

China-South Africa deals highlight great-power rivalry in Africa

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The visit by South African President Jacob Zuma to Beijing from August 24 to 26, heading a delegation of 400 business representatives and 11 government ministers, was another indication of intensifying international rivalry within the African continent.

A total of 12 deals were struck, pointing to South Africa's efforts to develop economic and political partnerships with the world's second-largest economy. The main agreements involved the building of a new titanium mine, as well as a processing site to produce pig iron in South Africa, with Chinese companies taking the main role in the construction. Also included were agreements on building railway lines and electricity grids throughout South Africa. Memoranda were signed to exchange nuclear power technology.

Beijing has pursued similar infrastructure projects throughout Africa, primarily to facilitate the transport of mineral resources to China and provide trade-offs for access to raw materials. To sustain annual economic growth of more than 10 percent, the Chinese regime is seeking to exploit Africa's vast natural resources, cheap labour and new markets via South Africa, which is the largest investor in the continent, outside of the US and Europe.

Over the past decade, China-Africa trade increased 10-fold, from \$10 billion in 2001 to \$107 billion in 2008. Fu Ziyang, China's vice commerce minister, predicted that this year's trade with Africa would again exceed \$100 billion, after a relative drop to \$91 billion in 2009.

While total Chinese investment in Africa is small compared to European and American capital, its annual rate increased 10-fold from \$80 million in 2003 to \$1.36 billion in 2009.

In the case of South Africa, China is now its largest trading partner, tripling imports and exports from \$4.87 billion in 2006 to \$15.2 billion in 2008. Last year, China overtook the US as South Africa's largest export market. South Africa exports \$6.57 billion worth of iron ore, copper, chrome, timber and paper pulp to China each year and imports \$9.45 billion worth

of mostly cheap manufacturing goods.

In the face of the deepening global economic crisis, Zuma's African National Congress (ANC) government is attempting to boost growth and narrow the \$2.7 billion trade deficit with China by pushing for more exports. South Africa is expected to grow a modest 2.8 percent this year.

Zuma's Beijing visit was the last stop on a tour of the four BRIC "emerging" economies (Brazil, Russia, India and China), where Zuma did deals as part of South Africa's bid to join BRIC. The grouping is a loose coalition, seeking to counter the global influence of the established powers of the US, Europe and Japan.

By joining BRIC, South Africa aims to position itself as a major regional power in Africa. Some of the memoranda signed in Beijing covered "joint efforts in the global arena" such as in the UN. South Africa is attempting to enter the UN Security Council and is looking to garner Beijing's support. In 2008, South Africa was widely criticised by Western powers for voting with China and Russia against a UN resolution condemning the Burmese regime, a close Chinese ally.

While the EU accounts for more than half the total foreign investment in South Africa, China's growing economic weight in Africa has provided South African ruling elites with greater bargaining power in the dealing with the US and European powers. An article entitled "Zuma's China policy: Is it good or bad for us?" in South Africa's *Times Live* on September 5 declared: "South Africa has resisted tying its flag to the mast of any major power and has carved out a niche as a country which walks its own path in global affairs."

Zuma's government is defying criticism of China by the Western powers. Concerned by China's rapidly expanding influence in Africa, Western commentators cynically argue that China is exploiting the African masses and natural resources like a colonial power. Three years ago, Zuma's predecessor Thabo Mbeki warned that Africa risked falling into a "colonial relationship" with China.

There has been a shift under Zuma, however. Trade Minister Rob Davies, who was accompanying Zuma in Beijing, denied that China engaged in “neo-colonial” activity in Africa. Davies declared that South Africa now has greater bargaining power against the Western countries because of China: “We don’t have to sign on the dotted line whatever is shoved under our noses any longer; we now have alternatives and that’s to our benefit.”

Delivering a lecture at Beijing’s Renmin University, Zuma sought to make a distinction between Chinese economic influence and that of the old Western powers. “Chinese assistance in infrastructure development in some of the less developed parts of Africa is certainly making an important contribution to future Africa development,” he stated. “We are still at an early stage of what will be an exciting journey, a journey out of poverty, a journey to sustainable improvements in the lives of our people, here in China and on the African continent.”

Zuma’s defence of China reflects bankrupt African bourgeois nationalism and Stalinism. During the Cold War, the now ruling ANC was politically backed against the apartheid order by the Stalinist regimes in Soviet Union and China. Like various African nationalist movements, the ANC’s perspective, supported by the South African Communist Party, which Zuma joined in 1963, is not to overthrow capitalism, but to seeking a better place for sections of the African bourgeoisie within world imperialism.

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Just as Mao’s anti-imperialist rhetoric and guerrilla war perspective for the “Third World” evolved into a government imposing naked capitalist exploitation of the Chinese working class, the ANC has become the chief instrument for the South African bourgeoisie since the end of apartheid in 1990. Initially, President Nelson Mandela attempted to maintain diplomatic relations with both Beijing and Taipei as two Chinese governments, but shifted decisively in 1996 toward China as the latter emerged as the chief cheap labour platform for global capitalism. Full diplomatic ties between the two countries were established in 1998.

With China now a significant exporter of capital, its capitalist elite has no qualms about aggressively moving to secure vital raw materials in Africa. In opposition to accusations of Chinese colonialism, commentators in China note that its activities are not so different from the old colonial powers. The state-run *Global Times* declared recently: “China’s behaviour in Africa plays by the rules set by western powers themselves.”

While the European powers and the US accuse various African regimes aligned to Beijing, such as Sudan, of “human rights abuses,” this criticism ignores centuries of crimes and the ongoing exploitation of the African masses by Western governments and corporations.

A *Financial Times* editorial on August 25, entitled “China’s new scramble for Africa”, warned: “Former colonial powers are in a weak position to lecture China on Africa. And, having preached the virtues of competition, the west cannot really grumble about being outbid by the Chinese in the race for natural resources in Africa.” Nevertheless the editorial in effect called on the old colonial powers to find a way to counteract China.

At an Africa-France summit in Nice in June, French President Nicolas Sarkozy pushed for direct competition with Chinese corporations through infrastructure and aid interventions, without actually mentioning China. “Africa is our future,” Sarkozy stated. “The African continent is asserting itself more and more as a major player in international life.” To make his message heard, Sarkozy brought with him executives of major French companies, nuclear giant Areva, oil company Total, France Telecom and Veolia, the world’s largest water supply company.

The most aggressive strategy comes from the US, which is boosting its military capacity in Africa. The Bush administration established a separate Pentagon African Command (AFRICOM) in 2007 as part of Washington’s global efforts to offset its economic decline with military might. This year, the Obama administration has allocated \$278 million to AFRICOM, not including expenses for other US military programs in the continent under the name of countering “terrorism”. Military funding to pro-US regimes in Africa is being increased by more than 300 percent this year, from \$8.2 million to \$25.5 million. The major recipients are South Africa, Morocco, Nigeria and strife-torn countries such as Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya and Liberia.

Washington’s militaristic policy underscores the fact that the Western powers will not allow China to impinge on their interests in Africa without resisting. South Africa’s new ties with China, far from bringing new geo-political stability, will only intensify this great-power rivalry.



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