

African elites must rethink their relationship with China

LSE's Waiswa Nkwanga argues that there is great need for African elites to protect their economies and people from potential Chinese exploitation, even if the latter's vast investment into the African continent is to be a force for good in the long term.

Africa was barely mentioned in the US presidential debates. Mitt Romney mentioned Mali twice in the final debate in reference to terrorist groups and Obama mentioned Somalia only once in the same vein. That was it.



But something else caught my attention during the presidential debates, which I think offers some lessons for African policymakers —China.

In all three debates, China was discussed at length as an adversary not to be taken lightly. Both Obama and Romney charged that China is a currency manipulator and a violator of trade rules and property rights laws, and vowed to do whatever it takes to stop China's dubious trade practices.

Yet, in Africa, China is seen in a completely different light—as a trusted and benevolent partner, especially in contrast to western powers. China enjoys unconditional support from African policymakers and scholars like Dambisa Moyo.

Of course, US's and Africa's issues with China are vastly different, but their situations are similar, centring on a common theme rooted in China's economic prowess. Like the US, China is an important economic partner for Africa.

Moreover, the main issue of concern for both may be similar—China's readiness to undermine international rules whether in terms of trade rules or human rights for its economic pursuits.

For a while, westerners, including the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, have expressed their concern about China's disregard for international human rights in Africa. The most blatant of which was in Sudan where China sold arms to the Sudanese government, even as it became clear that the regime was engaging in gross human rights violations.

In Zimbabwe, Chinese workers have been accused of mistreating their African subordinates, including administering harsh physical punishments reminiscent of Belgium's conduct in Congo in the 1880s and apartheid South Africa.

Chinese workers in Africa have adopted a pseudo-colonial attitude that, to them, justifies the treatment of Africans as inferior. Thus, when Zimbabwean workers complain about mistreatment, their Chinese superiors simply retort, "you should appreciate we've come to assist you." The Chinese have gone so far as to eat off plates and then offer their leftovers to Africans, [according to one article by the Guardian newspaper](#).

Africa is desperate for Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and China is the only economic power that is willing to take a gamble on this resource rich, yet unstable and neglected continent. Currently the biggest investor, China poured \$150 billion last year into Africa and helped with building the infrastructure that has been largely lacking on the continent.

But whether China is a force for good will ultimately depend on what African elites do. Thus far, African elites have reaped huge rewards from their relationship with China, including the \$200 million African Union headquarters recently donated by China to the continent.

Here, I must say that I'm not an expert on African affairs, but something seems very wrong with this picture — at least to me. This strategy, which focuses on appeasing those at the very top, is bound to fail. Successful developers, including China herself, have done so by putting ordinary people at the forefront of their development strategy.

Obama and Romney demonstrated further that elites have a responsibility to ensure that their economies and people are not exploited by an opportunist and self-serving emerging power. The question now is, whether African elites can do the same.

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