

*China's Battle for Hearts and Minds in
Africa*

*Reflections on Beijing's Soft Power in the "Hopeless
Continent"*

Antonio Fiori

(University of Bologna)

Johns Hopkins University – 28 January, 2019

Hopeless or Rising?









What is Soft Power?

- Term conceived and coined by Joseph Nye
- Not to be understood as the “soft” strength of a State; it can achieve the desired goals through persuasion or attraction without the necessity of using force
- Three resources constitute the soft power of a country: political values, culture, and foreign policies.
- Differences with hard power

Chinese Criticism of Nye's Soft Power

- He does not provide a clear line between hard and soft power (If country A provides economic aid to country B without explicitly or implicitly asking for any favor in return, is that soft power or hard power for country A?)
- His sources of power – culture, ideology, and values – are not always attractive, persuasive or appealing. Soft power can be counter-effective in certain situations.
- Hard power can have attraction and appeal (for instance, in the use of military power in humanitarian or international peacekeeping activities)
- It is the behavioral approach that defines the essences of soft power

Historical View of China-Africa Relationship

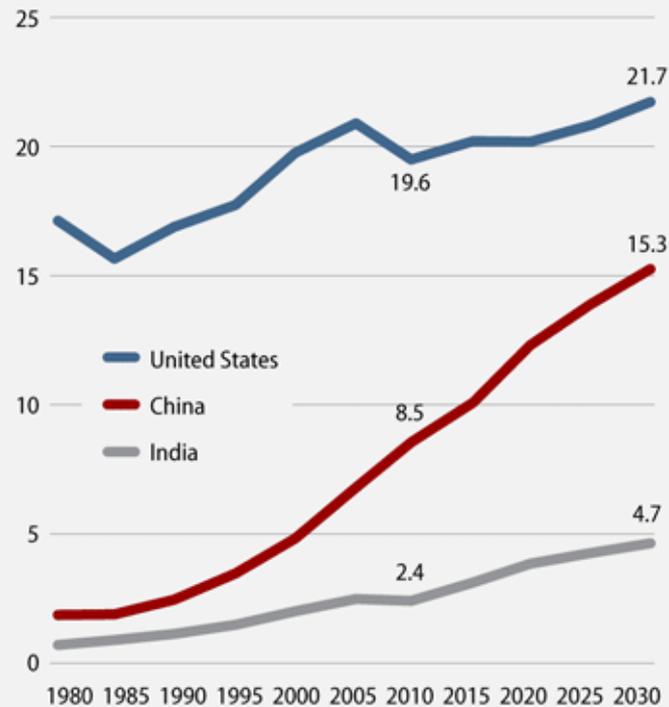
- Not a recent phenomenon (Tang dynasty 618-907; Ming dynasty 1368-1644: Zheng He's seven voyages (1405-1433))
- The “political embrace”
- Deng's “open door” policy towards Africa
- Tiananmen (1989) and the Going Out strategy
- A more pragmatic and rational cooperation with the establishment of the FOCAC (2000)

“Economic” Soft Power

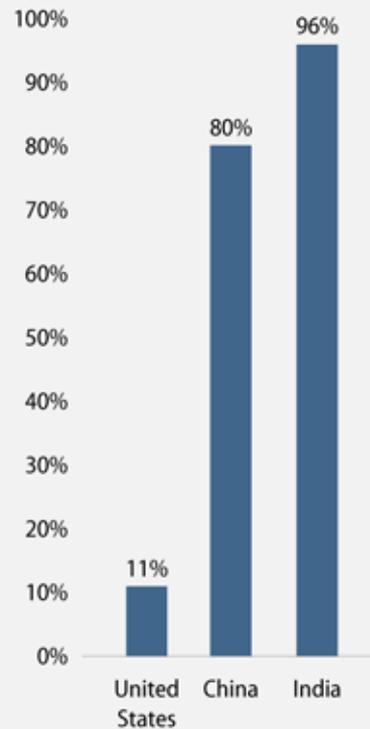
- Deviation from Nye’s approach: Chinese economic elements assume much more the role of “soft power” than in the case of the American or European approach.
- China’s economic growth needs to be sustained by a constant influx of natural resources
- Rent-seeking behavior, where the elites are enriched with little or no benefits for the masses

Projected oil consumption, 1980–2030

Million barrels oil equivalent per day



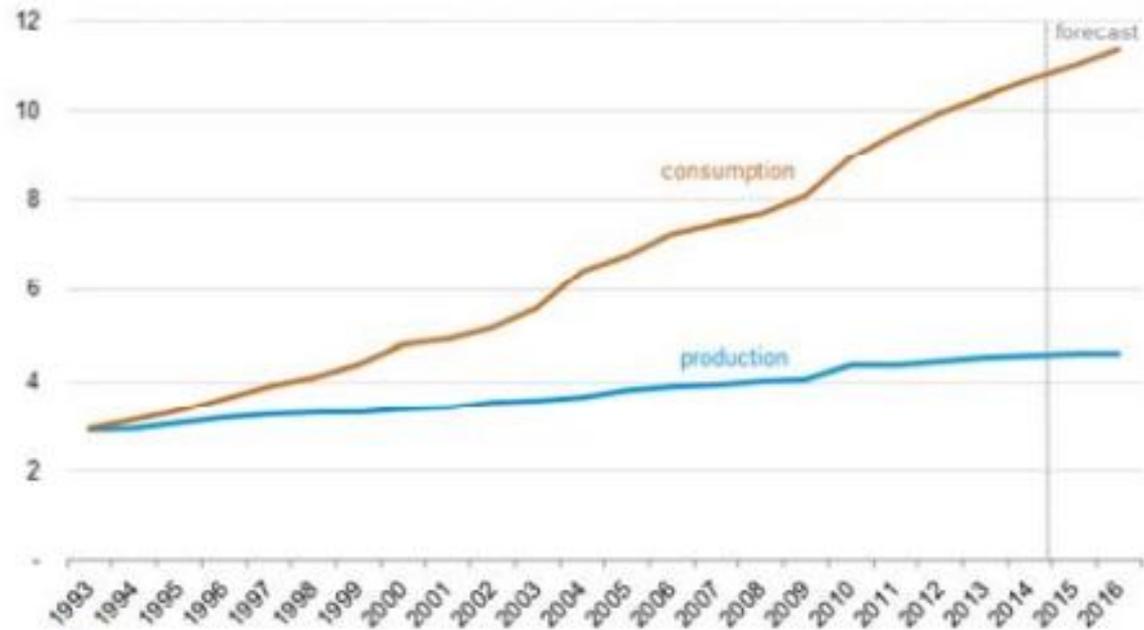
Projected oil consumption in percent growth, 2010–2030



Source: Energy Information Administration, Office of Energy Markets and End Use, "World Petroleum Consumption, Annual Estimates, 1980-2008," October 6, 2009, available at: <http://www.eia.gov/emeu/international/RecentPetroleumConsumptionBarrelsperDay.xls> (accessed February 26, 2010); EIA, International Energy Outlook 2009, Table A5, "World Liquids Consumption by Region, Reference Case, 1990-1930," May 2009, available at: http://www.eia.doe.gov/oiarf/leo/excel/leoreftab_5.xls (accessed February 26, 2010).

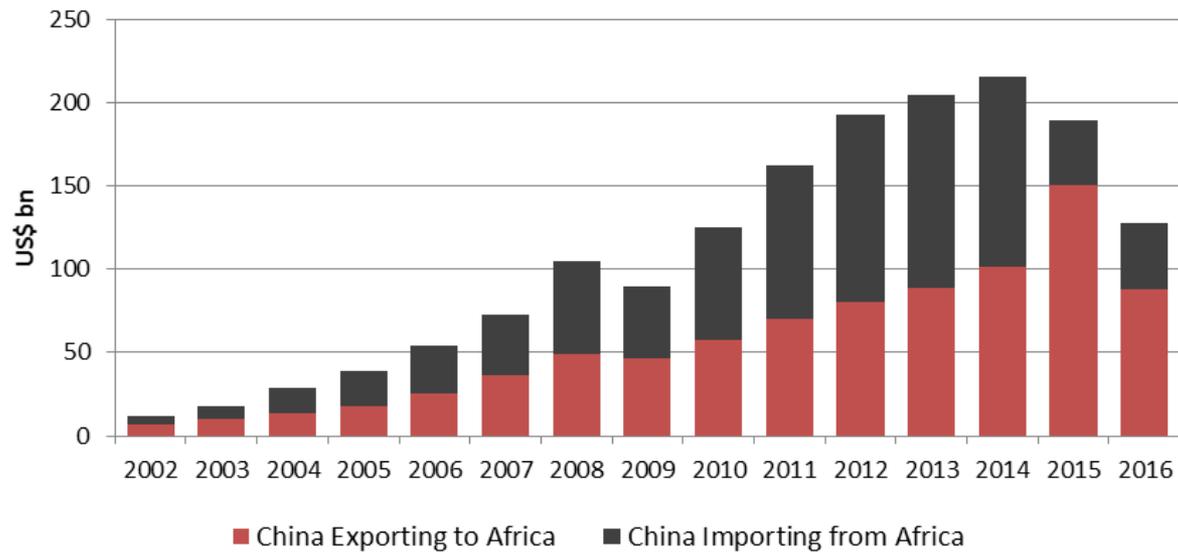
China's oil production and consumption, 1993-2016

million barrels per day



Source: Energy Information Administration and Short-Term Energy Outlook, May 2015

China-Africa Trade



January 2018

CHINA★AFRICA
RESEARCH INITIATIVE


JOHNS HOPKINS
SCHOOL of ADVANCED
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

- “Aid has played an important political role in China’s strategy to win support and protect its interests in Africa” (Kurlantzick,
- Development of China’s foreign aid to Africa as unraveling in three distinct phases:
 - solidarity (1955-1978): Free assistance
 - reform (1978-2000): Mutual benefit and more active economic cooperation
 - comprehensive development (2000-)
- Soft loans and debt relief rather than direct grants
- Beijing Consensus vs. Washington Consensus

Political Soft Power

- Promotion of the “One China Policy”
- “Supporters” at the UN and other forums
- “Non interference” principle and political survival of authoritarian leaders
- Beijing uses soft power to achieve certain political goals that promote its national interest in terms of relations with other states or enhancing its international power and prestige. Its objective is not to promote good governance, human rights, democracy or even economic development through its use of soft power.

“The Battle for Minds”: Cultural Soft Power

- Cooperation in the sector of education very intense
- 1950s to 2005: China has offered governmental scholarships to 19,000 students – typically learning the language and then proceeding to technical studies – from 50 different African countries, while, at the same time, dispatching more than 500 instructors to the African continent
- Educational support serves two main purposes for China: the first is to improve China’s image; the second, equally important, is to guarantee workforce capable of using Chinese high tech industrial products in Africa, which, of course, would also benefit the continent.

- The FOCAC has served as a major venue for strengthening the collaboration between China and Africa from different points of view, including education, as testified by the establishment of the Cooperation in Education and Human Resource Development (CEHRD) program (African Human Resources Development Fund to provide training and education).

- Bidirectional Cooperation
- Huge interest many African institutions have started to nurture towards the introduction of the Chinese language in their study plans, given that “China needs foreign languages, the world needs Chinese language.”
- Establishment – since December 2005, when the first was inaugurated in Nairobi – of more than 70 Confucius Institutes across the continent

- In May 2018, 300 delegates from 40 African countries gathered in Mozambique for the annual Joint Conference of Confucius Institutes in Africa. Also due to Confucius Institute's programs, the number of African students studying in China has grown from under 2.000 in 2003 to over 50.000 in 2015, making of China, as of 2017, the top destination for English-speaking African students, overcoming both the United States and the United Kingdom

- If in the past young Africans ended up studying in their own countries or in Western universities, the trend has now changed and more African students have turned their attention to China and its higher education.
- In addition, it must be noticed that Africans who study in China, unlike those who study elsewhere, tend to go back to their native countries upon completion, so contributing to their national development.

Media

- Chinese media presence integral part of the “going out” policy and as an attempt to enhance its “demonized” international image presented by Western media
- In order to give implementation to the “grand external propaganda” (*Dawaixuan*) ignited by the CCP, major media adopted corporate structures in their subsidiaries for further expansion in the African continent: in 2008 the central government invested RMB 45 billion in order to pave the way to the “Big Four” Chinese media actors: Xinhua News Agency, China Radio International (CRI), Chinese Central Television (CCTV), and *China Daily*.
- StarTimes: In view of June 17, 2015 – the date set by the International telecommunications Union (ITU) for countries in Europe, parts of the Middle East and Africa to finalize the migration from analogue to digital television broadcasts – it has competed with other actors being involved in the process of digital migration in more than half of African countries.

- As highlighted by Dani Madrid-Morales (2018), this expansion has also meant a gradual diversification, that has brought Chinese corporations and State agencies to be involved in five key areas:
 - *content production*, provided by Xinhua – China’s state news agency – to many African media houses;
 - *content distribution*, mainly Chinese soap operas that have become quite popular in many countries in the continent;
 - *infrastructure development*, largely supported by big companies like Huawei;
 - *professional training*, mainly offered by Chinese universities;
 - *direct investment*, such as the 20 percent acquisition of South Africa’s Independent Media by a group of Chinese investors.

- According to some commentators, this seemingly unstoppable expansion of state-sponsored media organizations (China, according to Shambaugh spends about \$10 billion annually on projecting its image and influence abroad), from a non-democratic country into Africa, has raised a certain preoccupation, since in some case it might overwhelm the hopes of consolidating fragile or imperfect democracies.

- China premises its media expansion into Africa on providing “positive reporting” or “constructive journalism,” aimed to influence perceptions of Beijing by “advancing new ways of looking at Africa,” a completely different attitude from the role of independent watchdog media plays elsewhere.
- Many analysts, however, have tried to demonstrate that this label of constructive journalism is mere rhetoric devoid of any substance, given the fact that when dealing with stories that can be harmful to Chinese economic or political interests these are filtered directly in Beijing, while “lighter” themes are left to the controlling of African editors.
- In addition, analysts’ recurring question is about the level of autonomy and independence African journalists detain when they have to cover aspects that are deemed “inconvenient” by Beijing, such as human rights violation, elections, civil society participation or being critical towards African dictators

Telecommunications

- Similarly to what has happened in other infrastructural sectors, China has emerged as one of the most pivotal actors in ensuring connectivity in the digital realm, thanks to its two Chinese information and communications technology colossuses – Huawei (privately owned) and Zhongxing Telecommunications Equipment Corporation (ZTE) (state owned) – who have come to dominate the African market, in constant and rapid growth and attracting an increasing number of investors.

- Both companies, busy in various sectors like rolling out optic fiber initiatives and submarine cable projects, look at Africa as a very remunerating region, to the point that Huawei – whose 15 percent of its global sales is generated in the continent – has opened tens of local branches and offices hiring between 4,500 and 5,800 employees, over half of whom are locals.

- The secret behind this incredible success lies in the support provided by the Export-Import Bank of China (EXIM) – owned and funded by the government and dedicated to nourishing China’s foreign trade, investment and international economic cooperation – or the China Development Bank (CDB): in substance, state-owned Chinese banks led by EXIM Bank provide loans on condition that African governments buy equipment and services only from Chinese companies.
- Moreover, the strong Chinese interest towards the African telecommunication sector indicates a recalibration in its investment’s pattern, from an exclusive engagement in extractive industries to an increasing inclusion of services – finance, banking and telecommunication – and manufacturing.

- Huawei and ZTE constantly enjoy the diplomatic aid their government can provide, given that companies are important players in public diplomacy since they shape the same image of the country. Therefore, when Chinese leaders visit the African continent they compose their delegation by including Huawei and ZTE executives, allowing them to have a preferential access to local governmental élites and build high-level relationships that can be highly important in order to gaining influence and winning contracts.
- Chinese companies, however, have been the targets of intense criticism for different reasons, as their lack of transparency, the resort to “vendor-guaranteed” loans and the adoption of corrupted practices, to which both Huawei and ZTE respond by stressing the importance of their corporate social responsibility portfolios.

UN Peacekeeping Activities

- United Nations peacekeeping activities have become an important aspect of Beijing's foreign policy, especially because they are strongly intertwined with soft power. China, in fact, is currently not only among the world's top 12 largest contributors of troops, but also the biggest contributor of peacekeepers among the five permanent members of the UN Security Council.

- The African continent, in fact, represents the most significant destination for Chinese peacekeeping contingents: around the 80 percent of the 2,500 troops China deploys in ten UN missions are in Africa, most notably in Mali, South Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo and Darfur.
- It must be highlighted that China not only provides personnel but also medical expertise, transportation equipment, engineering and logistical specialists for UN operations.

- The Peacekeeping Leaders' Summit held in New York in 2015 represented a concrete turning point. During that meeting, in fact, Xi Jinping announced that China would set up a permanent peacekeeping standby force of 8,000 troops, ready for rapid deployment whenever necessary.
- In addition, he pledged that China would contribute \$100 million in military assistance to the African Union over the next five years, to increase its capacity to respond to crises.

- China's deep involvement in peacekeeping activities is driven by different reasons:
 - First, and more obvious, Chinese troops are strategically deployed in resource-rich countries, like the Democratic Republic of Congo (mining concessions), Sudan (oil interests), South Sudan and Liberia (timber).
 - A second reason must be seen, however, in China's rising status on the global stage. Being aware of the fact that many countries are still diffident of its strategic intentions, Beijing wants to demonstrate to the international community that it is seriously committed to contribute to the establishment of international peace and security by indicating, in addition, the constructive role of the People's Liberation Army's significant increasing military capabilities and the role of China as a responsible power.
 - Finally, it must be highlighted the practical importance and substantial benefits that training alongside other countries' contingents of the UN peacekeeping brings to Chinese security forces in terms of experience, professionalism and modernization.

Official Diplomacy

- China's international diplomacy is part of that gigantic effort towards the construction of good and productive relations that may help to reinforce the "good image" Beijing wants to convey. Operationally, this effort is translated into high-level delegations that untiringly visit an infinite number of countries around the world, with special regards to developing ones.
- These visits are symbolically very important for the recipient country, because they reinforce the idea that China does not pay any attention to the size, the achieved level of modernization or the ideological affinity, but treats all its interlocutors equitably.

- It goes without saying that China genuinely aims – through this pretty intense diplomatic activity – at satisfying its national interests, but it is obvious that the treatment that Beijing reserves to second-rank conversers – made of frequent direct interactions, utmost attention and red carpets – is not exactly what other great powers, like the United States or the United Kingdom, can guarantee them.

- This impression was recently confirmed by the massive African participation to the FOCAC which took place in September 2018 in Beijing: 51 African leaders participated in the triennial event, while only 27 decided to travel to New York, one week later, in order to participate to the 73rd session of the United Nations General Assembly, and at least 24 African states sent lower-ranking officials to the UN than they did to FOCAC.

- In the last few decades China has developed and gradually reinforced a strategic campaign in order to build fruitful and durable relations with several African parties and political organizations.
- It goes without saying that since that moment even party-to-party relations were built around some pivotal principles, like independence, equality and non-interference in each other's internal affairs; something worth noticing is the fact that these relations could be extended to any political force, regardless of ideology. Against this backdrop, the strategy was successful, given that in the period from 1978 to 1990, over 300 exchanges with African political parties took place.
- Simultaneously, the initiative was coupled with economic incentives that began to be recognized to those African countries that officially decided to cut their relations with Taipei and adopt the "One China policy" in exchange for loans and low-cost infrastructural projects.

The Soft Power “Therapy”

- Health assistance is another form employed by China not only to provide development assistance but also to enlarge its soft power in the African continent, which, as widely known, is, in some areas, in need of assistance to eradicate maladies and diseases.
- China’s commitment has produced the implementation of about 255 projects in health, population and water and sanitation sectors in Africa for an investment of more than \$3 billion between 2000 and 2012.

- The most typical form of China's health assistance is incarnated by the dispatch of CMTs: in 2014, 43 of these teams were at work in 42 different African countries, treating over 5 million patients. The estimated operational cost China has to bear is between 29 and 60 million dollars.
- Apart from deploying personnel, China intervenes by building clinics for the local population, introducing Chinese traditional medical treatment (particularly acupuncture), donating pharmaceuticals, providing equipment and training to African health workers.

- Following the 2006 FOCAC – during which Hu Jintao promised the fortification of Chinese intervention in Africa’s healthcare – Beijing has helped to build several hospitals and malaria prevention centers in Africa, invested \$123.9 million in medical equipment, supplies and anti-malaria drugs, and trained over 3,000 healthcare workers from all over the continent.
- Beijing has also responded to specific medical emergencies in the continent. The contribution to the fight against malaria is particularly important and Beijing – especially after the 2006 summit – has implemented various measures, including the distribution of Cotecxin, the effective antimalarial drug produced in China. This might also be seen as a “low-cost” strategy to introduce Chinese-made medication to the African market

- This deep pledge cannot be considered but positively by both African citizens, who can recur to infrastructures and services implemented by Chinese and see the standards of local medical services improve, and by African leaderships, who can gain legitimation from their fellow citizens by cooperating with China in the healthcare sector.
- From the Chinese point of view health assistance represents another means to strengthen its diplomatic relations with Africa: it, in fact, can help Beijing to gain favorable trading terms and access to necessary resources, even though the Chinese government has constantly claimed that its health diplomacy is not finalized to the appropriation of Africa's resources.

Conclusions

- The manner in which Beijing deals with the outside world, including Africa, is very reflective of what is happening in China's internal affairs.
- China applies soft power in the African context not only to be attractive for the continent but also to address possible perceptions that its emergence as a global power may pose a direct threat to the status quo world powers (Peaceful rise, Peaceful Development, Harmonious World, etc.)
- China selects African countries according to their potential source of raw materials or alternatively as potential market for China's manufactured goods.
- China's aid to Africa is by no means altruistic but motivated by economic self-interest. However, the positive aspect of China's foreign direct investment in Africa has been the boom in Africa's infrastructural development.
- Chinese investments are welcomed by African governments, especially in light of decreased European and North American investments.
- China's approach to soft power is diametric opposed to Western uses of soft power, which often includes a political-moral or value dimension, for example human rights or democracy.
- The impact of soft power in China's relations with African states has been positive for Beijing in many respects but it also produced negative results in other instances.