

## REVIEWS

**Walsh, Barney. 2022. *Ugandan Agency Within China-Africa Relations: President Museveni and China's Foreign Policy in East Africa*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 157 pp. ISBN 978-1-3502-5550-0**

Barney Walsh's new book offers a unique look into China-African relations, specifically by squarely injecting African agency into the analytical framework, something that seems rudimentary yet often goes overlooked in academic works. Walsh offers an interesting case study, that of President Yoweri Museveni in Uganda, and explores how the embattled leader has adroitly exploited his country's relations with China and other global actors to solidify his political longevity. To the literature on Sino-African relations, the book casts light on a few extremely understudied aspects of Chinese involvement in the continent: the role of regional governmental organizations (e.g., the East African Community), and the interplay of domestic and foreign actors shaping the extremely vital issues of oil, security, and terrorism. The book reads very conversationally and will appeal to academics, public intellectuals, public sector officials, and anyone with an interest in East African affairs and geopolitical matters.

The book is organized in a straightforward fashion. It offers five chapters, although two serve as the introduction and conclusion and the other three yield the crux of the analysis. Chapter one or the introduction places Uganda into the global context, offering thoughts on its importance to the continent and academic enquiries within the fields of comparative politics and international relations. Chapter two provides a historical overview of China-Ugandan relations and how China interacts with Uganda's political economy, with considerable attention devoted to Uganda's many domestic actors who survive within an authoritarian regime. Chapter three dives into China's influence on security issues in East Africa and considers the role China has played in East African unity. Chapter four examines regional security within East Africa and considers the broader complexities of terrorism and oil, through an analytical lens firmly focused on security concerns. Chapter five presents the author's concluding thoughts and puts forward the importance of the book's central findings in relation to geopolitical concerns and the ever-evolving African political landscape.

One of the strengths of this book is that it shifts the analytical focus to an African leader, injecting agency into African political actors which often go missing or invisible in analyses of Sino-African relations. From this

purview, Walsh carefully details how Museveni has used China for his own personal and political gain – specifically, how he has carefully crafted his relationship with different Chinese actors to cultivate leverage to be used against his regional rivals, which has enabled him to spread influence to other countries, to play the West for institutional arrangements favourable to him and his country, and to stifle any possible internal threats. Several parts of the book offer rich descriptions of Museveni’s careful strategies that ensure his political survival. The discussion of Museveni’s awareness of China’s courting of Amama Mbabazi was excellent. It cleverly highlights the limits of China’s non-interference principle and demonstrates that given its increased interdependence with unscrupulous leaders it cannot help but be drawn into messy internal political conflicts. Also of note is Walsh’s consideration of other power brokers within the country – specifically Ugandan MPs – and their courting and interactions with China, coupled with the consideration of how Museveni responded. In short, China has become entangled in the web of political actors that may represent some challenge to Museveni’s iron grip on power. These analyses reveal that interstate relations in our globalized world usually end in two-way streets which both actors struggle to foresee. The book also explores an assemblage of actors that usually go unnoticed in academic publications. For instance, Walsh scrutinizes China’s relationship with a regional organization, the East African Community (EAC), and chapter three puts forth that China has shaped the EAC’s trajectory through financial assistance, and its involvement has allowed Museveni to bolster his own political longevity.

Chapter three’s overview of China’s complex relations within East Africa, and its geopolitical interests meeting economic reality among some countries, is excellent. The author skillfully illustrates the North-South divide within the EAC, the Coalition of the Willing (CoW), and states’ interests all in a very easy-to-digest fashion, especially for non-regional specialists. Further, Walsh’s discussion of the complexity of an oil refinery project bidding process highlights the many actors, both domestic and international, that shape the political economy of the country (pp. 135-137). It shows the limits of any given personality, even the strongman leader, to unduly influence and determine economic decisions taken at the national level.

Another strength is the impressive and original qualitative data the author employs throughout the book to develop his argument(s). Walsh culls evidence from a remarkable number of interviews with leading politicians in the country, diplomats, journalists, security attaches and sector (oil, hydroelectricity) specialists, influential businesspeople, bureaucrats,

ministry spokespeople, military officials, other academics, and ruling party members. Lastly, a very strong element in this book is the unique angle Walsh provides on fascinating topics: poaching, ivory trade, small arms and light weapons (SALW), increase in military expenditures, illicit networks and terrorism. Beyond discussing these elements, Walsh goes to great lengths to showcase the interconnectedness of these issues and the role that the Chinese government plays, whether directly or indirectly.

The array of sources included in the qualitative fieldwork of the book is impressive, but the work could have benefitted from raising the evidentiary bar throughout the manuscript. Many sources are “well-known” or the author has become “informed” of them. The evidentiary bar could be higher and greater transparency provided on the nature of these sources, and how this information was acquired. Greater efforts at triangulating some of these bits of information, say through local reporting or confirmation from other sources, would increase the respectability of several claims made throughout the book. The author takes the quotes from political officials and actors at their word and does not scrutinize many of the details discussed. We know that these actors have their own interest in mind when being interviewed and some due diligence, confirming the veracity of many of the claims these people make, would have benefitted the narrative. At times, the author cites what seem to be relevant officials but the present reader, not an Ugandan specialist, lacks the appropriate context to weigh many of the evidence put forth.

Further, the book’s structure may get in the way of its ultimate contribution. In certain areas, the author presents a great deal of details, and, at times, the reader may get overwhelmed.

In a way, the book tries to do too much or cover too much political ground. For instance, the discussion of Uganda’s judiciary (pp. 51-52) includes two paragraphs with a few anecdotes of the branch of government’s attempts to maintain its autonomy and independence from the executive. The court, assessed in many studies, is a vital actor but this subsection came across as quite rushed and not fully developed. Other aspects were also very briefly touched upon but not really explored in detail – e.g. the role of Chinese businesspeople within the country, migrants, local Ugandan traders (briefly examined on pp. 52-54). Chapter two gives a whirlwind tour through Ugandan political influencers, examining their connections to both China and Museveni. The author skips from the EACJ to the Kingdoms quite hurriedly, and these shortcomings appear again when Walsh explores the relations of several East African countries (e.g. Rwanda, Burundi) with China.

On the positive side, Walsh's book offers rich discussions and delivers immense details on specific issues or episodes. However, from an academic perspective the book could have situated its findings much more into the existing literature on Sino-African relations and given more definitive answers to some of the pressing questions related to Chinese influence. For instance, the role of South-South cooperation, whether China has bolstered an electoral authoritarian regime, and to what extent ordinary Ugandans are in support of their country's shifting relations with China. The book does offer much in the regard of whether China has undermined the autonomy of Museveni (it has not!) but the reader would have enjoyed the book engaging much more with the extant literature specifically interested in these topics or queries. For starters, the book briefly mentions the seminal works of Deborah Brautigam and Ian Taylor and offers passing references to them. But a more robust dialogue with these works, and many others, would strengthen the findings of the book.

The above should not be viewed as crippling criticisms but rather as suggestions to advance the analytical and theoretical core developed in this book for future studies. The crux of this book provides significant insights into how Uganda, specifically its long-ruling leader, has engaged Chinese actors. It is impressive for its collection of evidence from several vital players in the country's political ecosystem and the present reader greatly appreciates the author's desire to unpack "China" and not present it as a monolithic force. The reader also enjoyed the many actors discussed within the boundaries of Uganda and how Museveni has acted to ensure they do not encroach too far on his political stranglehold.

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