

Africa's Chinese challenge

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How should Africans manage their relations with China? They could start by taking a longer-term perspective, understanding what the Chinese want and why, and then making a judgement in light of their own clearly laid down priorities and interests.

In the 15th century, China's great explorer Zheng He [1] - whose fleet was then the world's biggest and most technologically advanced - made seven Indian Ocean voyages. They included visits to the east-African coast, as far south as the Mozambique Channel, where the admiral traded with the Africans and took giraffes, animal hides and gold back to China. After his last voyage, the "middle kingdom's" ocean-going fleet was broken up and the country turned inward.

Despite being potentially better placed than most of the other rising mercantile powers of the time, China - under the Ming dynasty [2] - decided against imperial enterprise. It didn't seem to matter in the short term; in 1820, China and India were still the two biggest economies in the world.

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China's internal preoccupation and lack of curiosity about the outside world was to prove costly, however. The country lost its technological superiority, its markets, parts of its territories and eventually its independence to more inquisitive, aggressive and better-armed powers - powers intent on imperial holdings which they could exploit and dominate. After suffering occupation (principally from the west [4], but also from Japan) and the chaos of squabbling warlords, the victory of the communists in 1949 began the process of Chinese modernisation and renaissance.

Behind the cover of a huge internal market, an independent nuclear shield [4] and a seat [5] on the United Nations Security Council, the party elite have made clear their intention to recover China's former pre-eminence. In the highly controlled, top-down society that is China, the price of change often has been high: politically induced famines, cultural revolution, executions, one-child policies. Millions have suffered from human-rights abuses and environmental degradation.

Since 1979, however - following reforms initiated a year earlier by pragmatists led by Deng Xiaoping [6] - an economic renaissance has been underway in China. The country's rapidly expanding economy (9% a year) has lifted [6] as many as 400 million people out of poverty since 1985 and, within the next two or three decades it is expected to be the largest in the world.

For Africans, then, it is important to recognise that China will never make the mistake of isolation again. China's post-1949 foreign policy has to be understood within this "interest" framework. A key plank, especially in relation to Africa, has been about minimising recognition of the "rebellious" province of Taiwan [7] and to reassert a one-China policy [7].

This post-1949 foreign policy can perhaps also be understood and characterised by two phases - an ideologically driven one before 1979 (but with a transition period in 1973-79) and the pragmatic one following the "open-door [8]" policy.

During the ideologically driven phase - and particularly in its rivalry with the Soviet Union over leadership of the world communist system - China armed and funded African liberation [9] movements, frequently supporting groups that had fallen out with Moscow. Aid such as the "barefoot doctors [10]" and the construction of the Tanzam railway [10] was also given. In return, China had two broad objectives: de-recognition of Taiwan in favour of the "one-China" policy, and a general endorsement of Maoist ideas, implicitly acknowledging the existence of a tripolar world.

Certainly, China's engagement with Africa and the world has been more pragmatic since 1979. Markets, raw materials and energy resources power the rise of industrial China. In the absence of political legitimacy, the Beijing regime has been under tremendous pressure to sustain economic growth and spread wealth. An increasingly wealthy population, which trusts the regime to bring more prosperity, is less likely to rock the boat politically.

Underpinning all this has been a fairly consistent guiding philosophy of "non-interference" - or what premier Wen Jiabao called [10] "a new type of strategic partnership" with Africa, founded on "political equality and mutual trust, economic win-win cooperation and cultural exchanges." With some consistency, then, China can operate with Africa. Indeed, President Hu Jintao [11] arrives in the continent on 30 January 2007 for a state visit [12] to eight nations - Cameroon, Sudan, Namibia, South Africa, the Seychelles, Liberia, Zambia and Mozambique. It is his third visit [13] since to took office in 2003, and follows the November 2006 summit in Beijing of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation [13].

While Africans should welcome an engagement with China, potentially the world's biggest economy, that engagement should be qualified. China represents an enormous opportunity, but the challenge for Africa is how it will manage China - how Africa will play to its own strengths, minimise its weaknesses, discover areas of synergy and opportunity, and exploit its vulnerability.

As Africans move forward with China, they should also look at the engagement through a historical prism. While China does not share the west's colonial baggage or a history of slavery in regard to their continent, Africans must recognise that slavery and colonialism were partially a two-way process. Western aggression succeeded because of African weakness and disorganisation - failings that can be repeated.

Africa has much that China needs: energy sources, raw materials, markets, vast and under-utilised arable land to help feed its billions, UN general-assembly votes. China's sourcing of some of these benefits in the last five years has already benefited Africa tremendously. Stephen Marks [14], a writer on development issues, says: "China alone was responsible for 40% of the global increase in the price of oil demand between 2000 and 2004." Chinese (and Indian) demands have driven the prices of commodities and other raw materials upwards after years of stagnation. As a result, writes Marks, "Sub-Saharan Africa's real GDP increased by an average of 4.4% in 2001-04, compared with 2.6% in the previous three years. Africa's economy grew by 5.5% in 2005 and is expected to do even better this year [2006] and next."

In his opening address [14] at the China-Africa meeting in November, Wen anticipated Africa's trade with China rising from its current \$40.6 billion to US\$100 billion by 2010. This cannot be anything but good news, given that the balance of trade is still in Africa's favour, and a more diversified client base is better than the old, overwhelming reliance on the western market.

The strength of weakness

How, then, to maximise Africa's strengths? Africa needs the prices for the goods it sells to continue to increase; with the kinds of goods it has - raw and unprocessed - this usually only happens in a tight market. But that market shouldn't be so tight that customers begin to explore and invest in possible alternatives. Africans should also be wary of selling out their non-renewable raw materials too cheaply - or too quickly, even if the price is right. One day they will need those same materials to drive their own industrialisation. So, African countries need to effectively manage their raw materials much more effectively, attempting to provide the sort of price stability which enables medium- to long-term planning for both producers and consumers.

African states are weak. Their economies are mostly basic, either extractive or agriculturally based, with very little value added before export. There is very little manufacturing base, or power, transport and communications infrastructure. The health sector is lacking, along with managerial and skilled-worker capacity. Leadership is exceptionally poor, and sometimes corrupt. For these reasons, the continent has suffered for years in its trade relations with the wider world. Beyond its commodities, it simply does not produce, at the right price, anything that the world wants.

Minimising these weaknesses means that Africa needs to be using windfall money from high commodity prices to invest in infrastructural works, alongside health and education. Investment is particularly needed in skills, management, entrepreneurial and leadership training. Even if Africa got all it desired by way of investment tomorrow, it would not have the capacity to manage the funds.

Africans have recognised this. The African Union [15] (AU) and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (Nepad [15]) were designed to deal with some of these issues on a national, regional and pan-African basis. The Nepad leadership's peer-review mechanism [16] was intended to address corrupt leadership. However, these structures are not moving along quickly enough, or indeed dealing with the threats on the horizon.

Africans seriously need to consider negotiating on a pan-African basis with China on the main outcomes it seeks. This seems to be in the air. President Hu pledged at the November 2006 summit to build the AU a conference centre - as the news agency Xinhua reported [16] - "to support African countries in their efforts to strengthen themselves through unity and support the process of African integration."

Perhaps the centre could look for Chinese investment in strategic regional infrastructure which will ease travel, power and communication flow, increasing both the internal African market and making export cheaper and easier. Africans might then prioritise the issues of jobs and enterprise, bringing this more to the fore in pan-African, regional and bilateral negotiations and agreements. A study for the UN Economic Commission for Africa [17] estimated in December 2005 [18] that 8 million new jobs must be created south of the Sahara just to absorb those coming onto the job market, and that the creation of low-paid jobs was the single most effective way of dealing with poverty.

In part of its dealings with China, Africa could make jobs a cornerstone of its engagement and the reduction of unemployment an important criterion for judging effectiveness. China's current actions in countries where cheaply manufactured Chinese goods (particularly textiles) are being "dumped [19]", or where China builds major infrastructural projects by importing workers from home, would thus be reviewed critically within this framework. Rather than be dealt with individually by China, African countries need to join together to negotiate the broad goals to be achieved.

For the time being, individual African leaders are still in the driving seat: striking deals and encouraging Chinese investment which, in some cases, enriches them and their cliques. But this does not address the broader agenda of reducing unemployment and poverty.

The humanitarian trade-offs of China's links with [Sudan](#) [20] are relatively familiar; much more off the radar are the environmental by-products of [Chinese investments in Mozambique](#) [21]. The Mozambican environmental activists Anabela Lemos and Daniel Ribeiro have reported that financing has been readily forwarded for the proposed [Mphanda Nkuwa dam](#) [21], which ignores the need for environmental-impact studies in a vulnerable earthquake-prone area, while unsustainable logging is leading to [deforestation](#) [22] in the Zambezia region.

Also on China's role in Africa in **openDemocracy**:

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Ben Schiller, "[The China model](#) [24]" (20 December 2005)

Leni Wild, "[China, Africa and the G8: the missing link](#) [25]" (11 July 2006)

Ian Taylor, "[China's African rise: the democracy dimension](#) [26]" (2 November 2006)

It is a matter of record that China has pulled more than 400 million people out of [extreme poverty](#) [27] since the mid-1980s. This is an invitation to other countries to learn from China's developmental model and adopt its six key principles (as characterised by professor and China insider [Wei-Wei Zhang](#) [28])

- people matter
- constant experimentation
- gradual reform, not big bang
- a developmental state
- selective learning
- correct sequencing and priorities.

Additionally, Zhang writes, Africa can benefit from autonomy of thought and action, letting its own reality determine solutions as much as possible.

Some African leaders heartily welcome the Chinese model because it has shown that the top-down approach can work. But Africa's people must never forget the huge price in lives, freedom and environment costs that China's people have paid for their country's economic turnaround. They should also canvas other models, such as that of India, where equally impressive economic growth rates have been achieved, but within a [democratic framework](#) [28].

China has achieved a green revolution, too. As the country seeks new sources for feeding its huge population, it also offers African governments and people a new option for sharing agricultural expertise, particularly those who might benefit from the kind of small farm holdings that predominate across the continent. And Africa must not repeat the pattern of merely being the sellers of cheap raw materials, which is then value-added elsewhere and sold back as a finished product at exorbitant rates.

Empire and continent

The more established China becomes, the more it will have to play by the same rules as other countries, or be punished. Its state-owned multinational corporations [28] are beginning to behave like their western counterparts. Although they will remain highly politicised, they are also becoming what Chris Alden [29] and Martyn Davies [30] have called Chinese "corporate champions [31]", and like many global corporations they will be open to boycotts and consumer pressure.

Nigerian human-rights activist Ndubisi Obiorah [32] sees this as an opportunity for African civil society, working in partnership with the broader human-rights community, to exert pressure on new global Chinese brands.

The Chinese talk of a new type of strategic partnership suggests that they do not want to make the mistakes of the old imperialists. After all, enduring relationships are made with the people of a country, not with transient governments or regimes. Countries dealing with Africa need to begin to understand that fairness, integrity and a mutually beneficial relationship for all will secure the kind of stability that might, in the long run, make Africa a good trading partner.

Yet like all imperial powers, the Chinese are also driven by self-interest, which - drawing on their history, and pressed by contradictions within - they will pursue aggressively. This too provides opportunities [33] that Africa can take advantage of; doing so means defining objectives, planning and setting up structures, and working with a degree of unity that, hitherto, the continent has not shown.

Where there are downsides to the dynamic Chinese presence, the possibility of Africa minimising them depends on how Africans begin to approach politics. The absence of a powerful and active civil society in Africa to mobilise effectively against human-rights violations at home is a handicap; developing it, and bonding effectively with western human-rights movements when they exert pressure for good business and intergovernmental standards, is an important aim. But it is urgent that ordinary Africans themselves define their interests, control their governments, and make their states accountable.

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- [19] <http://www.un.org/ecosocdev/geninfo/afrec/vol20no1/201-textile-market.html>
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- [28] <http://www.iht.com/articles/2006/11/01/opinion/edafrica.php?page=2>
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