China's Ties with Africa: Beyond the Hysteria

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If questions about Sino-African relations could be reduced to their essence, these could be summarized as three main points. Firstly,China is not a unitary actor. This might seem elemental, but judging from a lot of the past literature on Chinese relations with Africa, it seems to have been overlooked. The huge proliferation of small-scale traders operating in Africa, very often at an individual or family level and private in nature, means that managing this phenomena for the Chinese state is all but impossible. Weak rule of law, endemic corruption and the highly politicized nature of state organizations at every level of government means that the central leadership is in a perpetual struggle to keep up with an economy surging beyond their control, whether domestically or when this is projected overseas. Thus demands that "China" should do x, y or z in "Africa", as if there is one lever to pull and all will come right, misses the subtleties and realities of contemporary Chinese foreign policy. Chinese trade with Africa has become, in many ways, "normalized" i.e. diverse and involving multiple actors and individuals, rather than being—as previously—arguably state-directed and under the direct control of central organs of the government. The concept of a "China Inc.", complete with master plan, either at home or abroad, is intrinsically flawed.

The second key point about Sino-African relations is that there has been a fair degree of scapegoating of Chin aand its alleged negative impacts upon Africa. This criticism is directed at a variety of Chinese activities in Africa, but upon close inspection is either much less salient or accurate and in fact is often balanced out by other positive aspects of the engagement or, is not actually the fault of the Chinese. For instance, in construction and infrastructure development it is alleged that Chinese companies only use imported Chinese workers—even unskilled ones—and so do not generate much local employment or engage in skills transfers. Yet research suggests that local people accounted for the vast majority of the total workforce of most of the Chinese construction companies in Africa. Whilst many Chinese are employed as unskilled casual labourers, there are also many examples of local Africans being employed in management and administration positions. Given the low skills-base in much of Africa, it is in fact unreasonable to expect a high proportion of the skilled jobs to be held by Africans anyway—and Western corporations in Africa still make great use of expensive expatriates at the management level, even after many years of activities in-country. In fact, Chinese workers are generally willing to work in places lik eSierra Leone at relatively low salaries and in conditions that Western expatriates would not dream of doing.

Another allegation about Chinese activities in Africa is that manufactured goods are "flooding" African countries and wiping out small and medium producers as well as ousting local traders. Yet the consumers of Africa are more than happy with this and are benefiting—particularly those on limited incomes. And much of Africa's manufacturing industry collapsed long ago, way before Chinese imports appeared on the scene. Of course, it is not only African producers who have had to adjust to competition—between 1995 and 2002, more than 15 million factory jobs were lost in China (this amounts to 15% of the country's total manufacturing workforce). Africa is not unique. Chinese exports may possibly block avenues for diversification away from traditional exports for African economies and, if Africa is to escape its dependent relationship on the global economy and move on from being simply an exporter of primary commodities, it needs to start manufacturing. But it needs to be noted that domestic African issues and problems are arguably more significant in making African manufacturers uncompetitive and such issues have long undermined the continent's productive base. Also, Africans themselves import a huge amount of Chinese-made products entering Africa. And where there are shoddy or counterfeit products involved, it is up to African states to regulate and control these—not simply blame "China".

It is true that health and safety standards, as well as workers' rights and environmental issues, appear to be low down on some Chinese companies priorities. This is unfortunate and indefensible. But it reflects what is happening back home in China as Beijing's leadership resolutely pursues the capitalist road to development. This is certainly not to give such employers a free pass on such matters, merely to contextualize. And again, it is up to African states to regulate and control such problems and make sure that extractive operations do not occur with destructive effects on the local environment or deny African workers their labor rights. Unfortunately, many of Africa's elites post-independence have shown scant regard for their citizen's constitutional rights in general; it is doubtful that they will suddenly spring into action if and when Chinese investment is concerned.

Where the Chinese leadership is arguably culpable is in the issue of "non-interference" if and when this negatively impacts upon the human rights of Africans. But as mentioned, Chinese policy is evolving. It is apparent that the Chinese see their approach to Africa as benign but are now beginning to feel exposed by the intricacies of Africa's politics. Kidnappings in Nigeria, the targeting and murder of Chinese workers in Ethiopia, anti-Chinese riots in Zambia, a high-profile campaign targeting the Beijing Olympics over Darfur (including the resignation by Steven Spielberg as an adviser to the Olympics in February 2008) and a threat by Darfurian rebels to target Chinese citizens—all these have provided a steep learning curve. Until relatively recently there was an arguable complacency within Beijing about its policies in Africa. The attitude seemed to be that third party criticism (or even internal African condemnation) was motivated by "Chinabashing" and could be safely disregarded. However, a flurry of extremely negative articles in the international media about Sino-African ties, as well as incidents on the ground in Africa, has stimulated a rethink in Beijing. Furthermore, although Beijing bristles at being singled out for criticism for its policies in Africa, it can be argued that since China is a rising power and arguably a great one, it has to accept the fact that it can no longer hide behind the idea of being a developing state—the fact that once a state becomes a great power (or at least is perceived by many to be) its policies will be placed much more directly under the microscope, especially by other great powers jockeying for influence.

This leads us to the third and final key point when summarizing Sino-African ties. Ultimately, it is up to African leaders to manage their relations with China to benefit their own economies and citizens. It is not China's responsibility to "look out" for African self-interest. This is the job ofAfrica's self-appointed and elected leaders. Obviously, the internal structure of any given African state is all-important and this varies widely across the continent. Given, for example, that South Africa is a rather consolidated democracy by African standards makes a huge difference for how Pretoria deals with China, as opposed to say,Sierra Leone. One walks away with different degrees of confidence about how relations with Beijing will be managed after interviews with government personnel in Mauritius and Nigeria.

However, whilst China has an Africa policy. Africa does not have a China policy. Informants within the African Union assert that there is in fact no official AU view on Sino-African ties, either with regard to its benefits or its possible downsides. Problematically for constructing an African position on the subject, the PRC prefers bilateral dealings and so in this regard the AU cannot actually construct a "Chinapolicy". Furthermore, Beijing has warm relations with Morocco (a non-AU member), whilst the four Taiwanese-recognizing states (Burkina Faso, Gambia, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Swaziland) complicate matters. Consequently, as a collective unit, Africa has little real actual negotiating power with regard to China.

Fundamentally,Beijing's engagement with Africa is grounded in pragmatism and so it is up to each African state to negotiate how and where this relationship is shaped. The abandonment of ideology for economic growth by China actually affords Africa a greater degree of space in its connection with China—but only if this manoeuvrability is used wisely by Africa's elites. In some countries this should not be a problem as capable and sensible governments are more than able to manage the relationship to mutual benefit. In others however there is a worry that predatory elites at the apex of neopatrimonial regimes and not bothered by the impulse to promote development will make a mess of the chance to make the most of a renewed Chinese interest in Africa. Ordinary Africans can possibly play a crucial role in facilitating a true "win-win" situation by holding their leaders to account and critically examining the deals done with Beijing in their name.

In short, Chinese involvement in Africa offers up a welter of opportunities for the continent, but only if utilized sensibly

and if both sides are prudent about what can be gained from the connections. Interrogating how and in what ways Sino-African relations play out in the forthcoming years, directly and indirectly, and which Africans and Chinese might benefit or lose from the relationship(s), as well as in which states and economic sectors, will inform future studies.

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