

China's Rise in the African Franc Zone and France's Containment Policy

Written by Afa'anwi Ma'abo Che

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AFA'ANWI MA'ABO CHE, AUG 7 2019

China has risen and overtaken France to become the largest economic partner of most former French colonies in Africa, particularly those in the Franc Zone using the CFA Franc currency. China's surge in the African Franc Zone poses a major challenge to France's foreign policy towards Africa which, historically, has focussed on sustaining unrivalled neo-colonial economic and military ties. Presumably distraught by China 'going global' and 'encroaching' on its African sphere of influence, France under President Macron appears to have adopted a policy of containing China, 'demonising' Chinese presence in Africa as debt-trap predatory and threatening to the autonomy of African states whilst 'glorifying' French interest in Francophone Africa as altruistic and protective of the sovereignty of African states. This opinion piece articulates and elaborates on France's reaction to China's rise in French Africa as one of containment.

French African Policy

Traditionally, France's foreign policy in Africa has focused on maintaining a dominant neo-colonial economic and military attachment to its former colonies, pejoratively known as *Françafrique*. During his presidential election campaign, Emmanuel Macron condemned France's colonial past as a barbaric crime against humanity. His campaign rhetoric suggested an inclination to loosen France's paternalistic grip on its former African colonies. In his first address to French Ambassadors following his election in 2017, Macron outlined a vision for a reformed, more inclusive French policy in Africa, designed to move France from a position of neo-colonial dominance within its former African colonial sphere of influence to one of partnerships with both Francophone and non-Francophone African countries.

In line with his ambition to reform France's African policy, President Macron established a Presidential Council for Africa, an unprecedented advisory structure to shape France's security and socio-economic engagements in Africa, including efforts in countering terrorism, illegal migration, and human trafficking. Under Macron, France's interest in Africa appears to have broadened territorially to incorporate more non-Francophone countries, including Kenya and Ethiopia, but largely continues to involve a strong neo-colonial attachment to Francophone Africa, with France's 'equal partnership' vision for its former African colonies remaining mere rhetoric. Under Macron, France and French companies such as Balloré, Total, and Orange continue to wield near-monopoly over strategic sectors in African Franc Zone economies, including infrastructure, energy, and telecommunication sectors. President Macron, even if willing, has so far been unable, and – as predicted by some analysts of Franco-African relations – is unlikely to disentangle African Franc Zone countries from France's neo-colonial grip. Given sustained French neo-colonial presence in Francophone Africa and Macron's interest in expanding Franco-African economic relations towards non-Francophone African countries, Paris is inclined to resist and contain China's surging influence in Africa since the end of the 20th century.

China's Rise in the African Franc Zone

France's historical privileged access to political leaders, raw materials and markets in its neo-colonial and cultural sphere of influence in Africa is now rivalled by other major players, including the United States (US), the European

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Union, and most notably, China. At the end of the 20th century, the Chinese government sought to end the country's economic ideological mindset of self-reliance by adopting a 'going global' (also known as 'go global'/'go out') policy, which principally encouraged Chinese companies to take advantage of globalization and booming world trade to increase Chinese investments abroad. In 2013, China launched the 'One Belt One Road' (also known as the 'Belt and Road' or 'New Silk Road') Initiative, the most ambitious infrastructure investment project in history, which is designed to facilitate 'going global' by connecting Asia, Europe, and Africa. Since the adoption of the 'go out' policy, even France's historical sphere of influence in Africa, particularly the Franc Zone, has experienced a surge in Chinese trade, grants, loans, and investments. As of 2017, according to UN international trade data for goods (see table below), China had overtaken France as the number one source of imports for a number of Franc Zone countries, namely Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, and Togo, and occupied second spot behind France in Mali and Senegal.

How France Compares to China on Top 10 Ranking of Import Markets (for Goods) for Franc Zone Countries in 1995 and 2017 (amounts in brackets are in million US Dollars)

Source: Generated from UN International Trade Data

French Policy of Containing China

Disenchanted by China's rise in Africa, France under Macron appears to have adopted a policy of containing China in the African Franc Zone. To stifle further Chinese growth in its African sphere of influence, it can be expected that France would be keen to have its historical major power allies, including the US, compete rather than cooperate with China, as a part of the strategy for containing China in Africa. Fortunately for Paris, the US has adopted a competitive posture towards China. Notwithstanding the US's stance, France is making proactive efforts of its own towards containing China and reviving the 'sacrosanct' *Françafrique* connection. At the core of France's efforts to contain China are Macron's regular presidential visits to African countries and presidential speeches which, on the one hand, 'demonise' Chinese investments in Africa as inducing unsustainable debts and hurting the autonomy of African states, and on the other hand, 'glorify' French interest in Africa as altruistic and defensive of the sovereignty of

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African countries.

Upon becoming president, Macron asserted that, China has made important commitments globally, but China's values and interests, presumably including in Africa, are typically different from those of France. Consistent with France's neo-colonial ties with Africa and Macron's drive to make African countries France's 'major partners', the French President has visited 16 African countries (Mali, Morocco, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Algeria, Niger, Tunisia, Senegal, Mauritania, Chad, Djibouti, Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Egypt), more than any other major world leader in the same period. All the African countries visited by Macron have colonial connections with France except the last five listed. As already suggested by one observer, Macron's numerous visits to Africa suggest a 'determination to weaken China's grip' whilst reviving and expanding France's presence in Francophone and non-Francophone Africa.

Roman Serman, a former French presidential adviser, has rhetorically but unconvincingly asserted that it would be ridiculous to think that France could invoke its long standing *Françafrique* defense agreements – which, in part, provide France privileged access to natural resources and markets in some Francophone African countries such as Togo in exchange for French military support to the African countries during security crises – to, for instance, order Togo to tell China, '*quitter le pays*' (leave the country). But, in March 2019, Macron did so using tacit language during his visit to Djibouti, a small but geopolitically strategic former colony of France harbouring substantial foreign investment stocks and foreign military bases, including France's largest military base in Africa, the US's only permanent military base in Africa, and China's only official military base abroad. Macron implicitly asked China to steer clear of French Africa, saying:

'China is a great world power and has expanded its presence in many countries, especially in Africa, in recent years. But what can look good in the short term...can often end up being bad over the medium to long term. I wouldn't want a new generation of [BRICs] international investments to encroach on our historical [French African] partners' sovereignty or weaken their economies'.

Conversely, President Macron used a more charming language with regards to French interest in Africa, stating: 'French companies can offer a respectful partnership...one which will not bring on excessive, unsustainable debts and favors the development of local jobs'.

If the French president could so openly but subtly depict China to Africa in such diabolical terms, it leaves little to imagination as to what he would be saying, away from the cameras behind closed doors, to *Françafrique* leaders. France, under Macron, appears keen to contain China's presence in Africa, specifically French Africa. Paris also has the ability to leverage formidable influence it can utilise to serve its interests in the African Franc Zone, to the detriment of China. Key components of that influence include: i) the French language, which remains either the sole official or one of the official languages in all Franc Zone countries and almost all former French colonies in Africa (excluding Algeria, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia); ii) the colonial CFA franc currency in the Franc Zone, which despite criticisms and calls in some European and African circles to scrap it, remains the most used currency in Francophone Africa, with France guaranteeing its stability and convertibility through a range of monetary agreements which allow Paris to keep 50% of the foreign exchange reserves of the regional central banks of the states using the currency; and perhaps most importantly iii) the aforementioned French secret neo-colonial defense agreements with at least 8 French African countries, which principally guarantee the concerned African countries and their leaders, France's protection against internal and external foes in exchange for priority access to natural resources and markets, although some of those agreements have since been revised. Elaborate analysis of how France is using these soft and hard power tools to keep an extractive imperial grip on French African countries has been done elsewhere.

How will China respond to France's anti-Chinese campaign in the African Franc Zone? This is a hypothetical question but it has major implications. China could completely ignore France and focus on maintaining and expanding its presence in French Africa. After all, China is a superior economic power. But in recent years, China has been involved in a 'cold trade war' with the US and the Chinese economy appears to have slowed sharply. Opening-up to fierce rivalry with France on French African territory where France wields stronger historical ties and enormous

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soft power might not be so enticing to China at the moment. However, given huge extant Chinese engagements in Africa and President Xi Jinping's strong commitment to the 'Belt and Road' initiative, Beijing is also unlikely to exude cowardice against its cultural inclination to display draconic strength. A modest but assertive strategic response from China can be expected; one which would not seek to expand Chinese presence in the African Franc Zone in the near future but at least maintain its gigantic current engagements in a few French African countries, especially those that China considers critical to the 'Belt and Road' initiative, notably Cameroon and Senegal.

At the 2018 Beijing Summit of the Forum on China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), China deviated from a pattern of doubling and tripling financial pledges to Africa and opted to stagnate China's pledge at \$60 billion, the same amount pledged in the FOCAC summit of 2015. Prior to the 2018 summit, French African countries were already on the margins of Chinese engagements in Africa, with Anglophone African countries dominating the top ten list of African countries hosting the most Chinese foreign direct investment stocks as of 2015 and receiving the most Chinese loans over the period 2000 – 2017, according to data from Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies-China Africa Research Initiative (SAIS-CARI). Algeria, Cameroon, and Congo-Brazzaville are the only countries with French colonial connections to feature in those lists combined. Given China's marginal presence in French Africa within the bigger picture of China in Africa, France's disgruntlement with China's 'encroachment' in *Françafrique* could lead Beijing to keep only a strategic presence in the African Franc Zone while focusing its resources towards growing its already dominant influence in Anglophone Africa. Unfortunately for the people of the African Franc Zone, any curtailment to China's ambitions in the zone would only dent their prospects of benefiting from China's unmatched commitment to the continent.

About the author:

Afa'anwi Ma'abo Che holds a Ph.D in Politics from Swansea University, UK. He is a winner of Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies – China Africa Research Initiative's research grant/fellowship for 2019. Afa'anwi is a Senior Lecturer in International Relations and Peace Studies and the Deputy Director of postgraduate studies at Kampala International University, Uganda. He has published in reputable outlets, including the UN-affiliated Peace and Conflict Review, Peace and Conflict Studies, International Journal on World Peace and on E-IR.