

# CHINA IN SOUTH AFRICA: A LONG AFFAIR

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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHINA AND AFRICA GOES BACK A LONG TIME. THE FIRST INSTANCE OF SINO-AFRICAN CONTACT CAN BE TRACED TO 1415, WHEN ADMIRAL ZHENG VISITED MORE THAN 30 COUNTRIES IN AFRICA.

Official relations between Africa and China in contemporary times can be seen to have started in 1955 with the first Asian-African Conference in Bandung, Indonesia, aimed at promoting economic and cultural co-operation. The development of China-Africa relations gained impetus when it became clear in the 1990s that to maintain the “roaring pace” of its economic growth as a result of economic reforms, China would need to look for new sources of energy and natural resources – which it found in Africa.

By the mid-2000s, over 800 Chinese companies were trading in 49 African countries. In 2010, China became the continent’s largest trade partner, making up 10.4% of Africa’s total trade. This 10-fold increase in the decade between 2000 and 2010 – compared to the eightfold increase in trade with the rest of the world – outperformed the rapid boom in gross domestic product (GDP) in China.

This interest in Africa also extended into the political and military arena as China looked for partners in the developing world that could strengthen its position in the face of economic sanctions and political attacks after crackdowns on pro-democracy protests in the 1990s.

This intensified political-economic relationship in the era of globalisation and within a changing global geo-political landscape started to raise questions as to how China’s renewed interest in Africa should be viewed, whether China should be seen as partner or predator, the consequences of the tension between the US and China over mutual interests in Africa, China’s support for corrupt African leaders in undemocratic regimes, Chinese companies’ harsh labour practices, and the importation of Chinese labour to the exclusion of local workers.

At the same time there is the recognition that Chinese aid usually does not come with as many political and economic strings attached as aid from the US does, due to the Chinese policy of “non-interference in domestic affairs” (Daly 2009: 82). China has ingratiated itself to African countries by cancelling bilateral debt of 31 African states to the value of approximately \$1.27-billion, and continuing to give billions in development assistance.

As far as South Africa is concerned, its current formal relationship with China in the post-apartheid era should be seen as part of larger geopolitical shifts and a changing world order. Both countries form part of a “new geography of international relations” emerging since the end of the Cold War, according to Le Pere and Shelton (2007: 84). They say the

rise of countries such as Brazil, Russia, India and China and their increasing impact on the global political and economic stage, indicate that the “global South of developing countries no longer occupies a peripheral and generally marginal position in international affairs” (2007: 84).

China and South Africa are seen to be part of the vanguard of states in the Global South that seek new strategies to redress the systemic marginalisation of the Global South and reposition the South as a growth engine for the global economy and a strategic political formation.

South Africa, regarded by Beijing as the continent’s mineralogical treasure house, is one of the two leading African countries (next to Angola) with whom China does business.

The dynamic relationship between South Africa and China as emerging powers within the new global geopolitical and geo-economic order was formalised in December 2010 when South Africa received an invitation to become part of the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, China) group of emerging powers.

Although a vibrant and lucrative one, the relationship between China and South Africa has been rocky at times. Resistance against Chinese involvement is led by the trade union federation Cosatu, who has described cheap imported Chinese goods as a tsunami that will damage local industries. Yet South Africa, like other African countries, owes a historical debt of gratitude toward China for its support of anti-colonial and liberation movements.

China’s role in post-apartheid South Africa is therefore not a straightforward one. Whether viewed as a positive engagement or a negative impact, the size and impact of this relationship cannot be ignored. It can therefore be assumed that it would enjoy significant media coverage. The question is how this relationship would be portrayed.

#### A controversial relationship

China’s presence in Africa is usually viewed as a controversial one, and often portrayed as a Manichean binary – either predator or partner, friend or foe, comrade or coloniser.

Critics frequently highlight China’s support for undemocratic rulers such as Zimbabwe’s Robert Mugabe, its destructive approach to the environment, disregard for human rights, disrespect for workers’ rights, intolerance of an opposition and free press.

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Fears have been expressed that African leaders may point to China as an example of economic development without democracy to rationalise their own authoritarian rule. The underlying assumption in these media discourses, as Zeleza (2008) has pointed out, is that Chinese are corrupt and authoritarian themselves, and therefore have no qualms in flouting Western standards of good governance; because Chinese workers are used to poverty they can work cheaply under poor conditions in Africa.

On the other hand, positive views of China's role in Africa include the hope that China can serve as an alternative political-economic framework to the Washington consensus which has put pressure on African countries to adopt structural adjustment marketisation programmes, and point to an influx of modernisation, capacity building, human resources training and scientific exchanges. This view tends to regard Sino-African relationships as South-South solidarity in an era of globalisation.

A previous content analysis of South African media coverage of China found that, contrary to the above assumptions of China's presumed deleterious impact on South Africa, South African media have not been overly negative in their reporting. China received only a little more negative coverage than other foreign powers like the US and the UK, leading to the conclusion that the media image of China's involvement in Africa seems on the whole to be more that of a developmental partner than that of an exploitative colonialist.

In a follow-up study, a total of 1 159 statements were coded in 2010 and 101 statements from the first two months of 2011, covering the major print and broadcast media in the country. These findings again show that China was considered a newsworthy story both in general news as well as in business news (*Business Day* ranked second overall in 2010 and took the lead in the first two months of 2011). China is seen as politically and economically newsworthy, as an emerging economic power and a significant player in the new reconfigured global geopolitical landscape.

The analysis further suggests that coverage of China in South Africa is more balanced than one might have expected. Instead of portraying China either as a saviour or close partner for African states, or as an exploitative neo-colonial predator, coverage seemed fairly balanced. Even after the announcement of South Africa's accession to the BRIC group, both the top two outlets had a majority of neutral statements.

Compared to the other BRIC countries, China in 2010 topped the list of coverage in the South African media with almost double the number of statements in the media than India. In the first two months of 2011, China and India again topped the list of BRIC countries reported on, although India received almost double the number of statements (201) than China did (101). These figures suggest that the "Chindia" region is emerging as a focus point for South African media interest in the BRIC countries, as they are bigger trade partners than Brazil and Russia.

In the first two months of 2011, the economic situation and market position of China received the most coverage, while the rest of the top 10 issues were: mergers and economic co-operation, general economic issues, companies and economic policy, China's situation in the global economy, economic regulations, executives and management, and products and marketing.

The overall picture of China was, again, not an overwhelmingly negative one, nor was it only a positive one. Statements on China from 2009-2010 were on the whole balanced, with 696 positive versus 678 negative and 522 neutral, comparing well to India, which received 333 positive statements, 234 negative and 359 neutral over the same period. In the first two months of 2011, 21% of statements related to China were negative and 27% positive.

#### Further questions

These analyses of attitudes in the South African media over the past three years suggest that a more balanced view of China is emerging. Individual reports may still take an either/or stance but, when considered on the whole and across a range of media platforms, China is not represented in either a starkly positive or starkly negative light. It would seem that a cautiously optimistic attitude characterises South African media coverage while understanding that China's role in Africa is a complex one, which cannot be pigeonholed as either a bad or good news story.

#### References

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