

Xuewu Gu: China's Involvement in Africa: Trends and Perspectives

Since the end of the East-West conflict, Africa has been suffering from its marginal position in global politics. But now, China has discovered the continent which, so it seems, will increasingly be attracted by the pull of the People's Republic in the course of the 21st century. Prime Minister Zhou Enlai launched a diplomatic offensive in the African states as early as the sixties. Yet in the nineties, Beijing's strategy became more systematic, intensive, and effective when China began its active advance into Africa.

At first, China's involvement in Africa went rather unnoticed in global politics. Before September 11, 2001, the US hardly had any presence on the continent, nor were the events there much influenced by the Europeans. The Chinese leadership saw Africa as a strategic vacuum that gradually became a favoured destination of Beijing's foreign ministers.

Unlike the USA, Europe, and Japan, China does certainly not regard Africa as an economically marginal region but as a potential future market for consumer goods, which has already been conquered across the continent by Chinese goods – from electrical appliances to textile products and even kitchenware. Plastic sandals made in China, for example, have become part of African everyday life and may be found in any African village. Fifty years ago, when China and Africa began to exchange goods, the bilateral trade volume amounted to about 12 million US dollars only. By 2003, it had grown to 19 billion, and only one year later, by 2004, to 29 billion. China's chances of ousting the US from its first rank on the list of Africa's trading partners look good.

However, Sino-African trade is clearly biased in favour of China, causing not only increasing resentments in Africa but also growing disquiet in Beijing itself. To counterbalance this skewness, the Chinese introduced a policy to abolish tariffs on numerous goods from 25 African countries – an initiative which was meant to benefit specifically the poorest in those countries. Further measures are to follow.

What is more, Beijing is interested in Africa because of its oil deposits. Currently, 40 percent of China's oil demand is covered by imports. The country has been following a diversification strategy for a fairly long time now, in which Africa is playing an ever greater part and whose objective it is to achieve a broader distribution of suppliers. Imports from African countries have risen from 2.1 million tons in 1993 to 35.4 million tons in 2005. In the long run, Africa should become as important to the People's Republic's energy policy as the Middle East currently is. China will then obtain its oil mainly from four regions: Next to the two already named above, these would include the Asian-Pacific region as well as Russia and Central Asia.

With its West African oil strategy, Beijing penetrated into one of Washington's traditional areas of influence. It comes as a surprise that the supremacy of American oil companies in this region did not keep the Chinese from getting involved. It is hardly probable that Beijing wanted to challenge US power in West Africa; however, the rivalry between an established and a rising superpower has caused a delicate situation to arise. It remains to be seen whether the result will be cooperation or confrontation.

Beijing encourages the country's companies to invest in African infrastructure projects. And indeed, there is some indication that the continent's future infrastructure – motorways and airports, mobile telephone systems, power generators – will be of Chinese origin. Currently, Chinese investments – which increasingly concentrate on high technology – probably add up to three to four billion US dollars.

Beijing's leadership knows very well that maintaining a sustainable, stable relation with the African region will be possible only when politics are institutionalised and dynamism is encouraged. This is why it endeavours to structure its Africa policy along the lines expressed in the strategic paper entitled 'China's African Policy' of January 2006. In 2000, the China Africa Cooperation Forum was created to serve as a platform for dialogue between Chinese and African elites from politics and the economy. With its promise to cancel the 1.2 billion US dollars owed by some of the most debt-ridden African countries within a period of ten years, Beijing intended to gain the goodwill of the Africans. At the 2003 Forum in Addis Ababa, China further enhanced its endeavour to win Africa's favour by founding the African Human Resources Development Fund. Now, it may be asked what kind of gift China will present to Africa at the Forum of Beijing, which is scheduled to take place in November 2006.

The People's Republic is certainly profiting from the fact that the presence of the US, Europe, Russia, and Japan is currently weak in sub-Saharan Africa. However, the bad state of affairs on the continent which is being criticised by these countries – such as violations of human rights, wars, AIDS, hunger, poverty, corruption, and underdevelopment – apparently does not hamper China's eagerness. On the contrary: wherever the industrialised nations had withdrawn – from Sudan, Angola, and Zimbabwe, for example – the Chinese marched in at the double.

Sudan is emerging as the dream project, no less, of China's involvement in the oil industry. What is more, Beijing refused to agree to the sanctions that Washington proposed to impose on this African country before the UN Security Council – much to the chagrin of the West. When it comes to prompting Africa's governments to cooperate, China relies on adopting a course of non-interference in the countries' internal affairs.

China's aversion to conditions for international cooperation results not least from its historical experience in dealing with Western powers. Furthermore, Beijing knows that, due to this 'China factor', the West has lost some of its standing in the talks with Africa. The West must be aware that unwilling states will no longer bow to the pressure of a Western trade partner eager to make its involvement dependent on conditions when there is a partner in the East which is less demanding and, therefore, less problematic. Zimbabwe may serve as an example of this.

Beijing seems to have realised that it is easier to keep the gates to Africa open if it avoids the mistakes the 'American imperialists' and the 'European colonialists' made. This is why the Chinese have underpinned their march to Africa by measures designed to open the hearts of the African people to them. One of these measures is to send out teams of doctors. According to Beijing, more than 240 million Africans in various countries have been treated by Chinese doctors since 1963. Another tool is development aid; Beijing's 'list of gifts' included and still includes not only projects that attract public attention, such as splendid government buildings and stadiums, but also drinking water utilities and wells. What is more, spreading the Chinese language and culture turned out to be a very useful way to demonstrate China's soft power. The goodwill strategy of the People's Republic still works. To be sure, the people in Africa express concerns about and criticism of China's activities, but praise and appreciation prevail.

China's involvement in Africa, as it reveals itself now, at the start of the 21st century, results from three interacting factors, namely the decline of Western influence in sub-Saharan Africa after the end of the East-West conflict, the failure of Africa's modernisation project, and the rise of the People's Republic itself. It seems that Africa is about to be modernised Chinese style. However, this plan is hardly likely to suit the interests of the West. China's chances of establishing itself in Africa are good, yet Beijing should endeavour not only to gain the goodwill of the African countries but, just as importantly, to win the approval of the countries of the Western world.

