

China in Namibia
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Visitors to Namibia today are often surprised to discover many Chinese people in this southern African country. China has invested \$4.6 billion in Namibia since 1990 to build roads, shipping installations, a new railway, and other critical infrastructure; extract valuable resources from under the ground in mines throughout the country; create retail shops, hotels, and other businesses; provide educational support, scholarships, and exchanges; develop a Chinese naval base in coastal Walvis Bay as part of military/industrial development to protect China's global maritime routes, development that includes a satellite tracking station in Swakopmund – and to provide Chinese labor for all these ventures.



How did China get connected to a far-off African country?

Namibia was a South African colony, complete with a brutal apartheid regime, a white-run government, and white control of the country's land, mining, and industrial assets. An independence movement arose in the early 1960s led by two groups, SWANU and SWAPO. The movement had leftist-Communist-Marxist leanings, and China provided early funding along with technical and moral support for the resistance.

SWAPO became the *de facto* movement leader, and Namibia became independent on March 21, 1990 with a SWAPO-headed government. The very next day, China and Namibia established formal bilateral relations.

According to Namibia's Ministry of Home Affairs and Immigration, there are at least 100,000 Chinese in the country, 4.3% of the total population of 2.35 million and a larger percent than that of some of the indigenous groups.

A Ministry spokesperson's statement sums up many Namibians' attitude towards the Chinese: "The number of Chinese nationals in the country is increasing at an alarming rate, and is still increasing."

The political cartoon below reinforces the prevailing xenophobia towards Chinese immigrants who are perceived as stealing jobs, poaching endangered animals, and weakening the rule of law.



Leaders in Namibia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs have a different view. Namibia is a country that the World Bank labels 'middle-class,' but the label erroneously reflects a mid-point between two enormous extremes.¹ The country's index of economic inequality is the second-worst in the world². A few people, mostly whites or the black political and business elite, control nearly all the land and the wealth, just as they did before independence. Nearly everyone else, mostly black, is desperately poor. Only about 10 percent of the population falls into the middle class, less than in neighboring Botswana, with 30 percent, and South Africa, at 20 percent.³

China makes cheap goods, the Ministry spokesperson said⁴, and that's a significant advantage for the Namibian people. China's major exports to Namibia include mechanical and electrical equipment, clothes, shoes, hardware, tourist products and other daily necessities. One complaint that is often heard, however, is that China is exporting inferior products, which is why the goods are so cheap.

¹ <https://www.namibian.com.na/index.php?id=114655&page=archive-read> Accessed 9-1-2017.

² <https://www.theguardian.com/inequality/datablog/2017/apr/26/inequality-index-where-are-the-worlds-most-unequal-countries> Accessed 9-1-2017.

³ <https://www.namibian.com.na/index.php?id=79593&page=archive-read> Accessed 9-1-2017.

⁴ Personal conversation, 7-2017.

A second advantage, according to the Ministry spokesperson, is that the Chinese work “24/7,” with the implication that the Chinese work harder than the average black Namibian.

Finally, because of China’s role in supporting the Namibian liberation struggle, there is an enduring positive relationship between the two countries.

China continues to step up at critical moments. During a recent prolonged drought when more than 750,000 Namibians experienced great food insecurity, China was among the first countries to provide food aid⁵, and China is assisting in mitigating some of the risk factors that led to this crisis.

However, despite China’s positive role in infrastructural development, there is a strong perception that China is exploiting Namibia for its rich mineral resources: diamonds, gold, coal, uranium, copper, and rare earth minerals. As always, though, the counterpoint is that China shares technology, provides value-added opportunities, and fosters greater internal development than would otherwise occur.⁶

China has an almost-overwhelming presence throughout much of Africa, Australia, and many parts of Asia. There are clearly multiple perspectives on the economic, legal, social, and cultural consequences of these ties. Those perspectives often are influenced by the extent of an individual’s or a group’s economic vulnerability. Those whose jobs or economic futures are threatened in some way are eager to see China’s role be limited; others who benefit in some way, or who perceive no threat from China, the newest global behemoth, welcome Chinese investment and support.

China’s investment in Africa, and in Namibia, will undoubtedly increase to support China’s need for raw materials, export markets, military security and growth, and geo-political influence. It is important for the Namibian government to determine how to balance the pluses of this investment with the negatives of local unemployment, xenophobia, loss of domestic control over resources, changes in the legal system, and challenges to the natural landscape.

⁵ http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-07/30/c_136483212.htm Accessed 9-1-2017.

⁶ https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/02/magazine/is-china-the-worlds-new-colonial-power.html?mcubz=1&_r=0 Accessed 9-1-2017.

