

BOOK REVIEW

China's Relations with Africa: A New Era of Strategic Engagement

David H. Shinn and Joshua Eisenman. New York: Columbia University Press, 2023. xx + 484 pp. \$35.00; £30.00 (pbk). ISBN 9780231210010

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China's Relations with Africa: A New Era of Strategic Engagement provides a thorough analysis of China's extensive and growing political and security relations with Africa. It charts China's largely successful efforts to expand its influence on the continent by cultivating networks of relationships with African officials. In so doing, China's engagement with Africa helps to position Beijing as a leader in the Global South and an alternative to Western liberal democracy.

This comprehensive text on China's political and security relations with Africa is an extremely timely and important addition to the literature on China–Africa relations. Several other books have focused mainly on China's economic relations with the continent, in particular its development finance, including Axel Dreher et al.'s *Banking on Beijing: The Aims and Impacts of China's Overseas Development Program* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), and Deborah Bräutigam's *The Dragon's Gift: The Real Story of China in Africa* (Oxford University Press, 2010). In contrast, *China's Relations with Africa: A New Era of Strategic Engagement* acknowledges that for China, Africa is a key political and geostrategic partner, and one that is increasingly important in an era of growing Sino-US competition.

The book's twelve chapters (including the introduction and conclusion) point towards two key themes. First, the increasingly expansive nature of China's political ties to Africa; and second, the fact that these ties are principally (although not exclusively) based on cultivation of personal connections between Chinese and African elites and officials. The latter theme highlights a key difference between China's political and economic relations in Africa: while economic ties are driven by both grassroots and high-level engagements, political relations take place principally at the elite level.

The first substantive chapter focuses on China's bilateral diplomacy (long the core of its ties to African countries) and its global engagement through fora such as the United Nations. The second turns to China's efforts at the regional and sub-regional levels. The next chapter focuses on the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) engagement with African political parties, while subsequent chapters cover a variety of topics, including: propaganda and public opinion; security–development links; China's military activities to protect its citizens and assets overseas; security diplomacy; maritime security and naval expansion; and information technology and high-tech sectors. It concludes with several predictions, all of which point towards further deepening of China–Africa ties across multiple layers.

The book is based on a wide range of primary and secondary sources, grounded in Shinn and Eisenman's many combined years of doing research on this topic. Key original data sources include hundreds of interviews and conversations with African, Chinese and third-country elites, an original survey of the security concerns of Chinese citizens in 12 countries, and an original systematic data set of meetings between African political parties and the International Department of the Central Committee of the CCP from 2002 to 2022. These data sources are combined with exhaustive reviews of official documents and scholarly literature.

While all chapters of the book make a valuable addition to understanding of China–Africa political and strategic relations, it is the chapters that make most use of the authors’ original data that offer the greatest contribution. Of particular interest is chapter four, which focuses on relations between Chinese and African political parties, provides an engaging, original and rigorous account of how the CCP’s International Department uses “host diplomacy” (*zhuchang waijiao*) to cultivate interpersonal ties with African officials in both democracies and autocracies, for example through lavish trips, training workshops and scholarship opportunities.

Likewise, chapter seven makes excellent use of survey data to illuminate the consequences of the growing and significant security concerns that Chinese citizens and companies face on the continent: namely, a need for Beijing to expand its security and conflict mitigation activities, while also encouraging companies to take greater responsibility for managing the risks of doing business in unstable regions. Pushed by citizens’ expectations expressed in large part through social media, the Chinese state has been (somewhat reluctantly, given the country’s long commitment to non-interference overseas), compelled to get involved in conflict mitigation, and – when all else fails – to rescue Chinese citizens in trouble via evacuation missions.

An additional important contribution of *China’s Relations with Africa* is its accessible explanation of Chinese official international relations concepts, such as Xi Jinping’s “Community of Shared Future for Mankind” (*renlei mingyun gongtongti*), i.e. a fluid and “ever-expanding network of relationships with like-minded foreigners” (p. 6), which are often nebulous and challenging for non-Chinese observers to grapple with.

These contributions, combined with an engaging and non-technical communication style, mean that the book has potential wide appeal not only to audiences in the Chinese studies and international relations scholarly communities, but also to policymakers, think-tank analysts, journalists and other observers of China’s international relations. It would also make an excellent teaching tool for those looking for a comprehensive introduction to China–Africa political relations (chapter one), an account of Chinese party-to-party diplomacy (chapter four), and a summary of the factors driving China’s growing security presence in the Global South (chapters six to nine), amongst other topics.