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China and Sub-Saharan Africa

The People’s Republic of China (PRC, or China) maintains relations with nearly every country in Sub-Saharan Africa (“Africa”). Often dating to the Cold War, these ties grew in scope and diversity after the launch in 2000 of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), a channel for high-level contacts. Some Members of Congress have asserted that China’s geostrategic aims in Africa pose threats to U.S. foreign policy and national security interests. The Biden Administration has emphasized strategic competition with the PRC in its national security and regional strategy; the U.S. Secretary of Defense has labeled China’s activities in Africa as “destabilizing.”

PRC interests in Africa center on expanding trade, finance, and investment ties and securing international support for the PRC’s positions and policies. PRC industrial demand for Africa’s commodities, including critical minerals, make the region important for China’s manufacturing sector. PRC firms are active across Africa, where there is sizable demand for PRC goods and services, notably infrastructure construction. Much of China’s large-scale commercial activity in Africa is aided by PRC state-backed credit, often tied to the use of PRC goods and services. PRC loans have contributed to rising sovereign debt distress in Africa.

In terms of African governments’ approaches to the PRC, economic interests (e.g., export growth, capital, and access to inexpensive goods), as well as geopolitical motivations (either as a preference for some PRC policies or for diverse international partnerships), may influence decisions. Public opinion analysis in Africa shows a wide range of views. Surveys from Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa indicate more favorable views compared to non-African countries. Other polling suggests generally positive views of China’s economic and political influence, with the strongest assessments of the PRC’s model of development in Benin, Burkina Faso, and Mali.

Interstate Relations

The PRC has established diplomatic ties with all African countries except Eswatini, which has diplomatic relations with Taiwan. The PRC claims multiple bilateral “strategic” and other partnerships in Africa, maintains a mission to the African Union (AU), and has special representatives to regional groups (e.g., the East African Community).

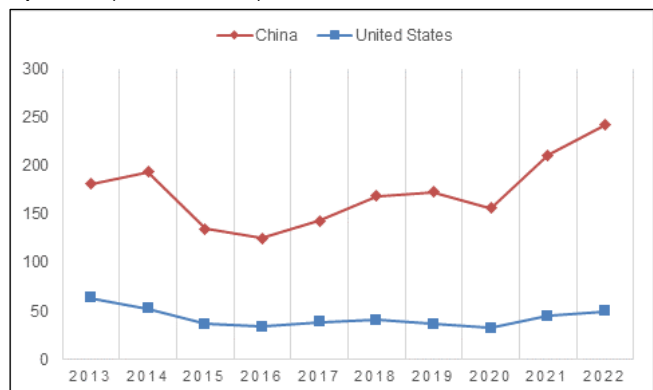
FOCAC has a multi-level structure consisting of summits, ministerial conferences, and other senior official meetings on thematic issues (e.g., trade, health, defense, law, and media). At triennial FOCAC summits, the PRC and FOCAC’s African members set out PRC-African cooperation goals, as under the *China-Africa Cooperation Vision 2035* adopted in 2021.

Cooperation also takes place via multilateral platforms such as U.N. bodies and groups of emerging economies. At a 2023 China-Africa Leaders’ Dialogue, PRC leader Xi Jinping said China would launch initiatives supporting industrialization, agricultural modernization, and talent development in Africa.

Economic Relations

China’s goods trade with Africa totaled \$243 billion in 2022, up from \$181 billion in 2013, per International Monetary Fund data. In comparison, U.S.-Africa trade totaled \$50 billion in 2022, down from \$63 billion in 2013 (see **Figure 1**). China’s top African trading partner in 2022 was South Africa (accounting for ~\$53 billion or 21% of PRC trade with the region). Other top PRC trade partners include Angola, Nigeria, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). China’s top imports from Africa consist of fossil fuels and metals, including precious metals and critical minerals, which are crucial in a range of strategic industries. China has a 2019 bilateral free trade agreement (FTA) with Mauritius, and China and the Southern African Customs Union have a customs cooperation agreement and reportedly are negotiating a full FTA.

Figure 1. U.S. & China Total Goods Trade with Africa By Value (\$USD Billions)



Source: International Monetary Fund Direction of Trade Statistics

China’s economic activity in Africa is mediated, in part, by China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a multifaceted foreign economic policy and investment program. (See CRS In Focus IF11735, *China’s “One Belt, One Road” Initiative: Economic Issues*.) Eswatini and Mauritius are the only African countries that have not joined the BRI. China has established a dominant position in many critical mineral supply chains by investing in mining operations across Africa (e.g., cobalt mining in DRC) and importing a large share of Africa’s mineral production.

PRC entities provided roughly \$90 billion in non-bond investment to African countries between 2005 and 2022,

with about three quarters going to the mining and energy sectors, according to American Enterprise Institute China Global Investment Tracker data. Top destinations included DRC (18%), South Africa (13%), and Guinea (9%).

Boston University's Global Development Policy Center has documented \$156.7 billion in loans from PRC lenders to African state borrowers between 2000 and 2022; top loan recipients included Angola (29%), Ethiopia (9%), and Kenya (7%). The transport and energy sectors were the targets of about 30% of such loans. PRC lending has contributed to growing African sovereign debt and, in some cases (e.g., Zambia), debt distress. PRC loans reportedly account for about 12% of African public and private debts. PRC lending to African countries has declined since 2017. Amid concern over rising African indebtedness during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the PRC joined the G20 Debt Service Suspension Initiative, a temporary suspension of debt service payments in 2020 and 2021. China is co-chairing creditor committees negotiating debt restructuring for Zambia and Ethiopia under the G20 Common Framework for Debt Treatments. Some experts contend, however, that the PRC has not been transparent in disclosing the terms of its loans to various African countries. Although China has canceled some African bilateral debt, delaying repayment and extending loan terms has been more common.

While African countries have accepted concessional and interest-free loans, as well as foreign aid grants, from China, public data on PRC aid flows is neither authoritative nor readily comparable to Western aid due to differing definitions of "aid" and data gaps. Like Western donors, China has supported training and vocational exchanges in Africa, including via PRC enterprises and initiatives such as "Luban Workshops" that have trained locals in areas such as agriculture and railway management.

Security Relations

The PRC has long sold arms to Africa, and from 2016-2020 reportedly was Africa's second-largest arms supplier after Russia. Data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute suggests that Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Angola have been among the world's top ten importers of PRC conventional arms since 2020. Other PRC military and security engagement in Africa is limited, but growing. PRC leaders have tasked the People's Liberation Army (PLA) with developing the capacity to protect China's global economic interests and PRC nationals in Africa, and with conducting regional military diplomacy and cooperation.

In 2017, the PLA established its first overseas military base in Djibouti—at a chokepoint between the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. This base is located near Camp Lemonnier, a U.S. naval expeditionary base and the sole enduring U.S. military base in Africa. In 2023, the Department of Defense reported that China "probably ... has considered" pursuing additional military logistics bases in East Africa or West Africa's Atlantic coast. In March 2023, the Commander of U.S. Africa Command testified to Congress that "[i]n itself, Chinese basing in Djibouti—or any future basing project—poses a marginal threat to U.S. interests on the continent," while also cautioning that a PRC base in West Africa

"would change the whole calculus of the geostrategic global campaign plans of protecting the homeland."

The PRC has carried out counterpiracy patrols off the Horn of Africa since 2008, in coordination with similarly-tasked multinational naval operations, and is a top peacekeeping mission troop contributor, primarily in Africa. As of late 2023, per U.N. data, China was the eighth-largest U.N. peacekeeping mission troop contributing country (TCC), with 2,275 personnel, and the largest TCC by far among the five permanent members of the Security Council.

The PRC has provided police and military training and aid in Africa; developed relationships with senior leaders; committed \$100 million in military aid to the AU from 2015-2020; set up a military training school in Tanzania in 2018; and in 2022, pledged ten additional "peace and security projects" in Africa in accordance with promises made during that year's FOCAC ministerial conference. PRC private security contractors operate in parts of Africa, primarily to protect PRC commercial interests.

U.S. Policy Concerns

The Biden Administration's *Strategy Toward Sub-Saharan Africa* asserts that the PRC sees Africa "as an important arena to challenge the rules-based international order, advance its own narrow commercial and geopolitical interests, undermine transparency and openness, and weaken U.S. relations with African peoples and governments." At the same time, Administration officials have emphasized that they will not force African countries to "choose" between the PRC and the United States, likely in recognition of some African leaders' and publics' sensitivity over state sovereignty and independence. Some U.S. officials also have accused China of so-called "debt trap diplomacy" and/or "predatory lending."

Issues for Congress

Congressional hearings have examined growing China-Africa ties, and Congress has established a range of assistance and financing tools to promote U.S. interests in Africa and elsewhere. These include the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) and the U.S. Countering PRC Influence Fund (CPIF), a foreign assistance appropriation. In the 118th Congress, the FY2024 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA; P.L. 118-31) expanded U.S. monitoring of PRC activities in Africa. The extent to which China's expanding presence and partnerships in Africa may inherently challenge or threaten vital U.S. interests is a focus of ongoing congressional consideration, as are U.S. responses. Issues of interest to Congress may include PRC firms' influence over critical minerals and telecommunications in the region; the impact of PRC influence on democratic governance in Africa; the level and impact of CPIF allocations for Africa; and the scope of U.S. trade and investment assistance to the region.

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