

BEIJING HAD CONTACT WITH AFRICA WAY BEFORE THE EUROPEANS

# China is Africa's biggest partner

MAY was Africa month.

This article shares some reflections as belated celebration of important, but often overlooked historical development of relations between Africa and China.

China is Africa's biggest trading partner, after notching more than \$220 billion, to overtake the US in 2014. According to the Quartz Africa, exports from such countries as Libya and Benin to China went up by more than 400% in 2021, while Togo, São Tomé and Príncipe, Sierra Leone, Burkina Faso, Madagascar, and Eswatini doubled their exports.

South Africa, Nigeria, Angola, Egypt, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo continued to be the top five largest African trading partners for China in 2021.

There are reportedly more than 1 million Chinese citizens doing business and working in Africa and more than 200 000 Africans living and working in China.

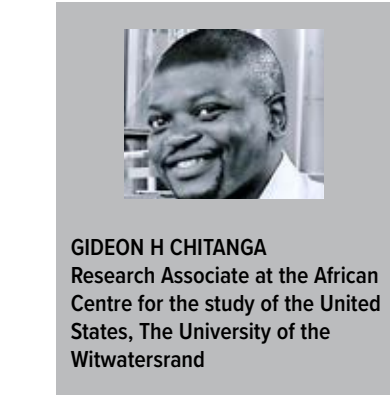
The launch of the Forum for China and Africa Co-operation (Focac) in 2006, and the participation of some African countries in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has consolidated socio-economic, political and cultural co-operation.

This growing co-operation has granted African countries greater multilateral independence freeing them from paternalistic and imperialistic conditionality associated with Western bilateral and multilateral initiatives in Africa, and stronger, more cohesive voice in redefining and shaping their interests in global affairs.

More importantly, these relations evolved from early contacts during the ancient times to gain momentum since the 1950s, before they were consolidated in the past two decades.

China had contact with Africa way before the Europeans, which belies the narrative about China making "new inroads" into Africa.

According to available historical evidence, the two continents began direct contact by sea route during the 7th century. Expert archaeological



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and historical evidence suggests that Zheng He, led some of the earliest Chinese fleets to the East coast of Africa, reaching places where contemporary Kenya and Somalia are located several decades before Vasco da Gama.

Vasco da Gama, the 15th and 16th century Portuguese explorer arrived in East Africa in 1498, opening the continent to 450 years of European colonial domination. Zheng He also visited the Sultan of Malindi – the most powerful coastal ruler of the time.

A joint team of Kenyan and Chinese maritime archaeologists discovered a 15th-century Chinese "Yongle Tongbao" coin at Mamburi village, north of Malindi on Kenya's north coast in 2010, corroborating these early contacts. Experts suggest that these old coins were carried only by envoys of the emperor.

Archival and archaeological evidence suggest that the Chinese might have arrived on Africa's shores hundreds of years earlier than Zheng He.

Voyages of discovery by the Chinese to the African Red Sea coast, East Africa and its Indian Ocean islands, required sea-worthy vessels.

During the Qin and Han dynasties Chinese shipping technology was already quite advanced after the invention of the central rudder.

A large-scale shipping factory archaeological site was unearthed in Guangzhou in 1974 containing segmented hulls, which were equipped with a navigational compass.

The ship which could hold over one hundred tons of cargo, was fitted with innovations which enabled maritime contacts between China and Africa earlier than the 7th century.

Drawing from evidence of maritime innovations and foreign historical documents in China, Li Anshan, author of a History of Overseas Chinese in Africa, says that historical relations between China and Africa started around 138-126 BC (prior to the Qin Dynasty in 221-206 BC).

The 1st century AD Periplus of the Erythraean Sea, one of the few ancient Greek sources on the Red Sea, Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf corroborates that during these early times, private contacts between China and Africa already co-existed with a small number of official contacts.

Fang Hao, in his 1953 book, History of East and West Traffic identifies commodity exchanges between China and Egypt. Hao concludes that during this same period the Chinese learned about Alexandria of Egypt (Li Xuan) and dispatched an envoy to Egypt.

Jan Julius Lodewijk Duyvendak, author of China's Discovery of Africa, suggests that these early expeditions were motivated by "the real need of overseas products felt particularly at Court", emphasising trade was the main motivation during early China and Africa contacts.

In contrast to the West, the Chinese did not seek to impose their ideas and beliefs on others, but focussed on cultivating trade relations and understanding with the communities they came in contact with.

Friendship and Solidarity During and after the Struggle for Liberation in Africa

The launch of the Peoples Republic of China in 1949 gave more impetus to rejuvenating Africa-China relations.

A generation of leaders since the rise of the Peoples Republic of China intensified relations with Africa to take multifaceted mutually beneficial diplomatic and socio-economic cooperation.

With the support of African broth-

ers, the 26th Session of the General Assembly of the UN adopted, with an overwhelming majority, Resolution 2758, and a decision was made to restore all rights of the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) in the UN as the only legitimate representative of China in the UN.

China provided material, financial and moral support towards the struggle for independence in Africa.

China was not involved with the slave trade and colonialism, but availed her self to support the struggle for independence in Africa.

As African countries gained their freedom, they developed a relationship rooted in the spirit of friendship, peaceful diplomacy, equality, common development, fairness and justice, openness and inclusiveness with contemporary leaders in China.

Conversely, early contacts between the West and Africa morphed into slavery and colonialism, which left extensive human, epistemic-intellectual and cultural destruction.

Millions of Africans were lost to the slave trade and colonialism.

Western countries occupied and looted mineral resources and historical cultural assets.

At the dawn of independence, Western colonial powers actively protected their kith-and-kin by securing the interests of former white settlers to the detriment of broader social justice for the oppressed African populations.

A succession of Chinese leaders formally hosted African leaders in China, and undertook high level visits to Africa, highlighting the diplomatic importance of the continent.

Chinese leaders from Mao Ze Dong, Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping attached great importance to the development of friendly relations between China and African countries.

In 2018, President Xi visited Senegal, Rwanda, South Africa and Mauritius affirming the development of solid relations.

The founding fathers of African independence such as Presidents Nyer-

ere, Mugabe, Dos Santos, Museveni among others, to contemporary leaders such as Ramaphosa, have visited and or send high profile delegations to China, cementing growing ties.

By 2000, China had entered into formal diplomatic relations with 53 African countries.

In the past decade, above 50 heads of states and government, and ministers from African countries made official visits to China.

In addition, more than 30 high profile representatives have embarked on diplomatic engagements in China.

China has played a decisive role in facilitating increased South-South co-operation, through multi-lateral institutions such as the Focac and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), sponsoring massive infrastructure projects, investment and aid in Africa. China has declared its support for Agenda 2063, of the AU, through the Focac, to promote economic development of the African continent.

In Africa, these projects have given more impetus towards the advancement of sustainable development, eradication of poverty and hunger, reduction of inequalities, employment creation, health cooperation, particularly combating pandemics such as Ebola and Covid-19.

In 2014 China initiated the largest and longest humanitarian and health aid initiative in China's history to combat Ebola.

During the opening of the Focac in Dakar, Senegal in 2021, President Xi committed 1 billion doses of Covid-19 vaccines to Africa and encouraged Chinese companies to invest no less than \$10 billion in the continent over the next three years.

China has proactively backed the waiver of patents on the production of Covid-19 vaccines to allow domestic production of vaccines in Africa, which faces severe shortages of vaccines.

Given these strong historical foundations, China-Africa co-operation can only get closer and stronger in confronting contemporary global challenges.

## Workers suffer bitter fruits of their labour

SOUTH Africa's biggest canning factory faces closure, threatening 4500 jobs, not just at the factory but the adjacent industries supporting it, at the worst possible time.

If you've ever been to the Langeberg, you'll know that agriculture and agri-processing is the biggest jobs creator in the area and this news will strike the local economy like a hammer blow.

Recently Tiger Brands started a consultation process with its workforce that it was planning to close down the Ashton factory, a facility which has been a vital cog in ensuring South Africa was ranked seventh globally in canning fruit, by production.

Two years ago the company had announced it would divest itself from the facility but, seemingly, without any takers, it has now decided to wind up a business that's operating for over 60 years.

Tiger Brands has been under the whip of late, and its most recent half-year financial statements showed its group operating had decreased by 5% to R1.5 billion.

The announcement of the company's intention to close the facility comes close on the heels of the signing of the Agriculture and Agro-Processing Masterplan which Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development Minister Thoko Didiza said would allow government to reimagine the sector.

"This Masterplan is lifting our gaze to imagine the agricultural sector we want in South Africa. We want a prosperous and inclusive agricultural sector that thrives on better utilisation of its natural and human resources," Didiza told Parliament last month.

News of the imminent closure of the factory has prompted Agri SA to call for intervention from the provincial and the national governments.

A local consortium has been in negotiations with Tiger Brands to take over the plant but there's the sticky issue of finances, and it seems it wants a government bailout.

Should government step in, it should be linked to deepening transformation in the agri-processing sector, that will benefit the factory workers and the surrounding communities which.

South Africa can't afford further de-industrialisation but government should also play a more active role in supporting companies to invest in local economies because once jobs are lost, it will be very difficult to replace them.

### IMAGE OF THE DAY



ROYAL Moroccan armed forces take part in the "African Lion" military exercise in the Grier Labouhri region of southeastern Morocco. | AFP

PUTIN HAS CAPTURED THE OLIGARCHS WITH COERCION

## Hopes to end Ukrainian war sooner, not later

BLESSING MBALAKA

AS THE Russian invasion of Ukraine hits its fourth month and the consequent global food and oil crisis deepens, world leaders are all looking for ways to end the conflict sooner rather than later.

One of the early options on the table was the blacklisting of so-called Kremlin allies, Russian oligarchs, and many Western countries jumped on the bandwagon immediately.

For instance, the UK sanctioned the assets of Russian oligarch Roman Abramovich, while the US, similarly, seized \$5.3 million (about R84m) from Konstantin Malofeyev's US-held bank account.

Despite apparent blacklisting, the war has not diminished, and Russian oligarchs appear to still roam the world.

A new option that has been put on the table by members of the European parliament is blacklisting territories that have become safe havens for Russian oligarchs.

The United Arab Emirates, for instance, has found itself in the crosshairs of pro-sanction campaigners as a result of leaked Dubai property data that revealed numerous property owners who are currently under international sanctions.

In the face of these campaigns, there are two questions that we need to ask ourselves: Is the move to sanction the oligarchs justified?

And are African countries destined to become a new haven for the movement of Russian assets?

In fairness, we can easily argue that mainstream Western media tend to overestimate the oligarch's influence on Putin.

Unlike state capture, Putin has captured the oligarchs with coercion.

He has complete control of the oligarchs and ensures they are barred from political interference, and if they revolt, they risk being imprisoned or potentially killed.

Sanctions have not historically been successful; the only people who suffer are ordinary citizens.

The idea that the sanctions would ultimately lead to a public uprising against the Kremlin is doubtful.

African countries have not been spared from the global food and fuel price increases caused by the conflict.

According to the World Economic Forum Annual Report, 14 African countries get more than half of their wheat imports from Russia and Ukraine and approximately half of

the continent imports a third of their wheat.

Still reeling from the economic devastation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, African countries are invested in ensuring that the conflict ends quickly.

Yet, thanks to the fragility of many African states, for instance, Sudan, Libya and Mali, it is possible that Russian elites may find Africa an excellent place to hide their assets.

South Africa and the rest of the continent should ensure that their countries are not used to launder money.

One of the measures suggested by civil society organisations such as the Financial Transparency Coalition is establishing a public beneficial ownership registry to improve financial transparency on the continent.

This would go a long way to stem

ming illegal financial flows.

For many reasons, Africa, including South Africa, should not become the next haven for Russian oligarchs.

The most important one is that allowing them sanctuary will make an already murky intra-African financial disclosure system impenetrable, which has implications for transnational crimes such as terror financing and money laundering.

In every crisis lies an opportunity; African countries should use this period to tighten their policies and regulation around illicit financial flows. But, just as importantly, African states should not allow themselves to be used as a pawn in this conflict.

*Mbalaka is a junior researcher at the Institute for Pan-African Thought and Conversation, at the University of Johannesburg*

### QUICK READ

#### GBV CASE

KWAZULU-NATAL ANC member Nkosesha Madlala Shezi has opened a case of gender-based violence against President Cyril Ramaphosa in connection with the robbery that allegedly took place at his Phala Phala farm in 2020.

Shezi opened a case of kidnapping, assault and illegal interrogation of a female domestic worker at the Durban Central Police Station yesterday.

Shezi, a businessman and chairperson of the ANC's radical economic transformation grouping, led a peaceful protest outside the police station. | IOL

#### EXPULSION

CONTROVERSIAL politician and convicted child rapist Jeffrey Donson and two other Independent Civic Organisation of South Africa councillors face expulsion from the embattled Kaniyand Municipality.

Donson, Werner Meshoa and Hyrin Ruiters will be the subject of a special council meeting set down for Wednesday.

Independent Media has learned speaker Roger Albertus would be mandated to initiate a disciplinary process against the trio, whose outcome will be communicated to MEC for Local Government Anton Bredell for a final decision. | IOL

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