



شبكة الجزيرة
ALJAZEERA NETWORK

China's threat to America in Africa

*Dr. Adams Oloo**



Al Jazeera Centre for Studies
Tel: +974-44930181
Fax: +974-44831346
jcforstudies@aljazeera.net
www.aljazeera.net/studies

30 June 2011

1. Evolution of China-Africa relations

China- Africa Relations can be traced from the 1955 Bandung Conference in Indonesia. From the 1950s until the late 1970s, China offered African countries politically motivated aid. Much of it included infrastructure projects as well as sectoral economic development projects. China's subsequent rapid economic growth in the early to mid-1980s prompted it to gradually redefine its international relations policy goals. Increasingly, it began to pursue bilateral ties defined by pragmatic economic and trade-related ends, rather than political or ideological ones.

Renewed Chinese interest in and ties with Africa were sparked in the late 1980s and 1990s by China's rapidly expanding domestic economy and export-focused manufacturing sectors, which spurred trade ties with other countries, including many in commodity rich Africa. In Africa, as elsewhere, China also advocated international norms of political neutrality and state sovereignty, particularly with respect to non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries. This was notably the case following a rise in international criticism of China prompted by the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown on democracy activists. As in earlier decades, Africa played an important role in China's strategy for achieving its policy goals within and through the UN system and in other international forums, where Africa's many member governments represented an important potential block of allied votes. Many of China's goals during this period were amenable to African governments, which wanted to boost their own trade and tap often under exploited natural resource reserves. Many also firmly espoused principles of non-interference in the affairs of sovereign states, in some cases, because like China, they were targets of foreign criticism regarding undemocratic governance and poor human rights records.

Currently, the types of economic and political co-operation that defined the Chinese-Africa relationship in the 1990s remain, albeit with some variation. China's voracious appetite for resources, especially energy resources, is widely viewed as the primary motive for expanding outreach to Africa, though Africa's current economic growth and future potential as a consumer market also spurs such ties. China's current political efforts to foster allies among Africa's many states are motivated by its perennial and increasingly successful efforts to internationally isolate Taiwan and efforts to carry African votes within U.N. and other International forums in order to achieve diverse policy goals.

While, the breadth, diversity, and extent of Chinese involvement in Africa are rapidly growing, these developments are also causing Sino-African relations to become increasingly complex and more politically challenging to manage. China's African undertakings are increasingly affected by diverse international events, politics and policy trends, with origins both in Africa and extrinsic to it. Examples include international responses to the conflict in Darfur, Sudan; Western support for universal good governance and fiscal transparency; and globalized economic competition.

2. China's foreign policy towards Africa and its benefits to the Continent

China's current political-economic bilateral goals and relations in Africa are defined in a formal document released in early 2006, entitled China's African Policy. It outlines China's goal of creating a new strategic partnership with Africa. It explicitly conditions official China relations with African States on their adherence to the PRC's "one-China-principle" calling this the "political foundation" of such bilateral relations. Among the most notable of China's efforts to foster closer ties with Africa, both bilaterally and at the continental level is the Forum on China-Africa Co-operation (FOCAC). FOCAC is a comprehensive effort initiated by China to build mutually beneficial economic development, trade co-operation and political relations with Africa. It was formed in October 2000 in Beijing during a summit of PRC and

45 African country leaders. Founding participants agreed to meet triennially, alternatively in China and Africa. The second FOCAC gathering in Ethiopia in 2003 adopted an “Action Plan.” In it, China promised to co-operate with Africa in the areas of infrastructure development, health care, human resource development, and China’s private sector investment in African agriculture.

At each FOCAC gathering, the PRC has made a concerted effort to demonstrate the concrete benefits that Africa is deriving from China as a result of the forums creation.

The PRC spurred African participation in the first gathering by pledging forgiveness of about 10 billion Yuan (about \$1.21 billion) to poor indebted African countries and expand PRC foreign aid to Africa. By 2006, China had provided tariff exemptions covering 191 items for 30 African; approved 17 African countries as PRC tourist destinations; trained 10,000 African personnel. And by 2009 China had provided \$3 billion in “preferential loans” and \$2 billion in “preferential buyers credits” targeted at poor African countries; deployed 100 top Chinese agricultural experts to Africa and established 10 agricultural technology centers; built 30 hospitals and provided about \$40 million in grants for anti-malaria drugs, prevention, and construction of model treatment centers; deployed 300 PRC Peace Corps-like volunteers to Africa; built 100 rural schools in Africa; trained 15,000 African professionals; doubled the number of PRC government scholarships for African students from 2000 per year to 4,000 per year.

Other benefits to Africa include the establishment of a China-Africa development fund worth \$5 billion to encourage Chinese companies to invest in Africa and provide support to them; assistance to the African Union in its peace-keeping missions; increased number of items subject to Chinese duty free treatment exported by poor African countries with diplomatic ties with China and provision of training in China for African military officers and other capacity building help for African militaries.

3. America’s warnings to Africa about China

China’s merger of aid and trade, and its tendency to portray PRC commercial and soft loan projects as “assistance” to Africa have been widely criticized on the basis that PRC aid to Africa is primarily driven by self-interest, and not the “mutual win-win” co-operation that China asserts defines its relations with Africa. America worries that China’s “no strings attached” aid offers may undermine political goals that have increasingly become an integral part of America’s foreign aid strategies. These include conditions that, in return for aids or loans, recipients comply with various international norms relating to good governance, the rule of law, transparency, anti-corruption measures, environmental standards and human rights.

To this end, America does believe that China’s business, aid and credit relations with and military equipment exports to the governments of countries like Zimbabwe and Sudan directly abet these states systematic and well documented internal human rights abuses and authoritarian rule which is the target of harsh criticism and sanctions by America.

America also fears that China’s increasing provision of new loans to Africa, even at low concessionary rates, may both undermine western donor governments’ recent large national debt write-offs in Africa and saddle poor countries with new indebtedness.

As China’s investment in Sudan’s oil industry has grown, so too has military cooperation between the two countries. Khartoum is reputed to have spent as much as 80 per cent of the revenue generated by Sudan’s oil fields on fighting wars with the country’s peripheral regions, including Darfur. Unsurprisingly, the National Congress Party (NCP) has frequently

turned to China for its weapons needs. China has provided the Sudanese government with Chinese-made tanks, bombers, anti-aircraft guns, helicopters, machine guns, rocket-propelled grenades, and ammunition, all of which were used in the country's long-running civil war.

According to the United States, China and Africa cooperation ensures that human rights concerns do not take a place atop the international agenda. This has been especially true at the United Nations (UN), where China and its African partners consistently weakened the UN Commission on Human Rights. China has been able to count on virtually every African nation on the Commission, including many with horrific human rights records such as Sudan, Eritrea, Zimbabwe, Sierra Leone and Congo, to back their non-interventionist positions.

United States sees China's separation of business interests from political concerns as an unhelpful obstacle to African democratization. U.S. officials warn that China's unwillingness to criticize its African allies' human rights records and corrupt governance undermines important development initiatives in Africa. China is widely seen as underwriting rogue regimes like the

Mugabe government in Zimbabwe and Omar Hassan Ahmad al-Bashir's National Islamic Front (NIF) in Sudan. China has also protected both of these states in the UN Security Council.

By providing an alternative source of economic and diplomatic support, China gives African tyrants increased bargaining power, enabling them to refuse Western-imposed reforms. While China's efforts to gain favor with African leaders may help spur short-term growth, Washington remains unconvinced that China's influence will have a positive impact on Africa's long-term development.

As a super power the U.S. government is also alarmed by China's role as one of Africa's primary arms dealers. While China has not reported any arms sales to the UN Register of Conventional Arms since 1996, the PRC has been a major weapons supplier to Africa for decades. The Congressional Research Service reports China's arms sales to Africa made up 10 per cent of all conventional arms transfers to the continent between 1996 and 2003, and increasing numbers of weapons are included as partial Chinese payment for resource right. For example, during the border war between Ethiopia and Eritrea, which lasted from 1998 to 2000, China sold a billion dollars in weaponry to each side despite an international arms embargo.

The breadth and diversity of China's engagement with Africa present numerous potential issues for consideration by the U.S. These include good governance, human rights, democratization, the rule of law and the potential for a renewed rise of African indebtedness to China, first on the heels of recent substantial U.S. and Western government write-downs of past unsustainable African debt.

4. Chinese/U.S. competition and it's impact on the Africa Continent

Rising Chinese investment in Africa suggests that China presents a competitive threat to developed country investment on the continent. Many African and foreign observers are also concerned about growing PRC political clout in Africa. Sino-African bilateral investment agreements are the focus of criticism because they often fuse business, political issues, aid and sometimes military considerations. These allow China to offer integrated "package deals". These may be more attractive to African governments than those offered by Western country governments, which exercise much less control over their private sectors than the PRC, and often operationally separate their aid, military, and diplomatic initiatives. In some cases according to critics, PRC-African deals contain provisions that may potentially conflict

with international human rights, transparency or environmental norms, or promote economic activities that do little to develop-or compete with-the African private sector.

In spite of the above, there are potential benefits to Africa resulting from China's involvement on the continent alongside the U.S. To this end, China may allow African countries to maintain more autonomy in international politics by lessening their dependence on official aid and credit from the U.S. and Western donor countries. China may also represent an alternative locus of global power with which African countries can ally in order to balance their ties with the U.S. and the West, particularly when faced with political conditionality's demanded by the U.S. and Western countries in return for aid, credit, or political co-operation.

Africa's energy and mineral reserves could be among the early geo-strategic battlegrounds for growing U.S.-China competition. China sees African oil producers, including those facing U.S. economic sanctions, as excellent business collaborators given that the CNPC does not possess the financial or legal sophistication necessary to compete with the large Western conglomerates. As a result, the Chinese have sought markets where they possess a competitive advantage owing to tensions between the exporting country and the Western powers over human rights or undemocratic governance, neither of which factor into China's negotiating calculus.

5. Proposed foundations for Sino -African Co-operation

The Sino-Africa co-operation should be premised on a partnership that is devoid of conditionality's. To this end Sino-Africa relationship should not be tied to the current caveat which demands that African states uphold the "one-China policy" before any assistance is given to them. The PRC has categorically stated that this will be the "political foundation" of such bilateral relations. We opine that such a conditionality amounts to blackmail and should not be entertained by African governments.

The foundation for Sino-African co-operation should thus be based on the following principles;

Firstly, there should be high level reciprocal leadership visits and diverse lower level bilateral learning exchanges and economic and technical co-operation committees. Secondly, the co-operation should seek to boost Sino-African trade, including through potential increased PRC duty free treatment for some African exports, the negotiation of free trade agreements and the provision of export credits for PRC investment and business activities in Africa-notably in infrastructure and utilities contracting. Thirdly, the co-operation should be based on the principles of enhanced dispute settlement, investment protection, double taxation accords and enhanced joint business promotion efforts. Fourthly, the co-operation should seek to support African development, especially in Agriculture, debt cancellation for poor African countries and economic assistance with no political strings attached. Fifthly, co-operation should target technical assistance in science and technology, cultural and environmental co-operation and human resource training through educational scholarships for Africans. Sixthly, the co-operation should seek to increase health sector assistance through the dispatch of PRC medical teams to Africa and finally, the co-operation should seek to train African personnel in disaster relief management.

* *Professor of Political Science at Nairobi University*