

Blinken's Africa Visit Failed to Turn Countries Against China

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Global Research, November 23, 2021

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Region: [Asia](#), [sub-Saharan Africa](#), [USA](#)

Theme: [Global Economy](#)

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Nigerian Foreign Minister Geoffrey Onyeama said during a joint press conference with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken last week that there is no problem with his country depending on loans from China, especially as his country's debt is quite "sustainable." Onyeama added that cooperation with China offers Nigeria excellent infrastructure development opportunities.

Blinken admitted during the press conference held in the Nigerian capital of Abuja that Chinese investments in Africa and African trade with China is huge. However, he also made the predictable Western argument about China's debt trap against African countries. The US Secretary of State insisted that African countries should not be left with a huge debt that cannot be paid off.

For his part, Onyeama responded to criticism of the Nigerian government regarding its supposed dependence on money and loans from China. The minister said Nigeria is trying to be very cautious on the debt issue. In fact, he claimed that the debt-to-GDP ratio is very good. Onyeama also stressed that this is a stable debt that the government closely monitors. He emphasized that Nigeria needs infrastructure for industrialization and that cooperation with China offers great opportunities to fill the country's huge deficit.

At the press conference, Fox News and the Wall Street Journal questioned Chinese-Nigerian economic relations. However, the attempt to stir up hype around Nigeria's alleged dependence on Chinese loans was unsuccessful.

It is because of China that Africa is gradually overcoming poverty, building necessary transportation infrastructure and achieving industrialization. China takes long-term programs, industry and agricultural development seriously and exploits natural resources for the benefit of not only its own country, but also local economies. Under these conditions, the US begrudgingly acknowledges that they are no longer the preeminent power of the world and must accept the importance of China in relation to Africa.

As for the debt trap theory, Blinken was forced to speak out, especially as the US has adopted a policy of confronting China at any opportunity given. It is especially hypocritical though as the US portrays Chinese projects as debt traps, but the US economy itself is also only growing because of its huge accumulation of debt. Nigeria's debt to China gives the country an opportunity to solve its social problems, develop its infrastructure like roads, railways and energy pipelines. At the same time, according to the Nigerian Public Debt Authority, the country's debt to China is \$3.121 billion, or 3.94% of the total public debt as of March 2020.

The US artificially exaggerates the scale of China's so-called debt trap to Africa. Blinken's first visit to Africa as Secretary of State was clearly intended to mark the US' presence in Africa after the previous Trump administration ignored the continent.

Another purpose of Blinken's trip to Africa is compete with China for influence, a task that is seemingly impossible. It is quite symbolic that upon arrival in Abuja, Blinken's motorcade drove by the China Chamber of Commerce in Nigeria - an immensely grand building. Then on his trip to Kenya after Nigeria, his convoy passed a Chinese-funded highway that is under construction and where Chinese characters can be seen on tractors and other heavy equipment. The US Secretary of State also held his press conference in a hotel where the Kenya-China Chamber of Commerce office is located. Blinken's trip to Africa was filled with such reminders of Beijing's growing influence on the continent and Washington's waning clout.

It would also be on Blinken's mind that this reality in Africa was by Washington's own choice. With the emergence of the unipolar world system following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Washington prioritized shaping its global vision through military means, especially when considering its wars against Yugoslavia, Iraq and Afghanistan. This had not only disillusioned many countries from the US-led world order, but also meant that Africa was ignored and only seen as a place of aid dependency.

“Too many times, the countries of Africa have been treated as junior partners — or worse — rather than equal ones,” Blinken said in Abuja. The US “firmly believes that it's time to stop treating Africa as a subject of geopolitics — and start treating it as the major geopolitical player it has become.”

Blinken however omitted that Africa has only become a “major geopolitical player” off the back of Chinese investments and attention. As Africa continues its path towards development it is unlikely that it will downgrade its relations with China for the sake of the US that has traditionally seen the continent as a place with little chance of development but cheap natural resources.

Although Blinken has to acknowledge China's significant role in Africa, he still attempts to turn African countries towards the US on the back of promises that have already been heard for many decades. When considering the traditional role played by Washington and Beijing in Africa, it is easy to see why African countries are unwilling to turn away investments and opportunities from China for the sake of pleasing the US. In this way, it is impossible for the US to replace China as Africa's main source of investment and development.

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