

China, Africa, and Neo-Colonialism

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BEN WILLIS, JAN 22 2014

Writing in 1965 on the continued underdevelopment of the newly-independent states of Sub-Saharan Africa, Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah suggested that in place of direct imperial rule a new and more insidious mode of control was becoming established. The essence of this 'neo-colonialism', according to Nkrumah, was that

"the state which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside" (1965, unpaginated).

Foreign capital, so he argued, was being used for the exploitation of developing world states, and not their betterment, and was therefore only perpetuating the inequalities and injustices of the colonial era. While Nkrumah's critique was directed at the dominant Western states of the time, modern China's expansion into Africa over the course of the last two decades – its burgeoning economic and political ties – has led to similar accusations of a "fresh neocolonialism disguised as South-South development" (Servant, 2005). Indeed, in 2006 even the largely supportive South African President Thabo Mbeki made the point of welcoming closer Sino-African relations whilst nonetheless cautioning that a partnership based primarily on the exportation of raw materials and importation of manufactured goods risked only replicating a "colonial relationship" that would see Africa "condemned to underdevelopment" (BBC News, 2006).

In seeking to interrogate assertions that China's recent involvement in Africa constitutes a further exercising of neo-colonialist exploitation, this paper does so by firstly outlining the contexts of African crisis and Chinese expansionism within which contemporary analysis must be situated. It then moves on to depict how China's renewed interest in the continent has been manifested, and subsequently provides an analysis of its main effects – using the examples of Angola, Sudan, and Zambia to illustrate particular aspects of contemporary Sino-African relations. It argues that while Chinese involvement in the continent is problematic, it certainly does not merit accusations of neo-colonialism greater than that of other more-established Western actors. It also brings with it some potential for greater socio-economic development, although this depends to a degree on the choices made by African states themselves.

African realities

In order to understand the continent's apparent susceptibility to various forms of economic and political exploitation, we must first look briefly – and in admittedly oversimplified terms – to the nature of African state formation since the colonial era. Contemporary state borders obviously derive from the partition of the continent by the European imperial powers during the late nineteenth century, and are widely acknowledged as being tailored to suit the political and economic needs of the metropole regardless of indigenous demographic, ethnographic, or topographic rationality (Herbst, 1989). Typically, a minimalist imperial administration was thereby constructed within, co-opting only a small local elite and geared towards the extraction of natural resources and other strategic goals of the respective colonial powers (Thompson, 2010: 16-22). On independence, few states therefore possessed the requisite attributes of traditional empirical sovereignty – instead being so-called 'quasi-states' that possessed governments "deficient in the political will, institutional authority, and organized power to protect human rights or provide socio-economic welfare" (Jackson, 1993: 21). Newly-established African elites therefore largely resorted to neo-patrimonial forms of rule – a hybrid of clientelism and patronage behind a bureaucratic-rational façade – in order to accrue state power and provide for limited domestic order and societal cohesion (Englebert, 2000). Militating against broad-based national

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development[1], this was often buttressed by a policy of 'extraversion' in which the economic resources and political support of external actors were further appropriated in order to maintain internal control (Clapham, 2008).

African agency has, of course, interacted with various structural constraints on development: small domestic markets, lack of access to maritime trade, ethnic heterogeneity, and adverse geographical endowments being among the most prominently cited (Sachs et al., 2004; Collier, 2008). Externally, economic diversification was also inhibited by a continued reliance on the export of primary commodities, itself often inducing a 'resource curse', that has only been exacerbated by shifts within the global economy since the 1970s (Arrighi, 2002). Here, falling commodity prices and a resultant debt crisis led to the imposition of neoliberal structural adjustment programmes by Western donor states and international financial institutions (IFIs). Parallel to this, Asian states' capture of the manufacturing sector, and continued barriers to developed world trade, contributed further to African states' development failures (Melamed, 2006). The crisis of the late 1970s therefore presaged a decline in living standards and economic stagnation that was portrayed as an 'African tragedy' by the 1990s (Arrighi, 2002). Alongside this, and with the end of the Cold War removing the Soviet Union as an alternate source of external support, the conditionalities of Western aid came to include an emphasis on political as well as economic liberalization that has threatened African elites' hold on power (Lynch & Crawford, 2011).

Obviously this is a rather broad-brush generalisation of the continent's varying experiences, but it does serve to demonstrate the numerous factors that accurate critical analysis must take into account: the complexities of African states and societies which engender underdevelopment and exploitation, and the pre-existing politico-economic structures within which Chinese actors are necessarily both constrained and able to exercise influence.

Chinese motivations

Without an imperial heritage in Africa akin to the Western colonial model, modern Chinese involvement on the continent dates from the late 1950s and was originally based on both communist ideological motivations of revolutionary Cold War solidarity and the shared experience of Western imperial exploitation (Alden & Alves, 2008). These largely amicable Sino-African relations dwindled in the late 1970s, with Africa viewed as increasingly marginal to post-Mao era Chinese interests of market-led modernization and rapprochement with the West and the Soviet Union (Taylor, 2009: 13-16). However, after Western reaction to the Tiananmen Square massacre and the unravelling of the Cold War, Chinese foreign policy gravitated further toward the developing world once again. Closer alignment with African elites was thus seen as mutually beneficial to the construction of a more hospitable multipolar world order – one with a greater emphasis on state sovereignty and non-interference, the elevation of communitarian socio-economic rights above purportedly 'Western' individual human rights, and the promotion of China as an authentic voice of the developing world within multilateral bodies and international fora (ibid.).[2]

Much greater focus, however, has been on the increased economic ties between China and Africa since the 1990s, and two factors are paramount here. Stemming from its distinct state-led model of economic growth, China has developed a substantially greater demand for natural resources to maintain rapid industrialisation, as well as the need for new export markets for its low-cost manufactured goods (Taylor, 2009: 14-15). These imperatives saw China look once again to Africa, viewing the continent – particularly in light of neoliberal restructuring – as an untapped opportunity for both. In contrast to the West, China therefore explicitly rejected the Afro-pessimism that had portrayed an increasingly 'hopeless continent' in need of paternalistic enlightenment (The Economist, 2000).

However, focusing narrowly on China's economic interests risks obscuring the distinct normative framework that it has chosen to construct in its relations with African states. China seeks to differentiate itself from the prescriptive and hierarchical approach of other external actors through an emphasis on political equality and mutual benefit, derived in part from shared historical experience (Alden & Large, 2011). This is particularly evident in the discourse and practice of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), set up in 2000 as the main framework for collective dialogue[3]. For example, despite the overwhelming differences in power between China and African states, FOCAC's inaugural declaration recognised all as "developing countries with common fundamental interests" that included "consolidating solidarity... and facilitating the establishment of a new international order" (FOCAC, 2000). China's 2006 White Paper on African policy similarly outlined a new "strategic partnership... featuring political

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equality and mutual trust, economic win-win cooperation and cultural exchange". In stark contrast to intrusive Western conditionalities, it pledged to "respect African countries' independent choice of the road of development" (FOCAC, 2006).

In tandem with this, China has also placed great store in symbolic diplomacy. It has courted African leaders by holding regular high-level summits, providing extensive state-organised receptions, and arranging numerous visits to the continent by high-ranking Chinese politicians – it has become tradition, for example, that the Chinese foreign minister's first overseas visit each year is to an African country (Taylor, 2009: 24). These displays of equality and respect, accorded to even the smallest of states, are widely appreciated within Africa and stand in contrast to the more critical and dismissive attitude often adopted by Western countries (*ibid.*). However, while state-level diplomacy and policy statements have clearly sought to distance China from Western practice both past and present, emphasising instead an equal relationship based on mutual development, it is to the substantive realities 'on the ground' in Africa which we now turn.

A closer relationship

While exact figures vary depending on the source, it is clear that after a decade of minimal growth in the 1990s, official trade between China and Africa has witnessed a dramatic increase since 2000 – rising from \$10 billion in 2000 to over \$100 billion in 2008 (Haugen, 2011). African exports to China and Chinese imports to Africa have each risen from less than 2% of the continent's total to more than 10%, putting China on course to become Africa's single largest trading partner within the next few years (African Development Bank, 2010). While this would place it ahead of the USA, mostly an importer of African goods, it is important to note, however, that the relative import and export figures for trade with China are still approximately one-third of the EU-27 totals – although this is steadily declining (*ibid.*).

Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) has shown a similar increase over the last two decades, from an estimated \$100 million in 2000 to over \$1 billion in 2006 (Kaplinsky et al., 2008). Ascertaining the nature and total of Chinese aid provided to Africa is more problematic, given that official figures are not disclosed and aid programmes are difficult to disentangle from China's wider trade and investment policies (Samy, 2010)[4]. That which arguably qualifies as Overseas Development Assistance – the majority of it tied to Chinese products and expertise – has however apparently increased from \$300 million to \$1-3 billion per annum over the last decade, putting China on a par with the largest DAC donors (*ibid.*). The question though remains as to whether this increased trade, investment, and aid is actually beneficial to the continent, or merely repeating past experience.

Disaggregating the overall trade statistics, by country and sector, does begin to suggest the latter. Chinese imports from Africa are concentrated on a handful of states – Angola (34%), South Africa (20%), and Sudan (11%) constituting two-thirds of the continent's overall total in 2007 (African Development Bank, 2010). Crude oil (70%) and other raw materials (15%) have meanwhile accounted for the overwhelming majority of total exports. Almost 100% of Angola and Sudan's exports to China are made up of crude oil, for example, while only South Africa has a relatively diversified export profile. Imports *from* China are somewhat more varied, although concentrated on the regional powerhouses of South Africa and Nigeria, and consist mainly of machinery and transport equipment (38%), manufactured goods (30%), and miscellaneous articles (22%) (*ibid.*). While Chinese FDI had spread across 48 African countries by 2005, with manufacturing the main focus, recent trends have gravitated toward resource development and an emphasis on South Africa, Angola, and other resource-rich countries (Kaplinsky et al., 2008).

As such, the obvious concern is that while Chinese and African elites have sought to "conceptualise emergent South-South relations as an historic opportunity for Africa's states to escape the neo-colonial ties to the West" (Tull, 2006: 471), the realities of Sino-African economic relations – themselves shaped by previous neoliberal reforms in both regions – militate against this. Recent developments appear to suggest they will neither alter Africa's asymmetric integration into the world economy, nor reduce the continent's dependence on primary commodity exports.

Indeed, the resource curse stemming from continued accrual of rents from oil and other raw materials may reinforce the neo-patrimonialism and extraversion of many African rentier state elites, with 'enclave economies' focusing on

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external markets and contributing little to local employment or wider national development (Taylor, 2010: 135-136). Diversification may be further inhibited by so-called 'Dutch disease', as rising currency values make other exports less competitive, whilst the volatility of commodity prices could leave states vulnerable to further boom-and-bust cycles, with price shocks raising debt levels and undermining long-term development plans (Shaxson, 2005).

Despite these potentially malign effects, however, it would be unfair to accuse China of practising a new form of exploitation; rather it is aggravating an existing political economy of resource extraction long practised by the West in collusion with African elites – as still apparent with the likes of France in Gabon and the USA in Equatorial Guinea (Soares de Oliveira, 2008). Over the last decade, Chinese involvement has also contributed to the continent's renewed economic growth, as increased demand has proceeded in tandem with rising commodity prices (Zafar, 2007)[5]. While this has benefited African resource exporters – although it may conversely lead to increased costs for the continent's energy importers – the developmental outcomes of increased revenue, as noted above, are dependent to a large degree on the choices of African elites.

Angola, for example, has used the opportunity of increased Chinese trade and investment, including at least \$7 billion in low-cost loans, to fund vital post-civil war reconstruction (Corkin, 2011). Without having to submit to the structural reforms required by the IMF or World Bank, however, this alternative has provided the Angolan government with the political space to pursue its own model of 'illiberal peacebuilding', de-emphasising civil liberties, rule of law, or economic freedoms, and "with a view to constructing a hegemonic order and an elite stranglehold over the political economy" (Soares de Oliveira, 2011: 288). Scepticism therefore exists over the broader developmental potential for the Angolan people, although significant aid and investment has clearly been successfully used to develop much-needed infrastructure such as railways, schools, hospitals, and housing[6] (Kiala, 2010). Alongside this, the government's continued diversification of its political and economic relationships – which includes Western oil corporations – does at the least suggest that China's relationship with Angola, currently its main source of oil imports, is a 'marriage of convenience' between elites rather than an explicit form of neo-colonial exploitation (Corkin, 2011).

Critics would, however, offer this as an example of how China's non-interventionist stance threatens to undermine the various political and economic reforms that not only Western actors but also those within Africa have increasingly sought to pursue since the end of the Cold War (Clapham, 2008). Again, such criticism should be tempered by the fact that Western states and IFIs continue to provide several billion dollars in aid each year to the likes of Cameroon and Ethiopia despite their often dire records on political rights and civil liberties (Brautigam, 2009: 285). That said, while China ostensibly agrees with the likes of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) – as supported by the African Union, assorted member states, and various civil society groups – it appears to run counter to their statist non-commitments and elite ties (Taylor, 2006). The problem, as Alden and Hughes note, is that "when the non-interference principle is used to justify opacity in dealings with elites, from aid disbursements to business practices, the view becomes more widespread that China is just another power out to exploit the continent" (2009: 569).

The problems and contradictions inherent in China's statist approach – as any form of interaction inevitably becomes some form of interference – have been particularly apparent in its dealings with Sudan over the last two decades. China has established a close relationship with the Sudanese ruling elite that has effectively enabled their continued and often exceptionally violent oppression of large segments of society (Large, 2008). Although China gradually pursued an ambivalent policy of 'constructive engagement' on Darfur, it provided an invaluable source of economic, political and military support to the Sudanese regime during both the civil war in the South and the violence in Darfur, frequently assisting the government in their attempts to resist any form of outside intervention (*ibid.*). In its desire to maintain a reliable source of oil, China has indirectly but actively sought to sustain a form of political control within Sudan – that of the ruling National Islamic Front – which clearly suits its own narrowly-defined interests.

A more distinctly ambivalent influence has been evident in Zambia, where anti-Chinese rhetoric became a central part of the populist platform of opposition candidate Michael Sata during the 2006 presidential election (Larmer & Fraser, 2007). Although unsuccessful in his bid, Sata articulated popular discontent at the negative effects of Chinese trade and investment – the sub-standard working conditions endured by Zambians in Chinese-owned

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mines[7], widespread use of foreign labour, and the presence of Chinese traders and goods in local markets that have displaced local business. However, this discontent does still exist alongside a widespread recognition of the continued need for Chinese investment, and should be balanced against the positive effects of Chinese involvement in Zambia – as for example in its role of revitalizing the country's copper industry, providing a limited number of jobs, and rebuilding key infrastructure (Kopinski & Polus, 2011).

Zambia also provides one example of the double-edged nature of the surge in Chinese imports. On the one hand, these have been extremely popular as they allow African consumers unprecedented access to low-cost manufactured goods – a notable sign of progress for many (Taylor, 2009: 169). On the other hand, Chinese clothing and textile exports have undermined local African production as they crowd out both domestic and third-country markets – the likes of South Africa and its neighbours have witnessed large-scale unemployment as a result (Zafar, 2007). It should be noted, nonetheless, that not only is this trade often facilitated by African businesspersons themselves, it is also a reflection of the long decline of the continent's manufacturing sector that began well before the recent increase in Chinese imports (Taylor, 2009: 82-86). Motivated in part to answer criticism of the effects of its export policies, the Chinese government has itself recently promoted several overseas economic cooperation zones, including Chambishi in Zambia, which are indicative of the development potential offered by Chinese investment. Rather than becoming “ghettos of restricted labour rights, full of foreign investors walled off from contact with domestic firms [and] contributing little to a sustainable transition” (Brautigam, 2009: 194), the possible spillover effects of these zones – in the subcontracting of work, providing of skills, and demonstration of good business practice – may have the potential to catalyse local industry and reinvigorate African states' manufacturing sectors.

Conclusion

Given the diversity of African states, China's involvement on the continent clearly varies according to local context, and has had to evolve over time to address the interests and perceptions of each party. At present, the Sino-African relationship appears – despite its various manifestations – to be broadly popular both in its own right and in comparison to the West: when asked the explicit question of whether China is practising any form of neo-colonialism, African survey respondents overwhelmingly reject the notion (Sautman & Hairong, 2009). China has sought, and with some degree of success, to construct an 'exceptionalist' approach toward African states, as based on mutual benefit and political equality, one that differs from the paternalistic and highly conditional approach so often proffered by Western states and IFIs (Alden & Large, 2011). However, given the political economy of numerous African states and the nature of Chinese engagement, it remains to be seen whether, in the long term, China will achieve little more than to “insert themselves into an existing bilateral relationship between Africa and the West, converting it into a triangular one” (Clapham, 2008: 367).

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[1] The term is used here to refer both to economic and broader human development. On the complex and

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sometimes weak relationship between the two, see UNDP (2010: 46 – 50).

[2] Although of diminishing importance in recent years, courting of African support has also been bound up in China's continued insistence on international non-recognition of Taiwanese statehood (Cheng & Shi, 2009).

[3] Alden (2007) details how broader Sino-African relations are mainly conducted on a bilateral basis while also involving beneath this an increasing number of non-state actors, from multi-national corporations to municipal authorities and small businesses.

[4] As Deborah Brautigam puts it, "China's development aid to Africa has increased rapidly, yet this might be the only fact on which we have widespread agreement when it comes to Chinese aid" (2011: 203).

[5] The extent to which this has actually reduced levels of poverty and inequality is debated (Pinkovskiy & Sala-I-Martin, 2010)

[6] The frequent use of skilled and unskilled Chinese labour in projects such as these enables Chinese firms to outperform competitors in speed and cost, but prevents the use or training of the local workforce and thereby generates resentment. Brautigam (2009: 154-157) suggests, however, that this problem is often exaggerated and is itself a policy choice of African governments who now increasingly recruit local workers.

[7] Rather than an issue of the exploitation of Zambian workers *per se*, Taylor (2009: 166-167) suggests that this is a general reflection of poor Chinese labour standards at home as much as abroad.

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