

# China in Ethiopia: The Long-Term Perspective

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There are few topics that have garnered more recent interest among western policy makers than the increasing investment and influence of China in African partnerships. China's increasing role in large-scale trade, building critical infrastructure, and even becoming a major player in international finance on the continent have all raised eyebrows in the governments of Western Europe and the United States. However, much of the initial analysis on these developments centered on China and Chinese agency, reproducing false narratives where Africans are not necessarily actors in these relationships but often passive or simplistic partners who are acted upon in service of Chinese ambitions on their countries. This narrative in turn reified the worst of colonial stereotypes and warps the western conception of their African counterparts. Thankfully, a spate of recent scholarship has emerged to emphasize the agency of the African governments in these partnerships and, even further, stress the benefit these arrangements offer to domestic and international goals of the African partners. This in turn offers a more accurate and nuanced accounting of China's activities on the continent, recasting the narrative of them as acting upon unsuspecting target nations to one of complex and mutually beneficial agreements between, if not peers, then at least sophisticated and competent actors. Aaron Tesfaye's *China in Ethiopia* is a welcome addition to this new wave of scholarship, offering a well-researched exploration of the evolution and future of the complex relationship between China and Ethiopia.

The volume itself offers a multifaceted approach to understanding the relationship between China and Ethiopia across an introductory section and six chapters. The introduction offers a broader discussion of Tesfaye's conception of the major threads of China-Ethiopia relations as well as a brief discussion of the overall historical arc of China-Africa relations. This is then followed by Chapter One, "China-Ethiopia Relations: Looking Back and Forward," which explores the complex history of Ethiopia-China relations, which have understandably evolved considerably through the past six decades. Although brief, it is an excellent overall survey of the topic and one that admirably sets the stage for the following three chapters, which form the heart of the work. Chapters Two, Three, and Four in

turn offer deeper explorations into the political, economic, and strategic relations between contemporary Ethiopia and China. All three of these are meticulously researched and documented, with the political relations focusing on the interests that drive and shape the economic and strategic plans and programs the volume discusses. Taken as a whole, these three chapters offer a multilayered and complex portrait of shared interest within the deepening partnership. Tesfaye then offers a final full chapter on the potential future dynamics of the partnership as represented by the Belt and Road Initiative and Ethiopia's regional hopes for greater integration, which offers a compelling picture of where this relationship might go. He then concludes with a summative conclusion that does an effective job of tying his previous points together.

In setting out to write what he himself describes as a “mid-level analysis” of China-Ethiopia relations, Tesfaye has added a well-needed and well-constructed volume to the growing field of China-African relations work. If there are any issues with the book, they are at best minor in scope. Some readers will likely find some challenges with his usage of the “strategic” as the third category, as this does not necessarily present a separate category from the political or the economic. Instead, the chapter more looks at how the partnership benefits both partners' larger ambitions on the continent, which does not perhaps necessarily fit the title. However, this is a minor issue of terminology. The only other issue is one that is shared by any work that attempts to stretch out the current dynamics into the future, which is the fact that futurecasting is exceedingly difficult. Given the outbreak of violence in Tigray and President Abiy's realignment of relations with Sudan and Eritrea in the past few months, some of the discussions in the final two substantive chapters may already have been overcome by events. However, despite these two small issues Tesfaye's work remains a well-written and deeply researched work that fills a critical gap in at the state level in the larger discussions China-Africa relations and should find a welcome home on many scholars' shelves.

With that said though, there are also several pertinent insights in this volume for the more American-based practitioner-oriented readership of this journal. In particular, there are three related dynamics that American policy makers should take note of from this volume to inform their own work. The first is the aforementioned Ethiopian agency and ability to shape its various partnerships with China. As Tesfaye notes throughout, Ethiopia does not take Chinese loans and aid blindly, but rationally weighs these debts and potential influence against its desired goals in the region. Secondly, while these partnerships are focused where the regional goals of China and Ethiopia align, such as in the stability and economic development of the Horn under the aegis of Ethiopia, it should be obvious these goals are not exclusive to China and Ethiopia. In fact, up until the recent eruption

of violence in Tigray, Ethiopia was the preferred partner for the United States in trying to develop a stable and prosperous Horn. Finally, it should be noted that despite the often heated rhetoric of a New Cold War, Ethiopia is not and will likely never be an exclusive partner for any developed power. As Tesfaye notes, despite the high visibility of Chinese partnerships in Ethiopia, the Ethiopians still maintain significant projects and partnerships with the European Union and even the United States. These partnerships are just as critical toward regional goals and often just as important in terms of influence but take place in less visible avenues of development.

Given these insights offered within Tesfaye's work, the practitioner or policy maker should reflexively reject the framing of a zero-sum competition between China and the United States in Ethiopia. It is well within Ethiopia's interest to retain a web of bilateral relationships to maximize its ability to achieve its domestic and regional goals. It is beyond the capability of any foreign government to alter that reality. With this in mind, the United States should focus on where its own international capabilities can help Ethiopia achieve our shared goals while avoiding direct competition with China. By focusing on our traditional and valued partnerships with Ethiopia in the realm of democratization, education, health care, and military professionalism we stand a far better chance to aid in the development and growth of a friendly regional power as opposed to forcing a zero-sum choice. However, where and how the United States and other allied democratic powers engage in the future will also be shaped by the aftermath of Ethiopia's current violent suppression of the Tigrayan regional government. Given the violence and increasing authoritarian nature of the Abiy government, it may not primarily be the rhetoric of competition with China that shapes American engagement with Ethiopia as much as it is the increasing debate within American foreign policy about the nature and scope of relations with repressive and undemocratic governments.

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