

FRENCH PERSPECTIVES ON THE NEW SINO-AFRICAN RELATIONS

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Bernard Kouchner was not elected Director-General of the World Health Organization. He didn't even make it to the shortlist [...] Professor Michel Kazatchkine was not elected President of the The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Malaria and Tuberculosis, despite a majority vote of the Board. His candidacy was blocked by a Chinese veto. Both men have something in common: they are French citizens and benefited from the political and logistical support of the French State...¹

Following the publication of China's Africa policy statement in January 2006, debate on the topic in the French press intensified to such an extent as to warrant sustained attention and numerous official reports from French ministries. As this chapter will show, however, the representation of China that emerges from this coverage is perhaps dictated less by Beijing's real policies in Africa than by a more complex analytical framework defined by often contradictory considerations. These include ongoing competition with the United States, the sluggishness of the French economy compared with Chinese dynamism, convergence with Beijing on issues such as the need for a multi-polar international system, the predatory character of Chinese

1 'Politique et mondialisation', *Le Nouvel Economiste*, 16 November 2006.

development, and the corruption that the Chinese presence feeds in Africa (Africa being, for the French press, corruptible by definition). The official discourse, by contrast, is more conventional and perhaps more realistic as well. However, it shares one common trait with that of the French media: its appreciation that China's policy in Africa does not exist *per se* but rather is a facet of China's global evolution. As a diplomat from the Ministry of Cooperation noted, 'Our vision of China is that of a global partner: there is no intention of bringing up Africa without putting it in a wider framework.'

If the goal of this chapter is to gauge French perceptions of China's emergence as a strategic actor in Africa, it must be noted from the start that this representation is not necessarily very coherent. Alternatively, one finds a veritable patchwork of realist analyses, pragmatic plans of action, and fears that are in turns publicly voiced, discreetly underplayed, or silenced. These are all elements that, in truth, originate in a series of different representations of France's role in the world in general and Africa in particular, and the instruments at its disposal at a time when the process of European integration is stumbling and American unilateralism strongly emphasizes the limits of French power in the international sphere.

This chapter starts by outlining the state of French political debates on Africa and on France's role in the world. This is followed by a brief discussion of the French vision of China and its actions in Africa and an attempt to bring out and explain the major points of contention and consensus in French perceptions of this process. The conclusion underlines several trends. To start with, France is currently having great difficulties in balancing its bilateral economic relations with China, which means that competition between the two states in Africa is a lesser concern. Secondly, an examination of the French and Chinese economic presence in Africa shows that the two countries are not clashing as competitors: France is far more present in the services sector and in market niches that have to date been of minor interest to China. It goes without saying that such a statement needs to be qualified on a sector-specific basis and has only relative validity for the time being. It is clear that in the energy sector, for instance, competition is real, though one should not discount the fact that technical complexity (for example, at the level of ultra-deep water oil

exploitation) often promotes partnerships. Finally, if a compromise is achievable in the short-term it is also possible to outline scenarios of divergence between French and Chinese interests in Africa.

This chapter emphasizes three aspects that stir up or can quickly feed mutual disagreement. First, the military dimension brings up potential discord as soon as conflicting interests emerge (particularly, but not only, in the case of Chad/Sudan); the risks of proliferation, especially in the nuclear sector, are also an important source of French and international disquiet. A second problem pertains to the acceptance of common rules of the game in Africa. China voices a certain number of critiques on international aid that can find willing ears in Paris, but its absence of transparency, the way it allocates official development assistance, and its very methods arouse muted opposition, due to the extent to which they diverge from the baselines that are the product of long-standing dialogues at the heart of institutions such as the OECD. The third problem is China's willingness to play its cards on the African continent without having a medium-term vision of their effects.

France's interests in Africa

Too many observers imagine that France has a timeless interest in the African continent. Others confine their attention to a certain set of statistics related to the French presence in Africa and its role in France's external trade. In fact, France's interest in Africa cannot be limited to economic rationality or the fact of a common history alone.

It is helpful, for instance, to go back to the riots of November 2005, which essentially took place in the Parisian suburbs and not in Marseilles. On this occasion, at least two competing frameworks of analysis emerged, each one embodying different issues for the French state and society. The first chose to emphasize the colonial dimension of the events by underlining that this revolt was carried out by the subjects of French colonialism (or rather their grandchildren).² The other, on the contrary, was centred on citizenship and

2 Gérardine Faes and Stephen Smith, *Noir et français* (Paris: Editions Panama, 2006). Romain Bertrand, *Mémoires d'empire. La controverse autour du 'fait*

reintroduced central questions about the social management of the French economic and welfare crisis. The purpose here is not to go back to these events, or to dispute the manner in which they were interpreted, but rather to remember how the debate echoed another discussion then raging among political elites about the decline of France or its international reassertiveness, despite the 'no' vote in the referendum on the European Constitution.³

Africa, at any rate, is no longer a determinant factor in the socialization of French politicians. In fact, their interest in the continent has fundamentally decreased since 1981 for numerous reasons connected with the evolution of international politics but also the death of those generations which, for reasons of personal history, had a closer rapport with the continent; the resounding failures of a French policy that always ended up affecting French elites (diamonds from Bokassa in the case of Giscard D'Estaing, the Rwandan Genocide, the indicting of Charles Pasqua, etc.); and the increasing mutual incomprehension between French political actors and their counterparts in Africa.⁴ These cursive remarks are not meant as sustained analysis but are enough to show the singularity of the former French President, Jacques Chirac, who stated the intention of reaffirming the French role in Africa as one of his key goals when he emerged from a five-year 'cohabitation' with Lionel Jospin's Socialist government in May 2002. While he kept his promise, this policy developed more as a function of international politics than of the specific reality on the continent.

When President Chirac's foreign minister, Dominique de Villepin, made his speech breaking with Washington over Iraq at the United Nations in February 2003, African delegates were the first to congratulate him. This was an apt illustration of one of the

colonial" (Paris: Editions du Croquant, 2006). Hugues Lagrange and Marco Oberti (eds), *Émeutes urbaines et protestations/Une singularité française* (Paris: Presses de Sciences-Po, 2006). See also www.riotsfrance.ssrc.org.

- 3 To size up the international perplexity vis-à-vis French political developments, see 'The art of impossible; a survey of France', *The Economist*, 28 October 2006.
- 4 Richard Banégas, 'Côte d'Ivoire: Patriotism, Ethnonationalism and Other African Modes of Self-writing', *African Affairs*, 105, (2006), pp. 535-52.

last international levers at the disposal of France, its capacity to get support for some its proposals from a great majority of the 53 African votes. Some might add to this the French military apparatus and an interventionist zeal that has greatly increased since 2002: more than 4,500 men in Côte d'Ivoire, almost 1,300 in Chad, several hundred in the Central African Republic as part of the military framework redefined at the time of cohabitation (1997-2002), and a pivotal role in European military operations in Africa. However, these French interventions are not considered a success. More often than not, they appear in the eyes of the nation's politicians as the cost of asserting power without the capacity to define a new doctrine: in France as much as in Africa, a sizeable segment of the elites waited impatiently for the May 2007 elections to close this chapter.

This half-hearted mutation of French political interest in Africa can be partly explained by the evolution of its economic ties with the continent.⁵ In 1950, the colonial empire represented 60 per cent of French external trade, with French interests benefiting from a near-monopoly position. This situation evolved very quickly in the post-colonial period on account of the exhaustion of the rentier capitalism that had essentially benefited import-export firms, agricultural and extractive industries (cocoa, cotton, minerals, petroleum) and the banking sector. While France remains an important economic partner for Africa at the beginning of the 21st century, the latter tends to play a shrinking role for France. France possesses a 20 per cent share of some markets in Africa but the relevance of the Franc Zone for French external trade has fallen to 1 per cent of the total, while France continues to absorb 25 per cent of exports from that region. The overall Africa share of French exports has fallen from 8.7 per cent in 1970 to 5 per cent in 2003, with Africa providing France with 4 per cent of its imports.

It would be wrong, however, to overstate this decline of Africa in France's external economic relations. Africa contributes a fourth of France's trade surplus (half of that from the Franc Zone alone). It is

5 This paragraph is based on Philippe Hugon, 'Permanences et ruptures de la politique économique de la France vis-à-vis de l'Afrique sub-saharienne', *Modern and Contemporary France*, 13, 1 (2005), particularly the economic data.

true that the maintenance of economic ties with the continent is still very much connected with rentier systems and political complicities, but even here one must be attentive to changes in the relationship. Oil is at the top of the list, and even more so in Nigeria than in the Francophone countries. The major French banks (Banque Nationale de Paris, Société Générale and Crédit Lyonnais) represent 70 per cent of banking sector activity in the Franc Zone. Companies such as Bouygues, Dumez, Electricité de France, Lyonnaise, Vivendi are very present in infrastructure, water supply and electricity works. This brief description illustrates why French diplomats are relatively serene when faced with current Chinese activism. A significant part of French business niches is in fact not threatened by Chinese ambitions at the present time: while the latter are enacted within the framework of a global discourse with continental ambitions for Africa, they essentially focus on no more than a dozen African states.

There is a final dimension where one can identify an important degree of convergence, even if this is not devoid of ambivalence, between France, China and African countries. For reasons relating to the downgrading of its international great power status, France welcomes reforms of the international system that put some meat into the semantics of the 'multipolar world' which the main French political parties routinely demand. One can note important affinities in this context. For instance, during the North Korean crisis in the summer of 2006 France and China were, if not in agreement, then pursuing a line of argument that was markedly different from that of Washington and its allies. Traditionally, French attention to the Third World, the rejection of brutal unilateralism and the will to bring certain demands of the developing world to the heart of Western fora form the grounds for possible additional convergence, although it is important not to overstate their depth or underplay the profound differences that remain beneath such apparent meetings of views. As the former French minister of Foreign Affairs Hubert Védrine put it, there is more agreement on what should not be than on what should exist.⁶

6 Hubert Védrine, 'L'émergence de la Chine vue de France', *Politique Etrangère*, Autumn 2006, available at <http://www.hubertvedrine.net/index>.

France and China

On 27 January 1964, France was the 'first big Western country' to recognize the People's Republic of China.⁷ While bilateral relations saw slow but incremental progress, especially during the 1980s, the repression of the student movement in Tiananmen Square in 1989 opened a deep crisis between the two countries: it took five years for them to get back on track.⁸ One of the legacies of this period is a recurrent debate on an end to the embargo on the sale of weaponry to China. France plays an important role in this (as Germany does also), because of the implications for its armaments industry of a possible resumption of sales. Such a decision is ostensibly to be taken by the European Union but has been highly politicized by the US perception that its allies do not implement the embargo with the same determination (especially at the beginning of George Bush's presidency, when China was perceived as a potential rival).⁹

In May 1997, China and France signed a declaration on the need for a global partnership regarding the most pressing international issues. This was strengthened by a new declaration, on the fortieth anniversary of bilateral relations, about a global strategic partnership that essentially picks up the same themes with the notable addition of human rights and the rule of law.

Paradoxically, the need for restatement underlines the difficulty of giving real meaning and substance to this strategic partnership: several French diplomats have privately argued that France is not the best partner for such dialogues and that the only credible venue should be the European Union. Yet the French want to safeguard

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7 This claim made by the official website of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs (http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/pays-zones-geo_833/chine_567/index.html) is untrue unless the UK is considered as an irrelevant Western country (London recognized Beijing in 1950, long before Paris), but fits in with myth-building on French-Chinese relations. For an analysis, see Françoise Mengin, 'La politique chinoise de la France', *Critique Internationale*, 12 (July 2001).

8 For the history of relations between the two countries see the China page of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs website: www.diplomatie.gouv.fr

9 See the China issue of *Foreign Affairs*, 84, 5 (2005).

their so-called 'foreign policy specificity' (this can be seen in French policy in other regions such as Africa and the Middle East). In addition, the points of view and policies of EU member states on any major issue of the day are frequently so distinct that Chinese officials find it difficult to identify an expression of European collective diplomacy.

The manner in which French decision-makers perceive China deserves closer scrutiny because their appreciation of its rise mirrors the perception of French decline, both economically and at the level of its international influence. Some quotes from the recent report by the Senate Commission on Economic Affairs aptly illustrate this.¹⁰ From the viewpoint of French senators, China is in the process of becoming one of the world's biggest economies, as it was in the past.¹¹ China, they note, represented 30 per cent of world GDP before the Opium Wars of the 1840s, and about 1 per cent at the end of the Maoist era, but more than 4 per cent today. This enthrallment with Chinese growth is signalled by constant reference to impressive figures. In Shanghai, a city with 20 million inhabitants, a building with more than 30 floors has gone up every 36 hours for the past twelve years; over the same period, 300 kilometres of urban motorways were built. Another example the senators bring up is that of certain factories which shelter and feed their workers, who put in 300 hours of work for a €100 wage. In France, the land of the 35-hour working week, these figures resonate in the national political debate. Fortunately, the report seems to say, China has some problems. It does not go into depth regarding the political context, other than to emphasize that the Chinese state is authoritarian and that its grip over the country remains uncontested. Far more interesting are the Chinese *problems* the French senators choose to highlight. They bring up the profound social inequalities (especially between the cities and the countryside), the major territorial imbalances (noting that Northern and Western China remain a China '*à l'africaine*'), the voraciousness

10 Sénat, rapport d'information n° 307, Session ordinaire de 2005-2006.

11 The thesis is of Chinese origin and plays the role of an antidote to accusations of 'great power' ambitions: according to it, China is merely becoming what it once was.

for energy resources (one Chinese GDP percentage point requires three times more energy than the US or European equivalent), the major financial vulnerability (especially regarding the growth in bad debt), the imbalanced demographic growth on account of the single-child policy and, above all, the environmental threat posed by Chinese growth.¹²

While the report ends with some considerations on bilateral relations, the overall tone is one of anxiety: 'While China wakes up, France sleeps', an obvious reference to the 'Franco-French' debate on the decline of France.¹³ The recent Chinese decision not to grant an important contract for the building of nuclear power plants to the French company Areva revived great apprehension regarding French capacity to redress the apparent structural deficit in trade relations with China (currently standing at about €12 billion). However, if the emergence of China as a global economic power worries France, then this concern is, all things being equal, far more salient in the French and European rather than the African context.¹⁴

To understand this, one has to return to the official analysis of the Chinese penetration of Africa highlighted above. The French Ministry of Finance notes very serenely that the strategic character of Sino-African relations is related to their growth rate, not their actual volume.¹⁵ In 2004, for instance, China represented 6 per cent of Africa's external trade. This is far less than France or the United

12 This is recognized for the first time in the 2006 Chinese budget. See 'Pékin alloue un gros budget à la protection de l'environnement', *Le Monde*, 22 July 2006. US\$175 billion will reportedly be spent fighting pollution in the next five years.

13 See Nicolas Baverez, *La France qui tombe: un constat clinique du déclin français* (Paris: Perrin, 2003). This has been followed by numerous other works and a vigorous debate in the French media. One can see the populism of both of the main candidates to the French presidency in May 2007 as responses to this type of discourse.

14 'European indifference towards the new energy challenges contrast with the Chinese', notes an official from the French Ministry of Defence. It must be recognized that European traumas in the energy sphere have more to do with Russian ambitions than with Chinese rivalry, as became evident throughout 2006.

15 See Ambassade de France en Chine/Mission Economique, *Lettre de Chine*, 177, June 2006.

States; yet in 1995, the Chinese share was a mere 1.5 per cent. In 2005 Africa generated 2.5 per cent of Chinese external trade, making it China's seventh largest trade partner. If compared with Russia or Singapore, this may seem modest. But the growth rate is exceptional: and increase of 59 per cent in 2004 and 35 per cent in 2005.

There is more. In contrast with the generic continental discourse on China's African involvement, French economists note that China trades mainly with countries possessing the primary commodities China needs at the present time. Eighty-five per cent of Chinese imports come from only seven countries, six of which are almost exclusively oil exporters (in descending order: Angola, Sudan, Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Libya, Nigeria) and South Africa, which supplies China with iron ore, platinum and diamonds. In turn, these seven countries receive an estimated 45 per cent of Chinese exports to Africa. Only Egypt, Algeria and Morocco entertain a meaningful commerce with China that is not completely based on the provision of primary commodities, which among other things leads to a trade deficit of about US\$1 billion a year.

From this description one can gauge that 'official' France, contrary to the French media, is not that fearful of a conquering China that would bar French products and services from African markets. To start with, Franc Zone countries, with the exception of Congo, are not much affected. While competition is fierce in some sectors (such as energy and construction), the relative specialization of current Chinese exports (textiles, electrical and electronic equipment, leather shoes) does not cast a shadow over French trade. This rivalry will doubtlessly increase, but at the present time French decision-makers seem to be betting on a slowdown of trade disagreements and a greater accommodation to Chinese competition in the medium term.

This measured pessimism stems from a series of analyses that underline certain structural weaknesses of the Chinese presence in Africa. It is noteworthy that this presence has indirect advantages such as the increase in the prices of primary commodities and perhaps even a real impact on the economic growth of the continent (5.4 per cent in 2004, the highest in eight years). Yet the Chinese concentration on primary commodities also has negative consequences for African countries. Chinese competition, for instance, has had a very

negative impact on the textile sector in Southern Africa. According to some estimates, 75,000 jobs have been lost in Lesotho in 2005, and a similar number in South Africa from 2000 to 2004.

China has put in place a programme of overseas development aid that was greatly expanded during the Beijing Forum for China-African Cooperation Summit in November 2006. However, this aid is assessed in very contrasting ways. On the one hand, these aid flows constitute a significant additional source of resources for countries in great difficulties; they also tend to favour sectors frequently abandoned by Western donors and the international financial institutions, and are not subjected to political conditionality (except for the Taiwan issue). On the other hand, more than 70 per cent of it is tied aid and may not be managed in a transparent manner, with the risk that it will benefit ruling elites but not the majority of the population.

It seems obvious—as Paris found out in its direct interaction with Khartoum—that African countries do not want to lock themselves in a unilateral relation with China that is reminiscent of that which they had with their former colonial rulers. Accordingly, the creation of a competitive environment between potential donors is part of an African diplomatic *savoir-faire*, whether or not one thinks it is well harnessed and managed.

Stumbling-blocks

While France does not see China's actions in Africa as a drastic challenge to its own position, it is undeniable that there are a number of stumbling-blocks where differences of analysis and conceptions of international relations emerge. This has to do with both structuring international norms and a quite specific set of interests.

Africa is, in many respects, a continent where the military stakes are high. This is the case in terms of a market (albeit one that is smaller than the Middle East or Asia), but the recurrence of violent crises also grants it great political importance. Before the normalization of relations between China and Chad (and the severance of relations between N'djamena and Taipei) in August 2006, it took the emergence of Chadian rebellions based in Darfur for the French Ministry of Defence to worry about the proliferation of Chinese

small arms. (This served the purpose of highlighting that Beijing was arming Khartoum, which was in turn arming the rebels.) Human rights organizations, for their part, have exhaustively proved that Kalashnikovs made in China have become widespread in Africa.¹⁶ In addition to disagreements about specific crises that are discussed below, there is real anxiety about this proliferation. For a long time, China did not sell great quantities of heavy weaponry, and that which it sold was to long-time allies like Tanzania; but it has no qualms about exporting small arms, which have been used in 'poor men's wars' across Africa. In this regard, China does not subscribe to UN rules (which, to be fair, were deemed non-binding anyway).

More recently, however, Western states, and France in particular, have become concerned with Chinese exports of heavy weaponry and advanced military technology. French military circles are particularly worried about the nuclear ambitions of Angola and Algeria. They do so for not entirely altruistic reasons as France is a potential supplier of such systems and technologies. That said, French concerns about proliferation seem more robust than China's and are linked to a wider European apprehension about the manner in which China itself attains mastery of new technologies at the domestic level, without much concern for intellectual property in instances of technology transfer.¹⁷

It is improbable—the question is frequently raised in Sino-European meetings—that the Chinese government will be insensitive to these considerations. Yet its public diplomacy does not provide much evidence of this, all the more so as Western states are major proliferators and the biggest sellers of military hardware in Africa.

Equally important are issues linked to the new international norms on governance. It will not be necessary to evoke here the famous five principles that supposedly guide Chinese foreign policy, especially vis-à-vis African states. It has already been mentioned that China

16 These constitute a fourth of the total.

17 A whole range of grey literature consulted by the author points to numerous failures by French industrial entrepreneurs whose Chinese associates had a similar production plant built in another region of China before bringing about bankruptcy of the joint venture. It is unlikely that only French entrepreneurs have had such experiences.

makes ample use of ODA tools such as tied aid that the OECD has long eliminated because of their disappointing results in recipient countries. Similarly, China makes ample use of credit lines for African states on the basis of oil production, as in the case of Angola and Nigeria, an arrangement frowned upon by the IMF. These methods seem to throw African states further down the spiral of indebtedness rather than helping them escape it.¹⁸

Moreover, pressing questions are being posed regarding the financing of Chinese companies in Africa. Numerous experts question the behaviour of Chinese oil companies capable of mobilizing credit from public sources at interest rates much lower than those available in international capital markets for operations with doubtful profitability. While there is little hard evidence about accusations of Chinese corrupt practices (hardly a Chinese monopoly) the operating standards and code of conduct of their companies are not framed in the same way of their Western counterparts. Western companies are compelled, *volens nolens*, to align themselves with norms on account of pressure from Western NGOs and public opinion. This is not exactly the case with Chinese companies.

French parliamentary reports and the grey literature emanating from French government bodies mirror these questions and even indict the behaviour of Chinese operators in certain areas, especially in the forestry sector, which sends 60 per cent of its exports to China. The French media are far more talkative and devastating in their criticism. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, the French media are prone to hyperbole in their international coverage. The coverage of Africa and anything to do with Africa, in particular, is closer than ever to caricature. (This may be fed by the fact that official attitudes towards China are far more restrained than those reserved for some of France's allies.) Secondly, information about Chinese businesses is often collected from direct (European) competitors who do not hesitate to describe their rivals' presence in terms of 'the victory of vice over virtue', the Chinese appearing as a disruptive presence for

18 See the lengthy considerations about the 'Dutch disease' and the oil resource curse in Africa in the report of the parliamentary commission of foreign affairs, Commission des Affaires étrangères, *Energie et géopolitique*, Rapport No. 3468, October 2006.

Western companies that were finally about to develop Africa. Thirdly, there is a reaction peculiar to the novelty of these actors. Simply because China is rocking an established order of things, its presence provokes a response. In the mid-1990s, the French press made a number of attacks against Mahathir's Malaysia, which was then getting involved in Africa. This was particularly so in South Africa where the French were also seeking a foothold in telecommunications and French companies such as Alcatel thought of themselves as the most competitive.

There is another area of disagreement with China that can potentially be linked with the two already mentioned: Chinese policies towards particular crises in the continent. The best illustrations of this are Zimbabwe and Sudan. Chinese relations with Robert Mugabe are long-standing and have always been warm. The international management of the Zimbabwe crisis has been sufficiently disastrous, especially on the British side, and the South African role sufficiently partisan to explain continuing Chinese support, even if the Zimbabwe that will emerge from the Mugabe era will have nothing in common with the prosperous country of the 1990s.

The political crisis in Sudan, the Darfur conflict and its regional repercussions, and the conditions of oil production there have placed Beijing in a negative position vis-à-vis Western public opinion. It is noteworthy that in Africa and in the Arab world, Chinese diplomacy is far less under attack over the Sudan situation. If there has been some movement in Chinese policy regarding this, it is far more on account of American pressure at the bilateral level than because of declarations by the African Union or heads of state such as the former Nigerian President Obasanjo.

French diplomats have generally gone for a very moderate approach in their disagreements with China in Africa, except when French interests are really threatened, as was the case with the Chadian crisis. Moreover, France calls for a dialogue on African crisis in the framework of the above-mentioned strategic partnership. But it will be very difficult to establish a dialogue while the framework of analysis remains defined by Chinese officials: it is hard to gauge the seriousness of the Darfur crisis if one limits one's interlocutors to Sudanese officials and their 'civil society'. In this regard, one is

faced with a set of difficulties that French diplomats have already experienced with Japan over Africa: how to 'politicize' the analysis of a crisis situation and not enter into the established discourse that permits everything, including the utmost passivity.

Conclusion

The French debate about China in Africa takes place at several levels. At the level of the political and administrative elites, it is first and foremost a debate about changes in France, its real or virtual decline, its incapacity to move while others demonstrate boundless dynamism. It is also a debate about the weight of France in Europe and its European capacity to establish the political and economic relationship with China that fits the French ideal for it. The extent to which this is the source of misunderstandings at the heart of the European Union is well known: among its member states, there are several that believe that the Union does not have the vocation to become a great power like the US, interacting as such with great powers-to-be like China and India. Nonetheless, the rise of China as seen from Paris reinforces the credibility of a multipolar world and renders it possible, necessary and virtuous. France can go on labouring towards a 'great power Europe' and against a 'free market Europe' which remains a compelling vision for the United Kingdom and many of new member states.

In discussions on the African continent, Paris wants to think of itself as indispensable. It is necessary to enter a dialogue about emergencies, establish common aid policies, and go beyond Chinese reservations about the African Union and regional organizations (China much prefers bilateral discussions). But everyone agrees that everything remains to be done and that even the terms of debate are still undefined. There is therefore some disquiet, even if it is put in perspective for the present by the immediate forms of Chinese commercial presence and economic interests in Africa. Many French companies are still not threatened in their niches. They certainly are threatened in strategic sectors such as mining, petroleum and construction, but these sectors were very competitive before the rise of China in Africa. France, like other Western countries, can brandish

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a seal of quality and make use of a technological superiority that China currently does not possess and that corruption alone cannot always control.

Most certainly, a Sino-European or Sino-French forum will not be able to deal decisively with questions regarding the behaviour of Chinese public and private companies in Africa, the ways in which projects get to be financed by Chinese ODA, and their implications for sustainable development and for the preservation of ecosystems in Africa. The only hope at this stage is that these questions are being posed within China itself in the framework of its domestic development and that they have resulted, in an exclusively Chinese setting, in very plural debates.