Building on their comprehensive 2012 book, *China and Africa a Century of Engagement*, David H. Shinn (former US ambassador to Ethiopia and Burkina Faso) and Joshua Eisenman (associate professor of politics in the Keough School of Global Affairs at the University of Notre Dame) have returned with their 2023 book, *China’s Relations with Africa: A New Era of Strategic Engagement*. Much like their 2012 volume, this book offers a comprehensive overview of contemporary China-Africa relations; however, this book has a narrower scope than its predecessor, with a greater focus on political and security relations. This is not an easy task; Sino-African relations are complex and extensive and cover a broad range of disparate topics, including Chinese social media influencers and high-level political visits. However, using a combination of excellent synthesis of past analysis and fieldwork, this book offers an exceptional overview of contemporary China-Africa relations within the framework of political and security relations.

A key concept of the book is that China, through its relationship with Africa, is attempting to validate its perception of itself as a leader of, and exemplar for, all developing countries. While this is not a new argument, this book offers a rich oversight of how China has attempted to achieve this objective.[1] The book outlines a detailed analysis of how China uses a network of relations—bilateral, subregional, regional, and global—to create an “overlapping latticework of relationship” (p. 8), allowing China to create a China-centered system where all areas of interaction from people-to-people, economic, and political relations are arranged. The authors give a detailed description of how China has used party-to-party exchanges, Africa-focused propaganda, and a network of forums to create what Lina Benabdallah called “guanxi connections with Africa’s current and future leaders.”[2] In particular, the authors argue
that this network increasingly allows China to promote “China’s own model of political governance as superior to liberal democracy” (p. 18). The authors question how effective this network has been in promoting this Chinese model. The authors highlight that, between 2013 and 2019, China’s favorability fell in major African states, such as Nigeria, where Chinese favorability fell from 76 percent to 70 percent, or Kenya, where China’s favorability fell from 78 percent to 58 percent (p. 342). However, the authors highlight that China’s Africa-focused media and its educational and cultural propaganda programs have been successful in influencing African elites, in a process that the authors call “elite capture” (p. 333), and that this has allowed Beijing to continue to expand its successful Africa-focused education and cultural propaganda programs. The book makes a clear and well-supported argument that China has created a pattern of interaction with Africa that has allowed it to place itself at the top of the hierarchy of developing states and now offers—at least as a role model—an alternative development model to that offered by the West.

Security—both traditional and nontraditional—is the key theme running through the text. The authors use security as a frame in multiple areas, including technology and information, food, energy, and trade. Core to this approach is that the authors argue that China’s expansion in Africa has created a new challenge for China. According to this argument, a strong relationship with Africa is key to overcoming many domestic Chinese challenges, such as food and energy insecurity. Africa has become an important source of raw materials for the Chinese market and an important destination for Chinese goods and investment. The authors argue that to protect these interests, China’s noninterference policy will evolve to allow China to protect these assets. While this is not a new argument, the authors offer an excellent overview of how this will evolve through both traditional and nontraditional security drivers.[3] Chapter 9, “Maritime Security,” is particularly noteworthy. The authors give a detailed outline of how China has started to build a navy with a global reach, setting out the role Africa plays in this development. This includes the development of port infrastructure, including a base in Djibouti. The authors highlight that Chinese companies have won contracts to manage existing ports in Togo and Nigeria; acquired equity in African ports in Egypt, Morocco, Tanzania, and Cameroon; and financed and built ports in Namibia and Mauritania. The authors describe how these private ports need to be considered from a security perspective and how they can be used as part of China’s objective of developing a global navy. This is an important chapter in terms of understanding how the US-China maritime rivalry is developing and the important role African ports will play in this competition. Traditional security areas—such as maritime security, arms transfers, and the developing role of Chinese private security firms—are well developed, and the authors succeed in dealing with issues such as developing the links between private Chinese actors and state actors.

In areas of nontraditional security—such as food security—the book’s arguments are less developed. The analysis of these nontraditional security areas is developed from the concept that China’s actions are driven by a comprehensive security strategy. This strategy is characterized by the link between security and development and is driven by national objectives of protecting China’s national and economic interests. However, the authors offer only limited evidence to support these claims. For example, in the area of food security, the authors present the argument that Africa might become vital to meeting China’s food security, and China will expand its long-term leases in Africa to produce food for the Chinese market (p. 177). However, the book offers little evidence that this is occurring. In fact, the book outlines that most of the food China produces in Africa is sold locally or to the international market (p. 175). By using the comprehensive security strategy as a framework for understanding Chinese foreign
policy, Shinn and Eisenman’s argument is logical. However, it does not take into consideration the agency of African actors in preventing China from increasing its presence in African agriculture at the expense of African states. It also fails to consider that the climate impact factors that could drive China to produce more food in Africa would also reduce Africa’s ability to produce such food.

While the nontraditional security issues the book addresses are underdeveloped, the book excels at linking traditional and nontraditional security issues—for example, how Chinese investment in energy and minerals (both on land and deep-sea) will lead to an increased presence of China’s traditional security military actors in Africa. This may take place via Chinese peacekeeping forces or by an increased presence of the People’s Liberation Army or Chinese private security firms, leading to changes to the Chinese nonintervention principle. These changes may result in China taking action when needed in order to respond to their strategic concerns in an African country.

An area that is often lacking in the research on Sino-African relations is the concept of African agency. Shinn and Eisenman dedicate a section of their text to discussing African agency in Sino-African relations (p. 44-49). The book outlines that African states differ in terms of their agency, depending on the strength of their institutions—for example, governmental bureaucracy, banks, and trade unions—or whether the state holds large oil reserves—for example, Angola and Nigeria. The book outlines several cases where African states have used their agency to negotiate better conditions when dealing with China. The authors also highlight that African states have used China as a bargaining chip in dealing with European and emerging donors, and vice versa. The book also outlines that some African states are self-critical about the degree to which they fail to exercise agency, both at a bilateral level or as a collective group through the African Union. By focusing on negotiations with China over the terms of loans, the percentage of Chinese laborers permitted to work on projects, the terms of mineral and energy deals, as well as labor and environmental laws, the authors highlight that African states overall have limited agency in their dealings with China. They also highlight that there is a blurring of the lines between the personal interests of African political leaders and that of the state. This can lead some to overestimate the agency possessed by African policymakers (p. 333). While this section is limited in terms of scope, this book is one of the few studies that attempts to look at African agency in Sino-African relations and set it in a pan-African context rather than an individual state-level analysis.

This book supports much of the past analysis of Sino-African relations with strong fieldwork. Overall, it is an excellent book, and it offers a rich overview of Sino-African relations. It is a useful text for any course on Chinese relations with the Global South, or for policymakers who seek a comprehensive overview of contemporary China-Africa relations. The book’s focus on political and security relations aligns with the wider trend of the securitization of China’s external relations. The book’s analysis of traditional security issues and matters of high politics produces some excellent insights—for example, into China’s growing presence in Africa’s maritime security sphere. However, in areas of nontraditional security, such as food security or technology and information exchange, the focus on securitization is less developed.

Notes


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Citation: Niall Duggan. Review of Shinn, David Hamilton; Eisenman, Joshua, China's Relations with Africa: A New Era of Strategic Engagement. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. July, 2024.

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