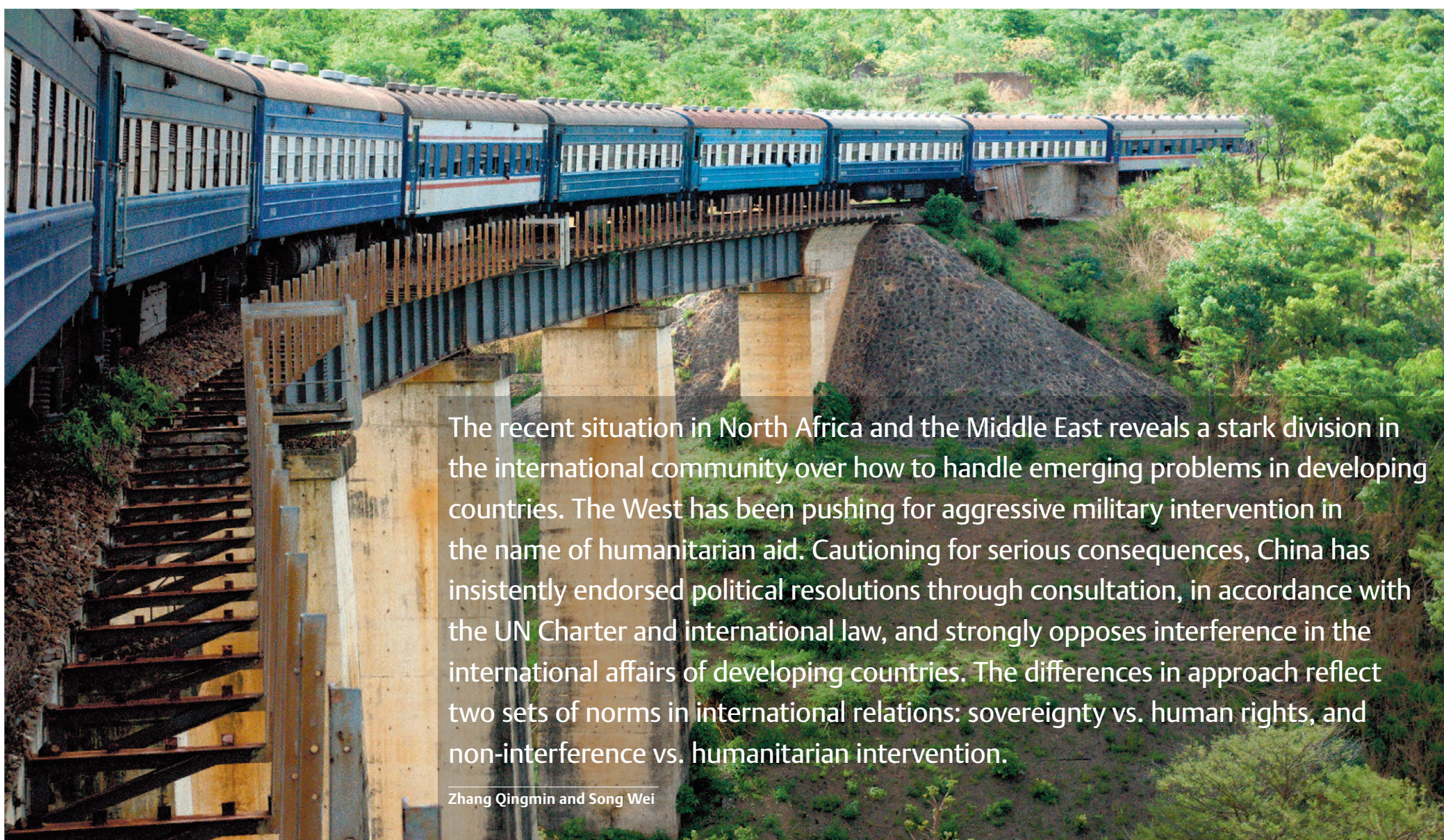


China's policy toward Africa: a Chinese perspective



The recent situation in North Africa and the Middle East reveals a stark division in the international community over how to handle emerging problems in developing countries. The West has been pushing for aggressive military intervention in the name of humanitarian aid. Cautioning for serious consequences, China has insistently endorsed political resolutions through consultation, in accordance with the UN Charter and international law, and strongly opposes interference in the international affairs of developing countries. The differences in approach reflect two sets of norms in international relations: sovereignty vs. human rights, and non-interference vs. humanitarian intervention.

Zhang Qingmin and Song Wei

Political and strategic based relations

The foundation of China's policy toward developing countries in general, and Africa in particular, was first expounded by Zhou Enlai, the first Premier and Foreign Minister of China, at the Asian-African Conference in Bandung, Indonesia in 1955. He said that most developing countries "have been subjected to colonial plunder and oppression, and have thus been forced to remain in a stagnant state of poverty and backwardness ... Suffering from the same cause and struggling for the same aim, it is easier for China and other developing countries to understand each other".¹ The People's Republic of China (PRC) has always considered its relations with developing countries as a cornerstone of its overall foreign relations and Zhou's idea still functions well in China's management of its relations with developing countries. But the basis for such relationship has undergone changes since the founding of the PRC in 1949.

During the early days of the Cold War the basis of China's relations with African countries was mainly political and strategic. China supported African countries' national liberation movements through military aid and political support, and African countries, in turn, were sympathetic to China on international issues. It was with the staunch support from Africa that the PRC replaced the ROC at the UN in 1971, leading Mao to humor that "it is our African friends who have brought us back to the United Nations." As a member of the UN Security Council, China has stood firmly on the side of developing countries. For instance, China voted 16 successive times for Salim Salim, the Tanzanian Foreign Minister, to be elected as UN Secretary-General in 1982.

The major strands of bilateral relations during the early days of the Cold War included mutual diplomatic recognition, frequent exchanges of high level visits, and China's aid to Africa. These were especially important when China was isolated and the newly independent African countries badly needed diplomatic recognition of their independence, and when their respective international spaces were limited.

The 1860-km Tanzania and Zambia Railroad (TAZARA, Tan-Zam, or Uhuru railway), constructed between 1970-1975, with a RMB 988 million interest free loan from the Chinese government, is a monument of China's foreign aid to Africa and a symbol of Sino-African relations during the Cold War.

Economical based bilateral relations

Opening up and reform in 1979 was a watershed in Chinese foreign policy as well as Chinese history. China needed to adjust to its shift in economic focus, and thus began to create a favorable international environment for its domestic economic construction, which became the main goal of its

foreign policy. By then all African countries had gained their national independence and they were facing the same task of having to develop their economy.

To adapt to the new international and domestic environment, China put forward four principles on developing cooperative relations with African countries, in 1985. They were, "equality and mutual benefit, stress on practical results, diversity in form, and attainment of common progress."² China reaffirmed its firm support for Africa, but it gradually shifted the base of its African policy away from supporting their national liberation and opposing hegemony, to developing mutually beneficial economic and technological cooperation. China's cooperation with Africa expanded from foreign aid to include other forms of financial aid, including preferential loans and joint ventures, thus demonstrating and validating bilateral relations.

Diversified basis of bilateral relations

Upon the ending of the Cold War, China came once under great pressure from the West; but most developing countries, African in particular, showed sympathy with, expressed understanding of, and voiced support for Chinese domestic and foreign policy. Chinese and African cooperation in the political field ranges from mutual support on human rights issues to intimate cooperation on concrete issues. For instance, Africa supported China's successful bidding to host the 29th Olympic Games in 2008 and the World Expo in 2010, and it has always supported China in blocking Taiwan's return to the UN. China, in turn, advocates for the UN to pay more attention to development and confronts the problem of under-representation of developing countries in the UN.

Another foundation of Sino-African relations, since the Cold War, lies in the significant and complementary nature of their economies. China needs raw materials and new markets for its products. Africa, along with Latin America, which is rich in resources and large in population, has what China needs for its rapid economic development. From a strategic point of view, Africa can help diversify China's dependence on Western powers, which are always politically critical of China. From Africa's perspective, China offers an alternative source of power and influence, and new markets for trade, particularly for the sale of raw materials and foodstuffs to promote growth at home and reduce reliance on western powers, and a source of investment without the strings attached, which is the case with most Western investments. Moreover, China and Africa have common interests in solving global economic problems, involving such issues as South-South cooperation in the age of globalization, and they both demand that developed countries honor their promises on market access, aid and debt relief.

China does to African countries what it expects others to do to China

China respects African countries' right to independently choose their own social systems and paths of development, and has never tried to impose the Chinese way onto African countries, because the Chinese political system was chosen by the Chinese people themselves, and the Chinese road of "socialism with Chinese characteristics" was earned through their own hard experiences.

China advocates that African issues should be solved by the Africans themselves through political consultation, without the interference of external forces. China respects the sovereignty of African countries, because China's sovereignty has been threatened by other major powers in the past; China knows how Africa feels. China cherishes its hard-won sovereignty and understands that other developing countries value their sovereignty too. China embraces the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other sovereignty countries and so does not interfere in the international affairs of African countries. China strongly disagrees with other countries exceeding their authority and meddling in the affairs of sovereign states, including China and African countries, in whatever pretext.

China does provide humanitarian assistance to other countries, but is opposed to using this means arbitrarily and with double standards. Take the Darfur issue for example; China sought to alleviate the suffering of the Sudanese people through humanitarian aid, but opposed sanctions against Sudan, which China considered would only bring more trouble. China insisted that the international community could influence the situation without interfering directly – China persuaded the Sudanese government to cooperate with the UN by offering suggestions rather than threatening forced sanctions. When the Sudanese government, the African Union, and the UN reached a tri-party agreement on the deployment of a "Joint Mission" in Darfur, China sent a 315-strong engineer brigade to assist the peace-keeping mission at the request of the UN. The Engineer Corps personnel was charged with bridge construction, water source exploration and road maintenance.

Another example of China's humanitarian assistance involved the recent situation in Libya, another African country. When the Qadhafi regime suppressed its people with brutal means, China voted for UNSC Resolution 1970 in February 2011, which demanded an end to the violence while imposing an arms embargo on the country and a travel ban and assets freeze on the family of Muammar Al-Qadhafi and certain Government officials. But China abstained from the UNSC

Above:
TAZARA railway.
©CC-Attribution.
Courtesy of
Richard Stupart.

Resolution 1973 a month later, which authorized “all necessary measures” to protect Libyan civilians. Despite achieving their goal of a regime change, the military intervention has only increased the suffering of the Libyan people and created a bigger humanitarian disaster.

Developing mutual beneficial economic relations

Economic relations are another important strand that binds China and Africa today. Remarkable evidence is the volume of the bilateral trade, which witnessed a robust boost in the new century. For instance, China-Africa trade was \$10 million in 1950, \$100 million in 1960, \$1 billion in 1980, over \$10 billion in 2000, and a massive \$150 billion in 2011; making China the largest trading partner of Africa. In addition, as of 2011, more than two thousand Chinese companies have now invested \$13 billion on the continent. China considers the bilateral trade relations win-win and mutually beneficial.

The structure of Sino-African trade has led to criticism of China's policy in Africa as “new colonialism”. China's trades with African countries are mainly with the resource rich countries, and oil accounts for most of Africa's export to China, while most of China's exports to Africa are industrialized products. Some in the West, based on this fact, accuse China of having an “insatiable appetite for energy and raw materials”, and see China's investments in Africa as “extracting resources rather than helping to create employment”, just like the imperial powers of the nineteenth century; sometimes they simply allege that “China is trying to colonize Africa”.³ Such accusations are theoretically illogical and have political ill-intentions.

First, the Sino-African trade structure resembles that of many other international trades today, which is not intentionally created by any party but historically formed. It is a structural problem resulting from the requirement of a division of labor in a globalized world, resembling that between developed countries, which mainly export services, and China, which mainly exports industrial products. But nobody calls the trades of developed countries “new colonialism”. In the same vein, China also buys a lot of raw materials from Australia, but nobody considers China's trade policy with Australia as neo-colonialist. Tellingly, criticism of China's trade relations with Africa mainly comes from those who used to exercise colonial rule in that continent. They are making incorrect historical analogies by invoking their own nostalgia.

Second, no colonialist treats its colonized as equals; yet, China emphasizes equality and mutual benefit in Sino-African relations. China has received more than two dozen state-official visits from Africa, and Chinese leaders have reciprocated to dozens of African countries in the 21st century. China has made it a diplomatic tradition that the first foreign visit each year, by its Foreign Minister, is in Africa. Furthermore, colonialists always fear the awakening of their colonized; yet, China has instead offered the African Union a \$200 million new headquarter complex to support African countries' efforts to grow stronger through unity. This gigantic complex, 113 meters high, in the center of Addis Ababa, is witness to China's friendship and commitment to Africa.

China does not fear, and in fact strongly supports, developing countries playing a more important role in international affairs. When China envisions a multi-polar world, it considers Africa as

a crucial element. When China advocates the democratization of the international system, it holds that all countries, big or small, strong or weak, ought to enjoy the equal right to participate in and make decisions on international affairs.

Thirdly, African people do not agree with the sentiment that China's policy in Africa is a form of new colonialism. While criticizing the Western world for having precipitated the weakening of the continent's economic systems and for having tried to “re-colonize” Africa, Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi said that “China, with its extraordinary resurgence and its commitment to a win-win partnership, is one of the reasons behind the African renaissance”, and that the economic emergence of Asia, especially China, is “an opportunity for Africa to build and rebuild partnerships”.⁴

Providing aid without strings attached

As most African countries are small, weak, and under-developed, China has continuously offered African countries economic assistance with no political conditions attached. To meet the challenges in the new century, China, motivated by some African countries, proposed the establishment of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), which has become a new platform to strengthen Sino-Africa consultation and cooperation. At the first Ministerial Conference of the Forum, held in October 2000, China committed to reduce or cancel RMB10 billion loans owed by less-developed countries in Africa, and loans owed by 31 African countries totaling RMB10.9 billion were written off in the following years. After Chinese President Hu made eight commitments at the Beijing Summit of the FOCAC in November 2006, Chinese Premier Wen further pledged another eight measures of aid to Africa at the 2009 FOCAC meeting in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt. The Chinese assistance towards Africa includes grants, interest-free loans, concessional low-interest loans, cancellation of loans, professional training (agricultural and medical experts), construction projects (convention centers, railways, roads, hospitals, etc.), zero-tariff export agreements, clean energy projects and facilities, teacher training, medical equipment and anti-malaria materials, cultural exchange programs, and much more.⁵

China's aid to Africa is at times criticized for supposedly supporting pariah regimes, whereby China is accused of disregarding human rights abuses, fiscal transparency, and clean governance. But China feels that the current norms of international relations limit China to having to deal with sovereign states through their government – and China complies with the current international norms and the spirit of the UN Charter.

As to the so called human rights abuses, China has let developing countries, African countries in particular, fend themselves against attacks from the West. China will not join the West in criticizing African countries on this issue and in putting pressure on them. China itself has made world-recognized progress in its human rights situation at home, and has done so whilst disregarding external pressures. China does hope that the human rights situation in Africa will improve along with its standards of living, which is one of the reasons for China's continuous aid to Africa; nevertheless, China maintains that external pressures are simply counter-productive.

Lack of transparency is another stick the West often uses to criticize developing countries, including China. But transparency can only be realized when a government is confident that it will not be threatened. Clean government is a common desire for all peoples, but all governments and international organizations, Western ones included, have problems of corruption. The only real difference is that corruption in developed countries mostly happens through “lawfully” hidden means, while corruption in developing countries is still in the early stages, and taking place in broad daylight. China, which is not spared from the sufferance of this disease, does not want to be a self-appointed judge who can preach governance to others, whether it concerns a developing or developed country.

Challenges and implications

Though China's relations with Africa are strong, it does not mean that no problems exist in their bilateral relations. In addition to Western suspicion and criticism, China has its own problems. The Chinese party-state system, which appeared as a strong monolithic unitary actor in world politics, is no longer so monolithic.

Professionalization, cooperation pluralization, and decentralization, have complicated Chinese foreign policy-making. For instance, the FOCAC follow-up commission is composed of 22 ministerial level agencies. Different voices can be heard from China. Bureaucratic coordination or mal-coordination hinders the Chinese government's efficiency in handling its relations with Africa.

As the Chinese government encourages Chinese enterprises “to go out” and invest in Africa, many business sectors are taking their own initiatives without the knowledge and control of the government. Like any business, they are all profit-driven, whether state-owned or private. Each investor has his/her own strategies, which together do not necessarily result in a Chinese national or state strategy. They are the sources of, and should be blamed for, many of the China-related problems in Africa, such as poor labor practices and environmental problems. But as it stands, the Chinese government is held responsible for whatever happens by Chinese in Africa.

In addition to these newly emerged problems, some traditional issues remain, such as the matter of Taiwan, an unalienable part of China, which is still recognized by a small group of African countries as the legitimate Chinese government, rather than the PRC. Trade frictions, such as quality concerns of many Chinese products, and anti-dumping cases, are also ripples in the smooth development of good bilateral relations.

Lastly, the accusation that China engages with Africa as if it were a colonial power, has nudged China out of its position of a developing country, at least in the conventional sense. Some African countries have very high expectations of China, and expect China to shoulder some extreme responsibilities, such as to check the aggressive policies of the West. But China, which still considers itself a developing country, would rather keep a low profile and refuses to be a leader; nevertheless, it unwaveringly supports developing countries on international issues.

The substantial and rich Sino-African relations and the existing challenges, are two sides of the same coin. The balancing act between the two sides will not only decide the future of Sino-African relations, but will also affect whether the norms of non-interference, equality, and mutual benefit between sovereign states, which China and other developing countries advocate, will prevail in international relations in the future.

Zhang Qingmin is a professor at the School of International Studies, Peking University. His focus is on Chinese foreign policy and foreign policy analysis (zhangqingmin@yahoo.com).

Song Wei is an assistant researcher at the Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation (songwei1st@hotmail.com).

Notes

- 1 Nianlong Han & Xue Mouhong (eds.). 1987. *Dangdai zhongguo waijiao [Diplomacy of Contemporary China]* Beijing: China Social Science Press, p.413.
- 2 Tian (ed.) *China's Foreign Policy after Reform and Opening up to the Outsides World*, pp.131-132, in Han & Mouhong (eds.), p.362.
- 3 *The Economist*, front cover story, 26 October 2006; David Blair, “Why China is Trying to Colonise Africa,” *the Daily Telegraph*, 31 August 2007.
- 4 www.thechinatimes.com/online/2012/01/2036.html
- 5 The full extent of the agreements and commitments made can be found on the FOCAC website, www.focac.org/eng/

Right: African Union conference center and office complex (AUCC) in Addis Ababa. ©CC-Attribute-Share Alike. Courtesy of Maria Dyveke Styve.

