

The empirical and ideological approaches to emerging powers

The current scholarship on the China-Africa relationship has become a discourse unto itself. What is intriguing about the development of this narrative is that it is largely a response to China's Africa policy. Despite the existence of a historical framework that explores China's long-term political, economic, social, and cultural engagement with Africa, which defined an identity and ideological context that informed relations, the current trajectory of the discourse seems to ignore the historic in favor of examining China as a new actor in the continent. The latter is evident in the way in which the analysis and debates are organized around China's footprint on the continent.

Simply put, China's structural and systemic rise as a significant global economic actor has become the lens through which the China-Africa relationship is being viewed. This has led to two schools of thought, which has had a catalytic effect for scholarship. Both schools of thought develop research and analysis around understanding Beijing's spectacular economic influence and lead to, inter alia, the following set of questions:

- What is China's Africa policy?
- How does China impact Africa's development?
- Is there African agency in the relationship with China?
- Who are the actors who benefit from this engagement?
- How does the China-Africa relationship affect the continent's other engagements with traditional actors from the North?
- Is there a model to China's engagement in Africa? What is the end result of the engagement?

While both schools attempt to locate their analyses within empirically driven evidence, the point of departure for each is that they seek to understand China's Africa relationship based on assumptions that are aligned to either proving or disproving the underlying issue of whether China is Africa's new imperialist power (in all its facets) with a colonialist project, namely, the

“Second Scramble” for the continent’s renewable and nonrenewable resources.

Thus, the rhetoric, which defines the scholarship, is anchored by ideological dispositions. This is underscored by interpreting the China-Africa relationship less in terms of what theoretical approaches may best be used to explain and understand the engagement and making it more about reacting to how the relationship is perceived and whether it will be a panacea for Africa’s development or perpetuate the continent’s underdevelopment.

Not only do both schools speak past each other, but they also compartmentalize the debate by masking the inherent nuances of Africa’s engagement with other actors from the Global South and examining how this may inform relations with China. In short, the above polarizing debate raises a myriad of questions (that are simple, complicated, and complex) about Africa’s engagement with China and other emerging powers from the Global South. Is the “Second Scramble” different from the nineteenth-century scramble, which produced and expanded imperialist and mercantilist projects in Africa and was only concerned with exploiting and extracting the continent’s resources for self-interest? Or are we witnessing a new form of South-South cooperation, embedded within the construction of a common development identity?

In other words, is the engagement with China and other emerging powers being labeled and identified as a new and alternative discourse to the Washington consensus on development? If so, how does

it differ from Africa’s past experiences, and in whose interests? Or is it merely a reproduction of Africa’s engagement with traditional partners? Moreover, whether for good or ill, how should the role of African agency be conceptualized, especially that of the government and business sectors, when their engagement and relations with the leaderships of these emerging powers is an integral part of the new international architecture?

It would seem that the debate itself on the China-Africa relationship is also informing how Africa structures its engagement with the other emerging Southern powers and the consequences thereof. In this regard, India is seen as a benign actor in Africa, with almost no criticism leveled against New Delhi of being predatory, mercantilist, or exploitative in its relationship with African states. This is despite the fact that India is also on the hunt in Africa’s extractive sectors.

What is clear about the China-India nexus in Africa is the role that media play in advancing the preoccupation with Beijing’s being a communist state and New Delhi the largest democracy in the world. Accordingly, India is perceived as not being a threat to what is identified as common values and principles aligned to good governance and therefore a responsible stakeholder.

The questions highlighted above, as well as other issues, seem to be crowded out by the prospect, or possibly the illusion, that emerging powers from the South offer a new impetus for resolving Africa’s development conundrum. This is implicit in

the official statements and policy pronouncements articulated by African governments regarding the relocation of capitalism to central East Asia and the designation of an alternative framework of development by the South.

Yet, the debate should also focus on whether Africa's engagement with emerging powers represents something different, or, rather, more of the same. The latter view continues to epitomize the scholarship, which is fundamentally concerned with whether the rhetoric about changing the global status quo is real or perceived. And, beyond that, how will the sovereign interests of the emerging powers advance Africa's reintegration into the global economy?

With these issues in mind, it would seem that engagement with the emerging Southern powers is creating a new Africa-South axis. Is it replacing the Africa-North axis or is it becoming an extension of the latter? However, even among these actors there is competition and rivalry, which creates renewed regional and state divisions with significant implications for global governance architecture.

At the same time, the new engagement reinforces old tensions between state authorities and citizens in African societies. While we cannot deny that these emerging powers have reignited the debate about transformation of the African state, the questions of what type of development we should be seeking and how Africa should engage with these actors (i.e., what is Africa's agenda and policy?) are as compelling as the recreation of new forms

of capitalist class formation. This is because class structures are aligned to state capital and accumulation of wealth in African societies, and because African governments are seen as active agents in this engagement.

The growth model and the trickle-down effect have not transformed access to wealth or resources or created conditions favorable to a better life for all. If anything, growth has widened inequality. And so the social justice struggles in Africa are the same as those in China, India, and Brazil, which are essentially common fights for human development and dignity. In other words, who benefits from growth has notable implications for class conflicts and tensions in Africa as well as in the emerging powers.

In light of the above, it would seem that the theoretical approaches to the China-Africa relationship as well as those relating to the other emerging powers from the South are not clearly defined. Does one assume a *realpolitik* approach? Or is Kenneth Waltz's structural realism more appropriate considering that Africa's wealth does play a catalytic role for how resources are distributed to strengthen the capabilities of China and other actors from the South? Perhaps Paul Kennedy's *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* is also relevant if we are to reflect on the nature of the global architecture and the shift to multipolarity.

Finally, it should be emphasized that the real challenge with the discourse on China-Africa is the weakness within African scholarship in developing its own agency and, in effect, shaping the studies, debates,

and discussions on the topic that can have a significant policy impact.