

# WestAfrica

## INSIGHT



# INCREASING INFLUENCE

## CHINA IN WEST AFRICA

# WestAfrica

## INSIGHT

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## EDITORIAL

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### This Issue: **Increasing influence: China in West Africa**

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**T**his edition of West Africa Insight reflect on the ways China is extending its influence across West Africa. Tobi Oshodi and James Barnett start by providing an overview and analysis of the role Confucius Institutes, of which there are now 15 in West Africa, are playing in support of China's soft power agenda in the region.

The focus on China's efforts to extend its influence in more indirect ways are also discussed in pieces by Emeka Umejei and Solomon Elusoji. Both look at the ways in which China has sought to gain a foothold in the media space in West Africa through providing content and supporting media houses and journalists, and to what extent these efforts are impacting reporting with specific focus on Ghana and Nigeria.

Folashadé Soulé switches the focus of attention to China-Benin military relations in a piece that seeks to better understand how and why such cooperation is being forged, and with what impact. Finally, Adedayo Bakare offers analysis of how Sino-West African trade relations might adapt to, and benefit from, the African Continental Free Trade Area as it becomes operational.

**Idayat Hassan**  
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## CONFUCIUS INSTITUTES IN WEST AFRICA: EXTENDING CHINESE INFLUENCE?

*The People's Republic of China has become an increasingly visible economic and diplomatic partner for West African states, and Africa more broadly, in recent years. From promising to construct the new secretariat of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) at \$31.6 million to its participation in the UN peacekeeping mission in Mali, China's footprint is as visible in West Africa as in any other part of the continent. Every West African country supports the "One China" policy, with Burkina Faso being the last to recognise Beijing over Taipei in 2018. But an often overlooked aspect of China's influence in the region is the soft power it exerts through relatively low-cost initiatives such as government-funded Confucius Institutes (CIs).*

### The soft power approach

In 1990, Joseph S. Nye, Jr. introduced the concept of "soft power" in his book *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*. In contrast to "hard power" - the capacity for coercion through military or economic means - which is how power has traditionally been understood in international relations, soft power is characterised by non-coercive appeal, attraction, and persuasion. China has sought to build and extend its soft power to achieve its strategic goals around the globe. In the last decade, it has spent an estimated \$10 billion on what could be considered soft power efforts according to the Chairman of the Great Britain-China Centre, Martin Davidson.

Observers have identified several elements of China's soft power efforts in Africa. These have ranged from Beijing's public health diplomacy - with the so-called "COVID-19 diplomacy" its latest expression -; to symbolic gestures like the construction of the \$200 million AU secretariat building in Addis Ababa; to the mobilisation of Chinese media to bolster China's image overseas; and to extensive government sponsored scholarships and exchange visits. Beijing's language of development, one that uses such phrases like "win-win," "brother," "partner," and "friend", is intended to present China as more benign than other global powers, particularly those that have colonial pasts.

## The teachings of Confucius

Ever since the first Confucius Institute (CI) was opened in South Korea in 2004, these educational venues have constituted an important component of China's soft power efforts. They allow Beijing to promote globally the Chinese language, as well as the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) approved narrative of Chinese history and culture. West Africa has been home to

CIs for over a decade. There are now 15 such institutes in West African universities, representing almost a quarter of the reported 61 institutes on the African continent. Depending on the university, the institutes offer anything from Chinese language certificates to four-year multidisciplinary bachelor's programmes in language and area studies.

**Table 1: Confucius Institutes in West African universities**

Country	University	Location	Partner Chinese University	Year Established
<b>Benin</b>	University of Abomey-Calavi	<b>Porto-Novo</b>	Chongqing Jiaotong University	2009
<b>Burkina Faso</b>	Bobo-Dioulasso Polytechnic University	<b>Bobo-Dioulasso</b>	Tianjin Polytechnic University	2019
<b>Cape Verde</b>	University of Cabo Verde	<b>Praia</b>	Guangdong University of Foreign Studies	2015
<b>Ghana</b>	University of Ghana	<b>Accra</b>	Zhejiang University of Technology	2013
	University of Cape Coast	<b>Cape Coast</b>	Hunan City University	2016
<b>Guinea</b>	Gamal Abdel Nasser University of Conakry	<b>Conakry</b>	Linyi University	2017
<b>Ivory Coast</b>	University of Felix Houphouette Boigny	<b>Abidjan</b>	Tianjin University of Technology	2015
<b>Liberia</b>	University of Liberia	<b>Monrovia</b>	Changsha University of Science & Technology	2008
<b>Mali</b>	University of Letters and Human Science of Bamako	<b>Bamako</b>	Southwest Forestry University	2017
<b>Nigeria</b>	University of Lagos	<b>Lagos</b>	Beijing Institute of Technology	2009
	Nnamdi Azikiwe University	<b>Akwa</b>	Xiamen University	2009
<b>Senegal</b>	University of Dakar	<b>Dakar</b>	Liaoning University	2012
<b>Sierra Leone</b>	University of Sierra Leone	<b>Freetown</b>	Gannan Normal University	2012
<b>The Gambia</b>	University of the Gambia	<b>Banjul</b>	Guizhou University	2017
<b>Togo</b>	University of Lomé	<b>Lomé</b>	Sichuan International Studies University	2009

The first CI in the ECOWAS sub-region was established in Liberia in 2008. Today all but two member states – Niger and Guinea-Bissau - have at least one. As with other elements of Chinese soft power, CIs can be understood as part of a “package” of assistance and cooperation that states receive in return for maintaining relations with Beijing. For example, the first and only CI in Burkina Faso was opened in 2019, just a year after the government switched its recognition from Taiwan to China.

Through the CIs, the CCP propagates its interpretation of Chinese history, culture, foreign policy, and society. For example, the description for a Chinese history course offered as part of the CI's bachelor's programme at Nnamdi Azikiwe University in Nigeria states: “through this course students should be able to have a deep understanding about the weakness of China from mid-19th century to the mid-20th century, and the rapid development of the last 30 years”. This reflects the CCP's narrative of the era preceding party rule as a “century of humiliation” at the hands of Western powers and China's eventual economic ascent as attributable to the party's “reform and opening” policies. Other courses in the bachelor's programme cover topics such as ancient Chinese civilisation, contemporary Chinese government, Chinese foreign policy to Africa, and a course on globalisation that stresses China's commitment to “peace and development... and globalisation of the world economy, by constructing One Belt One Road.”

Whereas CIs have come under increasing scrutiny in many Western countries over concerns about foreign political influence on academic freedom or even espionage, they have been uncontroversial and indeed welcomed in West Africa. While certain Nigerian politicians have criticised the opacity of Chinese loans, for example, there has been no equivalent scepticism of CIs from major political or community figures in the country. Many West African students and faculty alike are drawn to CIs out of a mixture of intellectual curiosity and the desire to improve career and educational prospects. This is understandable given the significant degree of Chinese investment in West

*it is in Beijing's interest to foster positive, or at least tolerant, views of Chinese citizens among African publics.*

”

Africa and the increasing number of Africans who study or work in China. Learning Mandarin and making connections with Chinese educators is a logical way of improving one's chances of doing business or pursuing higher education, especially as most West African universities offer no Mandarin courses.

The presence of CIs in West African universities offers China potential advantages that are distinct from other elements of its soft power agenda, most of which are focused on African elites. As Joshua Kurlantzick of the Council on Foreign Relations notes, soft power can be “high” and targeted at elites, or “low” and targeted at the broader public. As an example of the latter, CIs promote people-to-people interaction. Given the number of Chinese currently living across the African continent - estimated to be somewhere between one and two million - it is in Beijing's interest to foster positive, or at least tolerant, views of Chinese citizens among African publics. Second, CIs help Chinese universities build international partnerships, bolstering such universities' international prestige.

However, there are limits to these people-to-people exchanges. The instructors at CIs are almost exclusively Chinese nationals, with local staff playing subordinate roles, indicating that the institutes have either failed to produce enough qualified Mandarin-speakers or that hiring is prejudiced in favour of Chinese nationals. Relatedly, while the directorship of each institute is officially shared between a Chinese national and an academic from the host university, the fact that CIs are Chinese-funded mean that real authority is vested in the former.



# 60,000

**African students are studying in China**



# 12,000

**scholarship to African students with over opportunities offered annually.**

## Limits of influence

While China has had notable success in building soft power in Africa over the past two decades, it is no different from any other external actor insofar as it faces limits to its influence across the continent. Contrary to some simplistic reporting and analysis, Africans are not being helplessly dominated by China, nor are they overwhelmingly clamouring to praise and emulate China above all other countries, as some Chinese propaganda would suggest. Recent polling from Afrobarometer suggests that more Africans see the U.S. as the development model to emulate. There is also variation in popular perceptions of China across West Africa, with 85% of Cape Verdeans viewing China as a positive influence on their country, whilst less than 50% of Ghanaians feel the same way.

China's popular culture does not enjoy the same global appeal as that of the West. Chinese cinema cannot compete with Hollywood, Bollywood, and, in West Africa particularly, Nollywood. West African pop music takes more inspiration from America than China, while European football captivates millions of passionate fans across West Africa, despite Xi Jinping's fledgling efforts to make China the new world leader in the sport. Even in the realm of education where it is estimated that there are over 60,000 African students are studying in China - making the country the second highest destination for African students after France - the increasing number of Africans attending university in China does not necessarily mean that Africans

prefer Chinese to Western universities. In fact these large numbers are arguably a result of the Chinese government making such education more accessible via extensive scholarships, something Western officials might well consider. The 2020 UNESCO Global Education Monitoring report showed that China is the single largest provider of scholarship to African students with over 12,000 opportunities offered annually.

Furthermore, the work of CIs in promoting favourable perceptions of Chinese society is made difficult by recurring racist episodes between Chinese and Africans. For instance, the maltreatment of Africans in Guangzhou during the COVID-19 pandemic and the continued use of black face in Chinese New Year celebrations has dented the CI's narrative of China as "a friendly country". In response to the former, many West Africans took to social media to condemn the Chinese government while one Nigerian diplomat in Guangzhou rebuked a Chinese official in person, a stark contrast to the deferential attitude African diplomats have generally taken towards their Chinese counterparts in public. However, most West African officials kept quiet until the Guangzhou incidents blew over or otherwise reaffirmed their commitment to relations with China, underscoring the importance these countries place on their economic partnerships with Beijing.





## The next decade

Ultimately economic ties go further in explaining West African states' close relationships with Beijing - and the relative popularity of China among West African populations at large - than any number of CIs, scholarships, or donations of medical equipment. That said, it is too early to make a definitive assessment of CIs impacts in West Africa given that the first institutes were only established a little over a decade ago and soft power, which is notoriously difficult to gauge, often takes years to accrue. Assuming China continues to play an

increasing and multifaceted role in West African societies, it is likely that more West African students will develop a curiosity about Chinese language and culture and thus be drawn to the institutes. The more that CI graduates find professional or academic success in China or working on Chinese-funded projects, the more likely their younger peers are to take an interest in the institutes' offerings too. In short, we should not expect these institutes to disappear anytime soon.

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# INFLUENCE INDUSTRY:

## China's media engagement in West Africa

*At the outset, China relied solely on its state-led media to gain a foothold in the media space in Africa. But the limited impact of that approach has seen it shift towards a diversified approach to media engagement on the African continent. In this multifaceted model, China is not limiting its influence operation in the African media space to a singular approach. It deploys a mix of its state-led media organisations such as Chinese Global Television Network (CGTN), Xinhua News Agency (XNA) and China Radio International (CRI) alongside content-sharing agreements with local news agencies and media organisations, exchanges and training for journalists, and the Belt and Road News Network (BRNN). But all the approaches have the same goal: to exert its influence in the African media landscape as well as frame a positive narrative of China-Africa relations.*

### Establishing a presence

China's increasing bilateral trade with Africa, which was accompanied by a prevailing narrative that it preferred to engage only resource-rich countries, provides an important background to China's media expansion. The Chinese government was eager to tell a different story of China-Africa relations and in the early 2000s former Prime Minister, Wen Jiabao, stated his support for increased cultural engagement with other countries. Wen announced that Chinese media outlets going international would receive funding to enable them 'present a true picture of China to the world'. David Shambaugh, a professor at George Washington University, estimates that China has spent around \$10 billion in the last decade on its media internationalisation project.

The goal of this internationalisation project is twofold. One it is to counteract the Western media framing of China as a resource predator in Africa. The second is to use the African continent as a learning curve for its media 'going out' project. China is yet to succeed in the first objective, but it is making progress in the second.

In 2006, the Africa regional editorial office of XNA relocated from Paris to Nairobi. It commenced mobile news delivery in 2010. These developments were followed in 2011 by the establishment of China Central Television (CCTV), now renamed CGTN, again in Nairobi. This was the first and largest bureau of CGTN outside China. The arrival of CGTN changed the whole dynamics of global media attention to the African continent. It set off a competition between China's state-led media and the western media organisations covering Africa. The BBC's Focus on Africa programme commenced in June 2012, while CNN's Inside Africa started in 2014. All this was after CGTN Africa started in January 2012. The same year saw the launch of the African edition of Xinhuanet, an online service of the XNA.

In Nigeria there is a memorandum of understanding on information exchange between China and Nigeria and the News Agency of Nigeria and XNA. Xinhua also has an information exchange partnership with the Ghana News Agency signed

**It is estimated that China has trained more than 1,000 African journalists and media professionals since 2012** ”

under the Belt and Road Economic Information Partnership. In 2019, XNA signed a media content exchange and partnership agreement with Africa China Press and Research Centre based in Lagos, Nigeria. Whilst CRI reaches Ghana through shortwaves, CGTN and China Xinhua News Network Corporation form part of packages offered by satellite television providers in both countries.

These agreements make it more likely that these West African news organisations will promote positive stories about China and China-related events. As a result China's media expansion into West Africa risks impeding freedom of expression and engendering limited professional autonomy for journalists. Chinese media subscribes to a model of journalism that emphasises 'positive reporting'. This entails close collaboration between the media and government which runs counter to democratic ideals of independent scrutiny.

## Cultivating influence

China-Africa media cooperation commenced at the 2006 Forum on China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) event in Beijing, under the auspices of the Sino-African Cooperation Forum. This was expanded with an action plan on media training and exchanges that was formalised at the 2009 FOCAC event in Sharm El Sheik. At the fifth FOCAC meeting in 2012 China proposed a 'China-Africa Press Exchange Centre' with a focus on developmental reporting between Africa and China. The China Africa Press Centre programme, under the direct supervision of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, launched several journalism training programmes for African journalists. It is estimated that China has trained more than 1,000 African journalists and media professionals since 2012, including those from Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Senegal, through workshops and training camps in China.

These exchanges and training are well-funded by the Chinese government. Some are just two weeks, whilst others that last for ten months see journalists trained in China on various aspects of Chinese culture, politics, and society. A recent global survey of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and its member unions suggests that journalistic exchanges are the most widely reported form of Chinese outreach “with half the unions surveyed saying journalists from their countries had participated in exchanges or training schemes sponsored by Chinese entities”. In West Africa, journalistic exchanges are one of the means through which China seeks to exert its influence in the media in the sub-region. China also offers scholarships to journalists to study towards a master's degree in China. These journalists acquire new concepts of journalism such as constructive or solution journalism that they subsequently may apply in their own reporting.

There is also a China-Africa media cooperation forum through which China engages with journalists in Africa. Several journalists from the sub-region have participated in these forums. At the first forum held in Nairobi, Kenya in 2013, the Chinese ambassador to Kenya at the time explained that “our media should report China-Africa friendship positively”. In Ghana, the Chinese Embassy illustrated this in practice in 2017 when it exerted pressure on media outlets for what it saw as negative coverage of the issue of illegal mining that they argued was unfairly targeting Chinese nationals.

Content-sharing agreements are another way that Chinese media seeks to influence domestic coverage. The 2020 IFJ report pointed out that more than a third of the respondents reported that content-sharing agreements with Chinese outlets were in place in their countries. In some instances, Chinese state media content, such as Xinhua stories or CGTN footage, is offered for free, while in other cases companies are paid to carry advertising supplements. XNA, which first launched its service on the Africa continent in 1950, has a content-sharing agreement with the Ghana News Agency, the Nigerian News Agency, and local media organisations across the sub-region through which its content is offered free-of-charge. XNA being a state-owned media enterprise will not



distribute negative stories about China to its partners. Meaning that most of the piece from XNA to its partners are likely to be positive stories about China and China-related events.

Finally, China provides communication infrastructure and technical support to many of the countries in the West Africa sub-region. In 2005, China donated audio-visual equipment and a building to the National Radio of Guinea; in 2008 the Liberia Broadcasting System received technical support and a grant of \$4 million to improve FM radio expansion; and in 2011 the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Cooperation was the recipient of donated media materials. China's donation to the broadcasting industry in West Africa is framed as an instrument of foreign policy with the view to engender bilateral cooperation and win-win engagements.

## Belt and road news

The BRNN emerged from President Xi Jinping's address at the first Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in 2017 where he announced the development of new people-to-people exchange platforms such as a Belt and Road news alliance and a music education alliance. The BRNN facilitates its members to tell the stories about the Belt and Road Initiative in a way that “shapes healthy public opinion and helps the BRI

yield more substantial results for people living in countries along the Belt and Road”. It comprises 208 media organisations from 98 countries, with seven of the 40 member media council from Africa. Just one, ThisDay newspaper in Nigeria, is from West Africa. The council is responsible for making decisions on key issues regarding the development of BRNN and is chaired by China's People's Daily newspaper.

A joint statement of the BRNN media council, following its first meeting, affirmed its commitment to disseminate truthful, accurate, objective, and impartial news, and information to the whole world, and to play a constructive role in gradually strengthening understanding, mutual trust, cooperation, and exchange among people of various countries, and regions. If the expansion of Chinese media into Africa has caused concern in some quarters, the BRNN is likely to generate even greater controversy. Under it, China's propaganda and influence operation, instead of being promoted through China's state-led media, will be done by local media organisations in the sub-region. Africans are more likely to believe their own media organisations that are dishing out China's propaganda than Chinese media according to my own research.



## Growing influence?

China's continued ambition is to influence the media landscape in West Africa to ensure a positive narrative of China-Africa cooperation in the sub-region. In part it seeks to achieve this objective through a multifaceted approach to media engagement. While the focus of China's media influence operation in West Africa has been on electronics, print and journalistic training, a shift towards the digital media space is already happening. But what will be the impact of these efforts. Will it tilt the West African media landscape towards China, or will the region resist China's incursion in the media space in the sub-region?

Ghanaian journalists and policymakers have tended to push back against the Chinese media push and have limited use of their media sources, which they describe as propaganda. But the same cannot be said of Nigerian journalists and policymakers. Even though some Nigerian journalists argue that Chinese media is propaganda, they argue that Western media is no different from Chinese media in that both have

certain agendas they seek to push in the sub-region. Some Nigerian media professionals and houses use Chinese media narratives as a counter to western media framing of events. For example, when BBC or CNN broadcasts an event, Nigerian journalists, who are interested in gaining a different perspective on the same event will switch to CGTN Africa to see how it is being framed.

As China deepens its engagement with the media in the West Africa sub-region through diversified engagement with various media outlets, more engagement with journalists through media training and exposure to Chinese society, culture and politics is to be expected. In the long run, there is the likelihood that while journalists in the sub-region may remain rooted in the Western way of journalism, a new group of journalists that are empathetic to the Chinese model of journalism will emerge. This is unlikely to happen in the short to medium term, but China appears ready for the long haul.

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## NIGERIA'S MEDIA: PERSPECTIVES ON CHINA

*Nigeria's relationship with China has witnessed remarkable growth in the past three decades, in trade, cultural exchange and even military cooperation. China has also made significant incursions into Nigeria's media space, with the founding of StarTimes, the development of a local Xinhua bureau and the increasing facilitation of trips to China for Nigerian media professionals. Although China has had media interactions with Africa since the 1960s, programmes like the Forum on China-Africa Media Cooperation suggest that the country is seeking a deeper cooperation with the continent's media. The forum was set up under the framework of the fifth conference of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), held in Beijing in 2012, with the goal of improving mutual trust between Chinese and African media. It eventually led to the institutionalisation of the China-Africa Press Centre (CAPC), a specialised arm of China's foreign ministry, which facilitates ten-month learning visits to China for African journalists.*

### Sino-Nigerian media relations

In 2017, China and Nigeria signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to enhance friendly cooperation in media and information exchanges. The MoU was signed between Nigeria's Federal Ministry of Information and Culture and China's State Council Information Office. In 2019, the Xinhua News Agency signed an MoU with the News Agency of Nigeria to promote China's Belt and Road initiative by sharing and collaborating on news stories. Also in 2019, CAPC hosted its fifth ten-month exchange programme. Topics of the training included media management and ethics, China's politics and culture, and Sino-Africa relations. But how are these efforts reflected in the overall coverage of

China's regional role by Nigerian media?

On one hand, the relationship is viewed positively based on the flow of cheap Chinese goods (compared to those from the west) into the country, and its generous loans and heavy investment in the economy. On the other hand, there are fears that China is set to become a new imperialist power, benefitting from Nigeria's corrupt and dysfunctional political governance. Interviews I undertook with a dozen newspaper editors across Nigeria in 2018 about how they approach China in their coverage reflect these tensions. Influenced by the west, local public

opinion, cultural factors and China's increasing pull in the country, it was not possible to describe their approach as either negative or positive. However, two-thirds tended to see the relationship between China and Nigeria in an overall positive light.

This corresponds with a 2019 Pew Research Centre survey that said 70% of the Nigerian public have favourable views of China. The editors tended to value China's infrastructure investments in Nigeria and, against the backdrop of western powers, saw China as a better partner. But all those with favourable evaluations also held reservations about the relationship. There were continuing concerns about the lack of transparency of its actions, the susceptibility of the Nigerian government to corruption and the censored nature of Chinese state media.

## Five key framings

From my interviews, five key reporting frames about China emerged. One was of China as a superpower. China is a “technological and economic giant,” one editor said. Another offered: “China is a superpower just like the US. They have one of the biggest economies in the world. It is clear.” But at the same time China is also viewed as an imperialist power. “It feels like they want to take over the world, they want to control the world,” one of the editors told me. “You can see the intensity of how they try to break into less-privileged countries, underdeveloped countries; the fight they put in to get accepted.”

This framing reflects the unequal balance of economic power between China and African countries, a re-echoing of past imperialistic relationships where one country provides raw materials and the other, with superior technology, supplied more sophisticated goods. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, in the last quarter of 2020, Nigeria imported N5.6 trillion worth of Chinese goods, the highest of any country on the continent. But it exported only N157.78 billion worth of goods to China.

The third framing of China as a benevolent partner, is largely driven largely by Chinese contributions to Nigeria's infrastructure development. “Their



over  
**\$20 billion**  
investment of Chinese  
firms in Nigeria

investments in this country are quite enormous and very progressive,” one editor said. “I think that Nigeria's foreign policy should tilt towards China because they have shown that they are willing to help the country. It was estimated that the investment of Chinese firms in Nigeria was worth over \$20 billion as of 2019. In March 2020, the Nigerian government confirmed that it had borrowed over \$3 billion from China to finance infrastructure projects.

The last two frames - China as an exporter of 'fakeness' and a free-speech usurper - touch on more negative aspects. Editors criticised China for exporting “inferior products” into Nigeria. The idea of 'fakeness' was also extended to describe the character of its approach to development. “Fake in the sense that, the way in which they started their own development by stealing other people's technology and using it to develop their own,” was the view of one editor. Not all agree with this characterisation.

On the issue of free speech there was more widespread agreement. “I'm not really a fan of China,” one editor said. “And I say that from the perspective of a journalist, of how important freedom is to any citizen. The fact that the Chinese don't tolerate dissent, that is my biggest problem with them.”

**In March 2020, the Nigerian government confirmed that it had borrowed over \$3 billion from China to finance infrastructure projects. ”**



## Dual narratives

In April 2020, reports of Africans being discriminated against in Guangdong province in China - based on their 'perceived' COVID-19 status - started to emerge; videos of Nigerians roaming the streets of Guangzhou (Guangdong's capital city) and sleeping under bridges amid rainfall - after being unable to secure accommodation in hotels - went viral on social media. The issue snowballed into a diplomatic crisis with Foreign Minister Geoffrey Onyema describing the situation as “extremely distressing” and “unacceptable.”

There are two things to note about the Guangdong discrimination issue from a media perspective. One, it was brought to mainstream attention, not by Nigerian journalists, but social media users and western news media. Two, the official narrative that “it was all a misunderstanding” was cast by the Chinese government and aided by its Nigerian counterpart. This typifies the dichotomous nature of reporting about China in Nigeria. On one hand, there is social media and the western media influence, which emphasises values such as human rights and free speech; on the other side are government press releases and controlled communications, which prefer to focus on stability and economic cooperation.

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# Connecting security, ideology and economic interests: China-Benin military cooperation

For Chinese actors, whether state or non-state, Africa has become a terrain of multidimensional engagement. While large infrastructure and mining projects have been the focus of much interest and analysis, China's engagement on the continent extends to agriculture, technology, health, energy and security. As a West African diplomat puts it, China has become a “hyperactive partner” in Africa.

The last five years has seen China become increasingly involved in several domains of peace and security on the continent. It is the largest permanent member of the UN Security Council to provide troops for UN peacekeeping operations, it offers training for military officials on the continent and is increasingly pushing the sale of its military equipment. While its engagement in the Sahel region has been a source of growing interest, the drivers of China's involvement in smaller West African nations have been less analysed.

This article explores China's military cooperation with Benin. It assesses the drivers and pillars of China's security

engagement and especially military relations in Benin, and analyses how this engagement is perceived by Beninese officials. It starts by laying out how security has progressively been integrated in the China-Africa partnership agenda before explaining the different pillars of China-Benin military cooperation. It concludes with an assessment of how China, as a new partner, is perceived by Beninese officials.





## Security: the latecomer in Sino-African relations

Beginning in 2012, in the context of uprisings in North Africa, security became an official policy area in Sino-African relations. Although bilateral military partnerships with several African governments were in place before then, it was at the Forum on China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) V where a China-Africa Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Security was announced by then Chinese president Hu Jintao. In 2015, this was further elaborated at FOCAC VI when security was elevated to one of the five foundational pillars in the China-Africa comprehensive strategic partnership. As security was elevated as a strategic priority, China's involvement expanded to peacekeeping, the leasing of a naval logistics base in Djibouti, an expanded role in fighting piracy off the Gulf of Aden and an increase in arms sales. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute although arms imports from China accounted for just 17% of total African arms imports between 2013 and 2017, this was a 55% on the previous five-year period.

The drivers of these engagement are twofold. Firstly, China's greater involvement in Africa and exposure to conflict, insecurity, terrorism and risks of political instability has raised the challenge of protecting its interests overseas, and the interests of Chinese state-owned and private companies. China's security engagement is not only state-to-state. It also involves Chinese firms engaging in hiring and training private security forces in African

countries. While the principle of non-interference in internal affairs is still considered as key in Sino-African relations, China's policymakers have been gradually adopting a more flexible view of the principle by getting involved in peacekeeping and conflict mediation initiatives in Africa as exemplified in Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo, where China was part of efforts supporting the transition. Secondly, getting involved in security in a multidimensional way allows China to project itself as internationally responsible and supportive of international peace.

China's approach to security in Africa is one that "is at the nexus of security and development" according to academics Lina Benabdallah and Dan Large. As the relationship between China and most African governments is dominated by economic and development projects, these also guide security relations. This view of security resides in the belief that economic development is considered as part of security and improving socio-economic living conditions is considered as key for the prevention of conflict. However, China-Africa security relations not only involve material or economic engagement but also ideational and normative components. This multi-faceted offer aim to meet the needs and expectations of African governments who put economic growth and tackling poverty at the core of their national development strategies.

## Building connections with Benin

China-Benin military cooperation is organised around two pillars: the training of Beninese military officials in China and military infrastructure; and arms sales and the donation of military equipment. Benin's largest military barrack is being built in Allada by Poly Technologies Inc, a Chinese state-owned contractor. The project which has been in progress for four years, with funding coming mostly from Beninese national budget, is expected to be completed in 2021. It will be home to four Beninese battalions. Poly Technologies does not only act as a contractor but also sells military equipment to Benin. Previously security and military material such as military trucks, logistics materials and non-lethal arms were, for the most part, donated by the Chinese government. But in recent years, the Beninese government has ordered non-lethal arms from China including from Poly Technologies Inc. Besides military equipment, several private Chinese security firms are offering their services - video surveillance and fingerprints recognition - to interested parties in Benin in what is a small but growing sector.

The military training of Beninese officials in China is a central dimension of Benin-China security relations, and one that is increasingly growing. The number of scholarships and offers for Beninese officials to train in Chinese military schools and academies is increasingly rapidly. In 2017, 40 Beninese soldiers and 25 scholarship students attended courses in Chinese military schools and universities. In 2019, they were 60. This comes at a time when opportunities from France, the former colonial power and traditional military partner, available to military officials from Benin are decreasing.

China's scholarships are a tool of military diplomacy. A large component of the content of military training in China for Beninese - and more largely African - military officials consists of showcasing China's military power; with specific tours to become familiar with Chinese military infrastructure, materials and security norms.

“ In 2017, 40 Beninese soldiers and 25 scholarship students attended courses in Chinese military schools and universities. In 2019, they were 60.

According to Beninese officials interviewed for this article, they are attractive for several reasons. In addition to the fact that offers for training in the West are declining, young Beninese military officials express stronger demand to become more knowledgeable of other military cultures and powers, with China topping the list.

Scholarships are also considered as more attractive, not only in financial terms but also in providing an opportunity to discover China, despite personal awareness that these tours are tailored to showcase the positive aspects of the 'Chinese model'. Furthermore, those attending trainings at Chinese military schools are always passed with success by Beninese officials, allowing military officials to obtain their degree at home without fearing to fail the tests. However, there are challenges. Nearly all Beninese officials are not fluent in Mandarin. This results in Beninese military students not being mixed with Chinese students. This lack of integration results in limited interactions between students and officials.

At the same time, when making its scholarship offers, China frequently targets officials in charge of military infrastructure engineering, who are already developing capacities to construct key infrastructure at home such as roads. China intentionally offers them scholarships that will make them familiar with Chinese military infrastructure contractors and construction norms for future potential contracting opportunities. In doing so China wants to further future partnerships whilst showcasing how military engineering should be an integral part of overall military training. One of the key messages that Beninese officials come away from their training with is that economic aspects are an integral part of military training.

## Strategic partners

China's increasing engagement in the security sector in Benin is taking place in a context where Benin is also developing a comprehensive national security strategy. As Beninese senior policymakers engage more and more with China on security-related matters, this creates more room for Chinese policymakers to diffuse security and construction norms that can create opportunities for Chinese contractors. The idea that the Chinese model is more about discipline and order than dictatorship and that African countries require a strong army to develop economically is particularly prevalent in Beninese military and security thinking.

The Covid-19 pandemic has also offered further openings for enlarging security relations between Benin and China, and more largely with Africa. Several West African militaries have been mobilised in the fight against the pandemic. As part of its vaccine assistance to armed forces, the Chinese People's Liberation Army donated several batches of vaccines to several West African counterparts in March 2021. There is also an increasing demand from African leaders to learn more about how the Chinese military were mobilised and used to address the pandemic in Wuhan. Several trainings have already been



requested by African presidencies and defence ministries as part of wider knowledge sharing activities. It seems entirely possible that health cooperation in the security sector could become the next key pillar in Sino-African military-to-military relations.

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## China and West Africa relations in the free trade era

**T**he African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is a potentially transformative policy. It seeks to deepen intra-Africa trade by reducing tariff and non-tariff barriers to trade. While AfCFTA came into force in May 2019 and implementation started in January 2021, the speed of progress has been slow as negotiations and processes are yet to be concluded. Regardless, there is strong optimism about its prospects. AfCFTA will create a market with over 1.3 billion people and \$3.4tn in GDP. The Economic Commission for Africa estimates that it could improve intra-Africa trade by 15-25% by 2040, while intra-Africa trade could reach 50% of total trade, from around 15% currently.

Since its rapid growth phase began in the early 1990s, China has become one of the world's most important economic partners. In Africa, Chinese investment, loans, technology and human capital are helping to bridge wide deficits. In addition, China is an increasingly important trade partner: importing natural resources for its industrialisation and exporting cheap consumer and capital goods to African markets.

However, the nature of China's deals with West African countries have been subject to constant scrutiny. This is partly because of the lack of transparency and underlying political and military interests. While this is becoming a key concern in receiving countries, many have not turned their back on China. This is because China has grown to become the easiest way to source cheap goods, debt capital and expertise in the last two decades. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – which is improving connectivity by financing infrastructure to further trade – further illustrates the extent of this ambition.



## Granted loans to African governments



*Between 2000 and 2018, Chinese lenders granted \$147.9bn in loans to African governments. ”*

### West Africa's potential

In 2019 West Africa's GDP size of \$705.8bn made it the largest regional market on the continent. In the same year, West Africa was also the largest regional market for Chinese manufactured goods with importation of \$24.1bn (92.2% of total imports). However, total exports are lower at \$9.7bn and predominantly are comprised of commodities (96.6%).

Between 2000 and 2018, Chinese lenders granted \$147.9bn in loans to African governments. West Africa's share of the loans - \$20.5bn - was just 14.1% of total, significantly behind Eastern Africa (\$34.1bn) and Southern Africa (\$63.4bn). While China also has significant private sector presence in Africa, investment in West Africa is again limited. Its total foreign direct investment (FDI) stock into the continent was estimated at \$44.3bn in 2019 according to the China Africa Research Initiative. Meanwhile, Chinese FDI stock in West Africa is only \$7.3bn, or 16.4% of total. A similar narrative emerges when it comes to Chinese human capital, with just 21.5% of Chinese workers in Africa based in the sub-region.

West African countries have not fully harnessed the potential of their relationship with China. A lack of regional collaboration, particularly on large-scale infrastructure projects that are focused on opening countries up to trade, is one explanation for this. Intra-regional trade is weakest in West Africa at 7.1% compared with 13.5% and 13.6% in Southern and Eastern Africa respectively.

### Models of engagement

China's interests in West Africa, like the rest of the continent, are diverse and are represented by State Owned Enterprises (SOEs), private companies - of which McKinsey estimated that there are over 9,000 and individuals. Trade, investments and infrastructure financing in sectors such as construction, mining and manufacturing, which jointly account for 68% of Chinese FDI stock, are most prevalent.

Despite substantial trade, China's relationships with West African states does not include formal trade deals. China has so far used Double Tax Treaties (DTTs) and Bilateral Investment Treaties (BITs). The former are designed to make it easier for businesses with interests in both countries to operate by reducing or removing heavy tax obligations and by promoting lower tariffs on goods and services. BITs have the main benefit of dictating the nature of Chinese investments in partner countries and guarantee protection of the same. However, these agreements are not widespread. Only Nigeria has a DTT with China in West Africa, while just three countries - Nigeria, Ghana and Mali - have BITs. While Sierra Leone has an Agriculture Industrial Park, Nigeria is the main country in the sub-region with special economic zones; with two industrial parks and three free trade zones in Lagos, Cross River and Ogun states. These zones allow Chinese investments to find new markets, enjoy preferential treatment such as reduced tariffs and gain access to other developed markets.

Infrastructure loans to West African countries, the most common form of state engagement with China, often have content requirements of China's resources - transportation, communication and power equipment - as well as service contracts. This is one of the ways China generates external

demand for its goods and services, especially given spare capacity and slowing domestic investment. These can also be regional in scope. In 2016, ECOWAS, the region's economic bloc, signed memoranda of understandings with China covering transnational projects such as the Trans-West African Railway, the Trans-West African Coastal Highway, the West African Telecommunication Infrastructure Facility, and the West African Regional Aviation Field. In some cases, the infrastructure loans - in terms of repayment and collateralisation - are also resource-backed. For instance, in Ghana, the Bui Dam and a gas pipeline were backed by cocoa and crude oil. However, the 2014 commodity slump in addition to public opposition and concerns raised by multilateral institutions and credit rating agencies have diminished arrangements like this.

The increasingly high debt to GDP ratios of West African countries - the average surpasses the 55% debt to GDP limit recommended by the IMF/World Bank - could complicate infrastructure financing deals. However, concerns about 'debt trap diplomacy' are generally exaggerated as Chinese debt does not contribute significantly to debt distress. In Nigeria it was 3.9% of total public debt as at the end of the first quarter of 2021, with terms concessional at 2.5% interest rate payable over 20 years. China also offers relief, allowing renegotiation and suspending debt service as fiscal finances have deteriorated amid COVID-19.

But West Africa-China ties extend beyond the economic to include the political. In January 2021, the Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi visited five African countries, including Nigeria; a yearly tradition aimed at strengthening ongoing relationships. Nigeria, its biggest economic partner in West Africa, aligned with the One China policy by cutting diplomatic ties with Taiwan in 2017. China is also building the new ECOWAS headquarters. This strong alignment with political leaders has helped lay the foundation for private sector investments and facilitate the entry of Chinese companies into West African markets.

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**In January 2021, the Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi visited five African countries, including Nigeria; a yearly tradition aimed at strengthening ongoing relationships.**

## Aligning opportunities

During the last forum on China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2018, China and the Africa Union (AU) discussed ways to collaborate to further the continent's infrastructure agenda through the BRI. The AU signed a MoU with China on BRI cooperation, while a total of 49 countries have done the same. This cooperation is aimed at supporting infrastructure financing which is needed for improved connectivity. Cross-border infrastructure - transportation and communication - which will support a smooth operation of AfCFTA, is still very costly and undersupplied.

AfCFTA gives considerable freedom to member countries. About 7% of goods and services can be classified sensitive while tariff removal on these are expected to be phased over ten years. Similarly, 3% of items can be excluded from the deal. This means that countries with deep ties and obligations to China have flexibility to negotiate trade terms. China could also negotiate a trade deal with the bloc to get preferential deals. After all, West Africa's manufactured goods imports from China is only 34% of their total manufacturing imports according to UNCTAD data.

Similarly, there is flexibility around rules of origin and external tariffs. Rules of origin determine the goods that will be "made in Africa" and as such qualify for lower tariffs. The rules are still being negotiated and are yet to be formally implemented. Chinese investments could deepen to take advantage of the expanded African market, especially if rules of origin are tough. Also, as the AfCFTA is not yet a customs union, countries can negotiate external tariffs with their trading partners.



Furthermore, most African countries lack the short-term capacity to provide sophisticated manufacturing goods requiring high level skill and capital. While the AfCFTA seeks to boost industrialisation, it will take a while for the necessary structures to be put in place, for manufacturing capacities to improve and for trade within the continent to reach the desired levels. This means that there will be sustained demand for Chinese manufactured goods in the short to medium-term.

Even within the context of AfCFTA, China is going to remain a formidable partner. To derive strong benefits from this partnership, West African countries must be more deliberate and proactive in their dealings with China. This should include identifying and pitching key infrastructure projects that can unlock value, taking advantage of knowledge transfer opportunities and establishing and upholding standards for fair labour practices and adherence to environmental protection within those deals.

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