

US Misreads China's investment in Africa

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WASHINGTON -- As US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has just wrapped up her 11-day trip to Africa, which was regarded by some media reports as an effort to counterbalance China's increased influence in the continent, some experts said Washington has many misconceptions about China's investment in that region.

The experts said that while China's influence on Africa is on Washington's mind, it was not the sole reason for Clinton's trip, as a number of issues such as security and commerce were also important.

"China's influence in Africa is on Washington's mind, (but) I don't think it is the driving force of the trip," said Doug Bandow, a foreign policy analyst at the Cato Institute, a Washington-based American libertarian think tank.

Still, the US is aware of China's presence there and wants to "in some degree challenge the apparent attractiveness, shall we say, of the China model. So I think there's an element of that that's important to their (US) planning," he told Xinhua in an interview.

Mwangi Kimenyi, director of the Africa Growth Initiative at the Brookings Institution, said that in addition to other US national interests, the issue of China was on Clinton's mind as she planned her itinerary.

"So yes, I believe China is becoming influential in Africa and the US is becoming a bit concerned about it," Kimenyi said.

But he disagreed with the criticism that China is extracting African resources without benefiting local residents, noting that China has undertaken a number of projects to the benefit of local communities.

"Just this morning I drove on a major highway on which China is about to finish construction," he said in a phone interview with Xinhua from Kenya. "This is very valuable to Africans."

"One of our biggest problems is what you call the 'infrastructure deficit,'" he said, referring to the lack of infrastructure in some African countries such as roads, which hinders trade and slows development.

"And China is actually helping bridge the gap. China is doing a lot to narrow our infrastructure deficit," he said.

China has also been criticized in some Western media outlets for making investment in non-democratic African countries without any pre-conditions. On the flip side, the US has been lambasted for what critics say is an attempt to impose its democratic values on African countries as a pre-condition for investment or development assistance.

Indeed, some critics said the US needs to tone down what they call Washington's missionary-like zeal for spreading democracy. "I think the US goes too far, by exporting values," Kimenyi said.

"On the other hand, on the question of whether China is just extracting resources, I think this (accusation) is a little unfair, " he said. "The US should not take a moral high ground on resource extraction. We need to deal with the core issue to make sure there is transparency in the extraction of these resources."

Other analysts noted that setting pre-conditions on investment is a long American tradition going back to the administration of former US president Jimmy Carter and perhaps even further.

Bandow said a little competition for influence in Africa needs not necessarily be a negative thing, as competition brings more economic choices.

Africans will benefit from more than one country being interested in investment and development on their soil, he noted, adding that "African countries will use that to their advantage."