

China and Sub-Saharan Africa

The People's Republic of China (PRC, or China) maintains bilateral diplomatic ties with all countries in sub-Saharan Africa ("Africa" hereafter) except Eswatini, Taiwan's sole diplomatic partner in Africa. These ties, often dating to the Cold War, have grown in scope and diversity since the launch in 2000 of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). Some Members of Congress have asserted that China's activities in Africa threaten U.S. foreign policy and national security interests. The Biden and first Trump Administrations both emphasized geostrategic competition with the PRC in their national security and regional strategies. The first Trump Administration established Prosper Africa, a U.S.-Africa trade and investment expansion initiative, in part to counter PRC economic clout in Africa. The Biden Administration maintained the initiative. Such issues remain pertinent; at his nomination hearing, Secretary of State Marco Rubio warned of China using conditional finance, "debt diplomacy or debt traps," and bribery to incentivize governments, including in Africa, to diplomatically ally with China in multilateral fora.

PRC interests in Africa appear to prioritize expanding trade, finance, and investment ties and securing international support for PRC positions and policies. Africa's commodities, including critical minerals, make the region important for PRC industries and manufacturing. Many PRC firms are active across Africa, meeting often sizable demand for PRC goods and services, notably including building and road construction and digital communications infrastructure. Much of China's extensive commercial activity in Africa is aided by PRC state-backed credit, often tied to the use of PRC-origin firms' goods and services.

African governments' approaches to the PRC focus primarily on economic interests (e.g., export growth and access to capital and inexpensive goods). Geopolitical and political motivations—such as international partnership diversification, concord in selected policy areas, or shared rejection of sanctions and human rights criticisms—also drive ties in some cases. Opinion polls in Africa show a wide range of views on both China and the United States, and while survey perceptions of both are often broadly similar, in some cases China has drawn marginally or significantly more positive views regarding its economic and political influence or reputation.

Interstate Relations

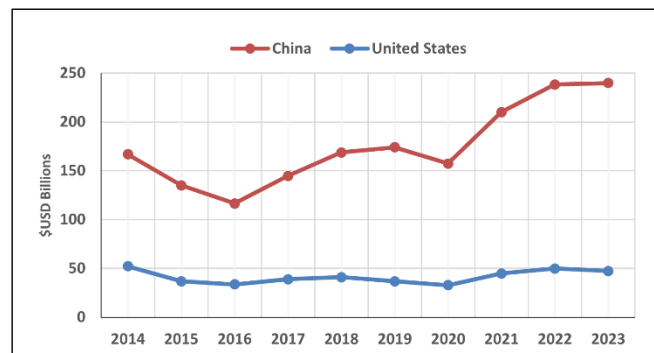
FOCAC, the most comprehensive PRC-Africa cooperation channel, consists of triennial summits, ministerial conferences, and official thematic fora (e.g., on trade, health, defense, law, and media). At the most recent FOCAC summit, in 2024, the PRC pledged \$29.6 billion in credit lines, and \$11.3 billion in undefined assistance. It also pledged at least \$9.9 billion in PRC company investments in Africa; ten "partnership initiatives" in varied areas, such as a "clean energy and green development" initiative; training; and duty-free access for many least-

developed African countries. China also claims several bilateral "comprehensive strategic" and other partnerships in Africa; maintains a mission to the African Union (AU) and special representatives to sub-regional groups (e.g., the East African Community); and cooperates with African states in UN and other multilateral groupings.

Economic Relations

In 2023, China's goods trade with Africa totaled \$240 billion, while U.S.-Africa trade totaled \$47 billion (see **Chart** below). China's top African trading partner in 2023 was South Africa, accounting for \$56 billion or 23% of PRC trade with the region. Other leading PRC trade partners included Angola, Nigeria, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). China's chief imports from Africa included fossil fuels and metals, including precious metals and critical minerals. PRC firms have invested in mining operations across Africa (e.g., cobalt mining in DRC) and import a large share of Africa's mineral production. These materials, crucial for a range of strategic PRC and U.S. industries, have helped China to become a major global mineral processor and establish a dominant position in many global critical mineral supply chains.

Figure 1. China & U.S. Goods Trade with Sub-Saharan Africa



Source: PRC & U.S. official trade data via *Trade Data Monitor*

China's economic activity in Africa focuses especially on mineral- and oil-producing countries and 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*.) In Africa, only Eswatini and Mauritius have not joined the BRI. China and Mauritius share a 2019 bilateral free trade agreement and the Southern African Customs Union and China have a customs cooperation agreement.

PRC-origin finance provides Africa access to non-Western-backed capital and has undergirded economic ties. Between 2006 and 2024, PRC entities provided nearly \$102 billion in large (\$100 million or higher) non-bond investments in African countries, with 75% going to the mining and energy sectors, American Enterprise Institute *China Global*

Investment Tracker data indicate. Leading destinations included DRC (17%), South Africa (11%), and Guinea (8%). Boston University's Global Development Policy Center has identified over \$171 billion in PRC-origin loans to African state borrowers between 2000 and 2023. Such loans peaked at \$27.0 billion in 2016, but have since declined sharply, to \$3.3 billion in 2023. Top recipients in 2023 included Angola (27%), Ethiopia (9%), and Nigeria, Kenya, and Zambia (each 6%); key sectoral targets included energy (36%) and transport (30%). Some experts assert that the PRC has been non-transparent in disclosing the terms of state-backed and other loans in Africa.

As of the end of 2023, per World Bank data, African countries owed China \$78 billion (15%) of an aggregate \$504 billion in African external public sector debt. PRC lending has contributed to growing African sovereign debt and, in some cases (e.g., Zambia), debt distress. Amid rising African indebtedness during the COVID-19 pandemic, China joined the 2020-2021 multi-lender G20 Debt Service Suspension Initiative. China also has co-chaired G20 multi-creditor committees negotiating debt restructuring for Zambia, Ethiopia, and Ghana. China has canceled some African bilateral debt, but reportedly prefers to extend loan terms and delay repayments.

Some African countries have accepted concessional and interest-free loans and development grants from China. Public data on such assistance flows is not readily comparable to that of Western donor governments due to differing definitions of "aid" and gaps in PRC public data releases. Among other assistance, China has supported a range of training and educational exchanges for Africans in China and as well as "Luban Workshop" vocational and technical instruction in varied sectors within the region.

Security Relations

China's leaders have tasked the People's Liberation Army (PLA) with developing the capacity to protect China's economic interests and PRC expatriates 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. It is located near Camp Lemonnier, the sole enduring U.S. base in Africa. China also "has likely considered" Angola, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Kenya, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Seychelles, and Tanzania as possible future locations for PLA facilities, the U.S. Department of Defense reported in 2024. In 2023, the head of U.S. Africa Command testified to Congress that "in itself" the PRC Djibouti base poses a marginal threat to U.S. interests in Africa, but that a PRC base in West Africa would alter "the whole calculus of the geostrategic global campaign plans" for U.S. homeland protection.

The PRC has carried out counterpiracy patrols off the Horn of Africa since 2008, in coordination with similarly-tasked multinational naval operations. China is by far the largest troop contributor to UN peacekeeping missions, the majority of which are in Africa, among the five permanent UN Security Council members. Drivers of this activity reportedly include PRC aims to promote multilateral responses to international security crises; build an image in the Global South as a responsible, altruistic peacekeeping power; and gain military and technical field experience.

The PRC has long sold arms to African countries and from 2019-2023 was the largest arms supplier to sub-Saharan Africa, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute research indicates. The PRC also has provided police and military training and aid in Africa, including a \$100 million 2015-2020 military aid pledge for the AU (which reportedly may have been only partially fulfilled); cultivated ties with African military leaders; set up a military training school in Tanzania in 2018; and conducted military exercises with several African militaries, including with South Africa and Russia in South African waters in 2019 and 2023. In 2024, via FOCAC, the PRC pledged to provide \$141 million in grant aid to African militaries; to train 6,000 personnel from such forces, with which it pledged to "conduct joint exercises, training and patrols"; and to train 1,000 police. PRC private security contractors operate in parts of Africa, mostly to protect PRC commercial interests.

U.S. Policy Concerns

Officials during the first Trump Administration identified "great power" competition as a top U.S.-Africa concern and labeled PRC economic activity in Africa "predatory." The Biden Administration's 2022 *Strategy Toward Sub-Saharan Africa*, stated that China seeks in Africa to "challenge the rules-based international order, advance its own narrow commercial and geopolitical interests, undermine transparency and openness, and weaken" U.S.-Africa ties. Biden Administration officials, however, asserted that they would not force African states to "choose" between the United States and China. Some African leaders object to making such a zero-sum choice. The Biden Administration also led G7 efforts to upgrade and add Zambia to the Lobito rail corridor linking Angola and the DRC to the Atlantic, in part to counter PRC global copper and critical mineral supply chain dominance. The Trump Administration has not stated whether it may maintain such efforts.

Issues for Congress

Congress has examined the extent to which extensive PRC activities and ties in Africa may challenge or threaten vital U.S. interests, and U.S. responses in hearings; required executive branch agency reports on "malign" and other PRC activities and influence in Africa; and created aid and financing tools to promote U.S. interests and counter China in Africa and elsewhere (e.g., the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation and the Countering PRC Influence Fund, or CPIF). Ongoing issues for congressional consideration may include PRC firms' influence over critical minerals and digital infrastructure in Africa; the impact of PRC influence on democratic governance in the region, such as via training and exchanges for African political and economic elites; PRC military basing activity; and the scope and impact of CPIF-funded programs and U.S. trade and investment assistance in the region.

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IFI2566

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