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Opinion | Why China is succeeding in Africa where the US is failing

China started building infrastructure in Africa decades ago, long before its Belt and Road Initiative could inspire Western jealousy

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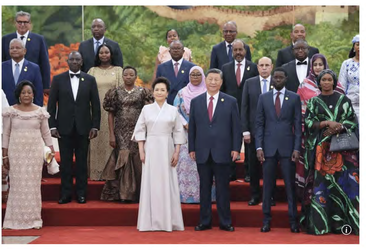

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Wenfang Tang
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This month, Beijing played host to the heads of state from 53 of the 54 African countries at the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation summit. It was a spectacular diplomatic show that might have made Western governments and media outlets feel jealous and bitter, leading some to harp on about debt traps. Others see the event as a victory for China's grand strategy to gain influence on the global stage.

Africa has been an integral component of China's grand strategy. It is a crucial geopolitical link in China's Belt and Road Initiative. African countries can provide vital support for China in international affairs as a voting bloc in the United Nations and other international organisations.

Beijing's interest in Africa is nothing new. It started in the 1960s and 1970s when China was isolated by the international community under Western domination, and when the Sino-Soviet relationship deteriorated. In the 1960s, Chinese premier Zhou Enlai spent more than a month in Africa, openly supporting countries' anti-imperialist national independence movements and calling Africans comrades and brothers.

China was helping to build infrastructure even when its own per capita gross domestic product was lower than that of some African nations. Some Africans still remember and are thankful for these projects that are still in use today. Ideologically, they have found Maoism more attractive than liberal democracy in their fight against Western domination and in their effort to build new nation-states.

In the 1980s and 1990s, China enjoyed a honeymoon period with the West under Deng Xiaoping, who led the country towards explosive economic growth. When the West finally realised that Deng was only interested in Western technology and market economics but not in its political system and ideology, it tried everything to prevent China from developing further.

It is partly against this background that China started to refocus on Africa in 2000. Beijing's current approach is to forge business partnerships based on mutual economic benefit without interfering in each other's sovereignty.

A worker sweeps the Gongo la Mboto cemetery in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, on August 12, among tombstones for the Chinese engineers, technicians and workers who died while constructing the Tanzania-Zambia Railway Authority railway. Photo: Xinhua

China's success in Africa is rooted in its ability to provide what African countries need, namely, infrastructure, sustainable development, economic digitalisation and local governance. China may be temporarily behind the US in developing military equipment and artificial intelligence technology, but it is leading the world in many areas, particularly infrastructure, clean energy, electric vehicles and the digital economy.

China's governance experience can also provide valuable lessons for African nations when it comes to providing public services and preventing corruption in non-Western political systems.

Further, Chinese success in Africa is perhaps partly due to the failure of US foreign policy, which ranges from outright disrespect to moralistic treatment. For instance, Republican president Donald Trump once referred to African nations as "s***hole countries".

While the Democratic Party is friendlier to Africa, its approach is out of touch with reality. For example, during a trip to Africa, then US president Barack Obama spent a considerable amount of time and effort trying to convince people to accept gay rights, but doing little to satisfy their need for economic development.

Although the US hosted two Africa summits, in 2014 and 2022, their purpose was mainly to counteract China's influence in Africa and to lecture Africa on US values and political beliefs.

In contrast, the Chinese approach of treating Africans as comrades and business partners has produced impressive results. In 2022, China's trade volume with Africa was US$282 billion, nearly five times more than the US'. Chinese-funded infrastructure projects are seen everywhere in Africa. China is also benefiting from access to Africa's natural resources and markets for its products, given that the African continent's population is as sizeable as China's.

A Ugandan student learns Chinese in school. Photo: Shutterstock

China's soft power is equally visible in Africa. While China-funded Confucius Institutes were forced to shut down in the US, they are flourishing in Africa. For example, the Confucius Institute at the University of Dodoma in Tanzania offers a Chinese Bachelor of Arts programme for more than 200 students. The success of the Confucius Institutes in Africa is a reflection of the continent's acceptance of Chinese cultural influence.

China's governance experience is also taken seriously by Africans. For example, the Mwalimu Julius Nyerere Leadership School near Dar es Salaam in Tanzania is modelled on China's Central Party School in Beijing. It aims to train young and upcoming leaders from the ruling parties of Tanzania, South Africa, Angola, Namibia, Zimbabwe and Mozambique. In the school's auditorium, Mao Zedong's picture is prominently displayed, together with those of the founding fathers of the African nations.

China's success in Africa is by no means without obstacles. In addition to the "debt trap" narrative propagated by the West, perhaps more serious is the challenge posed domestically in China. Chinese social media celebrities showed little interest in the recent China-Africa summit, and some only referred to the participants as a "gang of beggars". China's elite universities are dismissive of initiatives to set up exchange programmes with their African counterparts.

Their reasons – that these universities are not ranked high enough globally, or that it is unsafe for their students to study in Africa – have a whiff of Trumpian contempt. This mentality is in sharp contrast to the government's vision of China's grand strategy.

Sceptics focus on the economic and political risks of China's investment in Africa. Yet China is in Africa to stay, not to make money and run away. Its strategy is winning because it is built on a historical, humanistic view of mutual benefit and respect.

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