

## **EMPERYALİZMİN YENİ AKTÖRÜ: ÇİN VE ÇİN'İN AFRİKA ÜLKELERİYLE OLAN İLİŞKİLERİ\***

*A New Actor in Imperialism: China and Its Relations with African Countries*

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### **Öz**

Geçtiğimiz 400 yıl boyunca, üstün askeri güçce ve yayılmacı bir anlayışa sahip olan ülkeler, diğer bölgeler ve ülkeler üzerindeki etkilerini artırılmış ve kendi ülkelerini/ imparatorluklarını güçlendirmek için bu bölgelerdeki kaynakları sömürme yoluna gitmişlerdir. Emperyalist ülkelerle sömürlünlük arasındaki fark giderek daha açılmış ve daha belirgin bir hale gelmiştir. Afrika kıtası, birden fazla Avrupa ülkesinin odağı haline gelmiştir. Portekiz, İspanya, Fransa, Britanya ve Hollanda, Afrika'daki zengin doğal kaynakları cezbedici bulmuş ve üstün askeri güçlerini bu bölge üzerinde kullanmıştır. Çin ise, kısmi olarak milli kimliğine bağlı olan ve bu ülkelerden farklılaşan bir strateji benimsemiştir. Bu makale, okuyuculara farklı bakış açılarından Çin'in ve Batılı ülkelerin aksiyonlarını harmanlayarak, Çin'in Afrika'daki emperyalist arzularını ve bunun kitle ülkeleri üzerindeki etkilerini resmedecektilir.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** Emperyalizm, Çin, Afrika, ABD, Britanya, Kültürel Boyutlar.

**Abstract:** Throughout the last four centuries, some countries with advanced military power and expansionist ambitions have been increasing their influence over other states and regions in order to exploit the resources available in these geographies to strengthen their own nation or empire. The division between imperialist states and exploited ones has become more visible and the gap has been becoming wider. Africa has been suffering from the attacks and invasions of numerous European states. Countries such as Portugal, Spain, France, Great Britain and the Netherlands have been attracted by rich natural reserves in the continent and they were advantageous in terms of relative military strength. China, however, adopted a different strategy, partially linked to its national identity and cultural dimensions. This article will introduce different lenses to the readers by combining the Western and Chinese points of view and will try to picture the extent of China's imperialist ambitions within the continent and their implications on African states.

**Keywords:** Imperialism, China, Africa, USA, Great Britain, Cultural Dimensions.

### **1. Introduction**

Throughout the last four centuries, some countries with advanced military power and expansionist ambitions have been increasing their influence over other states and regions in order to exploit the resources available in these geographies to strengthen their own nation or empire. The division between imperialist states and exploited ones has become more visible and the gap has been becoming wider. Africa has been suffering from the attacks and invasions of numerous European states. Countries such as Portugal, Spain, France, Great Britain and the Netherlands have been attracted by rich natural reserves in the continent and they were advantageous in terms of relative military strength. China, located far away from Africa, has been less exposed to threats of the European states (yet still was exploited by some such as Portugal – Goa can be a good example of it). However, it did not mean that China was safe from the ambitions of more advanced countries. Japan

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has invaded some regions of China and other Asia-Pacific countries. Hence, it can be claimed that both African states and China has shared a common destiny for some period of time, the mutual agreements could be justified for these states.

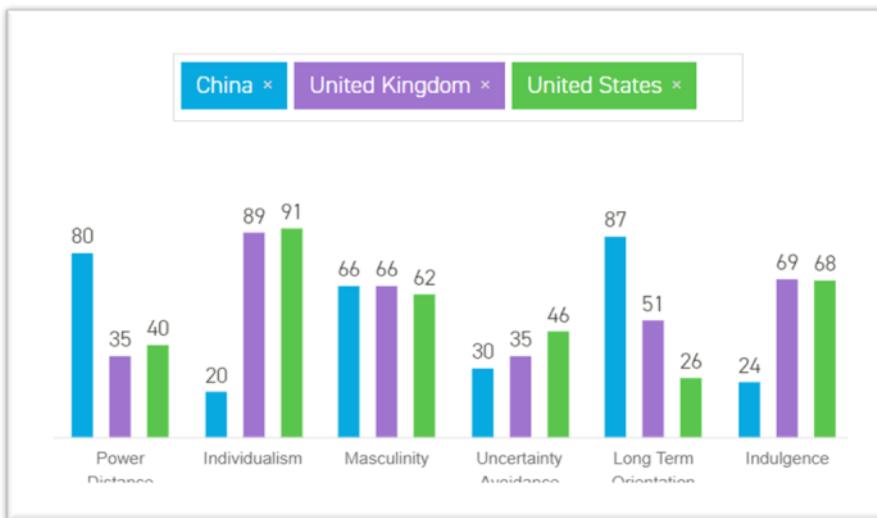
Following the Bandung Conference in 1955, China has started building strong relations with various African states (Ucheara, 2009, p. 95-111). As the time passes, China became significantly stronger and became the second largest economy after the US. China's various strategies to close the gap and become one of the leading countries in the last 50 years have yielded positive results, including the African relations. Some resources claim that China's imperialist ambitions within the African continent have contributed to that, while others mention that China has played an inevitable role in the continent's development (Sun, 2004). This article will introduce different lenses to the readers by combining the Western and Chinese points of view and will try to picture the extent of China's imperialist ambitions within the continent. It would probably be wrong to think China's investments and actions in the region were carrying completely humanitarian and non-profit ambitions, yet the country's actions in the continent were softer and friendlier compared to the actions taken by other leading countries both in Africa and elsewhere. The measurement will yield a result between the former and the latter, yet the exact result can only be found after a comprehensive evaluation.

The existing literature is mostly emphasizing that China is interested in the African continent due to its possession of vast natural resources (oil, gas, minerals etc.) and its potential for China's exports (Hanauer, Morris, 2014). These articles are often bringing a "Western lens" to the problem and fail to identify the contributions of China in the continent such as infrastructure investments. These articles only state that these investments contribute to the foreign exports to the region and reduce transportation costs for Western economies. Some others blame China for acting as "self-serving" and pursuing "immediate short-term gains" (Ucheara, 2009, p. 95-111). However, investing in infrastructure and development can hardly be classified as a short-term gain in the context of economics, since the return for the investments usually take more than 20 years. Some researchers had a more comprehensive overview of the relations and could address to the social and political dimensions of China-Africa relations and could identify the support of China on African groups seeking for liberalisation, and their implications on the current state of relations, including some African countries' concerns on China's "neo-colonist" approach (GlobalSecurity.org, 2018). While these researchers cover most of the political and social subjects, they fail to measure the economic implications of this partnership. There are only a few articles covering political, social and economic dimensions of the relations between China and Africa yet fail to come up with detailed analysis on these subjects and comparing it with the actions of other imperialist states. These studies try to answer whether China is "a predator or an investor" in Africa, yet the degree of so-called "predation" is not analysed in these articles (Lafargue, 2015, p. 61). Thus, this article will be covering the different dimensions of the China-Africa relations and contrasting it with the relations of other imperialist states on different geographies in order to reveal the key differences in those relations and to classify China's actions in Africa with respect to the common international relations concepts.

In terms of a theoretical point of view to be adopted, studies on identity in international relations will be leveraged in order to explain the key differences between the motivations of the Western states and China. Many scholars like Wendt and Wæver have contributed to this notion and utilized the identity in different subjects such as foreign policies and securitization theories (Vucetic, 2017). The basic summary of these studies would be to describe "who [the countries] are and who they are" in a given time and space. Geert Hofstede's cultural dimensions will also be utilized in contrasting some of the key differences in Western countries' and China's approaches (Hofstede, 2020). The two key dimensions will be focused in particular, which are "masculinity" and "long term orientation". While masculinity indicates the country is driven by competition, achievement and success, long term orientation signals the importance given on long-term gains rather than quick wins.

Hofstede has published his cultural dimensions model following his research that covered more than 50 countries and took almost a decade to complete. In total, he identified six dimensions to explain the differences between cultures. "Power distance" refers to the degree of inequality existing

between people with presence/ absence of power. Lower scores on Power Distance suggests the society is less hierarchical and inequalities are minimized. "Individualism" measures the degree of interdependence among the members of the society. Higher scores imply that the individuals take care of themselves and their immediate family rather than a larger group. "Masculinity" indicates whether competition, achievement and success are taken as key drivers within the society. "Uncertainty avoidance" refers to society's ability to cope with anxiety and welcome changes or innovations. Low scorers are more comfortable with unknown situations. "Long term orientation" refers to the time horizon that is valued by the society. Countries with low scores, such as the US, gives importance to short-term gains and quick results and display strong sense of nationalism. The last dimension, "Indulgence" measures the extent to which individuals control and suppress their desires and impulses. Countries with lower scores tend to have more controlled behaviour and put little emphasis on personal emotions.



**Figure 1: Hofstede's cultural dimensions for China, the Great Britain and the US**

**Source:** Hofstede Insights

## 2. Western imperialism: Cases of the Great Britain and the US

The Great Britain and the US have been particularly selected as they are the leaders of liberalist thinking and the key actors of imperialism for the last two centuries. However, the form of imperialism has been evolving throughout these centuries. The Old Imperialism, which lasted until 1800s, was mostly focused on controlling the global trade routes while exploiting the local natural and human resources of invaded regions. However, New Imperialism has begun after the Age of Enlightenment and Industrialization in the Western countries, and the new wave of imperialism had a mixture of the following reasons: economic, military and political, humanitarian goals, and technological advancements (Webb, 2014). The New Imperialism methodologies of the Great Britain and the US will be examined with some cases provided from their spheres of influence.

While describing the imperialist movements of the Great Britain and the US, "modernization" and the "nation-building" terms are often mentioned (Omvedt, 1969, p. 130-151). Hence, both Great Britain and the US have been legitimizing their imperialist movements by tying their motivation to the modernization of the state that they intervened or to the construction of a modern and sovereign state. While Great Britain was controlling various regions in the world including the Suez Channel in Egypt, South Africa and India, the goal was not entirely developing a modern state. The country was mostly hoping to use the land and the products available as a means of profit for their own nation and their expansionist ambitions.

The Great Britain, of course, tried to establish similar institutions and governance structures to what they have in their homeland, yet they were mostly used to impose the same system in colonized countries and strengthen the control over these societies. They have applied numerous unfair policies such as uneven trade duties and considerably low-price setting for raw

materials in favour of the British government (Kwatiah, 2016). In exchange, the capital owned by British has injected in infrastructure projects, mining projects and industrial investments in various consumer goods industries. The main rationale behind those investments was to ease and increase the level of colonial exploitation by the country. It can be claimed that the Brits were modernizing the Indian institutions, yet they were doing this to serve Great Britain's own agenda. The modernization was beneficial for the Britain – the investments allowed them to increase control over the region and maximize the goods/ services exploited by implementing industrial solutions to increase the output. The US, on the other hand, is identified itself as a liberator that saves the countries from the governance of old-fashioned leaders that are against the democratic approaches. Contrary to the Great Britain and other Western European countries who had controlled the captured regions for multiple decades, the US tends to encourage self-governance and independence in the intervened region as soon as practicable (Heiss, 2002). This fact should not be misinterpreted, since the US has similar interests with other Western countries such as Great Britain in terms of benefiting from the resources available. For instance, US-led invasion of Iraq enabled western oil companies to access the country's oil resources at considerably lucrative terms (Jamail, 2012).

The instances of Great Britain's and the US's imperialist movements can be populated with various cases. Great Britain often tried to build a ruling class and control those in the exploited regions such as India. Britain was also giving importance to "develop" them slowly in order to justify their actions with modernization (Porter, 2006). However, the US often has different set of actions to implement in the regions it intervenes, although both countries leveraged modernization theory to justify their actions. Modernization theory suggests that there is a unilinear path to modernization for all countries, less developed countries are at the earlier stages and they need to adapt similar and social structures with more developed countries in order to embrace modernization and advancement (Dunn, 2013). Imperialist states like Great Britain often imposed Western systems in Africa and Asia and defended their actions by linking them to "freedom" and "advancement" that they promise. The US also links their actions to modernization and liberalization themes (the US often refers to "spreading liberty"), yet it has no desire to rule any people living in exploited regions in a direct/ formal way. The US was focusing on the results instead of a proper progression plan. The Iraqi invasions plan was about "showing [Iraqis] the blessings of liberty" and it was estimated that the US forces could leave afterwards, which would take 30 days.

When the ambitions and actions of the Great Britain and the US are analysed, it can be inferred that the US have been mostly focusing on short-term actions rather than long-term relationship building, while Great Britain was giving somewhat more importance on longer-term interactions and benefits as well. The emergence of intergovernmental organizations such as NATO and the United Nations after 1950s could be one of the key reasons behind the differences in two countries' expansionist approaches. Another key differences between the Great Britain and the US were the post WWII world order and the decolonization wave in Asian and African states, which were formerly exploited by the European nations. Imperial states such as the Great Britain and France were perceiving colonies as a part of their international prestige, and the colonization was an acceptable norm before the World War II throughout the world. However, after the 1945, the US has taken the predominant position in the world order. Contributed by the international organizations such as IMF and the UN, the concept of nation-states has been promoted across the third world countries, which were underdeveloped and under the influences of colonial powers such as Great Britain. Although colonial powers resisted to this fact, the pressure from the leading powers and the UN has ignited a decolonization wave throughout the Asia and Africa. The US had a mission to establish democratic nation-states, and the country pictured itself as the leading power that can teach the lessons to the countries that need transformation and modernization (Berger, 2002). Hence, the external conditions were not the same during the times when the Great Britain and the US were the hegemonic powers, and it has influenced their imperialist actions. At the time of the Great Britain, modernization was not

necessary to justify imperialist actions, yet following late 1940s, the imperialism had to be justified with the modernization mission.

It should also be mentioned that the national identities of the US and Great Britain were different, which partly explains the differences between the US's and Great Britain's expansionist movements. The US was founded after a war against the Great Britain, which was the imperial controller of its territory. Hence, the US was usually not considering building an empire that controls other nations. Instead, the US was positioning itself as the saviour of the colonized states and can be classified as "expansionist" rather than "imperialist" with respect to some scholars (Heiss, 2002). Even in the 1800s, the US supported the decolonization of Latin American states during the first wave of decolonization. Considering both the differences in the national identities between the US and Great Britain, and the changes in the world order after 1940s, the differences between expansionist ambitions and the application of these ambitions between two countries can be contrasted and justified. Especially, the influence of the US's core values and its national identity in its perception of imperialism is a key asset to illustrate the impact of identities on the ideology and actions of the states.

In addition to the findings mentioned above, when Hofstede's cultural dimensions are taken into consideration, one can notice that the scores of two countries (see Figure 1) are roughly similar except one: long term orientation. According to the scores of the countries, it can be inferred that the US mostly focuses on short term, which means the individuals within the country (which might be affecting the national identity) do not sacrifice short-term material or social successes for long-term gains. The Great Britain, however, is focusing more on longer-term benefits compared to the US (UK is taken as representative). When these facts are considered, the differences in Great Britain's and the US's expansionist movements and interventions could be partially explained given the differences in their national identities. The national identity can have impacts on states' approach towards similar subjects, as outlined in Peter Katzenstein's "The Culture of National Security". He claims that the state interests are "constructed through a process of social interaction" (Katzenstein, 1996). The interests of states and its actions are dynamic, and Soviet Union's withdrawal from the Eastern Europe only in later stages of the Cold War rather than previous years can be taken as an example for the dynamism even within a state. Germany and Japan's cultural shift following the WWII from militarization to commerce is another instance where collective purpose had an influence on a state's actions in international arena. Understanding, and not ignoring, the impacts of culture and national identities, and perceiving the states as regional, cultural and institutional complexes is more useful than traditional dimensions such as power.

At this very point, the following question should be posed in order to support the hypothesis: Considering similar levels of "hunger for success and expansion" with Great Britain and the US, does the considerable difference in "long term orientation" change China's attitude towards African states, which had faced exploitations for centuries?

### **3. Long-term orientation of China and its implications on China-Africa relations**

Most of the studies assessing China's relations with African countries begin with China's energy needs and their interests in natural resources held by African nations (Albert, 2017). Particularly, those articles state that China needs oil and gas products extracted in the continent. The fact on Angola being China's third largest oil supplier is supporting the argument. It should be noted that natural resources were critical for China to literally "fuel" its growth. However, if China's only will had been to benefit from these natural resources, it could have followed the lead of the US and the UK and tried to colonize the relevant African states to exploit their natural resources. However, they have taken a different approach since the very beginning considering the new world order that discouraging colonization of states and supporting the independence of nation-states. China was not one of the superpowers back then, and could not easily adopt a colonization strategy. It is also important to emphasize that Mao Zedong, the leader of People's Republic of China, was a supporter of

self-determination of peoples and was trying to establish pragmatic relations between countries and people while enabling harmony (Lai, Lu, 2012). China was willing to invest in long-term relations with African countries based on mutual gains, which marked with 1955 Bandung Conference. During this conference, China and the African states agreed on multiple terms, including mutual respect for independence and mutual benefits. This agreement and China's actions from this date up until now reflects a totally different approach than top imperialist states of pre-WWII world order such as the Great Britain. China was willing to establish a long-lasting relationship with these states and offering them win-win opportunities which enabled the growth and development of African states, including USD 12 billion Coastal Railway in Nigeria and USD 4.5 billion Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway. The growth and prosperity missions were similar to the ambitions of imperialist states, yet the methodology was significantly different. China assisted African states in progressing and contributed to multiple infrastructure projects to enable well-developed logistics network across the continent without conquering or invading any of these nations, which suffered significantly from exploitation for centuries. To explain the key differences between the imperialism of the US, Great Britain and China's actions, the key differences between those will be identified and these will be leveraged to justify the divergence of China's imperialist movements.

The most visible difference that comes into the mind when these countries are considered is the political orientations of the countries. China has been under the influence of communism, whilst the UK and the US were the key supporters of liberalism and capitalism. As a part of communist ideology, China's non-invasive actions in the African continent could partly be explained by the mission of liberalizing nations. Russia's view on liberating non-Slavic nations after World War I can be used to support this argument. However, the USSR's actions in the Eastern Europe following the World War II hinders the reliability of communist approach in explaining the key differences between China and Western nations. Coup d'état in Czechoslovakia in 1948 and intervention to Hungary in 1956 are the examples of USSR involvement to different nation states in order to protect their interests and reach their ambitions. Regardless of the ideology and motives behind these interventions, communism and its influence on countries is not merely enough to explain why China did not take any military actions or invade a country rich in oil, gas and other natural resources.

Perhaps it is time to revisit the cultural dimensions studied by Geert Hofstede. According to him, there was a significant difference in "long-term orientation" dimension between China and the UK and US. The long-term orientation might have led China to consider long-term gains while building the relations with African countries. Yet, what were these long-term gains for China? For China, the progression of the continent and establishing good relations were far more important than some natural resources, since the progress would enable China to benefit more than just exploiting some resources of African states. China has invested in mega infrastructure projects such as Tanzania-Zambia railway starting from 1960s and increased the number of its diplomatic missions within the continent (Albert, 2017). Chinese investments also helped various African nations such as Ethiopia to reduce unemployment and enjoy prosperity. China has provided relevant know-how and funding for infrastructure and manufacturing projects within Ethiopia. The investments enabled Ethiopia's transfer to an industrialized country and reduce unemployment rates, which contributed to peace and security within the country (Kim, 2013, p. 181-194) China has contributed to maintenance of peace throughout the continent in addition to its investments in industrialization and development. Since early 1990s, China has been steadily increasing the resources allocated to UN's peacekeeping operations within the continent (Kuo, 2020). Overall, these actions are suitable to the pillars of Chinese model of expansionist policy – respect for the sovereignty, political stability and mutual economic development. China's infrastructure-and-industrialization focused approach and its insistence in building sustainable long-term relations with African states enabled it to become an alternative for mainstream Western model for development and peace throughout the world.

Thanks to both material and intangible investments, China has gradually become an important actor in the region and the world stage – the role of China in the United Nations has become more

critical. In addition to those, Africa has become a viable market for Chinese exports and manufacturing operations, hence China both marketed its cheaper solutions in the continent, which suitable for African countries, and started to shift its manufacturing to African states in order to remain cost competitive. These facts have boosted the bilateral trade between China and Africa, and China has become the largest trade partner of African nations in 2009.<sup>18</sup> According to the research made in 2016, 63 percent of Africans believe China's influence on the continent has been positive, hence it can be inferred that both China and African states benefited from this cooperation. China has followed a different approach than typical imperialism widely adopted by Western states and gained both regional and global advantage without seizing the control of African nations or undertaking a military intervention. It's cultural dimensions and long-term focus can be stated as the key differentiator, and it has enabled China to become a global superpower in less than a century.

On the other hand, these actions of China have been facing resistance from the citizens of various African countries. China provides the capital and delivers the projects that enable progress in most of the African states, yet it mainly leverages its own resources such as contractors, manufacturers and workforce to deliver those projects (Jalloh, Wan, 2019). This allowed China to develop its own footprint in the Africa with the utilization of its own skills and capabilities, which limited the development of local knowledge and skills. The jobs that could be filled with Africans were instead offered to Chinese workforce, hence the employment rates of local African workforce were capped at certain levels (Lyman, 2010). As a consequence of these actions, Africans were entitled to the debt of the projects completed entirely by Chinese resources, and they could not enjoy the development of their human capital, which is a key step towards development and prosperity for their states. In addition to this, Africans observed the expansion of Chinese culture within their states due to the existence of Chinese corporations and Chinese employees staffed in both manufacturing and construction sites. All of these facts triggered an aggression towards Chinese footprint in various African states, and their contributions to the continent have been questioning more than before.

#### **4. Conclusion**

When the findings throughout the sections are analysed, it can be claimed that China had some interests while building relations with and investing in African states, and those interests were sharing some commonalities with the Western imperialists, such as Great Britain and the United States. However, each of these countries were adopting different strategies to realize their expansionist ambitions. While the US was looking for short-term outcomes, China was aiming for establishing long-term influence over the African markets and taking relevant actions to contribute to the development of the continent, which differs from typical Western imperialists. The key reason of this difference is China's national identity shaped by Confucian beliefs supporting long-term orientation, and People's Republic of China's approach on self-determination of states coupled with its ambitions on building long-lasting relations. In addition to these cultural dimensions, its suffering from expansionist states such as Japan have had impact on China's foreign relations and enabled the country to successfully expand its area of influence and compete with global champions like the US. The China could successfully develop a model based on long-term gains and replaced the US as the key power in the African continent. However, imperialist movements, regardless of their magnitude and severity on a region, usually lead to some resistance within the exploited societies, and China has been facing problems throughout the continent on problems such as low wages paid to local workers in manufacturing plants located in Africa. China's mutually beneficial and differentiated strategy in Africa has yielded positive results so far, yet the country needs to revisit its strategy once again in order to mitigate reactions from its "partners" and replace the US as the biggest economy in the world.

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