

Courting Africa: Asian Powers and the New Scramble for the Continent

An Introduction

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Africa has gone through two previous “scrambles”: in the 19th century when the continent was divided among European colonial powers, and then during the Cold War, as the continent found itself once again at the center of the confrontation between the global superpowers of the United States and the Soviet Union. Today, a new scramble is underway, and Africa is once again at the center of a global contest due to a growing engagement between African countries and emerging Asian powers.¹

Along with the new scramble is the notion that Africa is rising, not least due to the significant size of its 1.2 billion-person market.² The speed with which the courting of Africa has taken place has surprised scholars, alarmed policymakers and been celebrated by many in Africa and Asia. Governments and businesses have rushed to establish relationships with governments of African States while also seeking to strengthen strategic and commercial ties. The West has expressed considerable concern about Asia’s, and in particular China’s, entry into African economies. However, many African leaders do not share in the forebodings of the West and instead have enthusiastically welcomed China’s growing economic footprint on the continent.

¹ Brautigam, Deborah, “The Dragon’s Gift: The Real Story of China in Africa.” (Oxford, UK; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009); Brautigam, “Looking East: Africa’s Newest Investment Partners,” *Global Journal of Emerging Market Economies* 2, no. 2 (2010).

² Beresford, Alexander, “Africa Rising?,” *Review of African Political Economy* 43, no. 147 (2016); Ewout Frankema and Marlous van Waijenburg, “Africa Rising? A Historical Perspective,” *African Affairs* (2018).

The Zambakari Advisory is pleased to publish its Summer 2020 Special Issue: “*Courting Africa: Asian Powers and the New Scramble for the Continent.*” To produce a quality perspective and shine a nuanced light on this “scramble,” we invited prominent scholars to think about Africa’s relationship with one of its biggest trading partners in Asia. We asked scholars, researchers, policymakers, advocates and business leaders to consider the growing relationship between Africa and Asian powers and to assess and qualify the rise of Asia’s involvement and the implications for Africa.

This collection features eight original articles contributed by such respected voices as Celine Sui, Matthew Edwards, Lina Benabdallah, Ibrahim Sakawa Magara, Hubert Kinkoh, Daniel N. Mlambo, Victor H. Mlambo, Stephen Blank, Akok Manyuat Madut and Prakash Paudel.

The global competition for Africa includes political and economic ties, military sales, technological trades and more. Across the African landscape, evidence confirms this growing interest in the continent’s vast resources. The Economist has noted that more than 320 embassies opened in Africa in just seven years (2010–2016). China alone has established defense–technology ties with 45 countries on the continent, becoming its largest trading partner in 2009 and opening its first military base in 2017 in Djibouti. And between 2006 and 2018, China’s trade with Africa increased dramatically by 226 percent, while India’s grew even more, by 292 percent; the European Union’s trade with Africa increased by a relatively modest 41 percent.³ Finally, the oil-rich Arab countries have built up ties with the continent, establishing military bases in the Horn of Africa region and hiring mercenaries to fight in foreign wars. In 2018, Africa’s three largest trading partners were, in order, China, India and the U.S.

In the first section of our issue, *Courting Africa: Political and Economic Engagement*, author and Sino–African expert Sui provides an overview of Chinese economic engagement with Africa from 1949 to 2019, with a primary focus on the period starting in the early 2000s. Following a brief history of Sino–African relations, she discusses the roles of African countries in China’s Belt and Road Initiative and then examines specific areas of Chinese engagement, including infrastructure financing, natural resources extraction, manufacturing and the technology and internet industries. She concludes by documenting regional competition among rising Asian powers, sketching the current state of economic competition for African riches, focusing on China, India and Japan.

³ Sköld, Mattias, “Carlos Lopes: Free Trade Area Can Break Old Europe Dependency,” Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, <https://nai.uu.se/news/articles/2019/05/21/101409/index.xml>.

Contributor Edwards, a respected voice in business- and political-risk analysis, provides his valued perspective on the volume and purpose of Chinese loans to African sovereigns in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis. He notes that the pattern of loans varies geographically between 2000 and 2017 and shares that almost 30 percent of the total loan amount has gone to Angola, with the governments of or entities associated with Ethiopia, Kenya, Congo and Zambia being other notable recipients. Among the leading borrowers in Africa, half have strong hydrocarbon or extractive sectors, and the focus of Chinese loans has been the transportation, power and mining sectors. More importantly, he finds there is very little Chinese financing going into education, health or the environment, providing strong evidence of a commercial rather than “human development” focus.

In the second section, *Africa-Asia Security Arrangements*, international studies Assistant Professor Benabdallah presents her analysis of China-Africa military ties, taking us back in time to African revolutionary wars in the 1950s and 1960s when Chinese support (providing armaments and training soldiers and medical staff) was invaluable to various African independence movements. She shows that the China-Africa military relationship consists of military-to-military diplomacy: training seminars and workshops for high-ranking African army officers, regular joint navy/army drills, providing capacity-building programs, strengthening networks between Chinese and African military and defense elites, and reinforcing the interlinks between commercial/developmental and security goals.

Next, political and international relations researchers Magara and Kinkoh state their case that the increased security cooperation between China and Africa, and Beijing’s strategic military basing on the continent — particularly in the Horn of Africa’s small but strategic country of Djibouti — will not only shape regional security outcomes but also potentially ignite superpower rivalries that may disrupt international polarity. The authors reject the argument that China’s increased presence in Africa is both for economic gains and to challenge U.S. dominance, and instead posit that China’s growing presence in the Horn is transforming the region into a potential Africa-based front for confrontation between China and the U.S. These two contributors conclude that the outcome of a competition between the U.S. and China on African soil will have profound implications for the continent’s states.

In their article, Africa-focused public administration postgraduates Daniel and Victor Mlambo chart the vast inroads made by China on the continent, from trade and infrastructure to political and economic impacts. They argue that China’s

policy has combined economic engagement with peacekeeping missions in Africa under the auspices of the United Nations. This has allowed China to engage most closely with African states in matters of security by deploying in Mali, Darfur and Sudan. The contributors conclude that despite the shortcomings of China's peacekeeping efforts in Africa, its presence on the continent has been gradually welcomed by African leaders who embrace the provision of much-needed Chinese resources and continental security support. The Mlambos remind the reader that additional motivation for China's peacekeeping presence is driven by the United Nations' increasing call for troop-contributing countries at a time when some Western governments are reducing such commitments; China is happily filling this void in support.

It is not just the major emerging Asian powers of India and China that have increased their presence in Africa. Trade between Africa and other parts of Asia has also grown: Between 2006 and 2018, trade with Indonesia and Turkey trebled; it more than quadrupled with Russia.⁴ Russia has further re-engaged with the continent, following a reduced presence after the dissolution of the Soviet Union led to the end of the Cold War in 1991, signing 19 military deals with African states since 2014.

In the third and final section of our issue, *Africa-Asia Selective Engagement: Case Studies*, foreign affairs expert and Russian-investment advisor Blank writes that Western analysts underestimate Russia's interventions and policies in Africa. He offers that trade and investment opportunities are critical to Russia's Africa policy largely because they introduce Russia to African elites and "audiences," thereby creating lasting relationships and policy linkages with them. According to Blank, economic gains generally serve as entrees for political and military influence, leading in this case to the attainment of Russia's political and strategic objectives. He cites Russia's stepped-up military agreements on the continent in just the last six years, and he concludes that Russia's participation in the new scramble for Africa is increasingly important to its overall global national security strategy – fundamentally a political, even strategic, quest. Russia's ultimate aim in Africa, writes Blank, is to create a bloc of pro-Russian states over which it has lasting political-economic and even military leverage, i.e., a sphere of influence.

Next, Madut, an Assistant Professor at The University of Juba and a South Sudanese diplomat executive director of the African Union, offers a unique case study of the role that China played and is playing in Sudan and South Sudan over

⁴ The Economist Newspaper, "The New Scramble for Africa," The Economist Newspaper Limited, <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2019/03/07/the-new-scramble-for-africa>.

the years. He states that the role of China in the peaceful implementation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was of paramount importance to South Sudanese leadership. Next, that despite supporting Sudan to the north in its struggle against South Sudan, China embarked on a courtship with the leadership in the south immediately after the signing of the peace deal. Madut then explores the pragmatic approach to cooperation in the light of the “opening-up” policy of China and its role in the war of liberation of South Sudan; how the realities of the CPA drove China’s quest to court the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement and Government of South Sudan during the interim period; how the oil became a double-edge sword in the context of African agency; and the role of China in the partition of old Sudan and the challenge to the doctrine of noninterference.

In the final article, peace and conflict management researcher Paudel offers another case study, examining Japan’s foreign policy — implemented to fulfill its own strategic national interests — through the island country’s participation in the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS). He finds, first, that those strategic interests are focused on access to oil and other natural resources in South Sudan and across the continent, vital ingredients in the continued acceleration of Japan’s economy. Second, Paudel’s study contends that as the “new scramble” for Africa is contested among Asian neighbors, Japan has leveraged its participation in UNMISS as part of its “All Japan Project”— an integrated framework for better coordination among civil/military interagencies such as embassy, SDF, JICA, NGOs, etc. and UNMISS — to outcompete its Asian neighbors, most notably China’s strategic presence on the continent. Third, writes Paudel, Japan’s proactive contribution in UNMISS as a responsible member of the international community is a strategy to present Japan as a “legitimate international power.”

The rise of Asian powers raises questions of historic significance for Africa and the world. Can the reemerging Asia-centered ascension provide solutions to the problems left behind by European and American hegemony?⁵ What does the rise of Asian powers mean for emerging African countries? What are the prospects, challenges and lessons of Asia’s ascension for Africa? How can African countries benefit from the growing social, political, cultural and economic ties with Asian powers? How can Asian powers benefit from social, political and economic collaboration, partnerships and investments into African economies?

I hope that this special issue and the work done by our valued experts will provide you with a better understanding of the “scramble” that continues to unfold in

⁵ Li, Minqi “The Rise of China and the Demise of the Capitalist World-Economy: Exploring Historical Possibilities in the 21st Century,” *Science & Society* 69, no. 3 (2005); Arrighi, Giovanni, “The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times.” (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 1994).

Africa as Asian states seek to benefit from the continent's untold resources. I hope that answers to some of the questions posed above can be found in this special issue. Finally, I hope this special issue provides you, our valued reader, with additional tools and resources to better operate in an increasingly complex political and economic climate.

About the Author

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