

China's New Engagement towards Africa: What do Africa and China expect from each other?

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Abstract

The uniqueness of China's African policy has been analysed and questioned by several scholars, but most of these studies focus on the Chinese side and what China aspires to achieve from its interactions with African countries. Less attention is accorded to the African side, its aspirations, its expectations, its objectives and its role in these interactions. That is why, this study tries to determine the goals that each of China and African countries looks to achieve from the new Chinese engagement towards the continent.

Key words: China, Africa, interactions, expectations, objectives.

Introduction

China is striving to enhance its political relations with African countries, intensifying diplomatic activities and strengthening its soft power to improve its image on the continent. It is more and more engaged in several cultural and social fields ranging from multiplying Confucius Institutes and intensifying people to people exchanges, providing health assistance and training courses. Nevertheless, China's presence in Africa remains essentially economic. China has become a key economic player on the continent, developing a pattern of relations that merges trade, investment and aid. In 2009, it replaced the European Union and the United States as Africa's major trading partner. Its trade with Africa grew

at an extraordinary pace from just \$9 billion in 2000 to reach \$200 billion in 2012, a more than twenty-fold increase since the turn of the century¹. China is also becoming an important investor in Africa and its Foreign Direct Investment flows on the continent have increased six-fold between 2005 and 2012² to attain \$26 billion in 2013³. China is also an important provider of development aid to African countries according nearly half of its total foreign aid to the continent, differentiating deeply itself from western donors by its singular approach of “no political strings attached aid”.

China’s increasing presence in the continent brought the imperative to secure its growing economic interests and to ensure the safety of its nationals present on the ground. It is why China is today more and more involved in the security issues of the African continent calling into question one of the most sacred principles of its foreign policy which is that of non-interference, pushing its limits until projecting to open a military base in Africa.

With regard to the impressive scale and scope of China’s engagement towards Africa, it may be considered as one of the most significant developments that the continent has known since the beginning of the twenty first century. The uniqueness of China’s African policy has been analysed and questioned by several scholars, but most of these studies focus on the Chinese side and what China aspires to achieve from its interactions with African countries. Less attention is accorded to the African side, its aspirations, its expectations, its objectives and its role in these interactions. That is why, this study tries to determine the goals that each of China and African countries looks to achieve from the new Chinese engagement towards the continent.

I- China’s expectations from its engagement towards Africa

- The search for super power status

The first objective of China’s foreign policy is to make of this country a great power, extending its influence to other parts of the world including

Latin America and of course Africa⁴. Chinese leaders have always considered that China, as a great nation, naturally occupies a central position in world affairs and must be treated as a great power⁵. This determination to become a great power has led Chinese leaders to attempt to project China's presence abroad and to improve its reputation in different parts of the world⁶ including the African continent which became an important pillar of its global strategy.

- *Taiwan issue as a determinant of China's African policy*

Through close ties with Africa, China seeks support for its political stances on the international scene. The African continent exerts an important influence in voting in multilateral organisations, as its 53 member states constitute one of the most important blocks⁷. As the "One China Policy" is of strategic importance to China and lies in the core of its national interest, China counts on African states to counter recognition of Taiwan as the representative of China⁸. In 1971, the support of African countries has been decisive for the People's Republic of China (PRC), enabling it to join the United Nations and to take over the China seat from Taiwan. The 26 African countries which voted for the People's Republic of China to resume its seat represented more than one third of the 76 countries that voted the resolution making China aware of the real political importance of the African continent and leading Mao Zedong to claim that "it is our African brothers who have carried us into the United Nations".⁹ Up until the late 1970's, Taiwan's diplomacy and Africa's close relations to the West undermined China's presence in the continent¹⁰. While Taipei had until recently obtained and kept the support of some African countries, China's diplomatic endeavours, financial proposals, and development aid to Africa succeeded in pushing African countries to interrupt their diplomatic relations with Taiwan,¹¹ and to normalise their relations with Beijing. It was the case of 46 African countries between 1971 and 1979. In the early 1990's, Taiwan also sought African support and used its financial resources to limit China's growing influence on the continent. The competition between the two capitals became more obvious as some African

countries played the two capitals against each other. However, with the large financial resources at Beijing's disposal, China won the diplomatic battle and gradually pushed Taiwan out of Africa¹². Sao Tomé and Príncipe has been the latest African country to turn away from Taiwan and to recognize Beijing in December 2016. At present, only two African countries namely Swaziland and Burkina-Faso continue to recognize Taiwan. China continues to actively work to attain complete interruption of ties between Taipei and its two remaining diplomatic partners on the continent. Indeed, Beijing refuses to provide economic assistance to the countries that recognise Taiwan, and has generously rewarded African countries that have turned their allegiance from Taipei to Beijing by rapidly expanding its economic engagement and according them huge aid packages.¹³

- **Enhancing China's international stand**

China believes that strengthening Sino-African relations contributes to raise its own international influence, and to achieve its ideological objective of building a more "just international order" based on multipolarity. In this context, Africa is of particular interest for China being the continent which gathers the greatest number of developing countries.

Another objective that China aims to attain from its engagement towards Africa is to increase its influence in the United Nations and other international fora. African countries account for more than one-quarter of United Nations (UN) member states and occupy three non-permanent member seats in the UN Security Council. Consequently, Africa represents an important voting bloc for Chinese-led initiatives or against Western-led initiatives that could be harmful to China's interests. Africa succeeded in playing this role in several occasions beginning by the decisive African support to China against Taiwan.¹⁴ African votes in the UN played, once again, in favour of China and helped protecting it from western criticism against its human rights policies. From 1990 to 2004, western nations have tried annually to introduce resolutions censuring China over its human rights record at the UN Commission on Human Rights. They failed during all these years due to African countries' support. In 2004, the resolution

criticising China presented by countries led by the United States was opposed by twenty eight countries including fourteen African ones¹⁵ giving evidence, once again of Africa's importance in achieving China's strategic objectives.

- **Ensuring the security of China's interests on the continent**

China is facing in Africa several security threats menacing its economic interests and the safety of its nationals present on the ground in some unstable African countries.¹⁶ Piracy off the coast of Somalia threatens the shipping lanes that are of critical importance to China's increased trade with Africa and other parts of the world. Internal conflicts and instability have, several times, threatened the safety of Chinese nationals working for Chinese enterprises acting on the ground. Terrorist organisations have targeted Chinese interests in different African countries. Facing this situation, and in an effort to protect its interests, China became involved in the security issues of the continent by contributing to different international security operations devoted to maintain stability in the region¹⁷, waging from its participation to peace keeping operations in Africa, to anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, and of course to counter-terrorism efforts deployed by the international community in the African continent.

- **Economic objectives**

China is convinced that its political weight will continue to increase if its economy continues to grow¹⁸. China's strategy is designed to sustain conditions needed for China's continued economic modernisation.¹⁹ Indeed, China liberalised its economy and opened to the West, in the mid-1970s, beginning a period of unprecedented economic expansion.²⁰ In order to sustain its high rate of economic growth, China needs huge amounts of minerals, from metallic and non-metallic minerals to energy minerals²¹. Without energy, China's modernisation and rise risk to be hampered and the ruling Communist Party would be severely undermined.²² Though China relies on coal for most of its energy needs, its oil consumption is second worldwide, behind the United States. Once the third world largest

oil producer in 1990²³ and the largest oil exporter in Asia, China became a net importer in 1993. The International Energy Agency's World Energy Outlook 2014 projects that China will become the world's largest consumer of oil by the early 2030s.²⁴ It also projects that China will account for 36 percent of the total global increase in primary energy use between 2008 and 2035, and that China's primary oil demand will nearly double from 8.1 million barrels per day (mb/d) in 2009 to 15.3 mb/d by 2035²⁵. To satisfy its growing oil demand, China's net oil imports will have to jump from 2 percent of its GDP in 2009 to 3.1 percent in 2035. At that level, net oil imports will account for 77 percent of Chinese domestic oil consumption²⁶. To respond to this increasing demand, and to secure access to these critical raw materials, China initiated the "going out" strategy in the late 1990s, which encouraged state-owned and private companies to invest abroad, particularly in countries rich in natural resources. China's oil diplomacy is intimately connected to its energy security calculations seeking to diversify its sources of supply, of which the Middle East accounts for an estimated 60 percent²⁷. China looked for new partnerships in different parts of the world and particularly in Africa, which is consequently gaining in strategic importance to China²⁸. To guarantee future supply, China is heavily investing in the upstream and downstream oil sectors in countries such as Sudan, Angola, and Nigeria²⁹ which constitute China's main African oil suppliers.

In addition to a very strong domestic growth, China's economy is further strengthened by its exports³⁰. Africa is seen by China as a largely untapped consumer market for its manufactured goods, providing an ideal market with its over a billion inhabitants of whom many are interested in China's cheap consumer goods³¹. Furthermore, China's modernisation has generated investment and employment opportunities at home, but the total demand cannot be satisfied making it unavoidable to invest abroad. With regard to its own needs, Africa provides attractive investment opportunities to Chinese companies which, financed by China Eximbank loans, seized this opportunity and took profit from this large untapped market³².

II-Africa's expectations from China's engagement towards the continent

China's new strategic approach to Africa has raised hopes across the continent that its increasing engagement will promote Africa's global status, create alternatives of partnerships, contribute to the promotion of African economic development, allow African countries learning from China's development model,³³ and reduce the continent's dependency on the West.

- **Equal to equal relations**

African countries expect to be treated with consideration on the international scene as equal counterparts, because they have long suffered from the injustice exerted by the colonial powers. China responds to this expectation by treating its African partners as equal sovereign states, by according aid without interfering in their internal affairs and lecturing them about western principles, and by accepting to engage in areas and projects judged too risky by Western companies³⁴ turning attention to long-neglected areas and fields. China's increasing influence on the continent is redefining Africa's traditional ties with the international community, enhancing the position of the continent with the arrival of a new concurrent to the traditional colonial powers.

- **Security cooperation**

Some African governments look for partnerships with China to acquire military equipment, weapons, and training. China has also been willing to sell weapons to countries on which the United States and other Western countries have imposed arms embargoes for political reasons, considering that such decisions constitute unacceptable interference in sovereign countries' internal affairs³⁵.

- **Learning from China's development model**

China has always attracted the attention of others, even in those periods of its history when it has been weak, divided or poor³⁶. China's vast

territory and huge population had made it a potential superpower for decades, but this potential did not come close to be realised until China embarked in an ambitious program of economic reform and modernisation³⁷. Since 1978, by entering a market economy, and opening to the world, China has revived itself as a major economic power³⁸. The key of China's rise is its economic reforms which adopted capitalist orientation, and deployed huge efforts towards gaining advanced technology and enhancing industrial research and development³⁹. The ascent of China as an economic power has transformed it from one of the world's poorest countries into the world's fastest growing economy through a process called 'a miracle', achieving one of the biggest improvements in human welfare anywhere at any time⁴⁰. Indeed, one of the most important challenges that China confronted was poverty alleviation, and it succeeded over the last few decades, to lift 620 million of its own people out of poverty, the largest ever number achieved in history⁴¹. China has increasingly become an influential power competing with the United States in world affairs⁴², its success in the economic arena and its ascent to the rank of second largest economy in the world is an inspiration to Africans. A growing number of scholars claim that China's model of development constitutes a component of China's soft power as it appeals to developing nations⁴³. As a Nigerian diplomat in Beijing said: "We have a lot to learn from China on economic development. ... So, why reinventing the wheel?"⁴⁴. Many African countries are impressed by China's rapid economic development, aspire to replicate it and believe that their nations can benefit from China's experience.⁴⁵ It remains, however, important to notice that African countries should learn from China's successful model of economic development but not copy it. They have to adapt it to their own historical, social, political and economic environments and create their own development model inspired from the Chinese experience.

- Economic partnership

Many African countries look for exports' diversification as a source of growth and employment. They look to China, as one of the largest and

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fastest growing economies, to provide opportunities for expanding and diversifying trade. To achieve this goal, discussions between Chinese and African leaders increasingly focus on enabling high-value export⁴⁶. In addition to trade exchanges, African countries highly rely on China as an important source of development aid especially that Chinese banks offer African countries favourable loan terms. China's concessional loans are subsidised through its aid budget, permitting lower interest rates than those available from commercial lending houses⁴⁷. China also distinguishes itself from the western donors by its singular approach of “no strings attached aid”, offering an appreciated alternative to African countries. China often highlights the fact that 45 percent of its foreign aid goes to Africa, and covers several fields ranging from education, health to agriculture and infrastructure.

In addition to trade exchanges and development aid, African governments and companies need reliable economic partners to invest in several fields of activity providing stable jobs to Africans who aspire to improve their social and material well being⁴⁸. Investments are expected to contribute to wealth creation and thus to economic development. African countries aim at attracting Chinese investment because Western private investment has been held back by a wide range of obstacles⁴⁹. In addition to its interest in all sectors of activity, China proved its willingness to invest in areas where Western firms have proven unwilling to invest; either because of high levels of political risks or in reason of the difficulty of the ground or the high costs of the investment.

What Africa critically needs is infrastructural development of all types, and in massive amounts, as it continues to suffer from archaic infrastructures built during the colonial era.⁵⁰ Regional infrastructure development is critically important to the continent's improvements in power, trade, transport and water capacity. This makes China's desire to invest in African infrastructure a welcome opportunity. Since the 1960s, and particularly during the past decade, Chinese companies have built bridges, schools, hospitals, railroads, roads, dams, telecommunication networks, and other important infrastructures across Africa⁵¹.

In addition to their infrastructural development needs, many African states aspire to achieve industrialisation, the most important pillar of economic development. As China's growth has slowed substantially from over 10% per year in recent decades to below 7%, China is seeking to accelerate the shift from an export-oriented growth model based on heavy manufacturing to one based on domestic consumption and services⁵². With a relatively young population and an emerging middle class, many African countries are seen as ideal destinations for domestically redundant, lower-end and labour-intensive Chinese industries,⁵³ and it is what has been highlighted during the sixth FOCAC in last December 2015.

Another field where African countries expect China's partnership is the agricultural sector. Indeed, one of the biggest challenges facing African countries is food security and agricultural productivity improvement. The Chinese experience in agricultural research and development especially would be useful to African agricultural producers. Chinese cooperation in the agricultural field is much needed given the withdrawal of Africa's traditional donors from this sector⁵⁴.

- **Technology transfer**

One of the most important elements that Africa requires for long-term development is technology transfer. Knowledge is the key component of any production system not only in the obvious areas of manufacturing and knowledge-intensive services, but also in the commodities sector⁵⁵. Africa needs new technology and professionalised training and China can provide both of them. China shows increasing willingness to assist Africa in the development of production value chains. For instance, China has recently built more factories to process African raw materials in Africa. Furthermore, China took the commitment to help train Africa's emergent professional workforce in several fields, and its commitment has largely been fulfilled⁵⁶ through its intensified training programs. As one Nigerian official noted: "The Western world is never prepared to transfer technology—but the Chinese do, [and] while China's technology may not be as sophisticated as that of Western countries, it is better to have Chinese

technology than to have none at all"⁵⁷. Chinese expertise in science and technology and its abundant capital can complement the abundant African labour and natural resources⁵⁸. If this equation is correctly fulfilled, China and African countries could really attain a win-win partnership.

Conclusion

It appears from what precedes that from its engagement towards Africa, China aspires to strengthen its stand seeking allies at the international organisations to support its positions, and enhance its international influence. African countries, for their part, aspire to be better considered on the international scene and to be treated by a great power as sovereign equals instead of being considered as inferior states. Economic objectives constitute the core of Sino-African relations. One of China's principal aims is to secure access to natural resources needed for its economic growth, and the African continent is known to be particularly rich in natural reserves. China is also looking for new markets for its products; meeting the demand of many African consumers who greatly appreciate inexpensive Chinese goods. China is also looking for investment opportunities for its state-owned and private companies, and African governments are looking for investors especially in fields and areas where western companies have been unwilling to engage. China also distinguishes itself as a generous donor of development aid without preconditions responding to the expectations of African countries which greatly appreciate China's approach of "no strings attached aid"⁵⁹. That is to say that in several fields, China's objectives fit African expectations as expressed by President Xi Jinping during his visit to Tanzania in March 2013 when he spoke of a dream of over 1.3 billion Chinese people for great national renewal and the dream of 1 billion African people for gaining strength and unity and achieving development and rejuvenation⁶⁰.

China has a considerable interest for the African continent, and this interest must be converted by African countries into a negotiating power

in order to maximise the gains they can obtain from their interactions with China, and more importantly to attain more balanced relations with the other powers competing with China in the continent.

The interests between African states and China can actually coincide and can, indeed, create better win-win situations, if the African side succeeds in negotiating more strongly the deals. China could be an efficient partner to African states at various levels, provided that African countries become more engaged on the basis of a unified agenda. Only then, can Africa take full advantage from the interest that China has for their continent. Otherwise, if China's engagement continues to be poorly managed, Africa risks once again to be exploited, and ultimately misses a unique opportunity to advance its political, economic and social development.⁶¹ As Ed Brown, a Ghanaian senior executive at one of his country's leading independent think tanks said: "This [relationship] is going to determine Africa's future for the next fifty years. The big question is whether African countries are dynamic enough to take advantage, and whether they'll end up being the appendage of somebody else all over again".

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