

# What it means to be a great power politics essay



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Great Powers are the most powerful members in the international system. The idea of Great Power plays a significant role in the theory of international relations as any changes in the Great Powers' strategies or emergence of new Great Powers normally alter the status quo. This essay began by examining the different criteria used by scholars to define 'Great Powers', following by my own definition of 'Great Powers' to further discuss and illustrate my understanding of this concept.

Today, China plays a new role in the international system, garnering increasing attention around the globe. China's economic strength and political clout are already influencing places beyond the Asia Pacific region. Africa, as a place in which Chinese engagement is expanding rapidly, can be used as a region to assess whether China is a Great Power or not. The second part of the essay analyses China's foreign policy towards Africa since the 1990s with attention to China's objectives there as well as the reactions of the African. Various aspects will be discussed, including China's political, economic, military presences and soft power to assess whether China is a Great power in Africa or not.

## II. Definition of 'Great Powers' in the International System

### Scholarly definitions

The traditional definition of great power can be found in the distinction made at the Paris Peace Conference, which suggested that great power is a 'state with a global scope of interests in the international arena'[1]Throughout the years, the concept of great power has been conceptualized by a number of

theoretical schools of international relations, for example, realism, liberal internationalism and constructivism.

According to a prominent British historian Arnold Toynbee, great power can be defined as ‘ a political force exerting an effect coextensive with the widest range of the society in which it operates’[2], while one of the leading scholars of the international relations in 20th century, Martin Wight regards, great powers as ‘ powers with general interests, i. e. those whose interests are as wide as the state systems itself, which today means worldwide’.

[3]And for Professor Hedley Bull from the University of Oxford, great power contributes to international system ‘ by managing their relations with one another; and by exploiting their preponderance in such way as to import a degree of central direction to the affairs of international society as a whole.’[4]I agree with these viewpoints that the ability to project influence and power beyond its region is a decisive factor for defining ‘ greatness’.

The concept of ‘ great power’ is a pivot in many realists’ international relations models, including the theory of hegemony, balance of power and the polarity in international system. According to a prominent Neo-realist scholar, Waltz Kenneth stated in his remarkably influential book, Theory of International Politics, the great powers’ ‘ extraordinary positions’ in the international system enable them to ‘ undertake tasks that other states have neither the incentive nor the ability to perform.’[5]

Some realist scholars argued that there is asymmetry of power within the international system. According to Krasner, when power asymmetries are high, the frequency of intervention increase.[6]He put forward the argument

that a great power intervene the weaker states' internal affairs by various norms, values and principles to justify and legitimize their actions. They sometimes violate those values and principles, but themselves stay free from external interference.[7]

Another realist scholar, Leurdijk also suggested that the international system is in ' hierarchical relations- relations of dominance and subordination'. [8]That means, the great powers are those who dominant over the subordinated countries.

Therefore, from this perspective, a great power is a state which has more state sovereignty and autonomy it can claim, and it is subject to less external intervention.[9]Also, a great power is able to enforce the rule of international law. Meanwhile, contemporary international law incorporates broader ideas more than ' the rule of non-intervention'. According to Khachikian from Stanford University, it now embraces ideas of ' permissible intervention', such as ' enforcing international peace, protecting one' nationals, preventing a spillover across state borders, stopping mass human suffering and others'[10]

Generally speaking, the traditional definitions of great power emphasize on the powers' wide global interests in the international system, while some scholars consider great power as a state which possess the capacity to exercise influence within the international system. From this perspective, great powers are able to intervene their targets of intervention and not being a target of intervention by other actors in the international system. To

conclude, we may say that the former viewpoint stress on goal and interests while the latter on put emphasis on capability and influence.

Both of the concepts are able to provide us a general view. And it is true that a great power should be a state playing active role in the international system and possess the ability to influence on the region it interested in. Nevertheless, I am of the opinion that the definition of Great Power should also be something more specific and concrete. There need to be a standard unit of account for measuring political power. In this essay, I will assess a country's power through various defining elements, for example, its geographic base, economic resources, educational and technical level, military potential etc.

‘ Great Power’ in a more tangible sense

To be a great power in international system, the nation has to possess not only economic prosperity and military might, but also strong soft power and identity as a leader. In this essay, economic strength refers to the ‘ level of development’. For soft power, strong cultural ties with other countries, moral strength and technological level should be considered. Identity as a leader refers to the bargaining power in international arena and the ability to take action independently and at the same time, plays an active and co-operative role in the international system.

Economic strength

Economic strength cannot merely assessed by the size of the economy, but also to what extent, the economy is ‘ developed’.

From my perspective, a great power must be 'economically developed'. 'Economic development' used here includes several meanings: First, the growth of national income (measured by the Gross National Product) or the output of goods and services per head of population. Second, the increase in ability of a society to produce goods and services and to satisfy wants. However, If we consider development as 'a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy,'[11]as what Professor Amartya Sen put forward, then one can argue that economic development as a process of expanding the economic freedoms that people enjoy. Apart from monetary value, economic security, living standards, life expectancy, and social welfare like education and health services should also be considered. Therefore, internally within a Great power, people should enjoy the rights to sell and purchase the goods at equilibrium prices provided by a competitive environment which the movement of labor and capital is free. Also, it should be structurally strong in the industrial, financial and technological sectors.

Economic growth is often the greatest source of global influence.

Nevertheless, high-level of 'economically developed' is just a criterion for being a 'Great Power'. For a 'Great Power in International System', the country should accept and adapt to the rules of games in the international system. Economically, the country has to cooperate with other leading economies in overcoming obstacles to world trade, being an active part of the international market.

Military strength

Military strength is a significant factor of a country's power projection capacity. Military strength of a certain country is usually measured by military expenditure, defense spending, number of military personnel and aircraft carrier, size of navy, etc. However, we should not neglect the level of military technology in assessing a countries power. The arm force of a Great Power should be a modernized one. Furthermore, to be a Great power in international system, the state has to maintain frequent high-level dialogue regarding strategic matters with other actors within the international system.

### Soft power and identity as a leader

The concept of Soft Power is invented by Harvard University political scientist Joseph Nye, he stated that ' soft power rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others.' [12] From my point of view, this idea embraces cultural factors, educational level, reputation of the state, etc. The higher the level of soft power, the higher the country's ability to achieve their objectives in their targeted region, therefore, it is a crucial criteria for being a great power.

National image is something intangible but important for a nation to portray itself as a great power. Stability of political and social systems, cultural interactions with other countries, active participation and contributions to world peace are all related to how the country is seen by the outside world. Having respect and prestige, it does not only help the state to overcome its internal problems, but also convince the targeted region that their actions are legitimized. A great power must be able to influence on the region you interested in, at the same time, that region welcome your influence and engagement. As soft power is a key factor for achieving international

objectives and legitimizing actions, we should take it into account when assessing a country's greatness.

Furthermore, the state identity as a leader is also a decisive factor. A great power is a state which has bargaining power in international arena and the ability to take action independently. 'Independent' does not mean refusal to bring itself in line with the international system, but referring to not being the target of intervention by other powers. And the identity as a leader also refers to active and co-operative role in the international system.

My definition for 'Great Power' is a combination of tangible and intangible elements. To conclude, a great power is an active player in the international arena with strong economic, military strength and soft power, while having interests and capacity to project its influence to places beyond its region. At the same time, the targeted place welcomes its influence.

### III. Is China a Great Power in Africa?

China's rapidly increasing engagement in Africa is virtually rooted in her remarkable rise as a global power. With greater involvement into African market in the form of development assistance, trade and investment, together with some level of military cooperation, peacekeeping and employment of soft power, China has emerged as a key-player in Africa. The expansiveness of her activities has gone beyond the Western engagement that came before her in the region and her engagement became one of the most significant developments for Africa in recent years. Through playing an active and positive role in Africa, China has built up her benign image and Great Power status in the world.



This part of the paper analyses China's foreign policy towards Africa since the early 1990s to discuss whether China is a Great power in Africa or not. As mentioned in the first part of this research paper, one of the criteria to be a Great power is the ability to influence on the region you interested, at the same time, your influence and intervention are welcomed by the region. Therefore, the second part of this paper examines the objectives underlying Chinese foreign policy towards Africa and discusses whether China is successful in achieving those objectives. China's involvement on the African continent will be reviewed from various levels, including economic engagement, political presence, military ties and the projection of soft power. It argues that the impressive scale and scope of China's engagement together with the positive reactions from African countries to China's expanding presence proved China to be a Great Power in Africa.

### China's Objectives in Africa

China's rapidly expanding engagement in Africa is actually part of its transformation of the foreign policy to a more active one. Chinese objectives in Africa basically include, ' access to natural resources', ' export markets', [13]projecting her influence beyond the Asia-Pacific region and thus strengthening China's status as a Great Power.

Facing fierce criticism from the West after the Tiananmen Incident in 1989, China started to establish closer ties with non-Western countries.[14]Since African states constitute a massive voting clout as they occupied over one-fourth of the seats in United Nations General Assembly, China can be benefited from developing cordial relations with them. In the 1990s, China

greatly increased her assistance to developing countries, especially to African countries.[15]

China helped African states overcome their tremendous poverty, boosting the African economic through comprehensive investment and development in the region. Beside economic sphere, China's contribution in United Nation peacekeeping and continued training and educational assistance reflects China's significant role in Africa that it can be conceived as a Great Power in the region.

#### China's Political presence in Africa

The beginning of the relations between China and Africa can be dated back to the voyages of Zheng He (1372-1433) in the Ming dynasty, while some scholars regarded the Bandung Conference of 1955 marked the real start of Africa-China relations.[16]The momentum of closer ties greatly accelerated throughout the last 10 years. Their closer relationships signaled by frequent high-level diplomatic trips by Chinese leaders to African capitals and frequent high-level diplomatic trips by African leaders to Beijing.[17]In 2006 there were 48 African states heads gathered in Beijing for the Forums on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), which marked the largest gathering of African top political leaders outside of the United Nations (UN).[18]

Besides, there are rapid establishment of African and Chinese migrant communities in both China and Africa. In addition to governmental level interactions, continuing increase in interactions between ordinary Africans and Chinese can also be seen within their relationship.[19]

The first part of this paper has mentioned that we may assess a country is a Great Power or not from a geographical perspective. Through this perspective, China's engagement in Africa is broad enough as a Great Power because it maintains official diplomatic relations with 48 African countries out of the total number of 53.[20]Several events reflected African support to China, for example, they supported Beijing to be the host city for 2008 Olympic Games during the International Olympic Committee (IOC) decision-making process. Also, Africa supported China's ' One-China policy' and helped prevent Taiwan from getting a seat in United Nations many times. [21]

Moreover, China is actively participating in the affairs of the African Union (AU). China promised \$100-\$150 million for constructing permanent headquarters and attended African Union summits in 2006 and 2007. [22]China's government's assistance has been appreciated by Africa. Jean Ping, the chairperson of the Commission of the African Union, commended China in January 2009 for her contributions to Africa and ' identified China as Africa's key strategic partner.'[23]He also expressed that the African Union would like to ' boost consultation and cooperation with China on the regional and international affairs.'[24]

Different from the European great powers in the 19th century, China did not send her troops to Africa to fight wars and depriving the African aborigine. Rather, China has demonstrated effort for keeping peace without appearing military threat. According to Xinhua News Agency in 2007, ' a total of 1, 400 Chinese troops are taking part in separate UN peacekeeping operations in seven African countries, including Sudan, where 415 Chinese peacekeepers

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are deployed in the south.’[25]The number of military personnel deployed by China in peacekeeping operations in Africa exceeds those of other permanent members of the UN Security Council, making China the largest contributor of all. Furthermore, China provides financial support to the African Union regarding the peacekeeping in Somalia and Darfur.[26]

Politically, China has a strong presence and influence in Africa. China also plays an active and constructive role in peacekeeping activities in Africa. At the same time, China’s role has been highly recognized by the African countries. For example, the top official in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ethiopia commended that, ‘ never in modern history has a nation successfully made such a determined and massive effort as China has in achieving progress within such a short span of time. Ethiopia has been following this remarkable achievement with great interest and admiration.’[27]As mentioned above, a Great Power able to influence the region at the same the region welcomes your influence. From this perspective, China is qualified as a Great Power in Africa.

#### China’s Military Presence in Africa

For arm sales to Africa, China ranked the third from 2003 to 2006. [28]Although China’s military ties with Africa are not as strong as political and economic ties, to some African states, military cooperation with China is extremely crucial. Especially for those countries under civil wars but that came under military embargo from the west, for example, Sudan and Zimbabwe. China has established some small arm factories in Sudan and Uganda, producing light weaponry for the region. Besides, in 2005 and 2006,

Nigeria purchased missiles and fighter jets from China and in turns, awarded oil contracts to China.[29]

In fact, China maintains security and military relations with all African countries except those four countries diplomatically recognize Taiwan. In this sense, China maintains a great military presence in the region. Also, its armament sales and peacekeeping activities have the capacity to alter the political situation in Africa. China's major objectives in Africa are getting natural resources and maintaining economic interests. And she is able to achieve her goals through providing the military resources to persuade African countries to help her.

To counter the American presence in Africa, China will continue to expand its military ties with African countries, at the same time, making contributions to the United States peacekeeping in the region. China's steps will further enhance her Great Power status in Africa.

#### China's Economic Presence in Africa

The volume of China-Africa trade in recent years increased dramatically, from \$8.92 billion in 2001 to \$40 billion dollars in 2005, \$73 billion in 2007, and reached \$106.8 billion in 2008. China is now, overtaking Britain and France, became Africa's second largest trading partner after the United States.[30]31

China has extended scope of duty-free imports from Africa from 190 to 440 items and is discussing with the Southern African Customs Union (SACU) for proposing a free-trade agreement between them.[32]African countries

greatly appreciated China's removal of tariffs on goods as they have benefited from China's action.[33]

In 2001, Hu Jintao called for Chinese enterprises to go ' global'. Key State Owned Enterprises have begun to set up joint ventures in extractive industries in Africa.[34]In 2005, China had already established over 800 enterprises in Africa region.[35]In 2009, Chinese investments by both the government and private enterprise in Africa almost tripled in value compared to the figures in 2000.[36]

Between 2000 and 2003, China provided \$1. 3billion in debt relief to 27 African countries and an additional \$1. 2 billion in debt cancellation for 33 African countries in 2006.[37]In addition, China has provided considerable amount of development aid, in the form of low-interest loans, to African countries. China provided \$13 billion to Angola, \$9 billion to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and \$2. 5 billion to Ethiopia as well.[38]

Additionally, China is the members of African Development Bank Group (AfDB), African Development Fund (ADF) and West African Development Bank (WADB). China contributed to the Banks' institutional activities, and technical assistance operations to promote economic and social development in Africa. China hosted the 42nd Annual Meeting of the Board of Governors of the AfDB and the 33rd Annual Meeting of the Board of Governors of the ADF in Shanghai in May 2007.[39]Besides, China is engaging actively into the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA),

and the South African Development Community (SADC).[40]All these reflected China's pivotal role in Africa.

With ongoing economic and trade cooperation and exchange, we can see that China presence in Africa keeps rapidly growing and China has capability to influence events in the region. As African countries are yearning for an alternative to the West that they have relied on over a long period of time, they are in need of Chinese investment and assistance to help develop their economies.

Unlike the Western donors who tend to impose Western values like democratic ideas on Africa, China invest and provide aid without much preconditions and interference in their internal affairs, therefore, it is not unimaginable that China is regarded by Africa as a more cooperative and valuable partner to the West.

Besides providing loans, China also invest in infrastructure development and many high-visibility projects, that the African leaders generally in favor. Physical infrastructure constructions have been long neglected if not avoided by Western donors.[41]Also, Chinese investors are highly reputed by the African of their rapid completion of infrastructures with acceptable qualities. [42]Moreover, the General populace in Africa prefers physical infrastructure to monetary aid as the aid money would eventually be manipulated by corrupt leaders. Through providing more practical help, China's influence and presence in Africa are further strengthened.

Nevertheless, some argue that there are also many complications for China to expand her presence in Africa. The biggest obstacle is the anti-Chinese

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sentiment resulting from the flooding of cheaper Chinese manufactured goods in African markets. The Chinese firms underbid many local firms in Africa, causing close down of factories and unemployment. However, we should not neglect that import of cheaper goods from China means that the African can buy many goods that they could not afford to purchase before. And the Chinese investment projects at least created some new job opportunities for the Africans. All these actually have improved the living standards of many general Africans.

Nowadays, China has already constituted a pivotal part in the African economy. Although the Africans may consider Chinese engagement as a challenge as they worry about China's growing global power may turn her role in African to become as stifling as they have experienced with the west[43], generally, they need China's participation and the African leaders today consider Chinese embrace as not only a source of investment, but also a chance as well as a counterbalance to the West.

### Soft power

To access a country is a Great power or not, we do not only consider its influence over their targeted regions through economic and military power, but also the influence through soft power. When examining China's power in Africa, its projection of soft power should not be neglected.

As mentioned in the first part of this paper, soft power ' rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others'[44]In this paper, China's soft power policy refers to the use of cultural, educational means to boost her image and thus to influence public opinion and persuade nations abroad in China's favour.

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The establishment of Confucius Institutes and the recruitment of international students are prominent forms of Chinese projection of soft power. China has already set up more than 20 Confucius Institutes throughout Africa, teaching African people Mandarin, Chinese history and culture.[45]

China has educational relationships with 50 African countries and keeps increasing her assistance on training and education to African countries. In 2005, China also hosted the Sino-African Education Minister Forum.[46] In 2007, there are around 5, 900 students from Africa studying in China, with most of them receiving scholarships provided by the Chinese government. [47] The Chinese government also promised to ‘ double the number of such scholarships by 2011,’[48] and ‘ establish 10 agricultural technology centers’ in Africa.[49] Every year, China trained large number of African professionals in fields of agriculture, education, medical science, etc. Besides, China’s state-run Xinhua news agency also trains African journalists in both Africa and China.[50]

China’s use of education, technical training and cultural exchange as a channel of employing soft power is successful in boosting China’s image in Africa and thus expanding its global influence. The projection of soft power can essentially gain the support from the general public in Africa. With closer and closer educational relationships, the future generations and educated elites in Africa will certainly have better understanding about China. Having support from governments, and non-governmental actors, including both educated elites and general populace, China gained legitimacy as a Great Power.

#### IV. Conclusion

My definition of great power as mentioned in the first part of the essay, is an active player in the international arena with strong econ