

## THE POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES OF CHINA'S RETURN TO AFRICA

*Denis M. Tull*

While the economic aspects of the PRC's growing involvement in Africa have received burgeoning attention, commerce, trade and related issues are not the only indicators of China's powerful return to the continent.<sup>1</sup> Beijing's political engagement with Africa has surged considerably over the last 10-15 years—although this fact is not captured by the neat measurement that economic indicators offer. For this reason, examining the political nature of the relations between China and Africa and the political impact this may have on the countries of the region is of paramount importance.<sup>2</sup> One can confidently assume that growing Sino-African interactions and the interests underpinning them are not limited to the economic realm—because, perhaps more than elsewhere in the world, economics and politics

- 
- 1 This paper is based on Denis Tull, 'China's Engagement in Africa: Scope, Significance and Consequences', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 44, 3 (2006), pp. 459-79.
  - 2 A political aspect this chapter will not cover is the question of whether the growing interests of China and other emerging countries (Brazil, India, Malaysia etc.) in Africa could at least over the long term invalidate the received wisdom on Africa's international marginalization.

in Africa do not constitute clearly demarcated distinct spheres.<sup>3</sup> Instead they are intensely connected and determine the forms of authority and power (governmentalities) that are prevalent in Africa.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, even if one were to assume that the eagerness of African governments to build closer ties with China was primarily driven by anticipated economic benefits, this would be likely to have political implications too. Key to this are strategies of extraversion. For centuries Africa's political elites have used relationships of economic dependence vis-à-vis the outside world to assert claims on resources and thus consolidate their domestic authority.<sup>5</sup> To start from the assumption that Africa's emerging relations with China will mark a discontinuity in this regard would amount to a serious misreading of patterns that have characterized Africa's relations with the rest of the world for considerable periods of time.

To analyze the political dimension of China's growing interaction with Africa, this chapter addresses three questions: first, how does China's growing political involvement in Africa play out? Secondly, what are the factors that explain China's rising popularity with African governments? And finally, what are the political consequences of China's return for African countries and the region as a whole? The chapter is organized as follows: the first part will briefly sketch the general transformation of China's external relations, which provides the general background to the country's more dynamic foreign policy towards other regions of the world, including Africa. The second section will outline and summarize the evidence of China's increased political involvement with Africa. The interests and objectives underpinning this process will also be examined. In a third step, the recent evolution of Sino-African inter-state relations will be analysed by focusing on the key aspects that appear to make China an increasingly important and attractive political partner for African govern-

3 Robert Bates, *Markets and States in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981). Nicolas Van de Walle, *African Economies and the Politics of Permanent Crisis, 1979-1999* (Cambridge University Press, 2001).

4 Christopher Clapham, 'Governmentality and Economic Policy in Sub-Saharan Africa', *Third World Quarterly*, 17, 4 (1996), pp. 809-24.

5 Jean-François Bayart, 'Africa in the World: A History of Extraversion', *African Affairs*, 99, 395 (2000), pp. 217-67.

ments. The final part of this chapter will look at the political impact on Africa that can be deciphered so far from increasingly intense Sino-African relations.

*The new parameters of China's foreign policy*

China's increasing involvement in Africa is embedded in the general transformation of its foreign policy. It has embarked on a more active foreign policy over the last 15–20 years outside its own Asian neighbourhood. Abandoning its rather isolationist posture, China has developed legitimate claims to play a more active international role by expanding and intensifying its bilateral relations throughout the world, joining regional bodies dealing with security and economic issues and extending its involvement in multilateral organisations. Therefore most analysts agree that Beijing's foreign policy has become more dynamic, flexible and constructive than it was in previous decades.<sup>6</sup> The causes of this remarkable transformation of external relations are manifold: firstly, it is based on China's enormous economic success story over the past two decades. This has ushered in a more confident posture vis-à-vis the outside world, which in turn has undergirded the country's quest to be recognized as an important global player by the rest of the international community. Secondly, and strongly related, practical economic necessities convinced the Chinese leadership to embark on a more active foreign policy. The financial crisis in Asia in the late 1990s highlighted the vulnerability of China's economy to global shocks. Since much of China's economic success was based on its integration into the world economy, this interdependence exposed the country to dangers that were to be mitigated by a more active political posture. In other words, regional and international stability were increasingly perceived as a critical factor of continued domestic economic growth. Beijing conceived a more active foreign policy as the best strategy to defend and assert its national interests abroad. Thirdly, the emergence of the uncontested hegemony of the United States at the end of the Cold War also

6 Evan S. Medeiros, and M. Taylor Fravel, 'China's New Diplomacy', *Foreign Affairs*, 82, 6 (2003), pp. 22–35; Robert Sutter, 'Asia in the Balance: America and China's 'Peaceful Rise'', *Current History*, September 2004, pp. 284–9.

provided a stimulus for a reinigorated foreign policy. Anxious that US supremacy in the international system might negatively affect China's 'peaceful rise' as a global power, Beijing developed the concept of *multipolarity*, which it defined as the forging of more or less flexible alliances to counter US hegemony and to build a fair global order. Putting this concept into practice necessitated the search for international, notably non-Western allies to enhance China's global leverage.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the conceptualization of China as a 'strategic competitor' by the US administration of President George W. Bush seemed to underscore that a *multipolar* world order, in which China was to present an important pole, was in Beijing's best interest.<sup>8</sup>

In summary, strategic considerations instigated a more active and globally-oriented foreign policy and, by extension, the search for allies, primarily in the southern hemisphere, on whom Beijing could rely in the pursuit of its national and international interests. The need to expand and strengthen China's bilateral relations with the states in sub-Saharan Africa was part of this strategy. From this perspective, China's fast increasing engagement in Africa is not so much a reflection of a singular or specific policy towards the continent. Instead, it is part of a general policy thrust that manifests itself similarly in Beijing's relations with other regions of the world (for example Latin America and the Middle East).

### *China's political involvement in Africa: an overview*

Although China's engagement with Africa has surged over the last few years, the country is not a newcomer to the continent.<sup>9</sup> Throughout the post-independence period of postcolonial Africa, China fostered relations with the states of the region. Aside from Beijing's

7 Peter Hays Gries, 'China Eyes the Hegemon', *Orbis*, 49, 3 (2005), pp. 401-12.

8 Elizabeth Economy, 'Changing course on China', *Current History*, 102, 665 (2003), pp. 243-49.

9 Philip Snow, *The Star Raft: China's Encounter with Africa* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989); Roland Marchal, 'Comment être semblable tout en étant différent? Les relations entre la Chine et l'Afrique', in Roland Marchal (ed.), *Afrique-Asie: échanges inégaux et mondialisation subalterne* (forthcoming).

activities during the Cold War, African countries were always important in the race for international recognition with separatist Taiwan. The harsh reaction of Western states to the suppression of the pro-democracy movement in 1989 provided the impetus for renewed engagement with Africa, after a period of relative passivity starting in the late 1970s. The imposition of sanctions by the US and the European Union (EU) compelled the Chinese government to seek closer ties to countries of the developing world, including Africa. This spurred a massive increase in Chinese-African travel diplomacy, which still continues. Between 2003 and 2005 alone, more than 100 high-level meetings between Chinese and African envoys took place.<sup>10</sup> In the first six months of 2006, President Hu Jintao, Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing and Premier Wen Jiabao undertook trips to Africa, where they visited 15 countries, including Nigeria, Ghana, Angola, Kenya and the Republic of Congo. For over a decade now, successive Foreign Ministers have made it a ritual to start the year's travel diplomacy with trips to Africa. Furthermore, and apart from the four states which entertain diplomatic ties with Taiwan (Burkina Faso, The Gambia, São Tomé e Príncipe, Swaziland), China has embassies in every African country. A rather novel part of diplomatic Sino-African interaction is the China-Africa Cooperation Forum.<sup>11</sup> Recently elevated from Ministerial level to a summit of heads of state, its third gathering occurred in November 2006. Finally, one of the most recent indications of China's renewed interest in Africa came in January 2006, when for the first time the Chinese government published an official paper outlining its policy towards Africa.<sup>12</sup>

Although an emerging economic superpower, China portrays itself, at least to African audiences, as a developing nation in order to underline the quasi-natural convergence of interests between China,

10 'Africa, China Growing Closer', *BBC Monitoring Newsletter*, May 2005.

11 Ian Taylor, 'The "All-Weather Friend"? Sino-African Interaction in the Twenty-First Century', in Ian Taylor and Paul Williams (eds), *Africa in International Politics: External Involvement on the Continent* (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 89-91.

12 The paper ('China's Africa Policy') is available on the website of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs <<http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx/t230615.htm>>.

'the biggest developing country and Africa, the continent with the largest number of developing countries' (Jiang Zemin). At the same time as stressing its attachment to 'South-South-solidarity', Beijing acknowledges its superior international standing and uses its permanent seat on the UN Security Council to position itself as a mentor of African countries on the global scene.<sup>13</sup> This includes China's claims to support fairer global trade and Africa's various reform-oriented institutions like the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and the AU, and an enlarged UN Security Council in which Africa should be represented.

While most of these pledges have remained extremely vague, China's increasing involvement in UN peacekeeping missions in Africa has been substantial. In 2004, for instance, some 1,400 Chinese participated in nine UN missions on the continent. The biggest contingent (558 troops) was sent to war-torn Liberia after the incoming Liberian government (2003) ended its diplomatic relations with Taiwan.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, a total of 1,090 Chinese soldiers have so far served in the UN Mission in the DR Congo.<sup>15</sup>

China's political involvement is matched or even overshadowed by its rising economic interests on the African continent. However, as will be shown below, there is plenty to indicate that China's political and economic interests and strategies in Africa go hand in hand. Fast expanding economic ties, dense travel diplomacy and a general discourse by both Chinese and African officials on the friendly ties between China and the countries of the region suggest indeed that Chinese influence in Africa is rising tremendously.

Growing engagement with Africa holds the promise of significant benefits for the Chinese government. With the exception of Nigeria and South Africa, most African countries are not heavyweights on the international political scene. However, the states of the region do amount to a quarter of the member states of the UN and thus are

13 'G8: Chinese Leader Urges More International Help for Africa', *Xinhua*, 16 July 2006.

14 However, China also provided 125 police officers for the UN mission in Haiti which recognizes Taiwan.

15 'China Sends Fifth Batch of Peacekeeping Troops to DR Congo', *BBC Monitoring*, 19 December 2005.

a source of considerable diplomatic support in international politics, particularly in international organizations with one country-one vote arrangements. For example, in the UN Commission on Human Rights, African countries have repeatedly—no less than 11 times, according to a Chinese diplomat—frustrated Western attempts to push through a formal condemnation of China's human rights policies.<sup>16</sup> Of late, intense courting led to China's recognition as a market economy by a good number of African states, a crucial status in the wake of China's WTO accession, to shield it from accusations of dumping practices.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, African countries are said to have provided support for China's successful bid to host highly prestigious international events: the 2008 Olympic Games and the 2010 World Exposition.<sup>18</sup> African backing is also crucial in the Chinese pursuit of the concept of a multipolar world. As China has intensified its participation in international multilateral bodies, diplomatic assistance by African states has turned into a valuable asset of Chinese foreign policy. Finally, diplomatic support from African states pertains to the recognition of the principle of 'one China'. This remains an important issue for the Beijing leadership, even though it has lately lost some of its urgency as Beijing was considerably more successful than Taiwan in the quest for African recognition as the sole legitimate representative of China. Lesotho (1993), Liberia (2003), Senegal (2005) and most importantly South Africa (1998) all shifted recognition from Taiwan to the PRC in recent years. In August 2006, Taiwan suffered another blow when oil-producing Chad defected to Beijing, possibly to alleviate the pressure from Chadian rebels that President Deby had allegedly suspected to be backed by China via its allies in Sudan.<sup>19</sup> China's alleged support for the insurgents may

16 'L'Afrique Pro-Chinoise aux Nations Unies', *La Lettre du Continent*, 30 March 2006.

17 Thomas Rumbaugh and Nicolas Blancher, 'China: International Trade and WTO Accession', IMF Working Paper (04/36) (Washington, DC: IMF, 2004), p. 12.

18 'Premier Wen's Visit to Boost China-Africa Partnership: Official', *Xinhua*, 16 June 2006.

19 Keith Bradsher, 'Chad's switch to Beijing's side draws angry response in Taiwan', *Washington Post*, 8 August 2006.

not only have been linked to the Taiwan issue, but also had access to Chadian oil in mind.

*What's in it for Africa?*

But what about the political gains for African countries from increased interaction with China? The extent to which China appears to be welcomed with open arms by most African leaders clearly suggests that Sino-African relations are not a one-way street and that Beijing has benefits to offer its African partners, too. Indeed, mutual benefit is a recurrent subject of Chinese official jargon on Sino-African relations. As Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao restated: 'In cooperating with Africa, China is not looking for selfish gains. We are committed to two principles: equality, benefits both ways, and the non-interference in internal African affairs.'<sup>20</sup> According to Beijing, equality in Sino-African relations inevitably results in a 'win-win situation' for both sides. This stand is embedded in a discourse which posits China not only as an appealing alternative to the West, but also as a better choice for Africa. It is supplemented by Chinese references to the shared history of imperialism and colonialism that both China and Africa have suffered at the hands of Western states. Given the increasingly ambivalent relations between African countries and their former colonial powers, China makes a point of stressing its distinctiveness from Western countries and their policies towards Africa. Indeed, there is at least one major difference in the ways in which Beijing and Western governments approach their African counterparts.

This of course pertains to China's non-interference in internal African affairs, a policy based on unconditional respect for national sovereignty which makes any attempt to interfere into the domestic affairs of a state illegitimate. Needless to say, China's view on this issue does not specifically pertain to Africa. Rather, the notion of sovereignty and its corollary, non-interference, is a cornerstone of China's conception of statecraft and international relations as a whole. What makes the Chinese stance on sovereignty so particular

---

<sup>20</sup> 'China and Africa - for better or for worse?', *IRIN*, 27 June 2006.



in regard to Africa is the fact that perhaps nowhere else in the world has state sovereignty been more eroded than on that continent. This was largely the result of Western-prescribed policies over the past two decades, first in the guise of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) in the 1980s, then in the 1990s with demands for democratization. By tying development assistance to economic and political reform, well-intentioned Western donors sought to impose or support structural change in Africa's aid-dependent countries. Although not consistently carried out, the imposition of economic and political conditionalities progressively undermined the sovereignty of African states and put their governments under considerable stress. Unsurprisingly these demands for reform were not well received by African state elites who developed numerous strategies to evade them.<sup>21</sup>

China, in contrast, sticks to its state-centred orthodoxy. This is reflected in the fact that, apart from the Taiwan issue, no political conditions like respect for human rights are attached to the development assistance it provides to African countries. According to Premier Wen Jiabao, the Chinese government believes 'that African countries have the right and capability to solve their own problems'.<sup>22</sup> That this posture on the issue of sovereignty is gratefully acknowledged by African governments is hardly surprising. As a member of Djibouti's ruling party approvingly noted, China shows 'esteem of our sovereignty and freedom. That's why we African people always keep a friendly feeling toward China.'<sup>23</sup>

Comparing the non-intrusive attitudes of China with Western ones, other African officials are more candid. No doubt airing a common view among African governments, a spokesman of the Kenyan government observed: 'You never hear the Chinese saying that they will not finish a project because the government has not done enough to tackle corruption. If they are going to build a road, then it will be

21 Nicolas Van de Walle, *African Economies*; Nicolas Van de Walle, *Overcoming Stagnation in Aid-Dependent Countries* (Washington, DC: Center for Global Development, 2005).

22 'Premier Wen hails Sino-African ties of cooperation', *Xinhua*, 18 June 2006.

23 'African officials affirm China's aid for development in Africa', *Xinhua*, 15 June 2006.

built.<sup>24</sup> Given the pervasiveness of corruption and autocratic structures in vast parts of Africa, China's lack of an ideological project in Africa and its pragmatic 'value-free' approach surely strikes a chord on much of the continent and explains to a large extent its rising popularity within African officialdom.<sup>25</sup>

Still, China's appeal certainly extends beyond Africa's hardened autocrats. The intrusive reform policies prescribed by Western donors are all too often at odds with the 'politics of the belly' in the vast majority of African countries where patronage and clientelist networks form the backbone of regime survival.<sup>26</sup> In this regard China's attractiveness to African governments may also be attributed to the fact that Chinese development assistance benefits the governments of receiving countries more directly than the policies of Western donors, who are preoccupied with the reduction of poverty. By the same token, Western donors for a long time perceived the African state as an obstacle to socio-economic development, often circumventing it and its elites by channelling aid through Non-Governmental Organizations. It was only at the end of 1980s that donors and the International Financial Institutions progressively abandoned their anti-statist policies, but Western development agencies still have an uneasy attitude towards the African state. This sharply contrasts with the state-centred concepts of the Chinese who, unlike Western countries, agree to finance grandiose and prestigious buildings (presidential palaces, football stadiums) that African leaders highly appreciate for their very own political reasons.

Similarly, China finances and builds infrastructure in many African countries, undertakings that—until recently—were out of fash-

24 See Tull, 'China's Engagement in Africa', op. cit.

25 By one measure, only 12 of the countries in Africa south of the Sahara are democratic whereas some 60 per cent of those states are hybrids or semi-democracies in which authoritarian practices and violations of human and political rights are still common. See Monty G. Marshall and Ted Robert Gurr, *Peace and Conflict 2005: A Global Survey of Armed Conflicts, Self-Determination Movements, and Democracy* (College Park: Centre for International Development and Conflict-Management, University of Maryland, 2005: 43f.).

26 Jean-François Bayart, *The State in Africa. The Politics of the Belly* (London: Longman, 1993).

ion among the Western donor community. Since most infrastructure projects are public sector works, China conceives its investments as goodwill projects to woo the sympathies of African state leaders. This enables China to gain political influence, which often opens the doors for commercially or strategically more attractive businesses in other sectors, for example to win tenders for oil and mining concessions.<sup>27</sup> Somewhat exemplary in that regard is the decision by Chinese oil companies to invest in construction (e.g. Angola) or refurbishing of more or less defunct oil refineries (e.g. Nigeria)—steps from which Western investors have shied away but to which the governments of both those countries have attached great importance.<sup>28</sup> These are examples of the much touted mutual benefits in Sino-African relations, insofar as these investments enable China to lock up barrels while African governments can pursue their legitimate economic interests of building or reconstructing their moribund downstream sectors. In contrast to Western oil majors, which bid only for the juiciest stakes, the Chinese government and its companies thus provide economic know-how and relief that positively influence the attitudes of African elites towards China.

Returning to the politics of conditionality pursued by Western donors, it has not been lost on the Chinese government that a number of African governments have been unable to manage the political economy of reform imposed by Western donors over the past two decades, sometimes with devastating consequences such as outbreaks of violent conflict. In addition to the wholesale failure of economic reforms (SAPs), these setbacks, in Beijing's view, have merely confirmed its analysis that the poor record of Western-driven reform efforts in Africa will inadvertently facilitate Chinese advances

---

27 Karby Leggett, 'China flexes economic muscle throughout burgeoning Africa', *The Wall Street Journal*, 29 March 2005.

28 In Nigeria, CNPC was awarded rights of first refusal on a number of oil licenses in return for its commitment to acquire stakes in the Kaduna refinery. The same approach was taken by a Sinopec affiliate in Angola, where the investments in the building of a refinery is expected to provide the company with licenses for new oil blocks. For details, see the chapter by Ricardo Soares de Oliveira in this book.

on the continent. As *Renmin Ribao*, the official newspaper of the Communist Party, noted:

...owing to the general failure in the West's political and economic behaviour in Africa, African nations, which were only suspicious at first, are now negating Western-style democracy and have reinitiated "Afro-Asianism" and proposed "going towards the Orient". This has opened up new opportunities for further enriching the content and elevating the quality of China-Africa cooperation.<sup>29</sup>

The divergences between China's policy of non-interference and the intrusive approaches of Western states have nowhere been more evident than in African countries that have been denounced as so-called pariah states by the Western community.<sup>30</sup> Beijing's close ties to the regimes in Sudan and Zimbabwe have received particular attention. Increasingly isolated by Western states because of human rights abuses, both Khartoum and Harare have turned to China as an alternative source of aid, trade, investment and diplomatic backing. For example, China, as a member of the UN Security Council, repeatedly blocked Western-sponsored attempts to have sanctions imposed on the government of Sudan in relation to the conflict in Darfur.<sup>31</sup> It either abstained from casting its vote or threatened to make use of its veto right.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, China has opposed Security Council action against the government of Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe. In 2005, it opposed discussion at the UN Security Council of a UN report into Zimbabwe's demolition campaign that left some 700,000 persons homeless.<sup>33</sup> More benign governments seek Beijing's diplomatic support too. For example, Senegal's recent shifting

29 Tull, 'China's Engagement in Africa', p. 467.

30 Chris Alden, 'China in Africa', *Survival*, 47, 3 (2005), p. 155.

31 *Reuters*, 'China threatens to veto Darfur UN draft—diplomats', 15 September 2004; Jasper Becker, 'China fights UN sanctions on Sudan to safeguard oil', *The Independent*, 15 October 2004.

32 Needless to say, China does not bear the sole responsibility for the international failure in Darfur. One has also to take into account the inconsistent positions of the US government and the ambiguous role of France. See Clough (2005).

33 'China, Tanzania Thwart Efforts to Put Zimbabwe Report on UN Agenda', *BBC Monitoring*, 26 July 2005.

of its recognition away from Taiwan to the PRC may well have been driven by the hope that China may support Senegal's bid to take one of the (to be created) African seats in an enlarged UN Security Council.

In the final analysis, and notwithstanding the peculiar cases of Sudan and Zimbabwe, the embracing of China by many African governments is an entirely rational and well-considered attitude. Beijing's rising political and economic interests provide Africa's countries with a rare opportunity to lessen their dependency on Western states and donor organizations by allowing them to diversify their relations with the outside world. As an alternative or additional source of diplomatic support, aid, investment and trade revenues, China is no doubt an attractive partner for African governments that perceive Western policies towards Africa as unduly intrusive and paternalistic. At the same time, China's popularity in Africa is also the flipside of Western neglect since the end of the Cold War, which resulted in a loss of Western strategic interests on the continent. Angola's President Eduardo dos Santos aired this opinion when he reportedly 'appreciated the fact that China assigns importance to Africa'—no doubt a reference to the relative withdrawal of the West from Africa.<sup>34</sup> By the same token, it can be argued that recent Western discourse on Africa, often focusing on the continent as a threat to international (i.e. Western) security, has done little to improve relations between African and Western governments.

### *The political consequences of China's return to Africa*

To assess the political impact of China's growing involvement on the continent, it may be useful to distinguish three issues that are particularly relevant to specific groups of African countries today. First, the PRC's manifest return to Africa is occurring at a time when many countries of the region continue to undergo difficult political transitions from authoritarian to democratic political systems (*democratising/transition countries*). The assumption that China will make a constructive contribution to support transitions to democracy in Af-

---

34 'Chinese PM, Angolan President Discuss Ties, Stability in the Great Lakes Region', *BBC Monitoring*, 21 June 2006.

rica's fragile states appears far-fetched. In contrast to all other major donors in the region, except Libya, the promotion of democracy is obviously not an objective of China's foreign policy. Such a policy appears inconceivable to the extent that it does not square with Beijing's relativistic conception of individual human and political rights. In addition, the self-interest of the political elite of the Chinese one-party state contravenes the notion of supporting democracy abroad. Doing so would logically imply that China's Communist leadership would dent its domestic political legitimacy. This is one of the reasons why Beijing clings to the dogma of non-interference. Its defence of sovereignty, often to the benefit of unsavoury regimes, is likely to undermine existing efforts at political liberalization at large. For revenue from trade (and taxes), development assistance and other means of support (i.e. diplomatic backing) is likely not only to reduce the leverage of Western donors; it also widens the margins of manoeuvre of Africa's autocrats and help them to rein in domestic demands for democracy and the respect for human rights. In other words, Africa's autocratic or semi-democratic leaders will benefit from close relations with China while ordinary citizens are likely to be negatively affected by this relationship.

A second source of concern is China's impact on *mineral-rich countries*, which often happen to be conflict or 'post-conflict' states. The fact that Chinese companies are bringing much-needed investment to challenging countries like the DR Congo or Sierra Leone is positive.<sup>35</sup> However, these business activities can be problematic. Increased Chinese interests in African resources come at a time when Western NGOs, recently supported by governments, have initiated an increasingly prominent debate on the relationship between mineral wealth on the one hand and its detrimental effects on developing countries on the other. It revolves around possible options and regulatory frameworks to transform mineral wealth from a 'curse' into a vector of socio-economic development. In light of its rapidly growing reliance on imports, it seems unlikely that China will join these efforts, let alone subordinate its economic interests to international

35 Andrew Child and David White, 'Chinese investors Targeting Virgin Markets on the Cheap', *Financial Times*, 15 March 2005.

attempts to solve the structural problems of richly endowed countries, as these are likely to hold back its access to resources. What is more, Beijing has no economic incentive to fall in line with Western views on fiscal transparency and accountability. By rejecting regulation efforts on the grounds of non-interference, China can position itself as a free-rider and is likely to win the political favour of and, by extension, economic benefits from sovereignty-conscious governments. In that regard, the case of Darfur (Sudan) is illuminating in so far as it underscores the extent to which China is prepared to defend its economic interests. That the Chinese government donated \$400,000 in support of the AU's mediation efforts to resolve the Darfur crisis in early 2005, a move that it hailed as a contribution to peace-building in Africa, appears disconcertingly cynical in that regard. If Sudan provides any clue for the future, it seems inconceivable that Beijing, not bothered by the humanitarian tragedy in Darfur, will compromise its interests for the sake of 'minor' (domestic) issues such as transparency.

A somewhat related question concerns the geopolitical implications that are likely to emerge if China continues its aggressive acquisition of energy in Africa and if—as many observers argue—the US also increases its energy demands in Africa over the next decade or so. Will this result in fierce competition for oil and gas between the two countries, or can political conflicts be avoided by mutual cooperation? At present the US administration claims to be fairly relaxed, while some voices in Congress warn of conflicts of interest in Africa.<sup>36</sup> Others even foresee a new scramble for Africa's resources, but one in which Africans, in the words of Kenya's Foreign Minister, 'are willing negotiators'.<sup>37</sup>

Finally, regarding *peace and security*, it is hard to come to the conclusion that China has played a generally constructive role in Africa. Firstly, China has become a major provider of arms and weapons to Africa. Between 2000 and 2003, for example, China was the second

36 US Department of Energy, *Energy Policy Act 2005*. Section 1837: National Security Review of International Energy Requirements (Washington, DC: February 2006).

37 Lionel Barber and Andrew England, 'China's scramble finds welcome in Kenya', *Financial Times*, 9 August 2006.

most important arms supplier of African states.<sup>38</sup> It is also disconcerting that China provided weapons to both sides of the Ethiopian-Eritrean war. Secondly, China is supporting African militaries across the continent, often with little concern for the impact this may have on peace, security and human rights.<sup>39</sup> Thirdly, a number of reports suggest that China has not respected international arms embargos. Of course, as long as these are imposed by Western bodies, it has no legal obligation to respect them. But there are also indications that China has broken arms sanctions which were imposed by the UN Security Council.<sup>40</sup>

### *Conclusion*

In summary, the evidence so far seems to indicate that overall China's return to Africa presents a negative political development that almost certainly does *not* contribute to the promotion of peace and democracy on the continent.<sup>41</sup> Even so, it is one thing to highlight some of China's egregious policies in Africa and quite another to echo the indiscriminate China-bashing that much of the media and other observers in the West are indulging in. Although Western policies towards Africa have come to reflect a more normative and reform-oriented edge in recent years and have broadly sought to promote appropriate objectives (democracy, human rights and conflict prevention), Western decision-makers have little reason to claim the moral high-ground vis-à-vis China. A fair number of flaws and criticisms that need to be levelled against Beijing's politics in Africa equally apply, though to a lesser extent, to Western policies towards Africa.

38 Richard F Grimmett, 'Conventional Arms Transfers to Developing Nations, 1996–2003' (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2004), p. 27.

39 Amnesty International, *People's Republic of China: Sustaining Conflict and Human Rights Abuses. The Flow of Arms Accelerates* (London: 2006).

40 Taylor, 'The "All-Weather Friend"?' p. 96. Amnesty International, *People's Republic of China: Sustaining Conflict and Human Rights Abuses. The Flow of Arms Accelerates* (London: 2006).

41 Taylor, 'The "All-Weather Friend"?' p. 99.



The broadly normative shift of Western policies towards Africa may be one of the reasons why the subject of Chinese-African relations has drawn such an extraordinary and often heated response since 2006 in many quarters. One is inclined to think that the attention the subject has received in the West has much to do with the attempts of Westerners to demarcate themselves from China and its 'value-free' politics towards a region that most Westerners falsely continue to see as a passive and helpless object of international politics. As regards the popular China-bashing, however, one cannot help thinking that Beijing's Africa policies are extremely *en vogue* if only because they provide Westerners with some respite from reflecting on their own deficient policies towards Africa. However, it needs to be clearly admitted that the study of China-African relations is in its infancy, and that accordingly the analysis presented in this chapter is merely a preliminary and tentative assessment. To learn about China's long-term and broad political impact on Africa, future research needs to pay much more attention to cases other than the few outrageous ones (notably Sudan) which are commonly cited as evidence of China's negative impact on Africa. This necessitates a closer look at Africa's Benins, Ethiopias and Rwandas, i.e. countries where China is present but where the political consequences of its involvement will be less evident and less obviously linked to the much touted hunger for resources and its attendant ruthless policies.

Ultimately, China's future role in Africa will be determined by African actors themselves, of whom a growing number seem to recognize that there are also downsides to China's growing involvement in Africa.<sup>42</sup> African actors, of course, are not a homogeneous lot. They include autocratic governments that have every interest to forge closer ties with China, if only to escape Western pressures for political and economic liberalization. Over the last decades, they have demonstrated deft skills in playing outside powers off against each other. But African actors also include the region's reform-minded organizations, namely the AU, NEPAD, and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Recently these bod-

---

42 At present, however, it seems that these concerns are mainly focused on negative consequences in the economic realm.

#### CHINA RETURNS TO AFRICA

ies have espoused procedures and principles which contravene the cornerstone of Chinese statecraft—state sovereignty. The progressive path taken by AU and ECOWAS in regard to the prevention and resolution of violent conflicts is particularly at loggerheads with Beijing's political concepts, for both organizations claim far-reaching prerogatives, including military intervention, to prevent or terminate large-scale human rights abuses and crimes against humanity. One may also recall that NEPAD's so-called African Peer Review Mechanism is, at least in theory, an instrument of political interference in the domestic affairs of states, which aims at promoting development and democracy in Africa. In the final analysis, it is not obvious how these competing conceptions can be squared—provided that Africa's regional bodies are determined to put their pledges for democracy and human rights into practice.