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# Soft Power Diplomacy on the African Continent: The Rise of China

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## Abstract

China's soft power push is accelerating at a time traditional powers such as the European Union and the United States are perceived to be scaling back their global commitments on the African continent. This has given more vigour and focus on what continues to be a deliberate, long term, and sustained Grand Strategy for China and its ambition. China's leaders have become more adept and attentive to pursuing strategic goals without relying on traditional tools of foreign relations. Moreover, with the growth of China's global influence, Beijing is less averse to boldly promoting China's values and models than it had been in the past. Many within the Chinese political establishment welcome this as a strategic opportunity to offer alternatives to Western norms on the African continent and beyond. Likewise, many African leaders, states, regional organizations as well as the continental organization on the African continent welcome this alternative option. With China's Grand Strategy now well-articulated, its soft power initiatives can be expected to expand in tandem with its political and economic activities. Nowhere is this more evident than on the continent of Africa. With a diverse and nearly endless potential of untapped natural resources, nations worldwide look to strengthen their ties with African nations. This article analyzes aspects of current Sino-African relations and seeks to explore the potential motives and activities of China in Africa and the potential corollaries concerning the global economy. With a focus that highlights the approach China has taken in Africa this article goes further to analyze China's methodology and the potential influence on future and present geopolitical relations, it has become clear that the continent of Africa holds a highly valuable piece of the global puzzle. This article aims to stimulate and implore further study regarding the implication of soft power politics and its long-term effects on numerous developing nations situated in Africa. Furthermore, this article provides insight into China's rising global influence and various policies and practices that have led to diverse views throughout the continent. Lastly, this article takes a look at China and the strengthening of its position on the continent and how China potentially possesses the ability to outperform many of its foreign rivals on the continent.

**Keywords:** African Union, China, Soft Power, Development, Multi-lateral, Realism

## Background

China's ever-extending reach is a semblance of its increasing presence in Africa. This presence is a manifestation of China's growing role as a major global power. China has announced its commitment to improving education, cultural exchange, and infrastructural development in Africa. Furthermore, an active development agenda has been adopted by China as a means of facilitating assistance to the continent as well as

furthering its own goals on the continent. The Sino-African relationship dates back many years with the present status being predicated upon China initially showing political support for the African liberation movement in which African nations fought against western colonisers for their eventual liberation. China proved to be a worthwhile ally in the initial stages of the birth of the modern African states.

In the 1950s, at the start of the cold war, the PRC (People's Republic of China) actively extended a hand to newly independent nations many of whom were on the continent of Africa. Initially, the PRC's approach was one that was in line with the communist ideals which it shared with the Soviets, but with diminishing relations with the United States and the Soviet Union, the basis under which Sino-African relations were established, changed. During this period the PRC was facing a decrepit economy, notwithstanding the newly established PRC was able to assist various nations in Africa with financial assistance amounting to over 2.5 Billion USD. With a closer historical glance, the Chinese government had taken an unprecedented step to initiating a relationship, which is today a clear illustration of what South-South relations are. During this period fifty-eight per cent of China's total foreign aid went to various countries in Africa (Li 2006).

Later, in 1971, it was African countries that lent a hand of solidarity to China by lending political support for China's greater involvement in global affairs. It was this support that allowed for the PRC to join the United Nations taking over the seat of the ROC (Republic of China), which was then represented by Taiwan. It was African states such as Ethiopia, Zambia, Egypt and Algeria that stressed their support in regards to the "One China policy" at the United Nations conference. Under Deng Xiaoping's leadership, China's eventual warming of relations with various superpower nations began to take place and the simultaneous scaling down of assistance to Africa occurred. China now set its attention towards "great power politics". This period of "great power politics" eventually led to a period in which Africa experienced more than two decades of disregard. From 1976 to 1982, total Chinese aid pledges to Africa fell from \$100.9 million to 13.8 million (Snow1995). Nonetheless, a few western nations such as France, Portugal, Spain and Britain continued to exert a monopoly-like control over large parts of Africa by utilizing previous colonial mandates that were enforced by the utilization of "hard power" tactics (Nkrumah, K.).

In more contemporary times the rise of China and its accompanying soft power has allowed China to present an alternative model to various developing nations that do not endorse the so-called Washington Consensus. In this regard, China has aggressively pursued its very own development agenda in Africa. As the US economy floundered and China's economy continued to grow in the recession of 2008-2009, Beijing's development model gained more popularity in the developing world. Compared with western countries' emphasis on democracy and numerous conditional reforms, China's Western development-first approach presented itself as a more appealing option for numerous African nations. China's own success story of poverty alleviation gave it more credibility with the upholding and promotion of its China model. Various methods of assistance were presented as options in regards to the development of various African nations. These forms of assistance came in the form of low-interest fee loans, construction of vital infrastructure, which included government facilities, schools, hospitals, telecommunications, power stations etc... Throughout the continent, from north to south, there are numerous examples of these mega projects taking place (China's Infrastructure Footprint in Africa). It is these projects that prove to be a major form of Chinese soft power on the continent.

With further involvement of Chinese soft power projection within the region, closely coupled with economic goods specifically, trade, aid, grants, loans, investment and debt relief. This issue begs the question on what distinguishes soft power from economic hard power. China has intricately interwoven these two policies.

A conscious use of soft power in Africa was instituted by the beginning of the 2000s, propelled principally by an increasing economic clout and rising need for energy and commodities to sustain the means of China's soft power. The Chinese government has made sure to dedicate a remarkable amount of economic capital in its

dealings with numerous African states, which has in turn led to a blossoming of Sino-African relations. Beijing has instituted policies that have allowed for state-run as well as private enterprises to obtain assistance and receive governmental policy support through low-interest loans and funds to trade with and do business in Africa (The Role of Chinas Financial Institutions).

Beijing has made it a priority to fight poverty domestically to properly address China's disparities in development. Simultaneously, China has been willing to provide financial support that is unequal to its own level of economic improvement and relative to the contribution made by highly developed nations. To some degree, this can be seen as unconditional payments that involve considerable generosity or sacrifice on the part of China or it may be a clear example of a push from China to considerably grow and utilize its soft power in the age of great power politics.

China's steady assistance through the years dating back to the last five decades still reverberates strongly with Africa. China has made it clear that a close partnership with African nations is of great interest. There has undoubtedly been a major shift in China's Africa approach, which is a departure from relations of the 1950s and 1960s that was predominantly political to now purely economic and logic-based relations.

Beijing always contends that its recent interest in Africa is building on a long history of friendship. China's South-South policy has been well represented in its continued engagement in Africa. With China's acceptance into the World Trade Organization in the year 2001, China has further experienced another major shift in its policies especially in regards to its south-south engagements. China has now adopted a policy that is based on pragmatic economic interest. The recent pursuit of influence especially in the areas of markets and energy has reinvigorated once again the outside world's interest in Africa. With this being said the major driving force behind China's policies toward Africa have and continue to be resource-based financial and profit-orientated with a key political blend.

### **Key concept abilities and limitations**

Soft Power has proven to be one of the most attractive methods the Chinese government has adopted in its approach to dealing with African nations. Soft Power was a term coined by Joseph Nye, a political science scholar who termed this unique concept as an influential force evolving parallel to the growth of the nation-state and nationalism. Soft power depends on attraction and persuasion instead of force and inducement, which is different from hard power that is based on partial economic and military power. China's soft power and influence undeniably are viewed by numerous actors as a consequence of its lure, cultural charm, policies, political ideology and approach. Soft power is significantly increased when an actors method appears presumably attractive and deemed legitimate by others. Eventually, such exercise of Soft power allows for that actor to position itself to easily have its way and obtain results especially if it understands the dynamics of taking advantage of what it sees is required to achieve what it needs. Soft Power has proven itself to be the most viable and long-lasting option in regards to influence and power in diplomacy. War, the threat of war, negotiations and other modes of states' behaviour are all geared towards obtaining favourable results. The speedy evolution of soft power has given credence to its overall value as well as it's relative importance in attractiveness as opposed to hard power which has proven to be more pricey as well as costly in terms of the loss of life (Nye, J. S. 1990).

In practical application, China's growing ability to advance its strategic interests through cooperation, and inducements are ultimately strengthening China's soft power. At the 19th Communist Party of China (CPC) Congress in October 2017, President Xi Jinping referred to China's influence as "soft power with Chinese characteristics." Xi went further to say, "We will improve our capacity to tell our stories, present a multidimensional view, and enhance China's cultural soft power" (n.d.) China has many contrasts. Although, it

is now the second-largest economy in the world, according to the World Bank China's GDP per capita of about 10,000 USD per annum, which puts it in 70th place on the world index followed by Argentina and Lebanon (Projected GDP Ranking). Despite China being a global economic powerhouse on the national level, the business practices of Chinese firms in Africa are often still constrained by China's overall domestic lower level per capita economic progress. China has benefited immensely from the fact that it identifies itself as a member of the developing world. For this reason, China has made use of the numerous political opportunities of standing shoulder to shoulder with African countries. The relationship between China and various nations on the continent is presented, as a symmetrical relationship as opposed to an "arrogant donor" relationship in which a particular nation presents itself as the moral authority as opposed to being an equal partner.

The African continent with the largest number of developing countries and symmetrically China as the largest developing country in the world share a resemblance that allows for such contrasting nations to support and assist each other in the struggle for resources, national liberation and development.

According to the Chinese Foreign Ministry, the guiding principles for China - Africa exchange and cooperation are sincerity, equality, mutual benefit, solidarity, and common development (Liang, W. 2012). China has therefore always emphasized "equality" and "Win-Win" in its interaction with African states, in contrast with the West's unequal "charity" and "conditional aid" stance (Liang, W. 2012). Some African countries have welcomed this unique approach which they highlight sharply differs from that of developed countries approach which is generally pegged to forceful political, economic and or policy ultimatums.

### **China, The African Union and a Multi-lateral Approach**

Since the founding of the Forum on China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in the year 2000, China's soft power push in Africa has grown exponentially. In these various forums, multi-billion-dollar relationships are cemented through trade deals, resource swaps and a variety of agreements (Tiezzi Shannon). In the 2018 (FOCAC) summit a wide array of investors, as well as diplomats from not just Africa but the world, assembled in China. As was stated previously china's lack of interference in the domestic affairs of nations that it conducts business with has provided an edge in terms of investment attractiveness. The issue of non-interference has always played a major role when it comes to nations deciding on their partnerships and alliances. China has been actively forging ties outside of official government-to-government channels, which had long been considered unacceptable. Today, however, China actively engages civil society, professional bodies, and the private sector to extend its inroads into Africa and its ability to influence African policymaking at different levels (Tiezzi Shannon).

China's growing role in Africa has largely been welcomed by numerous African heads of state as well as their populous. The African Union (AU) established the China-AU Strategic Dialogue in the year 2008. The objective of this dialogue was to strengthen ties between African states and China. Three years following the establishment of the unique dialogue, the African Union unveiled it's newly built \$200 million headquarters in Addis Ababa built and fully funded by China. At present China's soft power involvement on the African continent is substantial with it not only restricted to state to state relations but rather what one can describe as a multi-level approach with substantial ties with the African Union, regional organizations and individual states (David Dollar 2016). On the commercial level, the Chinese have made sure to involve themselves in day to day activities including smaller scale commerce and trade. There has been resistance as well as inquisitiveness by locals and some African governments across the continent who have become suspicious of the sudden influx of Chinese citizens and their governments, especially when local Chinese businessmen and women involve themselves in the local trading or services that are usually reserved for locals heightening competition for business in an already intense business climate (Liang, W. 2012).

China is well cognizant of this heightened climate and has moved forward to adopt a Soft Power strategy in its commercial and diplomatic relations. This new strategy is meant to allow China's penetration to be one that is accepted instead of being viewed with caution. For this reason, China has generously provided assistance on varying levels that includes low-interest loans, the building of vital infrastructure such as hospitals, schools government facilities, stadiums, power insulations (David Dollar 2016). Many of these projects were previously instituted by Africa's western "partners" who linked the implementation of these projects to political and economic changes that are forced upon individual nations as a prerequisite to any assistance and in some cases the imposing of sanctions, better referred to as the carrot and stick policy.

China has been experiencing mounting success in becoming accepted in many circles in Africa. This success has led to the recognition of China as a quite different power that respects the continent's diverse nature and utilizes its current status of still being a developing country as well. China has tried to make clear through its diplomatic approach that it fully understands the challenges that Africa faces in its development and emphasizes further advocacy in areas such as international trade and negotiations. (Kurlantzick et al., 2006, 1). With a balanced view of the growth in exchange especially in the domain of trade between African nations and China on the bilateral level, a 50 fold increase from the 1980s to 2005 trade figures proves China's soft power policies to be quite fruitful. Furthermore the quintupling between 2000 and 2006 from \$10 billion to \$55 billion and the approach to \$100 billion in 2010 makes for an even more convincing case. China has since overtaken France and the US as Africa's number one business partner (Michel and Michel, 2009, 3).

However, from a realist perspective, many critical voices emphasize that the ostentatious undertakings of the Chinese and their "superficial assistance" and "win-win" acts of philanthropy must be keenly observed (Bolton, J.J. 2018). It is further emphasized by diplomats that in the area of international relations that there is no such thing as a manifestation of true friendship where true love for others exists in earnest; it is merely interest-driven relations where one's eyes are fixed on what one aims to get, using any means and any tactic; even the one who is first to achieve these aims (Rourke, 1991). With China recently becoming Africa's leading partner in the areas of trade, investment, and development, new opportunities have arisen out of this partnership. Apart from bilateral relations with African states, China partners with regional and sub-regional organizations on a growing number of issues that have greatly broadened China's soft power approach. At the height of this flourishing relationship is the partnership between China and the AU in the areas of peace and security.

China's involvement in peace and security initiatives on the continent marks a departure from the country's non-interventionist foreign policy towards more active engagement. To better grasp the policy change, it is useful to situate Beijing's contemporary engagement in Africa from a historical perspective. When one reflects on the past fifty years, the Sino-African partnership has morphed through various stages of political, conceptual, and now economic relations. China was one of Africa's backers during the liberation era that finally led to the decolonization of the continent as well as African nations backing political support for the PRC joining the United Nations (UN), taking over the seat of the ROC from Taiwan, many on both sides like to take a look at yesterday's mutual assistance as yielding fruit and developing in today's ever-growing multi-level partnership. Today's present partnership can be seen as a continuation and strengthening of past relations.

### **The Grand Strategy**

Within the last decade, China has formulated a distinctive form of Soft power in Africa that has powerfully mustered resources to project its soft power to achieve its foreign policy goals. Beijing has repeatedly made it clear that the African continent remains vital to China's continued economic growth and global influence. Nonetheless, China's soft power push in Africa complements its long-term objectives of expanding its position in the world economy and beyond. China's ambition is one that is in line with its mercantilist beliefs that are



grounded in the ideology of state power, economics and their inter-leveraging. These policies display an expanding rational of the Chinese leadership and its pursuit of soft power and influence.

Within the first ten years of the 21st-century sub-Saharan African nations possessed the ten fastest-growing economies (GDP) in the world. With the rise of trade wars, protectionism and tariffs in the second decade of the 21st century's global political-economic arena it is clear that China will surely face difficulties projecting its soft power. Various academics have likened this to an intensification of rivalry between China (a rising power) and other major pre-established powers. Furthermore, it has been likened to China's slowing economic growth and low domestic GDP per capita and corruption. Various scholars also point to the fact that China, as a fairly new major global player must fully establish a political value system and an accompanying economic model that will pose as an alternative to the pre-established dominant US free-market capitalist principles. Many African countries admire China's economic growth but are yet to adopt China's political structure and example. China's soft power is undoubtedly pegged to its domestic attributes. China's soft power and influence will continue to be a projection based on how successfully China can maintain its rapid economic growth and to what level.

The overarching objective of the Chinese approach is to establish itself as a great power. China will have to implore a multi-dimensional approach to achieve this goal. China aims to leverage and multiply its gross domestic product (GDP) for it to raise the standard of living through the nation. The reality is that this cannot be achieved without Africa. To take it a step further China must increase its investments through both its private and public institutions. The "One Belt One Road" initiative has set up a strong foundation that has positioned the fortification of infrastructure, trade, and development links between China, Central Asia, Europe, Middle East and Africa that is pursuing a method that will allow for it to expand its financial reach globally. Africa plays a key role in China achieving these goals. The Chinese government views the continent of Africa as an emerging market with limitless natural resources that the world over is trying to gain access to.

Lastly, China has made a push to modernize and expand not just its economic initiatives but political and diplomatic soft power. The Chinese government has assumed a greater role in global and multilateral organizations such as the United Nations, which has allowed for an expansion of Chinese political ideals and a legitimizing of China's political perspective globally. Furthermore, China is expanding its hard power role in the peacekeeping sector, with China's debut in this arena being exercised on the African continent.

### **China- AU; The Future Multi-lateral Approach**

The future of the AU (African Union) and China relations has moved into the domain of strengthening their partnership in areas of specialized skills. The AU is consolidating their comparative advantage. Moreover, this has allowed China to characterize itself as a genuine partner of the continent (without the stigma of a colonial legacy in Africa). With Africa known as one of the world's "last frontiers" as well as a limitless reservoir of the world's most precious resources including human capital, China's is making sure to utilize its position as a major global economic power as well as implementing a hard, soft and "smart" power approach to gain ground in the global scramble for Africa. Those that are rivalling China's scramble for Africa have labelled China "abusers" of soft power (the practice of convincing other actors to follow its footsteps in their economic policies, trade relations, investments, etc.) as a strategy to counter American/Western hegemony and to extend its "Beijing model" of development. (Bolton, J.J. 2018)

A clear example of China assuming major global roles that were only previously held by major western powers is its recent expanded engagement in Africa to include support for peacekeeping operations as was previously highlighted (Liang, W. 2012). This has symbolized the beginning of a profound shift in strategy whereby Beijing is implementing a method of approach that is consistent with major powers, who have long been the nations to

utilize hard power (the practice of using military and/or economic incentives and strength to influence other actors).

With the creation of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in the year 2000, China began to set the stage for implementing and amalgamating China's Africa influence in Africa. Only six years after the establishment of (FOCAC) China outlined four foremost areas of engagement in China-Africa peace and security cooperation which include military cooperation, conflict settlement and peacekeeping operations, judicial and police cooperation as well as non-traditional security cooperation. Furthermore in 2015 President Xi Jinping, announced that China would set aside 100 million USD to the AU to assist in the creation and function of the African Standby Force and the African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crises (n.d.).

China has made clear through its actions that besides financial assistance direct capacity building, technological transfer and technical support there are just a few other ways that China will assist Africa. Furthermore, China has assisted in anti-terrorism operations, anti-piracy operations as well as assisting to better make sure African organizations have what is necessary to respond to security challenges on all levels.

With these steps not just through rhetoric but through placing resources at the disposal of the AU and regional groups, China has shown its encouragement for the growth of Africa's regional and continental peace and security design. Clear evidence of progress in the security sector is displayed through the incorporation of vital bodies such as the AU's Peace and Security Council (PSC) and regional Peace Support Operations (PSOs), and China's assistance in the financing of AU peacekeeping undertakings in countries such as Sudan and Somalia.

Additionally, China has provided equipment to regional economic communities (RECs), chiefly ECOWAS (Economic Community of Western African States), for the bolstering of a strategic logistics area. China has installed personnel to peacekeeping operations in over a dozen African countries over the last twenty years. Nonetheless, China's growing engagement must be carried out within a pre-established African architecture that the AU can assess to see how best to heighten African peacebuilding policies. There is no doubt that China is utilizing its arrangements with African nations as well as outside partners as an entryway in an attempt to achieve its interests not just on the African continent but globally, being that Africa holds the key for any major power to possess global dominance not only through its limitless invaluable resources but also its untapped human capacity and geographical attributes. In reality, there is no guarantee that Africa's political, security and economic interests will benefit from China's "Beijing model" approach in either the present or the future. What can be certain is that Africa has been provided with a clear alternative to the previously forcefully implemented "western models".

## CONCLUSION

Soft power is continuing to prove to be a formidable tool in the toolbox of Chinese diplomacy, especially in a hi-tech and ever more globalized world. The traditional approaches to China's diplomacy have now been diversified and have allowed for the possibility of objectives to be reached through multiple means not only for China but also for numerous states across the African Continent. Hard power is no longer the condition under which growth and dominance will be determined, but rather a crafty balance of policies that are appealing and who respects and is fair towards the other.

Based on the fact that China has adopted this approach in the initial stage of its opening-up policy under Deng Xiaoping, China seems to have understood the idea of mutual respect between nations quite well and is busy using its soft power throughout the continent dishing out interest-free loans, and supporting African led efforts toward sustainability. The unequivocal and fundamental truth is that numerous African governments are in favour and frankly enthusiastic about the alternative opportunities China has made available. These nations feel



this way with strong reason, especially nations composed of self-respecting individuals who do not like to be screened and constantly compelled to give accounts of their nations political, economic and development orientated transactions to other nations that believe themselves to be moral authorities and whom just recently and in some cases presently work against their interests in an attempt to extend their nation's power, control and subjugation solely for financial profit.

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