
CHINA: GOOD OR EVIL IN AFRICA?

China is transforming Africa, for good and ill. The United States and other traditional trading and aid partners of Africa need to pay closer attention than they are, and with Africans craft bold new policies that welcome Chinese investment and trade but condemn the taking of African jobs and the destruction of African industries. Africa and the West also need to persuade China that supporting Africa's most reviled dictatorships is bad for Africa and bad for China as a world power and an Olympics host.

China has become the largest new investor, trader, buyer, and aid donor in a raft of African countries, and a major new economic force in sub-Saharan Africa as a whole. Chinese trade with Africa is growing at 50 percent a year; already that trade has jumped in value from \$10 billion in 2000 to about \$25 billion last year. (U.S. trade with sub-Saharan Africa in 2005 was worth nearly \$61 billion.) China is building roads, railways, harbors, petrochemical installations, and military barracks; pumping oil; farming; taking timber; supplying laborers; and offering physicians. A number of African nations now depend critically on Chinese cash and Chinese initiative.

Growing rapidly, and bursting out of its long underdeveloped cocoon to become a major world power and global economic source, China needs sources of energy and the raw materials—copper, cobalt, cadmium, platinum, nickel, zinc, tantalum, titanium, and so on—that African nations can supply. China rivals the United States for Angola's oil, controls most of the Sudan's oil, and is exploring for oil onshore and offshore in five other African countries. It is a major purchaser of timber from West Africa. President Hu Jintao of China has visited Africa three times since 2003.

All of this activity and interaction is to the good, especially if Africa's GDP rises, its primary commodities find ready markets, and its people are able to purchase inexpensive consumer items. But there are major negative consequences: A flood of cheap goods, especially textiles and apparel, have already begun to undermine and bankrupt local industry, pushing hundreds of thousands of Africans out of work. The use of imported Chinese labor, rather than Africans, on infrastructural and factory projects—a common phenomenon—deprives Africans of employment opportunities. In many cases, China as an investor or as a purchaser of primary products (like oil) has also buttressed the harsh rule of authoritarian governments. China implicitly backs odious regimes, propping some of them up, supplying corrupt rents to many, and always reinforcing a regime's least participatory instincts. In the Sudan, Zimbabwe, and elsewhere, China is in numerous specific ways supporting regimes sanctioned by and otherwise condemned by the United Nations and leaders of the free and democratic developed world. It supplies small arms and other weapons—sometimes aircraft— indiscriminately, and in defiance of UN strictures.

At a meeting earlier this month at the Kennedy School of Government, senior African, Chinese, American, and European diplomats, practitioners, businessmen, NGO leaders, and scholars evaluated the yin and yang of China's mixed impact on contemporary Africa. They welcomed China as a force for GDP growth in Africa; simultaneously, they worried that China was a malign influence—a modern colonial colossus intent on stripping Africa of its wealth without leaving sustainable structures behind. At present, there is little technology transfer, little capacity building, and little attention given to good governance and effective institutions. China's slapdash approach to safety issues, especially in mining, has also been exported to Africa.

Because China does not regard itself as a new colonial power—it does not seek to govern subject peoples in Africa or impose a Chinese way of life and value system on indigenous inhabitants of the continent—it tends to cloak its hands-off approach in a mantle of supposed respect for sovereignty. But non-intervention is intervention in another guise. China is opportunistic, and regards opportunism as a virtue. The conferees at Harvard wondered whether it really was in China's considered self-interest—short- or long-term—to align itself with depraved regimes that would be overthrown or superseded. Over the Sudan and Darfur, for example, several commentators told the Chinese officials at the meeting that influencing the Khartoum government for good was a better strategy than the one being pursued now. It could win friends and partners in the rest of Africa and in the remainder of the world without risking the loss of oil. The same nostrum held true with regard to Zimbabwe, where China is the main buttress of the cruel and wildly corrupt government of President Robert Mugabe. Good deeds now would unlock the potential of Africa for China. They would raise China's moral stature and emphasize its self-professed break with earlier colonial endeavors. They would also help China conduct a stress free 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing and lessen the threat of a potential boycott by the world's athletes.

Africans were urged by the conferees to organize more effectively than they have hitherto—to meet the Chinese at least half way. Neither the African Union nor sub-regional organizations like the Southern African Development Community (SADC) have an articulated policy regarding China and Chinese influence. Each of the forty-eight sub-Saharan countries goes its own way, responding to China and Chinese entreaties (or Taiwanese in five cases) idiosyncratically. Possibly, the conferees suggested, the African petroleum producers, the African hard mineral producers, the African vulnerable industrial cases, and so on could develop specific policies toward China in these new functional groupings. Africa surely needs policies regarding the importation of Chinese laborers, special taxation privileges or not for Chinese firms (many are state owned), and protection or not for domestically produced goods. That complaint drove Zambian and Nigerian protesters earlier this year.

China has displaced European, American, and Japanese capital in several African countries. Indeed, unlike the West, China has opened embassies in forty-seven of sub-Saharan Africa's forty-eight countries. It has created Confucius Institutes in several national capitals, and partially funds a serious think-tank in South Africa. The Chinese Communist Party sponsors frequent people-to-people visits to and from Africa.

China is a worthy competitor for resources, and for construction projects. Additionally, its direct and indirect donor aid is now significant, overshadowing or

competing for influence with the United States and Europe. Africans like this new competition for their partnership. They further welcome China's lack of conditionality; Chinese aid—a promised \$20 billion—comes without immediately obvious strings (the Taiwanese question aside). For that reason, and because the Chinese espouse fundamentally different approaches to governance questions than the West does, the West and Africa should now encourage China to embrace positive principles, mutually agreed upon, for Africa's growth. China is a possible force for good in Africa; the West should help harness that potential.

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