Im Fokus

Beyond the New "Two Whateverisms": China's Ties in Africa

Ein Blick über die zwei neuen "Was-auch-immer-Ismen" hinaus: Chinas Verbindungen in Afrika

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Abstract

The exponential rise of Chinese activities in Africa over the last eight years has been accompanied by a rise in accusations that "China" is seeking to colonise Africa and/or is responsible for a whole host of issues and problems on the continent. Such commentaries have had the intriguing effect of manufacturing a new "two whateverisms" (*liangge fanshi*), this time built around crude binaries: whatever "China" does in Africa is immoral, and whatever others (either "the West" or African actors) do – or do not do – can be explained away, if not defended. This article argues for a more nuanced perspective on the prospects and issues that rising Chinese activities in Africa bring.

Keywords: Africa, Chinese exports, human rights, oil

Introduction

Beijing's expansion into Africa has provoked a flurry of public concern over whether China poses a strategic threat to Western interests in Africa. In critiques of China's burgeoning relationship with Africa, the argument that Beijing is undermining nascent constitutional rights and privileges, as well as more broader governance issues promoted by the West, is often placed centrally (Taylor 2008a), whilst the claim that China is somehow "colonizing" Africa is a familiar part of the dominant discourse on Sino-African ties. I have earlier argued that there is a material reason for this, intimately linked to concerns that China's economic rise threatens Western capitalist interests (Breslin & Taylor 2008). In this article[1]

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I seek to unpack why "China" is being blamed for issues and problems whose sources and origins are actually located in Africa. These discourses together have had the interesting effect of crafting a new "two whateverism" (*liangge fanshi*), this time constructed around simplistic binaries: whatever China does in Africa is wrong, and whatever others (either "the West" or African actors) do – or do not do – can be rationalized and justified. This article seeks to engage with such positions and argues for a more nuanced perspective on the opportunities and problems that increased Chinese activities in Africa poses for the continent's peoples.

The New Colonialists?

The accusation that China is a new "colonizing" power, exploiting Africa's natural resources, flooding the continent with low-priced manufactured products whilst turning a blind eye to Africa's autocrats is at the core of most critiques of China's current engagement with Africa (Tull 2006; Taylor 2007a). Senior politicians, both in the West and in Africa, have enunciated this. Thus Karin Kortmann, Parliamentary State Secretary in the German Development Ministry, has declared that "Our African partners really have to watch out that they will not be facing a new process of colonization" in their relations with China (McGreal 2006), whilst South Africa's President Thabo Mbeki warned in December 2006 that:

> The potential danger [...] was of the emergence of an unequal relationship, similar to that which existed in the past between African colonies and the colonial powers. China can not only just come here and dig for raw materials and then go away and sell us [Africa] manufactured goods. (*Business Day* 2007)

Meanwhile, African newspapers talk of whether "Africa might be China's next imperial frontier base" (Ejikeme 2007b).

It is true that there are certain facets of Sino-African trade ties that fit the pattern usually described as "neo-colonial" i.e. Africa exporting raw material in return for importing finished products, but this is by no means a relationship that is particular to Sino-African relations. It is, rather, a form of relationship that

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characterizes virtually all of Africa's trading relations with the outside world and has long been criticized and analyzed and, according to many influential analysts (Rodney 1973; Krieckhaus 2006), has its roots in the colonial period – when China was absent from Africa (Taylor 2006a). Contextualising Sino-African ties in this light thus puts into question the notion that Chinese economic engagement with Africa should be totally different from other external actors' relations.

Further contextualising this relationship, it does need to be emphasized that Chinese economic policies, although at times arguably neo-mercantilist in nature (Holslag 2007), are fundamentally capitalist. And in being capitalist, the Chinese leadership post-Mao is doing precisely what the West's elite classes want it to do yet are, on occasion, castigated for if and when processes unleashed by liberalization play themselves out on the global stage and in areas formerly held to be in Western capitalism's spheres of influence. Here, the growing concern about global energy supplies is particularly apposite in explaining some reactions to China's rise in Africa. This is equally linked to apprehension as to what Beijing's emergence as a potential superpower could mean, which is, at present, played out most graphically in the developing world, not least in Africa. As Breslin notes:

> China may not be a direct threat to the existing powers in the global political economy, but its growing importance for Latin America and Africa could provide an important indirect challenge. (Breslin 2007:139)

The material element in many critiques of Sino-African relations needs to be fully grasped.

This challenge as noted by Breslin is in particular often flagged over notions of governance and corruption. This is where some aspects of Chinese engagement with Africa is arguably less positive, relating as it does to Beijing's "non-interference" policies and the de facto hands-off approach to issues of human rights and governance. Yet it does have to be said that criticism of Chinese actors, particularly when it is focused on issues around access to oil contracts in Africa, can be seen as potentially problematic (Taylor 2006b). Firstly, it can be reasonably charged that when Western oil corporations complain about "the Chinese" sewing up oil deals in the Gulf of Guinea through corrupt and opaque means, they are being hypocritical, as it has long been alleged that Western companies, with the tacit approval of their home governments, have used graft to secure deals (Shaxson 2007). In some cases this is not even tacit but quite open. After all, the Elf corruption scandal in France revealed that:

> Annual cash transfers totalling about £10m [$5 million] were made to

> Omar Bongo, Gabon's president, while other huge sums were paid to leaders in Angola, Cameroon and Congo-Brazzaville. The multi-million dollar payments were partly aimed at guaranteeing that it was Elf and not US or British firms that pumped the oil, but also to ensure the African leaders continued allegiance to France. (Henley 2003)

Damning indictments of Shell's activities in Nigeria are well-known (Okonta & Douglas 2003) whilst Condoleezza Rice publicly labelled Equatorial Guinea's notorious president, Teodoro Obiang Nguema, as a "good friend" of the United States of America (*Washington Post* 2006), even though it is characterized as a "criminal state" elsewhere (Wood 2004). So constructing China's oil diplomacy as "bad" whilst glossing over the Western governments and corporations own duplicitousness in Africa's energy industries (see Soares De Oliveira 2007) is somewhat unpalatable and is an integral part of the "two whateverisms" discourse.

It is of course true that the sort of policies emanating from Beijing which are predicated on the notion of "non-interference" are longstanding for China and not unique to Africa (Taylor 1998). Equally, policies based on non-interference in domestic affairs do have a certain cachet if the alternative is an overweening power bent on promoting particular economic and political policies as universal truths or advancing a "with us or against us" discourse. However, a middle ground, that recognizes the notion of international society and that borders cannot be used to shield miscreants from censure if and when norms relating to basic life chances and rights regarding development and self-realization are being infringed upon, is more appropriate, particularly if this is applied to all external actors in Africa (and not just the Chinese or other non-Western interlopers).

There is growing evidence that the Chinese leadership recognizes an increasing responsibility on the continent, arguably spurred on by reputational costs associated with its relations with regimes such as in Sudan and Zimbabwe. Certainly, a more pro-active stance by Beijing in seeking a solution for some of the problems facing these (and other) countries is apparent (Taylor 2007b). This is quite a remarkable turnaround and reflects the reality that Chinese policies in Africa are in a complex process of evolution. Furthermore, it seems evident that Beijing has realized that Chinese operations need security just as much as Western investors and that if Chinese policymakers wish to facilitate the extraction of Africa's resources as a means to contribute to keeping China's economy going, a safe operating environment and the protection of investments is required. Oppressive regimes that stimulate uncertainty and instability are, in this light, clearly not

good partners in the long-term. A rethinking on the part of policymakers in Beijing is more than apparent and takes us further away from the notion of a Chinese colonization of Africa.

Which China?

A key issue that the proponents of the wholly negative interpretation of Sino-Africa ties neglect is that China is not in fact a unitary actor. This might seem elemental, but judging from a lot of the past literature on Chinese relations with Africa, seems to have been overlooked (Abraham 2005; Alden 2007; Guerrero & Manji 2008). As Breslin (2007:61) notes, "some non-China specialists still seem somewhat surprised to discover that [China] is not a monolithic political structure with all power emanating from Beijing". As the Chinese leadership has pursued its (uneven) economic liberalization policies post-Mao, it has progressively become more complicated and difficult for central authorities to control – or even be aware of – the diverse activities that various Chinese corporations and individual merchants are engaged in overseas. Obviously, what the key oil and other energy-based companies are doing is probably under great supervision (but even here there is rivalry and competition between different companies, complicating a coherent approach to Africa), but the huge proliferation of small-scale traders operating in Africa, very often at an individual or family level and private in nature, means that managing this phenomena for the Chinese state is all but impossible. Weak rule of law, endemic corruption and the highly politicized nature of state organizations at every level of government means that the central leadership is in a perpetual struggle to keep up with an economy surging beyond their control, whether domestically or when this is projected overseas.

Furthermore, contention over foreign policy aims and its implementation now stakes out debate within *Zhongnanhai* and when "China" acts abroad. For instance:

> The Chinese Foreign Ministry is generally the most supportive of China's evolving [...] diplomacy [i.e. how to deal with pariah states] but it is rarely able to assert its position over the Ministry of Commerce or the military. (Kleine-Ahlbrandt & Small 2008:54)

Thus demands that "China" should do x, y or z in "Africa" misses the intricacies and realities of contemporary Chinese foreign policy, as does the discourse that seeks to cast all actions by all Chinese actors as somehow representative of official Chinese foreign policy. We should also always recognize that:

> Because personalities differ, because politics is a highly contingent affairs, and because ideologies are not uniform, policy is never neat and predictable. Shifts in outlook, contention over goals, and misapprehension of the situation quite predictably produce a messy and disjointed policy process. These features apply as much to the [CPC] as other policymaking bodies. (Hunt 1996:231)

Chinese trade with Africa has become, in many ways, "normalized" i.e. diverse and involving multiple actors and individuals, rather than being – as previously – arguably state-directed and under the direct control of central organs of the government. Working out production networks, where things are made and/or finished and how such products reach markets is increasingly complicated (Breslin 2004). This is perhaps why much talk of Sino-African engagement reduces relations between "China" and "Africa" to an almost bilateral level. It is more than apparent, despite claims to the contrary, that the concept of a "China Inc.", complete with master plan, either at home or abroad, is intrinsically flawed. The multiplicity of Chinese actors now operating in Africa means that talking of "Chinese" activities as if such activities are emblematic of a grand Chinese strategy for Africa is inaccurate, as is a vision of China as a monolith. Indeed, the issue of whether Chinese policymakers have an all-encompassing strategy for Africa, covering economics and politics, as some analysts aver (Muekelia 2004; Kitissou 2007) needs interrogation. As Christensen notes on Chinese foreign policy in general:

> Many of the means to reach the regimes domestic and international security goals are so fraught with complexity, and sometimes contradiction, that a single, integrated grand plan is almost certainly lacking, even in the innermost circles of the Chinese leadership compound. (Christensen 2001:27)

How much more so today as China's leadership continues to liberalize economically?

If in Doubt, Blame China

There has been a fair degree of scapegoating of China and its alleged negative impacts upon Africa in much recent work. Whilst some of this is justified, a good deal is less salient or accurate and in fact is often balanced out by other positive aspects of the engagement or, is not actually necessarily factual. For instance, in construction and infrastructure development it is alleged that Chinese

companies only use imported Chinese workers – even unskilled ones – and so do not generate much local employment or engage in skills transfers. Yet a recent report on China's activities in Africa's construction and infrastructure sectors, examining Angola, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, and Zambia found that, except in Angola, local people accounted for between 85-95 percent of the total workforce of most of the Chinese construction companies examined (Centre for Chinese Studies 2007). Whilst many Chinese are employed as unskilled casual labourers, there are also many examples of local Africans being employed in management and administration positions. Given the low skills-base in much of Africa, it is in fact unreasonable to expect a high proportion of the skilled jobs to be held by Africans anyway – and Western corporations in Africa still make great use of expensive expatriates at the management level, even after many years of activities in-country. In fact, Chinese workers are generally willing to work in places like Sierra Leone at relatively low salaries and in conditions that Western expatriates would not dream of doing.

In observing the way Chinese workers work alongside African nationals, it might be averred that the Chinese seem to be quite integrated, at least in the construction industry. Furthermore, the expansion of Chinese construction companies into Africa has lowered costs. For example, in Namibia, local Namibian and South African construction companies had the market sewn-up and monopolized the industry with a consequent inflation of prices. But as Chinese construction companies entered Namibia, costs dramatically lowered and saved the Namibian taxpayer a great deal of money. The Chinese entering Namibia also forced local companies to improve productivity and service delivery. And of course, Africa is in vital need of infrastructure development, which no-one else is prepared to deliver at present.

Another allegation about Chinese activities in Africa is that manufactured goods are "flooding" African countries and wiping out small and medium producers as well as ousting local traders. Yet the consumers of Africa are more than happy with this and are benefiting – particularly those on limited incomes. Much of Africa's manufacturing industry collapsed long ago (or never has existed in many countries), way before Chinese imports appeared on the scene. Of course, it is not only African producers who have had to adjust to competition – between 1995 and 2002, more than 15 million factory jobs (15 percent of China's total manufacturing workforce) were lost in China (Rifkin 2004). Africa is not unique. Chinese exports may possibly block avenues for diversification

away from traditional exports for African economies and that if Africa is to escape its dependent relationship on the global economy and move on from being simply an exporter of primary commodities, it needs to start manufacturing. But it needs to be noted that domestic African issues and problems are arguably more significant in making African manufacturers uncompetitive and such issues have long undermined the continent's productive base. Also, Africans themselves import a huge amount of Chinese-made products entering Africa. And where there are shoddy or counterfeit products involved, it is up to African states to regulate and control these – not simply blame "China".

It is true that health and safety standards, as well as workers' rights and environmental issues, appear to be low down on some Chinese companies priorities. This is unfortunate and indefensible. But it reflects what is happening back home in China as Beijing's leadership resolutely pursues the capitalist road to development (as any perusal of the China Labour Bulletin will reveal). This is certainly not to give such employers a free pass on such matters, merely to contextualise. Besides, it is up to African states to regulate and control such problems and make sure that extractive operations do not occur with destructive effects on the local environment or deny African workers their labour rights. Unfortunately, much of Africa's elites post-independence have shown scant regard for their citizen's constitutional rights in general; it is doubtful that they will suddenly spring into action if and when Chinese investment is concerned. As a Kenyan newspaper put it:

> The reasons why Africa continues to do badly, in large part, have to do mostly with internal conditions [...] If things don't improve in Africa [...] China will leave us with huge holes in the ground, land polluted by oil spills, and wastelands where once lush forests stood. We shall be vilifying [China] the way we do the West today, and waiting for a "better deal". (Onyango-Obbo 2007)

Where the Chinese leadership is arguably culpable is in the issue of "non-interference" if and when this negatively impacts upon the human rights of Africans. But as mentioned, Chinese policy is evolving. It is apparent that the Chinese see their approach to Africa as benign but are now beginning to feel exposed by the intricacies of Africa's politics. Kidnappings in Nigeria, the targeting and murder of Chinese workers in Ethiopia, anti-Chinese riots in Zambia, a high-profile campaign targeting the Beijing Olympics over Darfur and a threat by Darfurian rebels to target Chinese citizens – all these have provided a steep

learning curve. As recently as 2005, the Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister Zhou Wenzhong was quoted as saying, with regard to Sudan, "Business is business. We try to separate politics from business" (French 2005). Such a statement is, today, arguably unthinkable.

Clearly, much of the problems facing Chinese activities in Africa stem from the lack of development and inequalities in many countries caused by malfunctioning political systems. But also, until relatively recently there was an arguable complacency within Beijing about its policies in Africa. The attitude seemed to be that third party criticism (or even internal African condemnation) was motivated by "China bashing" and could be safely disregarded. However, a flurry of extremely negative articles in the international media about Sino-African ties, as well as incidents on the ground in Africa, has stimulated a rethink in Beijing. Furthermore, although Beijing bristles at being singled out for criticism for its policies in Africa, it can be argued that since China is a rising power and arguably a great one, it has to accept the fact that it can no longer hide behind the idea of being a developing state – the fact that once a state becomes a great power (or at least is perceived by many to be) its policies will be placed much more directly under the microscope, especially by other great powers jockeying for influence. The United States of America and the Soviet Union had to learn this during the last century and China is facing this fact today, albeit reluctantly. In fact, it is now acknowledged within Beijing that there is a desperate need to promote the positive side of Chinese diplomacy in Africa and this facet of China's links with African states is receiving more and more attention (Taylor 2008b). It will be interesting to see how Beijing accommodates to Africa's intricacies as Chinese involvement in Africa broadens and deepens.

African Solutions for African Problems

Ultimately, it is up to African leaders to manage their relations with China to benefit their own economies and citizens. As one report put it:

> It is not China's responsibility to "look out" for African self-interest. This is the job of Africa's self-appointed and elected leaders. The idea that China's historical 'friendship' with Africa relieves Africans of the responsibility to forge a mutually beneficial relationship is dangerous. (Ejikeme 2007a)

Obviously, the internal structure of any given African state is all-important and this varies widely across the continent. Given, for example, that South Africa is

a rather consolidated democracy by African standards makes a huge difference for how Pretoria deals with China, as opposed to say, Sierra Leone. One walks away with different degrees of confidence about how relations with Beijing will be managed after interviews with government personnel in Mauritius and Nigeria. And in Ethiopia it seems that the government in Addis Ababa is able and competent to manage its relationship with Beijing and its political leaders are more astute and savvy than many other African elites who seem to think that anything non-Western is intrinsically good.

However, as a Kenyan report put it, "China has an Africa policy. Africa doesn't have a China policy" (*The Nation* 2006). Informants within the African Union (AU) assert that there is in fact no official AU view on Sino-African ties, either with regard to its benefits or its possible downsides. Problematically for constructing an African position on the subject, the People's Republic of China (PRC) prefers bilateral dealings and so in this regard the AU cannot actually construct a "China policy". Furthermore, Beijing has warm relations with Morocco (a non-AU member), whilst the four Taiwanese-recognizing states complicate matters. Consequently, as a collective unit, Africa has little real actual negotiating power with regard to China.

Fundamentally, Beijing's engagement with Africa is grounded in pragmatism and so it is up to each African state to negotiate how and where this relationship is shaped. The abandonment of ideology for economic growth by China actually affords Africa a greater degree of space in its connection with China – but only if this manoeuvrability is used wisely by Africa's elites. In some countries this should not be a problem as capable and sensible governments are more than able to manage the relationship to mutual benefit. In others however there is a worry that predatory elites at the apex of neopatrimonial regimes and not bothered by the impulse to promote development will make a mess of the chance to make the most of a renewed Chinese interest in Africa. For instance, in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC),

> Cobalt had suddenly become commercially attractive because the world price had been driven upwards by a surge in demand from China's fast-growing economy. The cobalt price had grown by 300 per cent in less than a year. (Butcher 2007:64)

However:

> The cobalt-rock is simply bagged and driven out of the country [...] That way ensures the smallest amount of benefit to the local economy – just

> the few dollars to each miner. If the local authorities were interested in helping the local economy, then they would have a processing plant here in Lubumbashi that converts the cobalt-rich rock into concentrated cobalt salts. It is not a complex process but it multiplies the value of the cobalt product by fifty times, maybe a hundred times [...] But the reality is this. The authorities in the Congo are not interested in how cobalt mining benefits the local economy. They are only interested in what they can take in bribes. And it is easier to count sacks of rock at the border and work out how many dollars you can cream off per bag. Until that fundamental attitude changes, then the cobalt boom driven by China will not benefit more than a few members of the Congo elite. (Butcher 2007:67-68)

Depending upon the elites in such states to do the right thing may thus be problematic. That is why African civil society must play a crucial role in navigating the new engagement with China. It is up to Africans to organize, connect and ensure that their economies benefit from Chinese engagement and that their leaders go into relationships with Chinese actors with open eyes. After all,

> Time and again African governments [have] complain[ed] that they cannot deliver development due either to a lack of support or to interference from the West. The resources [...] now come with "no strings attached". Any failure to share growth and strengthen the whole economy will not be China's fault but that of the African recipient government. (Amosu 2007)

Ordinary Africans can play a crucial role in facilitating a true "win-win" situation by holding their leaders to account and critically examining the deals done with Beijing in their name. In short, Chinese involvement in Africa offers up a welter of opportunities for the continent, but only if utilized sensibly and if both sides are prudent about what can be gained from the connections. Interrogating how and in what ways Sino-African relations play out in the forthcoming years, directly and indirectly, and which Africans and Chinese might benefit or lose from the relationship(s), as well as in which states and economic sectors, will inform future studies on the multifarious nature of Chinese engagement with the continent.

Concluding Remarks

Judging existing critiques of Chinese activities in Africa, it seems apparent that the motives and origins of these critiques needs contextualisation. Doing so provides an interesting take on how Western powers are reacting to the growing

Chinese presence in Africa and how concern over competition, particularly over energy resources, has reintroduced human rights in to the diplomatic discourse after many years of neglect and oversight. How and why this is so speaks volumes over the authenticity of these apprehensions vis-à-vis the average African (and Chinese) person. Equally, some of the African critiques and concerns about China conveniently overlook domestic issues within the continent that should have been solved a long time ago.

It is certainly true that material concerns about Chinese competition in areas formerly held to be in the Western "sphere of influence" motivates a lot of the critique aimed at Sino-African relations. The charge of hypocrisy and selectivity can be leveled at much Western criticism of China's human rights policies and how they are played out with regard to the relationships Beijing has been crafting in Africa. However, as Weatherley (1999) notes, some of the most egregious violations of human rights in Africa that China is arguably held complicit with (due to its active support for the offending regimes), cannot be justified even in terms of the Chinese discourse on human rights. This is particularly so when the Chinese position on human rights intimately links social development and welfare to the concept. This is a perfectly respectable position to take but Beijing's own coherence on the issue is arguably undermined by its diplomacy in practice if and when Chinese policy supports regimes that are anti-developmental. Given that the economic and social rights of people are held by Beijing to be central in its discourse on human rights, this is surely problematic.

It is imperative that Beijing needs to recognize that its dealings with some regimes in Africa at the state-to-state level risks tarnishing its whole African enterprise. China is like all other actors in Africa – it needs stability and security in order for its investments to flourish and for its connections with the continent to be coherent. Western nations have had to learn the hard way that propping up dictators willy-nilly is not sustainable nor desirable (even if this continues), and China will likewise learn this as its relations unfold. As Obiorah notes:

> After an initial phase of snapping up resource extraction concessions, it is almost conceivable that China will be compelled by instability and conflict in Africa to realize that its long term economic interests are best served by promoting peace in Africa and that this is most likely to come about by encouraging representative government in Africa rather than supporting dictators. (Obiorah 2007:40)

Furthermore, China's integration into the global economy and the concomitant responsibilities that have come with this greater incorporation necessitate structural and systemic reforms on Beijing, particularly through increasing membership of multilateral bodies. In the long term these could conceivably have an impression on Beijing in the development of a regime that incorporates increased respect for the rule of law and a better safeguarding for universal human rights. For instance, Beijing's key commitments pertaining to its membership of the WTO comprises responsibilities to advance the transparency, consistency and standardization of China's legal system. And it is more than obvious that over the past twenty years or so, Beijing has signed up to and ratified a growing number of international instruments pertaining to human rights and labour as it embeds itself in various multilateral regimes (Lanteigne 2005). Recognizing that the resolution of problems within the continent is in the interests of both Beijing and the West and Africa if stability and long-term relationships with the continent's economies are desired, is axiomatic. However, in a broader environment where commentators ignore and/or downplay destructive situations in Africa if and when Western interests are involved, or African elites responsible, whilst speaking up and acting outraged if and when Chinese interests are implicated, does somewhat ring hollow.

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