygur, Tibet. 4 directly controlled municipalities: Beijing, Tientsin, Shanghai and Chongqing. 2 partially autonomous special administrative regions: Hong Kong and Macao. The Popular Republic of China owns the cities of Hong Kong and Macao, which until the end of the 20th century were the last Asian colonies of the United Kingdom and Portugal respectively.</p>	<p>States: 54 Most recent independent state: South Sudan (2011) 2 States seeking international recognition and independence: Western Sahara and Somaliland. Is the continent with the most territories or independent States.</p>
	
<p>Politics: China was a monarchy until 1911. Since 1949, the Chinese Communist Party has been the sole political entity in charge of the Country and is the largest party in the world with more than 85 million members. Initially, the Popular Republic of China was a socialist state with a centralized economy. After the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, the Chinese Communist Party under Deng Xiaoping began a series of economic reforms that marked the transition to so-called social market economy.</p>	<p>Politics: since independence, many African States have experienced major instabilities, often resulting in violent power struggles and civil wars, both within each State and between neighbouring States. Part of these problems can be seen as a legacy of the colonial period, with its legacy of governments and national boundaries that are not representative of local conditions.</p>
<p>Economy: it is the second largest economy in the world in terms of (nominal) GDP produced, after the United States of America, while in terms of nominal GDP per capita it ranks 59th (2020).</p>	<p>Economy: the economic and social situation, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, is one of the most fragile on the planet. While some States, such as South Africa and Botswana, are establishing themselves as dynamic economic realities, albeit marked by strong social inequalities, other states have even seen their GDP per capita decline in recent years (causes: Population growth, climate change, migration, political instability).</p>

Table 1. Two geographical spaces, two realities compared: China and Africa (author's elaboration)

3. The history of China-Africa relations: a synthesis

The China-Africa relationship, which is much discussed at international level in both economic and geopolitical contexts, is not recent: in fact, there has always been a strategic interest. In particular, China has studied Africa as the “negative model” of what could happen to it; later it has positioned itself as the “positive model” for

Africa's development, indicating different priorities for African states such as nationalism as opposed to socialism (Mesetti, 2020).

The relationship between China and Africa is rooted in history. The history of the beginning of relations and trade between China and Africa can be traced back to two ancient historical phases. The first friendly contacts date back to the 2nd century BC, when the Han Dynasty (206 BC - 220 AD) and Africa began exchanging valuable goods. The Tang dynasty (618-907 A.D.) formally contacted the Arab empire which dominated North Africa and the Song dynasty (960-1279) increased trade, with a large number of Chinese products appearing for the first time on the northern coast of the continent (Cellamare, Baheli, 2012; Ferrari, 2008).

La storia di inizio delle relazioni e degli scambi commerciali tra la Cina e l'Africa può essere ricondotta a due antiche fasi storiche. I primi contatti amichevoli si fanno risalire al secolo II a.C., quando la dinastia Han (206 a. C. – 220 d.C.) e l'Africa cominciarono a scambiarsi beni pregiati. La dinastia Tang, (618-907 d.C.) invece, contattò formalmente l'impero arabo che dominava il nord Africa e quella Song (960-1279) incrementò i commerci, con un gran numero di prodotti cinesi che apparvero per la prima volta sulle coste settentrionali del Continente (Cellamare, Baheli, 2012; Ferrari, 2008)

It is reported that in 1415, while Portuguese caravels were arriving in the Gulf of Guinea, a Chinese trading ship brought a giraffe to Beijing (Ferrari, Trovato; 2021). Beyond the narratives, there is no doubt that Beijing played an allied role in the decolonization of African Countries. In fact, the first diplomatic relations between China and Africa were established at the time of the decolonisation of the Continent; in 1964 on the occasion of a visit of Minister *Chou En-Lai* to some African Countries some relations were reactivated (Alden, Large, Soares de Oliveira, 2008).

Egypt was the first African state to build relations with the People's Republic of China: it was on 30 May 1956 and since then relations between the two Countries have always been excellent (Cellamare, Baheli, 2012). Egypt has been in practice the “gateway” of Chinese foreign trade to the Continent without evaluating its strategic geographical position in the Mediterranean. The second Country was Sudan in 1959, but initially relations were only diplomatic, while economic relations began to flourish in the 1990s, facilitated by a confluence of interests: on the one hand, China's need to import oil and other resources; on the other, Sudan's search (under international sanctions for supporting terrorism) for new markets to exploit its wealth. The relationship between China and Sudan shows how China is pragmatic and does not interfere in the internal and international politics of African States. The independence of South Sudan (9 July 2011) has altered and brought about changes in relations.

In the early 1970s China resumed cooperation with African states, offering economic assistance to: Congo Brazzaville, Tanzania, Zambia, Benin, Mauritius, Madagascar, Nigeria, Rwanda, Togo, Zaire, Senegal, Upper Volta and Cameroon. In those years in particular, China finances the construction of sports, cultural and administrative facilities in African capitals and begins to develop funding for the

development of transport infrastructure (modernisation of the railway network in Angola; construction of the Tanzam Railway linking Tanzania to Zambia) as well as for the construction of roads and motorways in Ethiopia and Kenya (Bredeloup, Bertoncetto, 2006). In the same period, China provided military support to Angolan and Mozambican nationalist movements.

And, since the late 1990s, the Chinese have increasingly developed and increased their business in Africa. In the last twenty years, after the foundations laid by the Chinese State enterprises, an impressive migratory flow has exploded (in 1998, there were 150,000 Chinese in the whole of Africa) and is proceeding at an impressive rate. They are mainly workers, traders and contractors.

In his essay Whan Luo (2020) *China and International Aid. Cooperation, Development and the "Shared Future" for the 21st Century*, he argues that from the very beginning, the PRC has placed great emphasis on international aid programmes, and now, with its rise to international economic prominence at the height of what the Chinese call the "*Age of Opening-up and Reform*", its leaders have implemented active participation in all kinds of aid programmes aimed at promoting development in the most vulnerable Countries in order to give visibility to the reform of global governance towards more equitable and sustainable development. Many of the weakest Countries economically and socially on the planet belong to the African Continent.

Over the fifteen years (2000- 2015) China has intervened as international aid in the case of specific emergencies (Figure 1); for Africa: the drought that hit the Horn of Africa in 2013 (86.9 million) and the 2014 Ebola epidemic in West Africa (56.2 million). Aid is provided in two formats: either on the basis of bilateral agreements with other States (orange area) or through the intermediary of the United Nations or NGOs (blue area). As can be seen from the graph in Figure 1, the first format is the largest.

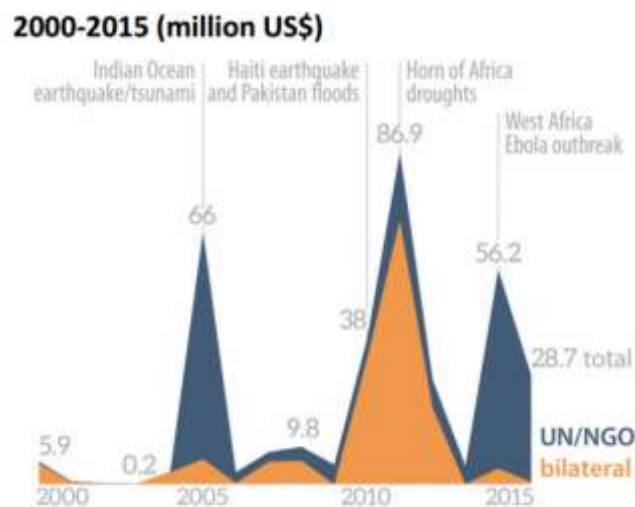


Figure 1 Chinese international aid 2000-2015. (Source: White Paper on China's Foreign Aid, 2021)

In addition to the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), launched in 2000 (see paragraph 4), and the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA), created in 2018 to implement plans and guidelines for international cooperation. Moreover, under Goal 2: “*End hunger*” of the 2030 Agenda², China is highly active in achieving the goal and cooperates with the *UN's World Food Programme* (WFP), not only through considerable donations of money, but also by materially providing food (especially rice) to famine-affected regions in Africa such as South Sudan, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Lesotho.

China is trying to export to some African Countries a development model based on reducing hunger, accompanied by the creation of infrastructure and the attraction of investment, which has already been successfully tested by China in its domestic policy³

In employing this strategy in its humanitarian foreign policy, China's goal with regard to the above-mentioned African Countries is to create concrete stability for two reasons: one commercial, to have secure partners for investment; the other security, as an economically stable Country not affected by hunger is a safer place to locate companies and safely transfer Chinese workers (Nicoletti, 2019).

Just over a decade ago, it was no longer possible for the US and European Countries to avoid the fact that Beijing's projects on the Continent have been expanding at a consistent pace. In particular, it has been reported that China's lack of transparency or “too much secrecy” makes it difficult to collect reliable data on its activities abroad, particularly in Africa, where governments in turn tend not to publish reliable or exhaustive data.

But already in the previous decade (between 2001 and 2010), according to the Fitch Ratings agency⁴, the Chinese Bank for Imports and Exports (Eibc) granted loans to African countries for 62.7 billion dollars, or 12.5 billion dollars more than the World Bank itself. In the same period, AidData, a research laboratory of the College of William and Mary⁵, in the United States, estimated China's economic commitments at \$74.11 billion and completed projects at \$48.61 billion.

² The full title of Goal 2 of Agenda 2030 is “End hunger achieve food security, improve nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture”.

³ In fact, through a series of multiple programs (for example, rural reforms, economic and infrastructural renewal plans) China has managed to half the number of malnourished citizens within a few years, becoming the first country to achieve one of its Millennium Development Goals of halving malnutrition by 2015.

⁴ Fitch Ratings, Inc. is an international credit rating and credit assessment agency with two headquarters, in New York and London. Fitch (China) Bohua Credit Ratings Ltd. (Fitch Bohua) is now a 100% affiliate of Fitch Ratings.

⁵ In the text of the document (China-Africa Action Plan 2007/2009), the intention is to open a bilateral Chamber of Commerce and to increase scientific and technological training, as well as to provide aid for a hundred rural schools, teacher training, media operators and environmental technicians. In the health sector, the plan is to build hospitals and malaria prevention centres. The plan also envisages increasing Chinese tourism and youth exchanges with Africa. The importance of

4. Sino-African Cooperation Forums: a tool for cooperation and dialogue

Since 2000, *Forums on China-Africa Cooperation* (FOCAC) have been held every three years to institutionalize relations between the two partners. The first was held in Beijing in October 2000, the second in Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) in 2003, the third again in Beijing in November 2006, and the last one in Dakar (Senegal) in 2021 (Table 2).

Year	Town	Country	Topic
2000	Beijing	China	-
2003	Addis Abeba	Ethiopia	“Carrying out practical cooperation and taking specific actions”
2006	Beijing	China	“Friendship, peace, cooperation and development”
2009	Sharm el-Sheikh	Egypt	“Deepening the new type of China-Africa strategic partnership for sustainable development”
2012	Beijing	China	“Build on past achievements and open up new prospects for the new type of China-Africa strategic partnership”
2015	Johannesburg	South Africa	“Africa-China Progressing Together: Win-Win Cooperation for Common Development”
2018	Beijing	China	“Walking together towards prosperity”
2021	Dakar	Senegal	“Deepening the China-Africa partnership and promote sustainable development to build a China-Africa community with a shared future in a new age”

Table 2. Twenty-one years: eight Sino-African Forums (source: author's elaboration)

Also starting from 2000, China cancelled 1.3 billion dollars of debt to 31 African Countries, and in 2003, on the occasion of the second Forum, it signed trade agreements for about 700 million dollars. Again in 2006, China cancelled more than 10 billion dollars of debts contracted by 32 African Countries and cancelled 2 billion dollars of duties on 190 African imported products. China's financial commitment with the succession of FOCACs has been implemented: 10 billion dollars in 2009, 20 billion dollars in 2012 and about 60 billion dollars in 2015; the same amount for 2018.

At the 2015 FOCAC in South Africa (Tab. 2), the FOCAC *Johannesburg Plan of Action 2016-2018* was launched. An ambitious ten-point Plan for Africa's development: infrastructure expansion, growth of financial services, economic development, industrialization, agricultural modernization, trade and investment facilitation, poverty reduction, health improvement, promotion of peace and security, and cultural sharing. As well as funding in the strictly economic sphere, there was also funding focused on the social sphere and internal development. At this 6th Forum, Chinese President *Xi Jinping* highlighted the progress in the China-Africa joint

this document is that it is a specific policy report articulated in specific details (Cellamare, Baheli, 2012).

growth project based on five pillars: shared trust, win-win cooperation, cultural exchange, security and union, and coordination in international affairs (Finazzi, 2015).

With the 2018 7th FOCAC Forum, titled "Walking Together Towards Prosperity" the priorities, as in 2015, were given, at least on paper, to the agenda of the African Union (Agenda 2063) and some of the agendas of Africa's regional economic blocs (figure 2). The 2018 summit was conditioned by the ongoing US-China trade war. China for the first time included the United Nations in FOCAC, providing a space for UN Secretary-General António Guterres.

Eight areas of cooperation were identified in FOCAC 2018: industrial promotion, infrastructure, trade facilitation, green development, capacity building, health care, trade and mobility of people, and peace and security.



Figure 2: Agenda 2063: Dashboard of Aspiration and Goals (source: <https://www.abbanews.eu/publicazioni/documenti-storici/agenda-2063-lunione-africana/>)

In the most recent and 8th Forum, held in Dakar at the end of November 2021, still in the midst of a pandemic emergency, Beijing promised funding of at least 40 billion dollars; 20 less than that made official during the 2018 summit. The 8th Forum, like the previous ones, saw the presentation by China of a Plan for Africa containing nine areas/programmes of intervention. The first of the nine programmes announced was the health programme with plans to send Covid -19 vaccines, in addition to the 200 million doses already sent from 2019, one billion doses of vaccine (of which 600 million as a donation)⁶In second and third place were

⁶ China is already Africa's largest provider of vaccines and now aims to become its largest donor. In addition, ten specific projects and the deployment of medical personnel are planned in the health program.

programs for poverty reduction and agricultural development⁷ on the continent in line with Agenda 2063 for Africa (AUC. 2015).

The Plan also includes investments in social activities (construction of schools, professional training, cultural exchange events between China and Africa) and in environmental activities aimed at combating Climate Change. With these projects, China is trying to strengthen its image abroad and of course gain as much support as possible in African Countries.

The projects in the field of digitalisation deserve special attention, as do the creation of centres for the application of satellite remote sensing and the reinforcement of Sino-African academic activities⁸. Here, the Chinese objective of implementing the presence of 'its' companies in the Continent's critical infrastructures is clear, as is the dependence of African governments on products made in China.

There is also the program on security cooperation. It includes specific projects: Chinese military assistance to the African Union, joint exercises, anti-terrorism activities and preservation of regional security. In addition, China is financing the African Standby Force, i.e. the continent's peacekeeping forces⁹. These activities allow the army to train for combat without violating the principle of "non-interference" in the affairs of third countries and to get to know the African theatre better. To then settle there permanently in the long term, as happened in Djibouti and as could happen on the West African shore. China is interested in having a "settlement" on the West Coast of Africa to monitor the movements of the Armed Forces of the NATO Countries to the west of the Strait of Gibraltar and to acquire a distant look at the Eastern coasts of the United States.

Moreover, the last Forum was less resonant because it was held both at inter-ministerial level, whereas the two previous editions directly involved the leaders of the participating countries, and because it was held in a mixed mode with planned teleconferences. Indeed, Chinese President Xi Jinping himself attended by teleconference to enunciate his plan for Africa. Important agreements were made: both sides commit to passing laws and regulations to facilitate and attract Chinese investment in Africa; both sides will produce a plan for cooperation and

⁷ Ten unspecified projects were announced in this area, the creation of centres for agro-technologies, the opening of a 'green line' to speed up the export of agricultural products to China and USD 10 billion in funding for African exports. The People's Republic of China has an increasing need to import food resources to meet their domestic needs. Therefore, it penetrates the Continent's agricultural sector. In addition, increased imports could help rebalance the Sino-African trade balance. The total value of trade in 2020 was \$187 billion, of which Chinese exports amounted to \$114 billion. Beijing's goal is to import 300 billion worth of merchandise from Africa over the next three years.

⁸ The academic agreements signed in November by Huawei (which has already built a large part of the Continent's 4G network and is now aiming to do the same with fifth-generation Internet) with Nigeria, Rwanda and Libya, the creation of a high-performance computing centre in Tunisia, and the agreement on cooperation between China and Benin in responding to cyber threats all point in this direction.

⁹ The People's Republic of China has long ranked first among UN Security Council members in terms of soldiers deployed on peacekeeping missions, and most of them are concentrated in Africa.

development of the railway network valid from 2021 to 2025. China will also continue to provide assistance to African countries in conflict resolution operations, and to support African initiatives within the UN to stabilise areas affected by armed conflict.

It should be noted that in the last two Forums (2018 and 2021), China has committed to reinforcing cooperation in the field of agriculture, continuing with new projects, introducing new technologies, training and field research carried out by teams of experts sent to Africa with the aim of providing the necessary knowledge.

It is also important to point out that during these Forums, the Chinese authorities meet with African partner Countries and those that recognise the People's Republic of China (in 2006, there were 48 out of 54, and today there are 51 out of 54)¹⁰, strengthening diplomatic relations and concluding important economic agreements. At the end of the Forums, a three-year program document on Africa is almost always drawn up, with the aim of ensuring the continuity of relations defined as "traditionally friendly" between the two parties and always with an emphasis on development and security.

For Chinese strategies, the African continent represents an important and indispensable source of resources (oil, agricultural products, land, diamonds, copper, cobalt and much more) and a huge market towards which to direct exports and industrial overcapacity. Moreover, from a geopolitical point of view, North Africa is a crucial vantage point towards Europe, i.e. the American sphere of influence in Eurasia. According to US intelligence, it appears that Beijing intends to build a military base on the West African coast in Equatorial Guinea, the second official Chinese People's Army facility abroad after the one in Djibouti on the Bab el-Mandeb Strait that has been active since 2017.

Between 2000 and 2014, in fact, the first Country to receive loans from China was Angola, and the second, Ethiopia. Most of the loans financed by China come from the China Export-Import Bank¹¹, which was specially set up in 1994 and is often criticised for the lack of transparency in the flows invested. Since 2000, it has allegedly made loans in Africa amounting to some 60 billion dollars, reaching 45 of the 54 African countries. Obviously, countries that have recognised Taiwan or that have always opposed China's involvement in African affairs were excluded.

The projects that China has financed the most in Africa, through the agreements made in the FOCACs, are in the transport sector, followed by the energy sector. Most of the transport spending has been on building or repairing roads, and an equal amount on building new rail networks. This infrastructure is an important support

¹⁰ Burkina Faso has not had diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China since 1994 along with São Tomé and Príncipe and Swaziland, the three African states are the only ones left to support international recognition of Taiwan. In 2018, however, an initial outreach contact took place between China and Burkina Faso and São Tomé and Príncipe (Tipà, 2019).

¹¹ Chinese credits have never had short deadlines, nor have they been granted with such high interest rates that the beneficiaries had to take out a further loan to pay off the previous debt.

for the continent's recent unprecedented economic growth. In particular, the construction of new railway lines which, although not up to the level of the greatest technologies China itself enjoys, represent a fundamental line of development.

Among the most challenging infrastructure works are the construction of a hydroelectric power plant in both Sudan and Madagascar, but also the costly underground exploration carried out in Mauritania and the upgrading of infrastructure networks in Nigeria.

About a decade ago, some observers described the contents of the development agreements drawn up by the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation as neo-colonialist practices. This would have occurred in 2013, with the introduction of the One Belt, One Road project, strongly supported by Xi Jinping. It is designed as a basis for generating new demand and meeting the demands of the Chinese market.

Chinese economic and financial "operations" in Africa are continually criticised for their transparency by both European countries and the USA. Such criticism has recently prompted and continues to prompt some African Countries to look more closely at China's projects and seek the support of other partners. In the summer of 2021, Ethiopia reached an agreement with a US-funded consortium to build its national 5G network. Nigeria will soon use British money to build the rail route between Port Harcourt (in the south) and Maiduguri (in the north-east), also partly built by the Chinese. The people of Sierra Leone believe that the construction of the port on Black Johnson beach will pollute the environment and take jobs away from local fishermen (Cuscito, 2021).

On the rebound, Beijing is promising better quality projects to overcome the growing criticism about the transparency of infrastructure operations (ports, railways, roads, fibre optic cables, etc.).

At this current juncture, Beijing needs to consolidate its fragile soft power. This may also mean reducing the quantity of financing to the benefit of quality. So as not to lose points in the comparison with the new infrastructure projects launched by the United States (Build Back Better World) and the EU (Global Gateway). China is also refining its policy on international aid to African countries, emphasising that aid must be understood as an adjustment to the gaps left by the main Western donor countries, which have reduced their contributions in recent years following the rapid contraction of their economies, and not merely as a means of "exporting" their products or interfering in the internal politics of the recipient Countries (Whag, 2020).

Two important factors must be considered in relations between China and Africa. The first refers to the efforts (also economic) that the People's Republic is making on technological and military competition with the US. The second is the management of the variable Covid -19. To these can be added the risk of the bursting of the real estate bubble exemplified by the Evergrande case. These dynamics lead the Chinese leadership to give priority to domestic projects and operations in the Indo-Pacific. However, without totally neglecting the opportunities offered by Africa.

5. Chinese neo-colonisation

As previously asserted and documented, the positive relations between China and Africa are not new, but the consolidation of traditional relationships that have grown over time. Another example not yet recalled is the one referring to the period of the Cold War and the new political axis called "non-alignment", where China's aid to many African countries was conspicuous and useful for their economic development. During the 1950s, the Bandung Conference (18-24 April 1955) was a crucial event in terms of cooperation between the so-called "Third World" States and China. In return for their interest and aid, African countries actively supported China's reunification and its presence in the United Nations.

When one reads in some reports and essays that China's growing interest in Africa has all the characteristics of a neo-colonialism, one must consider many factors, especially three. Firstly, for more than a decade a new competition has been underway to grab the planet's natural resources in ways other than colonial ones, using financial flows and investments that are far from transparent, so much so that the process remains, if not hidden, certainly ignored by a large part of society. Secondly, China's rapid development is universally considered one of the most important changes in the global economy¹². The country has experienced explosive growth over the last 25 years. China's economic rise can be attributed to a variety of factors such as large-scale capital investment, significant growth in manufacturing and increased domestic consumption. It should be kept in mind that China, as the world's second largest economy, is a major international player increasingly committed to competing with the US in the technological and military fields. The third factor is the recent internal difficulties. Not to be underestimated, Beijing is grappling with the persistent outbreaks of Covid-19 and the risk of the bursting of the real estate bubble exemplified by the Evergrande case. These dynamics lead the Chinese leadership to prioritise internal problems and control of the Indo-Pacific region.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, trade between the People's Republic of China and the African Continent has increased annually by 20%, with a parallel growth in Chinese investment of 40% (Gambino, 2018). The number of Chinese companies, both public and private, that have invested in infrastructure development, or won contracts for the construction of new infrastructure is increasing.

¹² China's annual real GDP growth until 2018 averaged 9.5%, and the World Bank called this rate of growth the fastest expansion historically recorded by a primary economy (World Bank, 2018).

CHINESE FDI IN AFRICA

Main destination of Chinese FDI in Africa

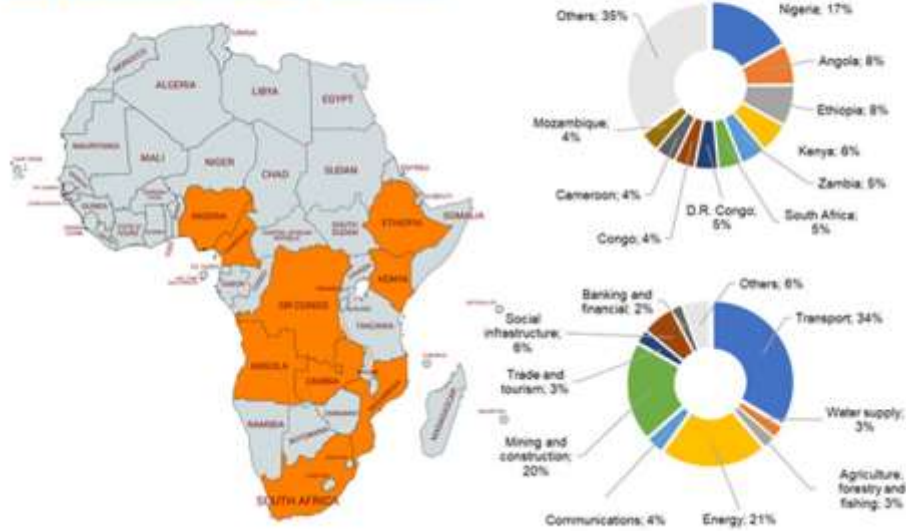


Figure 3. Countries where China has made its biggest investments (source: <https://www.affaritaliani.it/politica/geopolitica/cina-africa-investimenti-lorenzo-riccardi-rsa-intervista.html>)

The list of infrastructures built by Chinese public or private companies is growing. Some important examples: the port of Bagamoyo in Tanzania, the port of Walvis Bay in Namibia, the high-speed railway between Mombasa and Nairobi in Kenya, or the completion of the Entebbe-Kampala highway in Uganda (Gambino, 2018). And, as many analysts have pointed out, increased spending on infrastructure development is crucial for the growth and progress of African Countries.

The silence and by now almost capillary penetration in Africa became evident to the international community with the 3rd FOCAC summit (2006) and the important document drawn up on the occasion: "China-Africa Action Plan 2007/2009". In fact, the summit attracted international attention, not only from African governments and public opinion, but also from Europe and the United States, which had been less attentive until now to China's project of advancement on the African continent.

Consequently, Beijing's latest foreign policy strategy for Africa is to highlight common promotion and development goals to strengthen cooperation, safeguarding stability and peace as the basis for a mutually beneficial partnership in Sino-African relations.

At present, according to the Land Matrix observatory (<https://landmatrix.org/observatory/africa/>) foreign investment in Africa for land acquisition amounts to about 11 million hectares, 30% of which is for non-

agricultural use. In the new scramble for Africa, nearly 2.5 million hectares of farmland in just five sub-Saharan Countries have been bought or leased in the last five years at a total cost of roughly \$920 million. Land that until recently seemed of little foreign interest is now sought after by major international investor countries. Among these countries, China leads the world in terms of the value of hectares acquired (over 11 million hectares in 2018) (De Felice, 2018).

In particular, Chinese business interests in Africa include multiple sectors, such as agriculture, resettlement projects for Chinese farmers, mining, production and construction of transport infrastructure and special economic zones that serve as manufacturing, agribusiness or hubs for Chinese and/or other foreign companies as previously seen. (Götz, 2019).

5.1 The New Silk Road and Africa

In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping presented the 'One Belt, One Road' project (subsequently called the Belt and Road Initiative or with the acronym of BRI) whose primary objective is to increase infrastructural (roads, railways, ports, gas and oil pipelines, etc.) and commercial links between the People's Republic of China and the rest of the Eurasian continent and Africa.

Some experts in international geopolitics (Ferrari, 2008, Ferrari, Trovato 2021; Amighini, 2017) believe that the project, whose political objective is to bring Asia closer to Europe in the framework of the so-called Go Out policy to promote the international projection of the big Chinese groups, has already started in the early years of this new millennium.

The project is also known as the "Silk Road" because it draws inspiration from the ancient route that connected East and West. The BRI is now the foundation of China's foreign policy aimed at building a future world order with the People's Republic of China as its pole of reference. This is the main motivation for the geo-strategic importance of the project, the purpose of which is to follow commercial relations with political ones, thus guaranteeing China access to primary materials such as oil (see the agreements closed with African oil-producing Countries and suppliers of primary materials) and access to new markets for its products (MERICS, 2019).

In 2014, China's state communication bureau publicised the official map of the Silk Road Economic Belt nodes, which would connect central China to northern Europe via Asia, and the Maritime Silk Road nodes, which would connect China's southern coastal industrial zones to Europe via Indonesia, India and Africa, with a view to international awareness (Figure 4).

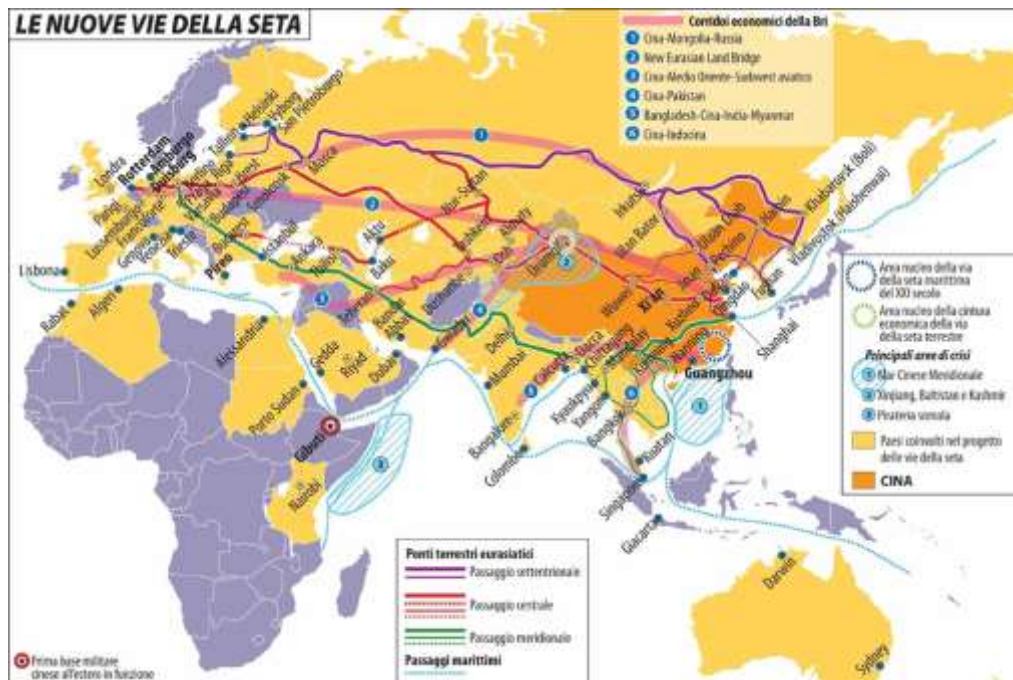


Figure 4: The new Silk Roads (Source: Laura Canali 2021; <https://www.limesonline.com/tag/nuove-vie-della-seta>)

Not so long ago, the Maritime Silk Road included a new route through the Arctic Ocean. The Arctic Route would develop from the port of Vladivostok in the Russian Far East, which is already connected to China's main goods hubs, via the ports of Dudinka, Archangel'sk and Murmansk on Russia's Arctic coast to the ports of Hamburg and Rotterdam in Northern Europe (Fig. 3). This last project does not find global consensus. In fact, Russia has encouraged the transit of ships from its ports, while 'western' countries fear China's interest in exploiting the natural resources in the Arctic region where, according to estimates by the US Geological Survey, 13% of the world's undiscovered oil resources and 30% of natural gas reserves are located, as well as other commodities such as coal, copper, tungsten, zinc, chromium, titanium, silver and gold (Ferragamo, 2020).

One of the main objectives of the BRI is to facilitate relations between regions and peoples that are often separated by physical borders, therefore appears as an economic and social project in which infrastructures have been designed and financed in a multi-strategic way.

This vast and highly ambitious project will have huge costs and will involve almost 70 Countries, which are home to three quarters of the Planet's energy resources and account for almost a third of the global gross domestic product (Morgan, 2018).

From these timely but concise observations, one can see that the strategic consequences of the BRI are obvious. With the continuing development of bilateral agreements, the Beijing government is building international consensus. A concrete example of this is the first Chinese military base abroad located in Djibouti (Horn

of Africa strategic region), a strategic international maritime hub where the military bases of the United States, Japan, France and Italy have long been located ¹³(Ivona, 2018).

Chinese business interests towards the African continent go far beyond the military base in Djibouti. The revival of trade routes along China's ancient Silk Road linking China to East Africa has been promoted by Chinese leaders as a symbol of China's commitment to Africa. A study funded by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa found that East African exports could grow by as much as \$192 million a year if the new Silk Road projects are put to profitable use.

An interesting indicator of the growing trade connections between China and Africa is the increase in the level of integration global liner shipping networks. maritime connections since 2013, when China's strategy (BRI) was presented to the world, have been constantly increasing, with a few exceptions due to the internal geopolitical situation of each State. Egypt is the country with the highest connectivity index, at 0.607 in 2018. Djibouti also has a high connectivity index, which can be attributed to the port of Djibouti's function as an infrastructural hub for goods produced in Ethiopia in the various hubs created specifically with Chinese capital ¹⁴(Ivona, 2020).

China's presence in Africa is increasing all the time. The Maritime Silk Road is bringing further investment to a continent where China has succeeded, in the space of a few years, in becoming the leading trading partner, and where the China-Africa cooperation forums (FOCAC) have played a primary role.

It should be pointed out that Africa is also an important user and therefore importer of Chinese industrial products (cement, steel, aluminium, glass) to be used in BRI projects. One example is the construction of the Nairobi-Mombasa railway, considered a priority project of the BRI, which in 2016 and the following year increased cement imports tenfold. Conversely, however, Kenya's cement exports to other African countries declined by 40% (Ivona, 2020).

Over the last decade, Tanzania's and Uganda's imports from China have increased by 60%, while Kenya's have grown by 4% and 6% respectively over the same period. Kenyan producers have attributed the decline in market share of their Country's industrial products to Chinese firms (Ivona, 2020). The examples are numerous: in 2019, China's global aluminium exports increased by 20%, with exports to Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa reaching about \$50 billion. In 2018, Chinese steel exports to Nigeria have increased by 15%.

The strategic relevance of Africa in the BRI project is also evident from the adherence of Eritrea and Guinea Bissau to the Belt and Road Initiative a few days before the last Focac summit in China in 2018. The first country is strategic for

¹³ China's stated aim is to provide logistical support to counter-piracy and counter-terrorism operations on the high seas (Cuscito, 2017).

¹⁴ The principal one in terms of surface area is the Hawassa Industrial Park in Awasa (about 300 km south of Addis Ababa); currently a total of 5 textile packaging hubs have been built and another 8 will be completed by 2022, covering a total area of more than 70 sq. km.

China to monitor the maritime routes to the Suez Canal while the second could consolidate the Chinese presence in West Africa.

Officially, the Chinese government continues to emphasise the great efforts it is making to reduce poverty in Africa and improve social welfare, as noted in the Reports on the Progress, Contributions and Prospects of the Belt and Road Initiative (Office of the Leading Group for Promoting the Belt and Road Initiative, 2019).

Currently, China remains the largest foreign financier of infrastructure projects in Africa (19% of the total) and with a concentrated number of investments in East Africa (139 out of the total of 482 completed up to 2018) particularly in the transport, shipping and ports sectors (52.8%), followed by energy (17.6%), industrial, commercial and residential real estate (14.3%) and mining (7.7%) (Edinger and Labuschagne, 2019).

6. Impacts and consequences of the Chinese presence in Africa

By now, the current image of the African continent is marked by the growing geopolitical influence of China. In a framework elaborated by Dufaux (2006) and published in *Géocofluences*, it emerges how, at the beginning of the 90's, Africa did not host any Chinese except South Africa.

First with the oil-producing countries: Nigeria, Angola, Gabon, Sudan, followed by Zambia, because of its copper, the Democratic Republic of Congo (copper but also cobalt, aluminium, coltan, gold...), Mozambique and gradually all the others have seen more and more Chinese workers arrive. Now, the number of Chinese immigrants in Africa is estimated at 1.2 million by default. In the last twenty years, a massive migratory flow has exploded (in 1998, there were 150,000 Chinese in Africa) and it is proceeding at an impressive pace. The people arriving in African Countries are mainly workers, entrepreneurs and merchants from the eastern coastal areas of the People's Republic of China, such as the province of Zhejiang: the same province that gave rise to the Chinatowns of Rome, Milan, Naples and Florence (Kuang, 2008).

These are rather closed communities, whose isolation, or rather self-sufficiency, is an indispensable model. It is very difficult and complex to investigate the Chinese world in Africa. Relations with the local population are reduced to a minimum. And detachment fuels prejudice and diffidence. In Luanda, the capital of Angola, many Angolans believe that the tens of thousands of Chinese employed on the construction sites are prisoners at hard labour. In Zambia and Congo, articles have been published in popular newspapers in not-so-positive tones about Chinese emigrants, who have been labelled “swindlers” or “exploiters” (Politzer, 2008).

The radical transformations of Chinese society and economy in recent decades have had far-reaching effects on migration flows. At the same time, the growing number of Chinese migrants abroad and the consequent increase in remittance transfers to the motherland have played a significant role both in financing economic growth

and, above all, in expanding the market for Chinese exports, which have been favoured by the presence of a worldwide network of active and substantial Chinese business communities that are increasingly integrated into the host Countries' economies.

World Bank estimates¹⁵ in 2012 placed China in fourth place globally in terms of the number of citizens abroad, behind only Mexico, India and Russia. In 2010, the number of Chinese emigrants was estimated at over 8.34 million.

In the recent Report International Migrant Stock 2020 Documentation. (UN DESA, 2021) Even if we exclude the more than 2.5 million migrants in the territories of Hong Kong and Macao, the People's Republic remains one of the top emigration countries, especially if we consider that the total population of Chinese origin scattered around the world is more than 2.5 million.

Since the second half of the 20th Century, there has been an outflow of Chinese-speaking people, mostly from Hong Kong or Taiwan, migrating to Ghana in search of business opportunities. Today, the expatriate community in Ghana occupies every rung of the entrepreneurial ladder, from massive infrastructure construction projects and mineral extraction to retail shops in local markets¹⁶.

In this reflection on migration flows arising from the intensification of relations between China and Africa, there is also migration from African countries to China. A non-marginal flow is represented by about 20,000 African migrants, including many irregular migrants, who flowed mainly into the more developed areas of southern China following the increase in economic relations between China and some African countries. The main countries of origin are the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria and Mali (Politzer, 2008).

In the perspective of a progressive increment of immigration, the Chinese government is equipping itself with specific migration policies, aimed in particular at attracting migrants with a profile adapted to the Country's development needs¹⁷ (Pieranni, 2011).

Another aspect of Chinese 'presence' is debt. Indeed, debts tie African governments heavily to China. In some cases, as in Kenya, Angola or Mozambique, it exceeds the security level. For Congo in 2019-20, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has already intervened with a \$450 million bailout; as of March 2020, Brazzaville's debt to China was about \$2.65 billion. 82% of Djibouti's external debt is in the hands of China and, in the event of default, the small Horn of Africa country risks ceding control of the strategic port of Doraleh, at the entrance to the Red Sea, which is crucial to the New Silk Road (BRI), to the Chinese.

¹⁵ World Bank, Bilateral migration matrix, <http://go.worldbank.org/JITC7NYTT0>, July, 2012

¹⁶ Interesting information on Chinese migration to Ghana can be found in the Wenner-Gren Foundation's Dissertation Fieldwork Grant publication aimed at observing the interaction between the Chinese community and native Ghanaians.

¹⁷ China already ranks among the top global destinations for foreign students. The largest community is South Korea, which accounts for about a quarter of the 238,184 registered study immigrants. They are followed by the United States and Japan

In the last five years, Africa's total debt has doubled and much of it has been contracted with China, which intends to collect it one way or another. China comes, helps and then demands the bill. Kenya is in the same situation as Djibouti. In fact, the port of Mombasa (ancient capital and second Kenyan metropolis), one of the most important in East Africa, has been used as collateral for the 3.2 billion dollar loan for the line connecting it to Nairobi. If Kenya does not pay, China's Exim Bank will take over. The Kenyan port of Lamu¹⁸ could also be ceded for 99 years to China if the Kenyan government does not meet the conditions for repayment of the loan. Another case of indebtedness is Zambia. Its external debt amounts to some 9.37 billion dollars; if the debts of state-owned companies are added, the figure rises to 15 billion. One third is owed to China. Lusaka airport could soon be in Chinese hands, as could the national electricity company (Zesco), while 60% of the Zambian National Broadcasting Corporation (Znbc) is already held by a Chinese company. Zambia will become a political-economic colony of China... In 2019, Zambia's economic growth slowed to settle at 6%, the lowest pace in 27 years. Between January and August 2020, it fell by 6.2 %, as a result of the pandemic (Ferrari, Trovato, 2021).

Another element to reflect on concerning the Chinese presence in Africa is the introduction of the Chinese language (Mandarin) in some African countries, which is to be found in the massive presence of Chinese investors, visits by CEOs and heads of state to strengthen economic and trade agreements, and companies involved in all those infrastructure sectors that are rapidly changing the face of the continent, and which show that China is now the privileged interlocutor in Africa. The introduction of the Chinese language suggests a desire to create closer relations. In Africa, the languages of the colonising countries were imposed as a *conditio sine qua non*, and English, French and Portuguese remain the official languages of African countries, a legacy of the former colonies that has never been erased. Let us not forget that in Africa, children learn at school not through their mother tongue but using a 'foreign' language that has become official. And where the mother tongue in some cases is a subject of study.

Back in 2014, South Africa started school curricula with Mandarin as one of the subjects taught. At the time, this was widely criticised by one of the trade unions, SADTU (South African Democratic Teachers' Union), which called the programme “the equivalent of a new form of colonization”.

In 2018, Uganda developed a project to start teaching Mandarin in 35 secondary schools, involving as many teachers who are native to Mandarin. And the project, despite criticism, is being extended to other schools. In Ghana, employees in immigration offices (including those working at the airport) are required to take Chinese courses (Sinopoli, 2019).

In Kenya, Chinese has also been studied since primary school, with the intention of adding the new business language, Mandarin, to the historic colonial languages.

¹⁸ A small island on Kenya's northern coast near the border with Somalia and a UNESCO World Heritage Site from 2001.

Kenya will soon become the first African country where Mandarin Chinese will be taught in all schools, along with French, German and Arabic (Alfieri, 2019).

Teachers are usually supported by tutors from the Confucius Institutes, an organisation that promotes Chinese language and culture around the world. The first institute in Africa was opened in 2005 at the University of Nairobi. Today there are 48 Institutes all over the continent, financed partly by the Chinese government and partly by their host universities. Today, China is second only to France for the number of cultural institutes in Africa, a considerable achievement considering that China had no colonial ties on the continent (Alfieri, 2019).

Through language teaching, China also seeks to consolidate its presence in Africa through culture. For many African states, learning Chinese today is as crucial as learning English, French and Portuguese was in the 19th century. It will be crucial to see in the near future how much space will be given to maintaining their own cultures and mother languages. Between 1,500 and 2,000 languages are spoken in Africa, but only 200 are spoken and taught in schools, as a Report (2017) by UNESCO and the Association for Development and Education in Africa recalled a few years ago.

In Africa, the powers at play are changing, or have already changed, also through cultural contaminations. China's pragmatism and flexibility in building relationships with each African country seems to have begun to bear fruit (Cellamare, Baheli, 2012). The Beijing government has been able to exploit the complexity of long-term guarantees of goods and resources through the ancient system of barter: in exchange for investment capital and infrastructure, certain African countries have granted and still grant the exploitation of their resources and a share in infrastructure projects. There is, however, another factor besides money that fascinates African governments: non-interference in internal affairs by China.

The Chinese declared search for win-win solutions in their collaboration with African governments and the fact that China itself is still considered by African countries as an emerging economy still make the Sino-African relationship equal and not paternalistic.

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