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AFRICA WITHOUT EUROPEANS

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To talk about the relationship between Asia, a land of venerated civilizations, and Africa, the continent that gave birth to mankind itself, is to embark on a terrain fraught with unsubstantiated superlatives and systemic misrepresentation, which challenges some of our most cherished perceptions of Africa's international relations. First, we have to admit that a focus on 'Asian relations with Africa' that omits the Indian subcontinent necessarily understates the most significant and sustained interaction between Asia and Africa, which transcends all the periods of contact. Since the migration of merchants, settlers and slave traders from the Indian land mass began in earnest in the 10th century, the steady growth and exchange of relations has served to bind the two regions together. In all the serious indicators of cultural penetration—whether language, religion or cuisine—the impact of Indian civilization can be read in the daily lives of ordinary Africans. The cultures of the Far East have had no equivalent imprint upon African society, nor Africa upon them. Secondly, in order to understand the ties between Africa and Asia, and in particular Africa's ties with an emerging China, we need to resurrect and reorient our thinking about the past if we are to come to terms with the meaning and impact that this relationship may hold for the future.

It is the very nature of 'otherness' in the experience of Chinese contact with Africa ('two unlikely regions' in Philip Snow's memorable phrase)—the fact that it stands outside the pattern of international relations and historical memory—which forms one of the key features of this relationship to this day.[1] This notion of 'difference' allows us, as Mark Duffield has said in his work, to see in these relations on the periphery, or boundaries as he prefers to call it, something deeply significant about the broader shape of international relations in the contemporary period.[2]

Africa-Asia relations in the era of colonialism and the Cold War

Of course it bears mentioning that before the advent of European colonialism in Africa, there is considerable evidence and historical record of Asian contacts and presence on the continent. Alongside the traders and slavers from Arabia, Persia and the Indian subcontinent were peoples from the Indonesian archipelago who came to settle on the island of Madagascar. Ibn Battuta, under the orders of the Moroccan Sultan, commenced a lengthy expedition in 1325 across the Islamic world that took him along the trading routes to East Africa, India, Southeast Asia and China. Zheng He (Cheng Ho), the eunuch admiral sent by the Ming dynasty to explore the outer reaches of the known world, visited these same shores in the early 15th century. Indeed, when Vasco de Gama arrived on the Malabar Coast seventy years later he was 'immediately challenged by two Spanish-speaking Muslims from Tunis' who demanded to know why the Portuguese had come to India. 'We have come in search of Christians and spices,' was his astonished reply.[3] A map from that period depicting the eastern and southern reaches of the continent, presented as a gift to South Africa in the 1990s, underscores this

1 Philip Snow, *The Star Raft: China's Encounter with Africa* (Syracuse, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. xvi.

2 See Mark Duffield, *Global Governance and the New Wars: The Merging of Development and Security* (London: Zed Books, 2001).

3 Glenn James, *Renascent Empire? The House of Braganza and the Quest for Stability in Portuguese Monsoon Asia, ca. 1640-1683* (Amsterdam University Press, 2000), p. 59.

clear message—that unlike the Europeans, the Chinese respected the Africans, traded with them and made no effort to proselytize, colonize or enslave the population.

The era of European colonialism began a process by which Asian-African relations were primarily mediated and understood through Western institutions and experiences. In this way, much like their Chinese counterparts when faced by the dominance of 'alien' influences such as the Mongols and the Manchus, the actors came to be 'indigenized' by nationalist historians. For instance, the administrative headquarters of the Portuguese and Dutch colonial empires—which had territorial enclaves in Southern and Eastern Africa—were in Goa and Batavia respectively. The Portuguese presence in East Africa, owing to time and distance from the metropole, was mostly sustained by economic and military ties to the Viceroy in Goa from 1530 to 1752.[4] Goan society itself was, according to historians, dominated by a Hindu Brahmin caste, while incoming Portuguese made common cause in pursuit of profits with Indian or Indonesian merchants, who flew the flag of the *Estado da India*.[5] Jan van Riebeeck, founder of the 'refreshment station' on the Cape of Good Hope in 1652 that marked the start of European settlement, had been transferred from his posting at the Dutch East India Company's office in Nagasaki, where he had held office for seven years, to the African wilderness.[6] Like Portuguese East Africa, the economic logic borne of distance meant that the Cape station was run by Batavia from its inception to 1732. Until the 19th century, thousands of slaves from the Dutch territories in Malaysia, Indonesia and the Indian Ocean region were brought to the Cape as craftsman and house servants, making up a large proportion of the colony's population.[7] A Sufi

4 Malyn Newitt, *A History of Mozambique* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 106-25.

5 James, *Renascent Empire*, p. 142; Newitt, *A History of Mozambique*, p. 108.

6 Masako Osada, *Sanctions and Honorary Whites: Diplomatic Policies and Economic Realities in Relations between Japan and South Africa* (Westport: CT: Green, 2002), pp. 27-8.

7 Robert C.-H. Shall, 'Islam in Southern Africa, 1672-1998', in Nehemia Levtzion and Randall Pouwels (eds), *The History of Islam in Africa* (Oxford: James Currey, 2000), p. 330.

saint and political leader, Sheik Yussuf, was exiled to the Cape in 1693 from Sulawesi and his burial mausoleum (or *kamarat*), along with that of his followers, remains an international site of pilgrimage.[8] Reflecting this predominance, Afrikaans emerged as a language of slaves, *'kombuis taal'* ('kitchen Dutch'), and it was no accident that the first document written in Afrikaans was the Koran.

The high noon of European colonialism, coinciding with the end of slavery in British and French territories, brought with it a new influx of Indian labourers to Southern and Eastern Africa. It was the struggle for political rights in the Union of South Africa, played out as a bureaucratic tussle between Britain's India Office and Colonial Office, which brought a Gujarati lawyer, Mohandas Gandhi, and his peculiar campaign of civil disobedience to prominence.[9] Few realized at the time that Gandhi's twenty-one years in Africa honing his campaigning technique would eventually be used to topple the British Raj and ultimately inspire nationalists in Asia and Africa. As the 19th century came to a close, a sprinkling of Chinese labourers and traders were brought to South Africa, Madagascar and French West Africa, paving the way for future generations after colonialism's demise.

Africa's age of nationalism is a product of co-operation between the leaders of the two regions and gave shape to the independent South. India's role in supporting African decolonization in the newly established United Nations was crucial to engineering the institution's shift away from the shibboleths of European empire to the post-colonial era. Of equal, if generally underrated significance was the impact of the Afro-Asian Solidarity Conference at Bandung in 1955, which not only situated the emerging states in relation to the bipolar conflict but gave them a common outlook on key features of the international system such as sovereignty, intervention and the pursuit of multilateralism. These exercised, and continue to exercise, considerable influence over the shape of the modern African state system and the conduct of foreign policy.

8 Shall, 'Islam in Southern Africa, 1672-1998', p. 328.

9 See Richard Huttenback, *Gandhi in South Africa* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1971); G.B. Pyrah, *Imperial Policy and South Africa, 1902-1910* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1976).

However, the advent of independence in Africa, far from loosening the European hold over our understanding of Africa-Asia relations, in fact merely shifted its focus to the ideological prism of Cold War. And though consciousness of a shared set of concerns and experiences did emerge through Bandung and was sustained (in an admittedly fractious way) through initiatives like the Non-Aligned Movement, too often this sense of solidarity was lost in the course of Cold War rhetoric and posturing by African and Asian leaders. So while the ideational dimensions of decolonization had taken hold, the contours of interest-based relations between Africa had only begun to take shape among one of the three leading Asian states, Japan. Japanese foreign policy towards the African continent was essentially forged during this period and represents an attempt to shake off the narrow strictures of Cold War politics placed upon Tokyo. Resource diplomacy provided the first substantive, interest-based rationale for deeper engagement with Africa, and in Tokyo's increasingly complex approach to the continent, which expanded to include development and humanitarian assistance as well as trade policy, we begin to see the outline of the first truly Asia-Africa relationship unencumbered by external forces. Throughout this period, however, India's Africa policy remained subject to its autarkic economic practices, which limited the country's capacity for trade and investment, as well as being complicated by its relationship with the hundreds of thousands of immigrants from its shores. These 'people of Indian origin', who were designated 'ambassadors of India' by Indira Gandhi, occupied a particularly vulnerable status in the political and economic life of some African societies that erupted into controversy and, in the case of Uganda, their wholesale expulsion. As for China, locked into a revolutionary phase that disavowed capitalism, it pursued an ideological foreign policy towards Africa that owed as much to the Sino-Soviet dispute as to its ongoing diplomatic contest with Taiwan.

A Chinese scramble for Africa?

The end of the Cold War and, since the mid-1990s, the emergence of China (and more recently India) as a significant economic and political force in Africa has instigated a transformation in the continent's

traditional international relations orientation. While the ideological period did see some instances of genuine African embrace of the Soviet Union, manifested in Mozambique, Angola and Ethiopia in particular, the vast majority of African states retained preponderant economic and political ties with the West. One result of the growing Chinese engagement in the continent is the emergence of debate in Africa, echoed if not fuelled in Western circles, about whether China is a new imperialist power on the continent. Those who suggest that it is focus on three dimensions of the relationship, one primarily economic in nature, a second political and a third related to (depending on one's view) either misperceptions and xenophobia or deeper social challenges posed by China's growing presence in Africa.

In South Africa, Nigeria, Botswana, Mozambique and other states, African voices from primarily local business and trade unions are raising the alarm about the dire impact that Chinese imports and businesses are having in their areas of concern. Indeed, within the most important diplomatic and trade relationship, China and South Africa, this concern has caused rethinking about embarking on Free Trade Agreements with China. Reflecting this new wariness, Adebayo Adedeji, the former head of the Economic Commission for Africa, has noted that the trade links with Asian economies, where Africa supplies primary commodities and Asia supplies manufactured goods, merely replicate the structural inequities found with traditional Western trading partners. He says:

> The traditional scenario that obtained in our trade with the developed world, whereby our country supplies the former with commodities and imports from there manufactured products including capital goods, is being reproduced, deliberately or not, in our intra-third world trade. I feel such a situation is completely unacceptable to us.[10]

A second array of concerns surrounds the 'no political strings' approach which has accompanied—or indeed been instrumental in—China's breaking into African markets. The norms and values articulated as part of the NEPAD agenda and incorporated in the

10 Cited in Jagdish Hiremath, 'Indian Foreign Policy in Africa: Current Status and the Future', in N. Vohra and K Mathews (eds), *Africa, India and South-South Co-operation* (New Delhi: Har-Anand, 1997).

African Union's founding constitution, which support accountability, human rights and democratic practice, are crucially dependent on Africans—in partnership with Western states, NGOs and co-operating MNCs—for implementation through a range of incentives. The 'Beijing Consensus' challenges this formula and may embolden states, even those not recognized as pariahs, to opt out of the complexities that these norms and values introduce to their economic and political programmes.

The last concern, murmured more than directly articulated, is that the growing physical presence of Chinese in Africa is merely a prelude to widespread immigration. Essentially this is a contemporary version of the 'yellow peril' phobia, and is based on a fear that Chinese numbers, industriousness and ingenuity will swamp Africa. The Sudanese government, for example, despite its close ties to Beijing, has expressed concern about the failure of thousands of Chinese labourers to renew their work permits, and has jointly set up with the Chinese embassy a bureau devoted to handling this problem. The spread of Chinese retail trading posts across many parts of Africa, especially notable in rural towns where there had not been any retail outlets for a generation and certainly no Chinese presence, is another area of marked concern.

While each of these concerns has compelling aspects, the suggestion that what is happening is a form of emergent Chinese imperialism towards Africa is wrong on a number of counts. Specifically, such an approach ignores or misconstrues China's approach to the continent in three important ways, relating to ideology, territorial sovereignty and mercantilist trade relations.

Ideology. In contrast to European imperialism, there is no overriding 'civilizing mission' driving China's approach to Africa. One could accuse Beijing of paternalism through the mutual benefit/self-interest framework of relations but there, unlike the revolutionary period in the 1960s, no effort has been made (or intended) to 'convert the Africans' to any ideology or rehabilitate their way of life. What one sees in relations between China and Africa is more reminiscent of the 'tributary state system' which, through the use of 'soft power', caused kingdoms to emulate Chinese civilization. But no effort has

been expended to force themselves on Africa and, indeed, the Chinese government has demonstrated that it can quite happily work with any political and social environment it finds itself in. Moreover, the absence of ideology has served to facilitate the entry of Chinese businesses into the fabric of prevailing economic structures formed and shaped by the West, in a way that, unlike militant Islam in other parts of the continent, does not necessitate a direct challenge to the established order of things.

Territorial sovereignty. In another difference from the classic imperialist period, there is no move by China to claim territories and peoples beyond its historical arena of action. The defence of ethnic Chinese, recalling one of the classic impulses for imperialist intervention, was indeed a matter for Chinese foreign policy during the anti-Chinese riots in Indonesia and perhaps, at the level of just a murmuring, with the recent killing of nine Chinese oil workers in Ethiopia in 2007. But it has yet to do more than motivate diplomatic notes and, despite some concerns about crimes against Chinese citizens found in the Chinese press, there is no suggestion that it would ever go further than that. It should be noted however that on questions of sovereignty, the recognition battle with Taiwan and an essentialist notion of citizenship do come into play and do provoke a response on the part of Beijing. Having said that, there is no reason to think that, even in the dire case of military conflict between China and Taiwan, African states with close ties to Taipei would experience anything beyond diplomatic and possibly economic snubs from China.

Mercantilist trade relations. Exclusive control of markets, a hallmark of classic late imperialism (and one which proved to be a constant source of problems for the metropole in each empire**),** plays no part in Chinese trade policy.[11] China's competitive advantage in labour costs is, of course, a key feature of its ability to undercut manufacturing in other markets, and its adherence to the liberal trading regime embodied in the WTO is a sure sign of its acceptance of this

11 See D.K. Fieldhouse, *Economics and Empire, 1880-1914* (London: Macmillan, 1984).

key global economic framework. The desire to promote Free Trade Agreements, binding the Chinese economy more closely to South Africa through privileged trade arrangements, is about as near as it comes to control of markets (and would be a gross exaggeration of the meaning of an FTA); but, of course, such an agreement would still conform to WTO principles.

At the same time, there are elements of China's conduct which do echo Africa's experience with Western imperialism. If one looks back at the West's actions in Africa, and indeed its actions towards China and Japan, up to the mid-19th century, these did not conform to the period of late imperialism which we more commonly associate with imperialism generally. In China, for example, between the late 16th century and 1839, Western countries and companies were involved in carving out spheres of influence with small territorial enclaves to facilitate trade, some modest recognition of special status and rights of access being negotiated with Beijing, sometimes under duress, often not. Missionaries were seen by all parties in this period, Western merchants and Asian governments alike, as a dangerous nuisance. With African international politics it was much the same until the 19th century events culminating in 1884 Berlin Conference. Western trade enclaves, close ties with African counterparts, respect for indigenous political system and formal diplomatic relations grew alongside slavery, resource exploitation and the uprooting of indigenous peoples. The territorial impulse came later, in the wake of changing dynamics within Europe itself that ushered in new powers on the world stage and hence a virulent form of competitive nationalism that transformed the search for resources and new markets into a dangerous extension of European political rivalries.

Thus, if we are looking to understand the possibility of Chinese imperialism, perhaps it is this trajectory and transformation away from seeking and maintaining spheres of influence based essentially on trade to the need to capture markets from rivals by gaining territorial control that is the most important signifier in future relations. Pessimists would point to the Chinese government's post-FOCAC 2006 commitment to establish special economic enclaves in five African countries, where Chinese businesses are to enjoy privileged treatment as well as preferential access to Chinese capital and Afri-

can markets. Furthermore, an examination of the European colonial period offers another comparative dimension that is suggestive of China's contemporary involvement in Africa. The use of 35,000 Indian labourers by British firms to build the transport infrastructure of its colonies in East Africa, famously in the case of the railway from coastal Kenya to the Ugandan interior in the 1890s, was the start of longstanding Indian settlement in the region. This historical pattern of migration, with former contract labourers staying on to take up commercial ventures, open retail shops and encourage further immigration, seems to be replicated in the growing Chinese presence in Africa today.

However, as mentioned above, in the absence of an ideological impulse coming out of China and without 'salvation merchants', there can be no pressure group at home to inspire the need for use of power in the name of higher good—one of the overriding arguments for territorial control, developed from David Livingstone's memorable rallying cry of 'commerce, civilization and Christianity'.

Rising Sun, Wheel of Dharma and Red Dragon: an Africa without Europeans

More than anything, it is the rise of China that has introduced new dimensions into relations between the two regions and is itself indicative of a fundamental change in the pattern of international relations. Linking the foreign policies of all of the major Asian powers—Japan, India and China—is an explicit commitment to multilateralism as well as an insatiable drive for resources to fuel the industrialization that has sustained their rapid economic growth. The quiet diplomacy of Japan can be contrasted with the exuberance with which China has proclaimed its interests and the flourishing presence of Indian trade and settlement on the continent. For all three, Africa represents a place where their global ambitions can be given expression at the same time as their economic needs are being fulfilled.

Africans, as agents of their own destiny to an extent not seen before, are increasingly deciding the shape that relations with Asian states will take rather than allowing these to be experienced and understood through Western eyes. Are they set to abandon the transformative

projects like NEPAD, founded as they are on Western norms and values, in pursuit of Chinese ties? Relations with China certainly provide an attractive alternative to African governments weary of Western interference and conditionalities. The wholesale adoption of such a position would spell an end to the universalistic ambitions contained within the post-Cold War project of challenging the prerogatives of sovereignty through recourse to humanitarianism.

And finally, it can be argued that the most significant outcome of the African-Asian relationship is the beginning of an 'Africa without Europe' as a cardinal point of reference for the continent's international relations. With the age of imperialism well and truly gone, a new set of relations can take hold and a 'brave new world' is emerging in which Europe and the United States are merely bystanders. This impotence is felt perhaps most acutely by Western NGOs, in some ways the contemporary version of imperialism's salvation merchants, for whom the loss of influence over African lives is deeply troubling.

Will the newly acquired economic prowess of Asia and its accompanying political dimensions result in a kind of proxy conflict in Africa, echoing the European conflicts of the 19th and 20th centuries? There are signs that this could be the case, for example the stiff competition between Japanese, Chinese and Indian companies for commercial rights to oil in Sudan and Angola. Does this indeed mean that Western interests, whether commercial or normative, are in the decline in Africa? Possibly, but the selective engagement of the United States and the residual presence of European interests will remain a feature of external relations for African states. Nevertheless, the much vaunted 'Pacific Century' is at last upon us and it is in Africa, the once-forgotten continent, that the dynamics of Asia's rise may be seen most clearly.