

# Is China A Neocolonial Power In Africa? – Analysis

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China-bashing has predictably reemerged as a familiar theme in the current 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, with the frontrunners of both parties attacking China for having committed a myriad of alleged outrages against U.S. interests.<sup>1</sup> Hillary Clinton, the Democratic frontrunner, is of special interest, as she had prominently accused China of engaging in neocolonialism in Africa during her 2011 visit to Zambia in her position at the time as U.S. Secretary of State.<sup>2</sup> The Chinese have not forgotten this slight, and the state-owned Xinhua news agency recently published an opinion piece critiquing Clinton's accusation of China's alleged neocolonialism, concluding that:

“Accusing China of being a neo-colonialist in Africa puts the biased West in an absurd scenario where the robber acts like the cop.”<sup>3</sup>

As I recounted last year, China has indeed been very active with its various economic projects in Africa. To briefly recap: “Recent examples of such projects include China Railway Group's Light Railway in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, the first phase of which was recently completed; China Railway Construction Corporation's Abuja-Kaduna railway in Nigeria, which was completed in December 2014, and which is the first phase of a larger railway modernization project connecting Lagos with Kano; and the Lobito-Luau railway in Angola, also built by China Railway Construction Corporation, which will eventually be connected to the Angola-Zambia and the Tanzania-Zambia railways. Likewise, Chinese engineering firms ... are constructing airports across the continent, including airports in Angola, Comoros, Djibouti, Gabon, Kenya, Nigeria, Sudan, Tanzania, and Togo. Apart from the transportation sector, Chinese companies are also involved in Africa's energy sector, including hydropower dams in Ethiopia and Uganda; biogas development in Guinea, Sudan and Tunisia; and solar and wind power plants in Ethiopia, Morocco, and South Africa. Other economic sectors Chinese companies are actively involved with in Africa include agriculture, construction, healthcare, mining, and industrial manufacturing. A recent count estimates over 2,000 Chinese companies are engaged across almost every country on the African continent.”<sup>4</sup>

Does this intense level of economic engagement count as neocolonialism? Gordon observes that the relationship of neocolonialism is one of “political-economic domination” such that “there is no viable cultural, economic, or military opposition to the hegemonic weight of the current ‘world order.’” The world order today is Euro-American, and its hegemony was won through not just the collapse of the Soviet Union and its socialist satellites at the end of the Cold War, but also the “years of successful political, economic, and military destabilization of Third World sites of resistance.”<sup>5</sup> Such efforts at destabilization continue in our contemporary era, as can be seen in the 2011 Western intervention against Muammar Gaddafi's regime in Libya, which in turn led to the strengthening of African jihadi groups such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and Boko Haram, and which in turn has led the U.S. to establish a network of secret military bases across the African continent to fight its War on Terror.<sup>6</sup>

Mason reminds us of Hu Jintao's 2006 pledge to double China's development aid to Africa, and of the subsequent surge in Chinese investment in infrastructure construction on the continent. Indeed, Chinese aid is more attractive for African governments compared to that offered by the West as it famously comes without the preconditions for political or economic reforms usually imposed by Western donors.<sup>7</sup> Memories of the painful experience during the 1980s across Africa of the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) and the World Bank's structural adjustment policies looms over the Nigerian government's recent decision to seek infrastructure loans from the Chinese government rather than the IMF.<sup>8</sup> Such memories echo Sartre's warning that neocolonial efforts to emphasize the economic benefits accruing from colonial reforms are in fact intended to disguise the reality of political domination.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, development aid from China has allowed developing countries such as Cambodia to avoid having to adjust their political and economic orders to satisfy the demands of Western donors.<sup>10</sup>

Mason suggests that the increased Chinese emigration to Africa that has accompanied the increase in Sino-African economic engagement mirrors the “white settlement and rule in Africa” that occurred during the colonial era, and focuses in particular on the economic impact of Chinese merchants in Africa, who “sell goods made in China,” as well as that of their African counterparts who travel to markets in Guangzhou and elsewhere in China to purchase goods for sale back in African markets.<sup>11</sup> This influx of cheap goods from China has been known to “drive out traditional suppliers” and “undermine the local economy.”<sup>12</sup> Dixon notes that the removal of trade barriers following Nigeria’s entry into the World Trade Organization in 1995 led to a flood of imported goods from China, and this in turn led to mass closures of local factories that were unable to compete with the cheaper Chinese products. The resulting deindustrialization of northern Nigeria laid the economic conditions for the rise of the Boko Haram insurgency which still afflicts the region today.<sup>13</sup> However, this by no means represents the inevitable outcome of local industries in Africa confronting global competition. Brautigam cites examples of local African entrepreneurs in countries like Kenya, Lesotho, and Madagascar who were able to successfully compete against Chinese and other foreign imports, in some cases thanks to the human resource development and technology transfer provided by Chinese industrial investment in their countries.<sup>14</sup>

A related claim that is commonly presented in the media about China’s alleged neocolonial exploitation of Africa is that China and its firms have been engaged in a massive land grab on the continent. In Brautigam’s calculation, if all these media reports were accurate, Chinese companies would own 6 million hectares, or 1% of Africa’s total arable land. However, the actual figure is closer to just 240,000 hectares. As she explains: “Discouraged by poor infrastructure, political instability, and the sober realization that profits were likely to prove more elusive than hoped, Chinese firms came, explored, and then often went elsewhere—most often to countries in China’s border regions: Russia, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia.”<sup>15</sup>

The small actual size of Chinese-owned farmland in Africa also disconfirms related accusations of China’s alleged neocolonial plot to transform Africa into a farm to feed the hungry masses back home in China. Recent trade data shows that China is currently importing most of its food commodities like maize and soybeans from major non-African agricultural exporters like the U.S. and Brazil. Indeed, the development of Africa’s food producers into major global food exporters will require significant investment in agricultural modernization, which means the countries concerned will have to do more to attract much-needed investment from international agricultural firms like those of China.<sup>16</sup>

With regard to journalists and researchers repeating false claims about China’s agricultural activities in Africa, similar examples can be found in reports of Chinese loans to African states. A 2011 report from Fitch Ratings calculated that loans issued to Sub-Saharan African states between 2001-10 from the Export-Import Bank of China amounted to 67.2 billion USD, “overtaking World Bank lending of USD54.7bn to Africa for the same period.”<sup>17</sup> This claim would subsequently be repeated elsewhere. Mason, for example, repeats the claim that Chinese aid to Africa exceeded that of the World Bank.<sup>18</sup> The suggestion that China has been inundating Africa with cheap money has various implications, including the neocolonial image of China purchasing influence from impoverished African governments. However, the Fitch claim is wrong. A recent study of Chinese loans to Africa from Johns Hopkins University’s China Africa Research Initiative (CARI) shows that a more accurate estimate of Chinese loans to Africa during 2001-10 would be 30.5 billion USD, or less than half of Fitch’s estimate. Indeed, China’s growing pledges of development aid, including concessional loans, should be differentiated from the loans that are actually agreed upon and accepted, especially since a “growing number of countries ... have suspended or canceled Chinese offers of credit lines.”<sup>19</sup> As the authors of the CARI report recount of their analysis:

“Of the 1,223 reports of Chinese loan financing that we analyzed, only 56% actually materialized and are being used. The rest turned out to be mistakes, hopes, rumors, cancelled, or real loans—but not from China.”<sup>20</sup>

Looking beyond Africa, this trend of misreporting China’s global activities is most glaringly seen in alarmist reports of China’s alleged attempts to subvert the existing Euro-American world order by creating a parallel constellation of international institutions.<sup>21</sup> In the case of the new international financial institutions (IFIs) set up by China, including

the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and the New Development Bank (NDB) set up by China with its BRICS partners, China has always asserted that these are intended to supplement rather than replace the existing constellation of IFIs.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the modest nature of the first projects to be funded by the AIIB and the NDB confirms that this is the case.<sup>23</sup> Beyond the shores of Africa, China is also not exhibiting the behavior of an aspirational neocolonial power.

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Critics argue that the People's Republic of China (PRC) has become a neocolonial power. Although it does not hold the kinds of colonies imperial powers used to lord over, it is said to conduct itself as one of them. While Blanchard adds nuance to this narrative in his own analysis, many scholars appear to take it as common wisdom. Beijing's new transnational infrastructure, like pipelines and highways, are viewed as initiatives to send more resources to the PRC. These projects are reported to deplete national treasuries. Africa is depicted as the major victim of this new Chinese global abuse drive. China is said to propping up its own industries by extracting raw materials, such as minerals, fossil fuels, and agricultural commodities, from all over the world, with Africa as its main target. While a number of African nations have welcomed Chinese engagement and investment, it often comes at a very high cost, with a focus on extractive industries, entanglement with neomercantilist trade policy, and a tendency to adopt the worst practices that prop up kleptocrats and autocrats such as DR Congo's Joseph Kabila, while fueling corruption in an effort to win contracts. China's engagement in Africa was once driven by revolutionary ideology motivated by competition with the Soviet Union as much as it was directed at "capitalist roaders" aligned with the United States. China is also Kenya's largest bilateral lender. Kenya is one of the three highest debtor nations to China in Africa, along with Djibouti and Ethiopia. It is also a country where Secretary Tillerson will be visiting. "Accusing China of being a neo-colonialist in Africa puts the biased West in an absurd scenario where the robber acts like the cop." As I recounted last year, China has indeed been very active with its various economic projects in Africa. A related claim that is commonly presented in the media about China's alleged neocolonial exploitation of Africa is that China and its firms have been engaged in a massive land grab on the continent. In Brautigam's calculation, if all these media reports were accurate, Chinese companies would own 6 million hectares, or 1% of Africa's total arable land. Establishment politicians enthusiastically embrace the idea of China as a neocolonial power, for the obvious reasons that it diverts attention from their own imperialism and helps promote disunity and mistrust within the global South. Hillary Clinton says China is engaged in a "new colonialism" in Africa. John Bolton believes China is using "predatory practices" to stunt Africa's growth. Yet these accusations are not exclusive to the professional defenders of imperialism. Adrian Budd, writing in Socialist Review (purveyors of finest Third Camp ideology since 1950), points to "Chinese investmen