

China and Africa's development: the testing ground of a world power

China's irruption into Africa has come as a great, and largely unwelcome, shock to people working in the development sector. Moreover, it comes at a time when development budgets in most donor countries are under pressure from domestic constituencies. What offends so many development experts in Europe and North America is China's refusal to play by the rules they have made over the years.

Stephen Ellis

Commercially based cooperation

The main aid donors aim to develop a common strategic approach to client-countries via the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), but China has declined to join this Committee and is therefore not bound by its views. The Chinese government also offends central tenets of the policies hammered out within the Development Assistance Committee; it openly offers bribes to already corrupt heads of state in Africa; it pays no heed to debt reduction schemes painstakingly negotiated over months or years; it cheerfully admits that its main interest is business rather than the reduction of poverty; and it professes no aspirations for democracy and human rights.

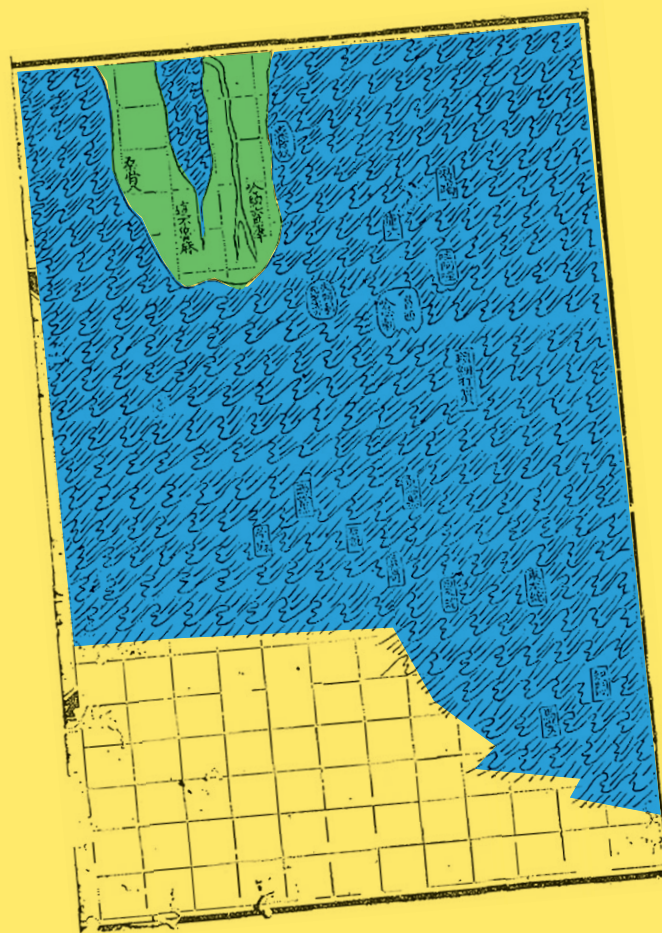
While offending against so many of the dogmas of development that have evolved among OECD countries, China has itself made a strong pitch for the moral high ground. China is itself a developing country, as its government reminds anyone who cares to listen. It is itself a historic victim of Western imperialism. When, in the fifteenth century, the Chinese admiral Zheng He visited east Africa at the head of an imperial fleet, he did not attempt to colonise the region, but simply returned home. His voyage marked the end of official Chinese interest in Africa, until after the Communist revolution of 1949, when the Beijing government took quite a close interest in Africa during its age of decolonisation. Eclipsed by internal wrangles during the Cultural Revolution, China's Africa policy was then dormant until quite recent times. Nowadays, Beijing's professed aim is no longer the export of revolution, but commercially based cooperation among moral equals. To many Africans, tired of receiving lectures from Western politicians whose own moral credentials are not always beyond question, this comes as a breath of fresh air.

The newcomers are here to stay

At the same time, many Africans are now beginning to see a downside to Chinese interest in their countries. Somewhere between a quarter of a million and a million Chinese nationals now live in Africa, most of them entrepreneurs from the private sector rather than employees of parastatal companies. Many are involved in retail trade. It has become quite common, in all parts of Africa, to find a Chinese "mom and pop" store selling general goods, and the family serving behind the counter more likely to be learning whatever African language is spoken by their customers than the old colonial languages English, French and Portuguese. In Senegal and Malawi there have been public signs of resentment by local market-sellers annoyed by competition from these foreign interlopers. More often, there is anger that in many construction projects – the roads and sports stadia that Chinese companies are building with such speed – even the drivers and manual labourers are often Chinese.

Prestige infrastructure projects, whose aim is usually to provide the means to export raw materials more efficiently than is possible at present, are doing little to create jobs in societies that suffer from chronic unemployment. In Zambia, a couple of incidents in Chinese-owned mines that have led to the deaths of workers have given Chinese managers a bad reputation, in a country known for its strong trade unions. The fact that people are discovering the negatives as well as the positives of the Chinese presence is really just a sign that these newcomers are in Africa to stay.

The great and growing volume of Chinese trade with Africa is often commented upon, as Africa provides China with the oil, copper, hardwood and other commodities that it needs, while in return it exports cheap manufactured goods. There are few examples of Chinese commerce leading to the creation of processing industries, with Sudan being a rare exception, where Chinese assistance has helped the country to develop an oil refining industry and even a processing sector making cheap and simple plastic products.



Partitioning Africa

Less often publicly debated is the likely impact of China's interest in Africa in the fields of international politics and diplomacy. Everyone knows that Africa was colonised by a handful of European powers, and these countries have subsequently had a tendency to regard the continent as their own backyard. Less often appreciated is the fact that Africa has had, and continues to have, a unique relationship with the elusive entity known as the international community.

The notorious partition of Africa that resulted from a conference held in Berlin in 1884-1885 was the work of a collective known as the Concert of Powers. The European states of that time were conscious of forming an international family of nations that as yet included only a few members from outside the European continent. Britain, France and the other colonial powers secured recognition of their spheres of influence in Africa by negotiation within this international club. When Germany was deemed unworthy of colonies after its defeat in 1918, some of its former possessions were assigned as mandate territories to the new League of Nations and its successor, the United Nations. When African colonial territories gained their independence in the 1950s and 1960s, the UN, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and other multilateral bodies came to play a key role in their development.

This brings us back to the OECD, another multilateral body, and its Development Assistance Committee. If China does not want to join this particular club and does not want to observe its protocols and principles, then what might it do? There appears in this respect to have been an interesting and rapid evolution in official Chinese attitudes towards Africa. It is not by accident that China's diplomatic offensive in Africa began with countries that were at odds with the multilateral organisations that wield such influence throughout the continent. In particular, the Chinese government established a privileged relationship with Angola, Sudan and Zimbabwe, all countries with valuable economic assets, to be sure, but more to the point, countries whose governments were on poor terms with the World Bank and other agencies, as well as with the donor community as a whole, on account of an array of political and economic offences ranging from corruption and debt, to human rights abuses. By proposing itself as a commercial and diplomatic partner from outside the strictures of the OECD consensus, China was able both to gain access to some attractive commercial opportunities on advantageous terms – notably crude oil from Angola and Sudan – but was also making a point about the nature of its place in the world.

Sovereignty

Since that time, the Chinese government has shown an impressive degree of pragmatism. For all its posturing, it has not actually invested much in Zimbabwe, recognising in President Robert Mugabe a partner who, at age 88, is unlikely to endure. From its initial suspicion of the multilateral architecture that has been erected around Africa for decades, the Chinese government has discreetly begun to acquire a share in the ownership of this edifice. China now contributes more troops to UN peacekeeping missions than any other permanent member of the Security Council. In October 2010, China was participating in six UN peacekeeping missions in Africa. While it retains its rhetoric of respect for African sovereignties, it is quietly reconciling itself to the very institutions that regularly intrude on those same privileges. It is pressing for a larger stake in the World Bank and the IMF. The most interesting test-case for Chinese policy in Africa has been Sudan, where in 2006 the Beijing government succumbed to intense international pressure by lobbying Khartoum to accept a hybrid African Union/UN peacekeeping force.¹

China's shift away from a fundamentalist attachment to the principle of sovereignty is for good reason. One of the most striking features of the longer history of sub-Saharan Africa is its relative lack of states, in the modern sense of the term. As the historian John Lonsdale noted many years ago, "the most distinctively African contribution to human history could be said to have been precisely the civilised art of living fairly peaceably together *not* in states."² Africa's colonisation in the late nineteenth century, whatever else it may have been, marked the continent's inscription into an emerging international order of states in an inferior role. Its reincorporation into a world of nation-states after 1945 was intended as an emancipatory gesture, and the strategies of development that have dominated international attitudes towards Africa ever since can be understood as attempts to give substance to the sub-continent's legal status as an assembly of sovereign states. This effort cannot be said to have been notably successful, as the number of 'failed' states in Africa testifies.

Enter China. Its government has an ideology of non-interference, but its rulers are also technocrats who are obliged to recognise that an absence of states with efficient bureaucracies, able to enunciate rules that are more or less respected throughout their national territories, poses problems for modern business. The Chinese government was deeply shocked by the collapse in 2011 of its Libyan ally, Colonel Gaddafi, and the consequent necessity to rescue 30,000 Chinese citizens threatened by the fighting there. More recently, the taking of Chinese hostages in hostilities in Sudan has received considerable public attention in China. The government's support for the government of Sudan, including its provision of the arms used to perpetrate many massacres, is clouding its relations with the new republic of South Sudan, where most of the country's oil is located. The current resumption of fighting between the two Sudans is now testing the success of Beijing's approach over recent years.

No moral baggage

The logic of great power status leads the rulers of a rising state to try and shape the political context of the countries that matter to it. China is learning that intervention in Africa is sometimes necessary for the most hard-headed reasons. If the existing international architecture turns out to be accessible to a newcomer, and can be used in the Chinese interest, then Beijing's pragmatists will consider it potentially useful. Beijing is increasingly seeking to project the image of a great power able to assume the responsibilities that accompany its status.

China's assumption of a place at the top table is reshaping the contours of the world system. Nowhere is this likely to be more visible than in Africa, which has such a marked tendency to suck external actors in to its domestic affairs. However, it is clear that China is not simply evolving into a great power that treats Africa the same way as others do. Above all, China does not carry the moral baggage that underpins so much Western intervention in Africa, still rooted in the nineteenth century concept of a civilising mission. In regard to Africa this is likely to remain a mark of difference between China and its traditional partners.

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Notes

- 1 Steven C.Y. Kuo. 2012. 'Beijing's Understanding of African Security: Context and Limitations', *African Security*, 5(1):24-43.
- 2 John Lonsdale. 1981. 'States and Social Processes in Africa: a Historiographical Survey', *African Studies Review*, 24(2-3):139.