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Peer review method: Double-blind
Received: 22.09.2022
Accepted: 11.10.2022
Published: 10.12.2022
Review article
DOI: https://doi.org/10.47305/JLIA2283368t

How to cite:
Tomic, Dusko, Eldar Saljic, and Mohamed Badine El Yattioui. 2022. "SPECIFIC PROJECTION OF CHINA'S SOFT POWER IN AFRICA: A NEW SECURITY PARADIGM". Journal of Liberty and International Affairs 8 (3):368-77. https://e-jlia.com/index.php/jlia/article/view/767.

SPECIFIC PROJECTION OF CHINA'S SOFT POWER IN AFRICA: A NEW SECURITY PARADIGM

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Abstract: *According to the International Monetary Fund, the People's Republic of China is nowadays the largest economic power in the world. Therefore, it is unsurprising that China was represented in nearly every global market. Contrary to the belief that Chinese investments in underdeveloped countries should lead to their development and improvements in standards, Peking was accused of using the countries in development to strengthen its economy and to increase its political influence. The modus operandi was allegedly a striking example of projecting soft power in the expansion of hard power in many regions worldwide. The combination of economy, trade, investments and security questions was clear. This phenomenon was evident in Africa because China had a special and robust economic and geostrategic interest in this region. This research critically analyzed how this strategy can be considered a new security paradigm. In addition, there was a straightforward project from the Chinese government to extend this model to other regions to obtain global leadership.*

Keywords: *Soft Power; China; Security; Strategy; Africa*

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between the PRC and African countries expanded mainly in recent years. The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) played an important role in this expansion. The forum was founded on October 10, 2000, and consists, besides the PRC, of several African countries (except Eswatini, formerly Swaziland). The FOCAC served as a platform for the development of diplomatic relations. However, the African representatives insisted that the FOCAC should be used to develop economic relations between the Member States. This way, the African Member States gained access to sustainable alternatives to secure economic development, apart from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or the World Bank, while China gained access to the African markets (Pelnēns 2010). A new or different globalization started with an ambitious China and defensive western countries (El Yattioui 2018). The impact of the 1980s debt crisis was substantial, with an apparent diminution of the infrastructure finance from multilateral banks and bilateral aid agencies. Between 2007 and 2020, China provided 2.5 times more finance for African countries' infrastructure projects than all other bilateral institutions combined (Brautigam, Bhalaki, Deron, and Wang 2022). Major Chinese infrastructure projects have a lasting impact on the African continent. In several capitals, the Chinese have built an official building, a stadium, a conference center or a train station (Kernen 2014).

CHINESE SOFT POWER: DEFINITION AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Chinese influence goes through many elements, including cultural and economic. This country relies on active cultural diplomacy and a strong media presence to give a positive image. On the economic level, soft power involves the establishment of special economic zones, while the aid policy makes it possible to combine hard power and soft power. Chinese soft power is based on the principle of South-South solidarity while positioning China as a benchmark. The deployment of instruments of influence is also justified by domestic imperatives (such as access to energy resources) and the imperative to counter foreign criticism regarding this Chinese strategy in Africa. The Chinese success appears as an alternative to American and European partners (Bénazéraf 2014).

The end of the Cold War prompted Joseph Nye, at the end of the 1980s, to analyze the emergence of a new form of power, which he called "soft power" (Nye 1988). He was the first to consider that the traditional attributes of power (military force, demographic weight, geography, strategic resources), or hard power, declined during the Cold War in the face of elements such as institutions, the population's education level, technology or culture. He links the fall of the USSR to the weakness of its soft power and its inability to compete with the United States.

Soft power strategies seek to improve the image and strengthen the influence of the states. From the end of the Cold War, the concept of soft power aroused interest in certain Chinese intellectual circles, while the leaders of this country saw it as a 'Western concept'. Joseph Nye's (1988) first book on soft power was translated in 1992 by He Xiaodong and published by China's Military Translation Press (Courmont 2012). As Barthelemy Courmont (2012) explains very well, Wang Huning (1993) was the first to write about soft power in China, suggesting in particular that "if a country has an admirable culture and ideology, other countries will tend to follow it. (…) It does not need to make use of expensive and less efficient hard power" (p. 23). It takes up the broad lines of Nye's concept while emphasizing that culture is the main source of soft power. We had to wait until 2007, as Courmont (2012) reminds us, to see that soft power was officially adopted as a political principle during the 17th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The plan was to use soft power to obtain full power's characteristics by having both hard and soft power.

Different currents of thought have developed because Chinese researchers have not all defined soft power similarly. Among these schools of thought is the 'Cultural school', also called the 'Shanghai school', which quickly established itself as the dominant school on the subject. It is so-called because of the importance it places on culture. It stems mainly from the conception of soft power proposed by Wang Huning in 1993. Culture is the primary source of soft power since it encompasses foreign policy and domestic political values. The proponents of the Cultural school consider the ancient history and traditional culture as the main elements of Chinese cultural soft power. To improve the attractiveness of China on the world stage, this school, therefore, advocates the promotion of Chinese culture internationally (Courmont 2012).

SPECIFIC PROJECTION OF CHINA'S SOFT POWER IN AFRICA: A NEW SECURITY PARADIGM

Trade and exchange rates are good examples of Chinese influence in Africa. In 2019, the trade volume reached 192 billion US$. China is also the largest foreign direct investor in Africa. Loans by Chinese creditors also increased. Estimates state that between 2000 and 2019, 1,141 contracts were signed, with an estimated value of 153 million US$. The most considerable Chinese investments go into improving infrastructure and logistics (mining, energy, communication, transportation, warehousing, and wastewater industries). Such a rich portfolio of investments is not randomly chosen. It represents the broader intention of China to expand its 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI). The project is aimed to create new trade routes on land and sea. These investments also confirm the existence of resource sharing between Africa and China under the mediation of FOCAC, which should meet the demands of the BRI and the FOCAC (Broadman 2007). China is now considered a leading global investor. This country became a key actor in a few years: the second largest in Foreign Direct Investment flows with 143 billion dollars and the third largest in Foreign Direct Investment stock with 1980 billion dollars in 2018. Chinese Foreign Direct Investment stock increased by 94 times in only 15 years, between 2003 and 2018, from $0.5 billion to 46.1 billion dollars (Zhang 2021).

In two decades, China became sub-Saharan Africa's principal lessor, holding 62.1% of its bilateral external debt in 2020, compared to 3.1% in 2000 (Bertrand and Zoghely 2021). We should be precise that these loans mainly benefit seven countries, concentrating two-thirds of Chinese loans over the period. The key actors are two governmental banks: EximBank of China (56.8 % of the loans) and China Development Bank (22.9 % of the loans) (Bertrand and Zoghely 2021). Since 2016, Chinese loans to this region have undergone a geographical reorientation and a drop in the amounts committed to secure this country's debts. This relative decline in Chinese loans is accompanied by a growth in foreign direct investment (Bertrand and Zoghely 2021). If the successes of Beijing's strategy of influence are the result of a process that was slowly organized, relying on soft power, the means that China has deployed to highlight its assets also explain this success, just as much as Washington's difficulties in maintaining American soft power. A pendulum swing from Washington to Beijing has thus taken place, with the difficulties of one intensifying the successes of the other (Courmont 2012).

China's presence in Africa has strategic goals. In the last decade, the Asian giant built a 'network of alliances' in different parts of the African continent (Horn of Africa, Central African countries and North Africa). They all have strategic importance, so China is trying to consolidate long-term geopolitical projects, the so-called Belt and Road Initiative and the String of Pearls. The country "has resumed the path undertaken by Zhen He" (Espin and Barona 2022). The expression 'China in Africa' reflects quite explicitly that Africa is, above all, a space, a playground where 'Chinese strategy' can be deployed (Kernen 2014).

Many discussions and critics about China's presence in Africa have existed for years in the academic world. They are talking about a 'new imperialism'. Dobler (2017) explained that many scholars had analyzed the different "actors and institutions and their different agendas and ways of acting" (Dobler 2017, 450) and they "have differentiated between African countries and their economic and political trajectories" (Dobler 2017, 450). He is in clear opposition with scholars like François Bart (2011), David Bénazéraf (2014) or Cédric Le Goff (2017). These authors consider China a hegemonic power trying to maximize its interests without considering the African ones. Ngamondi (2020) opposes them about three ideas they share: the existence of a dominant thought, the ambition to re-colonize the African continent, and the disempowerment of African states. China developed a much more diplomatic approach to the region, maintaining good relations with African governments, respecting their political views and increasing economic ties. China does not impose language, culture or religion (Espin and Barona 2022).

Chinese President Xi Jinping announced the BRI project in 2013. It is one of the main pillars of the Chinese economy. Through the realization of this project, the PRC would finally strengthen its connections and trade with Europe, Africa, Latin America, and other Asian countries. The BRI includes 140 countries. Out of the 140 countries, African countries make up one-third, with countries in East Africa being more influential. Some of the most significant projects confirm this assumption, like the standard railway in Kenya, connecting Mombasa and Nairobi with the railways between Ethiopia and Djibouti. Even though the BRI helped the horn of Africa become an important hub for the new 'Maritime Silk Road', it is evident that China is using these projects as a form of soft colonization (Cegit 2022).

Apart from resource sharing to align the goals of the BRI and the FOCAC, China also uses a debt-trap policy when giving loans. Under such policy, China approves large-scale loans to partner states that do not have the potential to repay such loans. When the recipient of the loans cannot repay the loan in time, the government demands economic or political 'favors' like, e.g., ownership of ports, railways, or tax exceptions for its companies operating in the recipient's state. Such strategies are present in different parts of the world and are used to increase power and economic influence. Particular countries cannot exit the debt trap because they still must repay the loans despite the demands they have fulfilled.

The most considerable controversy occurred in 2017 when a Chinese logistics center was opened in Djibouti. Officially opened in 2017, the Center's main goal was to support and supply Chinese vessels from China to Europe. However, other countries, especially the United States of America, claim that China practically 'occupied' the territory to build the base. China arrived in the Horn of Africa through the Belt and Road Initiative expansion. Because the Government of Djibouti could not repay the loans received from China to build infrastructure, the Government of Djibouti was practically forced to rent a part of its coastal territory to very favorable conditions for the Chinese government so they could build the logistics center (Lanteigne 2009). The consequences of the competition between India and China over control of trade routes in the Indian Ocean can be related to the possible consequences of creating this military base in Djibouti. The idea is that China could also turn ports developed in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Myanmar into military installations to strengthen its position in this area. Many experts consider that the presence of the military base already consolidates China as a global power with strong ambitions and interests (Espin and Barona 2022). Long-term investments and China's first military base outside its territory in Djibouti are increasing Chinese influence in the continent. A vigorous debate exists between the analysts who consider that African countries would become strategic partners for China in economic and military terms. Others interpret these investments as a neocolonial policy to consolidate its global position (Espin and Barona 2022). This is the first Chinese military base outside its territory with a contingent of up to 10,000 troops (Dubé 2016). Chinese investments in the transport sector have also been significant in Nigeria, Algeria, Kenya and Ethiopia. However, Djibouti, receiving fewer funds, may be of "equal or greater strategic importance to China" (Espin and Barona 2022, 9).

Many countries implied that the Center is, in fact, a Chinese naval base. China denies these claims, stating that the state is paying an annual rent of 20 million US$ and that the Center was built to protect Chinese interests in the region, especially the maritime trade routes. However, it is fascinating that China has enforced the Center by drilling through the sea floor and expanding the docks so they can receive two aircraft carriers. Some officials state that this has been built so that the newest Chinese nuclear submarines can dock in these centers. These submarines have also been spotted in the Indian Ocean (Cegit 2022).

Apart from Djibouti, Tanzania has also been caught in the 'debt trap'[1]. Currently, China and Oman are building the 'Bagamoyo Mega Port'. In 2019, however, the work on the projects came to a stop because of accusations against Chinese investors. The accusations stated that certain conditions were 'humiliating' and 'unacceptable' for Tanzania. Two conditions in the contract were brought into question. One condition binds the Government in Dodoma to the obligation not to develop or build other ports, while another allows the Chinese government to rent the mega port for 99 years (Mattern 2007). Two years after the works stopped, negotiations are taking place about the continuation of construction, with the outcome still unclear. Apart from the Bagamoyo Port, Tanzania received funds from the Chinese EXIM Bank to build gas pipelines and railways. Tanzania is the next African state to receive a Chinese submarine basis because of the Bagamoyo project. Thus, the two conditions in the contract should not be surprising. Instead, it should be treated as the primary goal of Chinese investments.

The previous examples show that China has a developed pattern of debt-trap politics. These politics are used to enforce and expand the influence in Eastern Africa, primarily targeting developing countries with many natural resources. To achieve these goals, China uses private companies and investors, like, e.g., the EXIM bank, which Beijing runs *de facto*. The whole meaning behind Chinese operations in Africa has the goal of enforcing the Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean. This position is essential for the BRI and the 'String of Pearls' strategy. Such a strategy aims to surround India with Chinese ports from the South China Sea to the Horn of Africa (Djibouti). China also aims to build a base in Cambodia to increase its presence. The process of economic dominance is followed by private security companies in China, who are now employed in Africa as well (Nye 2007).

The main goal of private security companies in China is to secure BRI projects. One of the largest private security companies in Eastern Africa is the 'DeWe Security Service', which employs more than 20,000 workers (The Economic Times 2022). Their activities span from Djibouti and Ethiopia through South Sudan and Kenya. At first glance, this company appears private. However, according to Chinese laws, all security companies with more than three members must have a highly-ranked member of the communist party present on the board of

[1] Debt-trap diplomacy is used to define a creditor nation extending loans to another nation in order to expand its political advantage.

directors. Furthermore, 51% of the ownership must be state-owned, with most of the employees being former members of the Chinese army (Cegit 2022). It is evident that these companies, together with conglomerates and banks, are just one of the instruments China uses to improve its presence in Eastern Africa (Gill and Reilly 2007).

Based on the presented information, it is evident that Beijing learned an important lesson from history. This explains why any direct conflict or military conquest is strictly avoided. China uses different ways to control key areas in Eastern Africa to ensure its position and protect its economic interests. Despite the avoidance, China managed to ensure increased deployment of its troops in Africa, mainly through the support of the United Nations (UN). More Chinese troops in Africa are protecting Chinese projects today than peacekeeping troops deployed by Member States of the UN Security Council. Such a movement of troops develops the Chinese African Standby Force (ASF). Thanks to international missions, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has diplomatic coverage for its presence in countries vital to the BRI. Since China is the UN's second-largest investor, Beijing could use this position to largely influence decision-making regarding its interests in Eastern Africa (Cegit 2022).

The most important remaining questions for Africa are the immense debts and the inability to repay them. Despite the promise made by the Chinese President in 2019 that the BRI projects will be more transparent and favorable for developing countries, with many sources claiming that there is a change to the structures and the repayment periods, there is no guarantee that developing countries will be able to repay their debts. Therefore, there is a threat that developing countries might face situations where they would be pressured into signing concessions (Tomic and Saljic 2020).

Kenya is one of the countries that face an overtake of their port in Mombasa by Chinese companies since Kenya cannot repay the debt taken to build its railway. Such an outcome can be predicted based on the presented examples of other states (Taylor 2009).

CONCLUSION

Undoubtedly, China will continue to build its 'Maritime Silk Road'. Evidence for it is found in the constant improvement of their naval force. Therefore, the main focus of the BRI could be targeting Western and Southern Africa. It remains unclear whether Beijing will use the same strategies as in Eastern Africa. It is also questionable whether China will use the same strategies in Europe since the Chinese FDI has mainly increased over the years, especially in the Western Balkans (Krstinovska 2022). The first country to experience the Chinese debt trap policy was Montenegro. Currently, Montenegro cannot repay the loan taken from the EXIM Bank, and it remains unclear whether Montenegro would have to sign the control over Port of Bar, the largest commercial port in Montenegro, to its Chinese partners (Taylor 2006). The Chinese government argues that these investments are part of a win-win strategy. It supports the internationalization of some of its companies. Indeed, it has significant leeway in the projects it decides to finance. It should be emphasized that large Chinese companies frequently prepare these projects, even when African states carry them out, in the hopes of completing them autonomously. Therefore, the Chinese government can still shape the internationalization of particular 'their' businesses, albeit in different ways (Kernen 2014).

COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

Acknowledgments:
Not applicable.

Funding:
Not applicable.

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