



China-Africa Relations in the Time of COVID-19



While China has funded large-scale projects in Africa, such as this railroad in Kenya, relations between Africa and China have at times been rough since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Source: Macabe 5387 via Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nairobi_Terminus_-_platform.jpg, CC BY-SA 4.0

OE Watch Commentary: As the accompanying article from *Deutsche Welle* notes, 2020 has been “a very bumpy year” for Chinese-African relations so far. While China has provided significant aid to Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic, the outbreak has also shed light on several problems with the relationship.

According to the article, one of the most disturbing issues is the way numerous Africans studying or working in China were treated during the early days of the pandemic. Racism and discrimination, especially in the city of Guangzhou, and what was perceived as Beijing’s inadequate response to them, have badly eroded the positive feelings many Africans previously felt towards the Chinese. Cultural differences are also playing a part in Africa itself, with the article citing an example of a Chinese factory owner who was accused of forcing workers to stay at their jobs and not allowing them to go home during the pandemic.

Adding to the frayed relations, while much of Africa is economically distraught from COVID-19, it is unable to turn towards China for the necessary funds to help

overcome its difficulties. Though China has been sending aid, big investments from the Chinese such as those in the past may, at least temporarily, remain in the past as China struggles with its own faltering economy.

Still, despite the many problems, in the long run China’s prospects in Africa might actually benefit from the pandemic, according to the article. To begin with, there are an estimated one million Chinese living in Africa. They are one reason China has been so generous with aid to the continent during the pandemic despite its own economic troubles. Notably, that money is not just from the government, with many mainland Chinese and their businesses having also made donations. Those funds flowing into Africa help buy goodwill.

Additionally, since it appears growth within China might be constrained for a while, Chinese investors are looking abroad. Facing increasing restrictions from the US and Europe, they are searching in Africa for opportunities. However, some Africans are increasingly wary of the imbalance in trade between the two parties as well as the increasing debt to China that Africa is piling on. Thus, as the article discusses, it is expected that the relationship between China and Africa may continue to be strong in the short to medium term, but changes are possible in the long term, if Africa pushes to decrease the massive trade imbalance. **End OE Watch Commentary (Feldman)**

“The coronavirus outbreak has revealed cracks in the China-Africa dynamic. Gone are the days of Chinese big loans and major borrowing. Beijing’s relationship with its African partners is changing, experts say.”

Source: Chiponda Chimbelu , “COVID-19 pandemic to transform China-Africa relations,” *Deutsche Welle*, 8 June 2020. <https://www.dw.com/en/covid-19-pandemic-to-transform-china-africa-relations/a-53724530>

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But despite many negative headlines, China looks like it could still benefit from the ongoing pandemic in Africa. Beijing was the first of the continent’s partners to get the coronavirus outbreak under control, and that’s not its only advantage.

It is hardly a surprise that official Chinese aid has been outstripped by private donations in the COVID-19 response. Beijing has already pumped significant amounts of cash in Africa. It is now the continent’s largest bilateral creditor, accounting for around 20% of external debt on the continent, according to several estimates. So while the Chinese economy falters, private involvement in the Chinese response may be a sign of what’s to come.

Still, the relationship between Beijing and its African partners is largely unequal. The trade deficit is staggering, and the incidents in Guangzhou were also a sign of the dynamic. African traders do not have the same economic power and access to the market that Chinese migrants have on the continent.