The debate on China’s meteoric rise in Africa has been dominated by two extreme and opposite views. One tends to see China’s presence in the continent as generally negative and generating a lot of resentment among Africans. The second view is inclined to see the Chinese presence as largely beneficial providing African states with generous aid in the form of soft loans, major infrastructure programs, but, above all, providing a balance to traditional European and American dominance of the region.

The recent second China-Africa summit in Egypt and Beijing’s pledge of $10 billion in loans to the continent has brought into focus China’s growing investment in Africa. The responses have been diverse, not only from international observers, but also from individuals in the region. Building upon interviews from a broad range of Africans, Visiting Fellow at Nanyang Technological University Loro Horta shows that elites generally favor China’s presence in the region while the lower classes do not. Much of the local disapproval results from Chinese companies using limited amounts of domestic labor – particularly in relation to Western companies – as well as the flood of sometimes illegal Chinese immigrants to Africa selling cheap goods. Environmental degradation caused by Chinese companies is also an issue. Importantly, such divided opinions on China’s presence in Africa, if not addressed, could have a detrimental effect on what could be a positive relationship – China has been investing in infrastructure in the region, while the West has not. Horta fears that unless remedied, this unhappiness could erupt into violence. But in the end, he notes, quoting an African Foreign Minister, it is the continent’s responsibility to protect itself from exploitation.

But Africa’s poor don’t see China as a great power
Loro Horta
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African elites in general seem to welcome China’s new found enthusiasm for the continent. China provides many African governments with generous and large loans, allowing them to develop badly needed infrastructure, expand agriculture, and strengthen their security apparatus. Perhaps most attractive of all, Beijing asks no questions or imposes any conditionality on such investments, at least for now.

China’s so called non-interference policy and its no-strings-attached approach to aid has gained it many friends and admirers among African elites. Moreover, China’s model of a strong government and its focus on economic growth is looked upon by many African despots, and even some democratic leaders, as an example to follow. Frustrated with decades of instability and corruption, which many African elites tend to blame on the West and its liberal democratic model, the continent’s elites are fast embracing the Chinese model.

Out of the 67 African officials interviewed from six countries across the continent and ranking from junior military officers to a former...
President, 63 expressed quite positive views about China. In contrast, out of the 98 non-government affiliated people interviewed – among them street sellers, teachers, and small business people – 73 expressed highly negative views about China, some bordering on racism. From this small sample, hailing from Angola, Mozambique, South Africa, Namibia, Cape Verde and Zambia it becomes apparent that African elites clearly welcome the Chinese presence, while the people are growing increasing ambivalent.

These discrepancies result from the different ways in which China touches different sections of African societies. In Angola, where Western companies rely primarily on local labor, Chinese companies bring 70 to 80 percent of their labor from home. For instance, while nearly 90 percent of Chevron’s workers are Angolan, including specialized personnel such as engineers and managers, Chinese oil companies employ fewer than 15 percent Angolan labor and usually at the end of the pay scale. For instance in 2006 at a Portuguese run construction site in Maputo, Mozambique, there were only five Portuguese out of 120 workers. While nearby, a Chinese run site had 78 Chinese workers and only eight locals, three of which were night watchmen.

The influx of thousands of Chinese migrants into Africa is becoming a major source of grievance for the local population. In Angola, Chinese street sellers are fast putting out of business thousands of locals and Malian sellers who have been there for generations. The fact that many Chinese tend to live in isolation with little or no contact with the local population further aggravates the resentment already present. China has also been accused of serious environmental damage in Mozambique, Southern Sudan, and Equatorial Guinea to mention a few. In Southern Sudan, local villages attacked a Chinese oil team, killing its leader, whom they accused of poisoning their land. Chinese workers have also been killed in Ethiopia, and Equatorial Guinea; while in Nigeria, rebels warned Chinese companies to stay way from the oil rich Niger delta region.

Although African elites and the Chinese government sing the song of friendship and mutually beneficial south-south cooperation, there is growing resentment at the grassroots level that has so far been ignored. It should be mentioned that this resentment is not common or equally acute in all countries. For instance, in Cape Verde, one of the continent’s most successful and transparent countries, the government has imposed strict conditions on Chinese investment such as requirements on hiring local labor and environmental standards. A similar situation obtains in Botswana and Namibia.

It should be mentioned that Chinese companies are not the only ones at fault on environmental issues. However, on the hiring of local labor, Chinese companies have by far the worst record. The large influx of Chinese migrants, many of whom are illegal, has caused severe damage to China’s image as a great power in the eyes of the Africans. As noted by a Mozambican high school teacher:

“They say China is a great power just like America. But what kind of great power sends thousands of people to a poor country like ours to sell cakes on the street and take the jobs of our own street sellers who are already so poor?”

Unless these issues are addressed, the growing resentment in the lower sectors of African society may erupt into violent incidents and undermine a relationship that could bring great potential benefits for both sides, provided it’s wisely managed. To its credit, Beijing has taken some positive steps to address this problem by restricting Chinese textiles exports to certain African countries in order to protect indigenous industries and pledging to employ more Africans in its projects.

However, judging by the record of Chinese companies in their own country, there are great limitations to what the Chinese government may achieve. How could one expect Chinese mining companies in Africa to comply with environmental and safety laws if the mines they operate in China are considered the most dangerous in the world?

Nonetheless, China assisted African at a time when many in the West scorned the continent. After the end of the Cold War, Africa was abandoned by the West and the 1990s were marked by great suffering and instability. China’s meteoric rise in Africa forced many in the West to re-engage the continent, diminishing its marginalization. Beijing built major infrastructure projects such as mega dams, badly needed roads and telecommunications in the continent that no Western nation was willing to fund. Still, it remains to be seen if in the long run, the benefits will outweigh the many problems caused by the new great power in the African savanna.

Perhaps in the end, the greatest responsibility lies with African elites, Cape Verde and a few others that have shown that with an honest and responsible approach, Sino-African ties can be highly beneficial to both sides.

As noted by a former Mozambican foreign minister.

“In the end it’s up to us, the Chinese like anyone else have their interest and will plunder us to the extent that we let them. Africa’s
future is in our hands like it as always been. Let's stop blaming others and wait for people to feel sorry for us.”

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