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# China's Evolving Behaviour in Africa and the Options of Cooperation with Europe

Jonathan HOLSLAG

## A Bumpy Journey

From all accounts, China's return to Africa has been a bumpy journey. Not only was it one of the most scrutinized recent events in international politics, but it also tested China's traditional diplomatic premises such as non-interference, equality and mutually beneficial cooperation. This thematic issue of the *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* will not judge the degree to which these principles were upheld. Rather, it will present new insights into how China's presence on the African continent has evolved, what challenges it has encountered, and how this all affected the prospects for Chinese cooperation with Europe in Africa. It is clear that China has seen its economic presence and its diplomatic manoeuvrability in Africa become imperilled, not least by bad governance, lack of regional stability, and piracy. Most contributors to this issue also recognize that this makes cooperation with Europe imperative. Yet, they also find that pressing common interests have not been sufficiently converted into synergies – neither bilaterally between China and Europe, nor in a trilateral setting with African stakeholders.

This volume is of relevance to scholars and policymakers with an interest in the evolving Sino–African and Sino–European relations. It presents five papers. Bert Jacobs first investigates the differences and complementarities between China's and Europe's trade relations with sub-Saharan Africa. Interestingly, the analysis of an extensive dataset reveals that neither corruption nor democracy significantly influences European and Chinese commodity imports from different African countries. In a detailed case study, Lucy Corkin debunks the idea that China is the mercantilist antipode of free trade Europe. She demonstrates that China's Africa offensive is becoming increasingly diffuse and that commercial interests are as important as political strategies.

The following papers examine two specific aspects of China's security policy towards Africa. Sara Van Hoeymissen looks at China's overtures to African regional organizations in regard to the mediation and resolution of African conflicts. She finds that China has strengthened its relations with those bodies, yet that its actual support remains modest

and tied to the protection of its economic interests against the backdrop of global competition for African resources. Susanne Kamerling and Frans-Paul van der Putten reconstruct how the Chinese navy has turned into a key player in the fight against piracy in the Gulf of Aden, which signifies a major step in the use of military force to protect overseas interests. While this could prove a welcome opportunity for China and the international community to join forces, Beijing's main aspiration, it seems, is to demonstrate that it can guarantee the security of Chinese ships in distant waters. The final paper, by Anna Stahl, on the prospect of trilateral cooperation between China, Europe and Africa confirms that it has been rather difficult to turn the vast potential in terms of common interests into synergies.

## China's Evolving Role in Africa

With security issues becoming increasingly important in Sino–African relations – we only need look at the outbreak of instability in Northern Africa – this project could not be timelier, as it contributes to the scholarly and political debates in Europe about how to respond to China's role in African security affairs, which is undoubtedly going to develop much further.

China's policies toward Africa have transformed dramatically in the last decade, and this evolution coincided with important shifts in China's institutional decision-making processes on African affairs (Brautigam 2009: 131-157; Raine 2009). There has been a proliferation of actors, resulting in a complex web of ministries, departments, commissions and companies that all try to defend their interests. Whereas the Ministry of Foreign Affairs officially has the responsibility of overseeing policies, it is the Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) that has gained most influence. It organizes economic cooperation, guides investment, manages foreign aid projects and since recently has been dispatching high-level delegations frequently. The MOFCOM screens Chinese companies that bid for large concessional loans to finance their projects in Africa. Often these are part of a closed circle of larger state-owned enterprises, which maintain close relations with the State Council and China Exim Bank (Li 2010). While companies certainly lobby the government, the large volume of state-backed loans is still an important instrument for the government to “steer” operations in Africa. But within the guidelines of the

government, companies can be quite autonomous in pursuing their own agenda, as Lucy Corkin convincingly demonstrates in the case of Angola.

China's economic foray into Africa has been impressive (Alden 2007; Brautigam 2009; Taylor 2006; Rotberg 2008) and Bert Jacobs' paper presents interesting data to elucidate this trend. While China has by no means surpassed the European Union as the main economic player, its growing presence has created an economic setting that allows African countries to hedge more between different partners. It has been successful in crafting an economic diplomacy that suits its national interests. As an export market, China outweighs the European Union in eight countries. Especially in Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Angola, exports to China have expanded dramatically. The economic crisis of the last two years seems not to have greatly affected relative trade flows. From the second quarter of 2008 through the end of 2010, African exports to the EU, China, India and the US all decreased substantially. Taking various statistical caveats into account, Chinese investments have also remained relatively small. Only in Niger, Mauritius and Sierra Leone has Chinese investment as a share of total inflows reached more than 10 per cent. In major raw materials-producing nations like the DRC, Nigeria and Chad, China still occupies a small position as an investor. Labour services and construction have been the sectors that probably registered the most impressive growth. Hence, the People's Republic by no means overwhelmed Africa, and the economic crisis did not significantly boost China's economic presence. This also explains why Africa represents a small part of China's raw material imports and an even smaller share of its exports.

## Challenges

A crucial question in that regard is, of course, how serious the security challenges are that China has been confronted with (Holslag 2009; Saferworld 2011). Overall, opinion polls show that Africa is still the continent with the most positive views of the People's Republic, in several cases surpassing the perceptions that Africans hold of various European countries. Positive perceptions come from investments in neglected areas including infrastructure, more affordable consumer goods, support for industrialization, new job opportunities and a general consensus of considering the Chinese "hard-working". Since China plays the roles of investor, donor and competitor simultaneously, different parts of society –

political elites, entrepreneurs, small entrepreneurs, factory workers – benefit in different ways. The position of African NGOs, trade unions and political elites significantly influences perceptions across states. On a country-by-country basis, attitudes tend thus to be more complicated (Alden 2007: 72-93; Brautigam 2009; Naidu 2010). Within one state, people can be disturbed about the influx of Chinese workers, while at the same time recognizing the positive impact that China has on their economy. Popular criticism of China's investments in Africa stems from low environmental standards, labour safety, harsh working conditions, dumping and a lack of investment outside the mining and oil sectors.

There are several sources of uncertainty compromising China's aspirations in Africa. To start with, Chinese business activities often fall prey to endemic instability and violence in economic partner countries (Holslag 2009; Zhu 2010: 48). Between 2007 and 2009, at least 30 Chinese citizens were killed in violent incidents and more than 70 were abducted. Libya presents the most dramatic example of how instability affects the security of Chinese expatriates: As many as 36,000 Chinese workers, mostly in the construction sector, were evacuated after violence erupted there in 2011 (Chin 2011). Most construction sites remain abandoned to date. In five countries, Chinese energy operations were attacked. In six countries, rebel groups threatened to sabotage Chinese companies. Since 2003, there have been seven coups in countries where China was expanding its economic influence. In several countries, political opposition groups have criticized the Chinese for backing corrupt or authoritarian governments, often forcing the latter to revise contracts (Brautigam 2009: Chapter 3). Public frustration about unequal economic growth has turned Sinophobic in several countries (Alden 2007: 81). Violence also threatened economic interests indirectly. Beijing has invested increasing efforts into branding itself a responsible actor on the international stage, but mayhem in Sudan and Zimbabwe has thwarted this aspiration (Zhu 2010; Large 2009). African violence reduces China's diplomatic manoeuvrability and, as Anna Stahl's paper in particular highlights, challenges its ability to maintain the policy of non-interference, which has facilitated business relations with many states.

## China Responds

Even at the highest political level, there is growing awareness of the risks that Chinese companies are exposed to in Africa. The outcome of sever-

al years of internal debates seems to be that overseas economic presence is considered a vital national interest and, consequently, that the government is responsible for its protection. In the first place, Beijing has responded to these challenges by informing its companies and citizens. The Ministry of Commerce and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs issue consular guidelines for most countries. In case of the DRC, for example, the MOFCOM advised:

During the past few years there have been many incidents where bandits wielding knives and carrying guns have robbed Chinese companies and injured Chinese staff. Chinese personnel must observe the security situation in Congo closely and be proactive in taking necessary security measures, and not turn pale at the mention of a tiger. When looting occurs here, one must not try to fight back, escape or call for help – robbers usually will not harm you (Research Institute of International Trade and Economic Cooperation of the Ministry of Commerce 2009).

The Chinese embassies became more proactive in issuing security advice and organizing evacuations as part of contingency plans. This happened for instance in Chad, Niger, Ethiopia and Libya after workers came under fire. Frequently, Beijing also more assertively demanded that local governments be responsible for the security of Chinese projects. In most countries, police or military forces guard Chinese mining projects and construction sites (Shinn 2009). Contrary to often-heard rumours, China has thus far refrained from despatching its own security forces.

But that might change. In 2003, President Hu Jintao categorized protecting overseas interests as one of the PLA's historical missions. China's participation in the UN Security Council-mandated anti-piracy operation in the Gulf of Aden is interpreted by Susanne Kamerling and Frans-Paul van der Putten as a signal that China will not refrain from using its growing military capabilities to protect its interests abroad. There has been a fundamental gap between China's interests and influence in international maritime security (Tan 2009). In the long run, the country's programme of military modernization aims to limit this gap. The taskforces that have been deployed since January 2009 have escorted dozens of mainly Chinese ships. Beijing sought to demonstrate its capability of protecting Chinese nationals and Chinese-flagged ships abroad. Rather than merely relying on protection by foreign navies, the PRC showed that it could do no less than the other great powers. Chinese taskforces have been interacting with their European counterparts

and were also involved in the Shared Awareness and Deconfliction (SHADE) meetings in Bahrain. However, the Chinese navy insisted on escorting commercial vessels without participating in the International Recommended Transit Corridor (IRTC). Intelligence exchanges were also limited. There have thus been several constraints to China's cooperation with other countries, and it is not clear yet what its new experiences will imply for China's future posturing. Through increasing its fleet of destroyers, frigates and supply ships, and possibly by adding aircraft carriers, and by using commercial ports in friendly countries, the PLA Navy would in the future be able to also deploy to other waters around Africa.

China has also become an important contributor to UN peacekeeping operations in Africa, with about 1,600 soldiers being deployed in 2011 (Saferworld 2011; Gill and Huang 2009). For Beijing this should be considered a testament to its commitment to multilateralism and its peaceful development strategy, taking responsibility in the international community's efforts to promote peace and stability. But peacekeeping can also be seen as an instrument in rather realist strategies. First, UN operations allow gaining military experience in a non-threatening way. Second, peacekeeping permits the strengthening of linkages with local armed forces. In the DRC, for example, Chinese engineering units have been building training sites and facilities for the Armed Forces of the DRC (FARDC) in South Kivu. Third, these operations contribute to China's soft power and help foster political goodwill. Finally, such missions provide important opportunities to gather intelligence and monitor areas that are of interest to Chinese investors. This is particularly relevant with regard to post-conflicts settings, such as Liberia, where Chinese companies can play an important part in infrastructure reconstruction (Van Hoeymissen 2010: 3).

One continuously salient policy area Beijing is mulling over is the question of how to balance the formal principle of non-interference with an apparent desire to be regarded as a responsible power in Africa. In contrast to current perceptions of Beijing's immutable line on sovereignty, China now seems to agree to international involvement in humanitarian crises. Its posturing on the crisis in Darfur has been widely recognized as an indication of Beijing's gradually growing support for international efforts to address violence in Africa (Large 2009; Holslag 2008). But a closer look reveals the limitations of this apparent evolution in China's stance: China's involvement was still anchored by

- its support for the sovereignty of Sudan,
- its preference for Sudanese or regionally brokered mediation processes and
- its opposition to sanctions.

It has clearly sought to protect its Sudan-wide investment and has been particularly wary of US intentions in Sudan. To the international community, China presented itself as an active mediator and it seized on Khartoum's changing tactics in order to showcase them as a Chinese diplomatic victory, but in the end China remained rather reluctant to exert pressure (Large 2009; Large and Patey 2010; Van Hoeymissen 2010: 5-7). So far, the Darfur issue also appears to have constituted a rather unique case in China's recent diplomacy, which cannot be considered evidence of a more general Chinese shift away from its traditional non-interference policy.

China's attitude toward five recent coups – in the Central African Republic, Mauritania, Guinea, Madagascar and Niger – seems to support this observation (Holslag 2011). In all five countries, China was steadily expanding its economic presence before the political turmoil, and its pragmatic hands-off response allowed it to also consolidate its position under the new strongmen. All five dictators turned to Beijing for aid, which China willingly provided. Whether it concerned paying wages of administrations, providing military aid or financing public infrastructure, for China this was all business as usual. There were also few changes in the official discourse. After the coups in Guinea and Niger, the Chinese government defended its economic cooperation with the juntas by stressing its concerns over the well-being of the people. In most cases, China avoided high-profile political visits, but in low-level everyday politics, little changed and the embassies facilitated contacts between Chinese companies and the new regimes. While African regional organizations were often divided over how to respond, China did not appear to feel constrained by even the most limited sanctions imposed by these bodies (Van Hoeymissen 2010).

China has extended its diplomatic support to security initiatives undertaken by African regional organizations but, as Sara Van Hoeymissen observes, China's financial assistance to regional organizations remains very limited compared to the aid provided by the European Union and the United States. As African countries continue to hold differing views on sovereignty and intervention, the compromise that emerges on specific issues in African regional arrangements is often the lowest common



denominator in terms of its impact on the target state's sovereignty. This compromise stance thus provides China with a reference point that does not greatly challenge the cherished principles of sovereignty and non-interference. The outcomes of African regional mediation processes that safeguard the position of ruling elites enjoy considerable legitimacy in China and are likely to receive unconditional diplomatic and material support.

Even though China considers the rule by law – which differs from the Western notion of rule of law – and government transparency both conditions for development at home, it has remained reluctant to embed these principles in its policies toward Africa. Corruption and bad governance has repeatedly imperilled Chinese business interests, but there is no evidence that Beijing is considering attaching some form of conditionality regarding governance practices to its economic cooperation. The Chinese understanding of good governance still differs a lot from the traditional European definition of good governance as a democratic, transparent and efficient system of administration (Ling 2010; Tao 2009; Berger and Wissenbach 2007). While good governance is a key element in most European foreign policy documents, Chinese official foreign policy rhetoric barely refers to the concept. In China, good governance remains primarily associated with internal stability and maintaining sovereignty. The security dimension of China's policy in Africa will therefore most likely continue to be characterized by a particular emphasis on territorial integrity and non-interference rather than multilateral interventions.

In areas where China did adapt its policies, implementation remains problematic. Arms trade is a case in point. China has been a small supplier of arms to Africa, but the volume of arms sales is expanding rapidly. Beijing has repeatedly vowed to limit the illegal trade in light weapons. At the same time, Chinese firearms are increasingly used by rebel groups and criminal gangs throughout Africa. The discovery of a ship loaded with weapons that was bound for Zimbabwe in 2008 also showed the gap between China's voluntary discourse and the extent to which it really manages to control arms exports to conflict-prone countries. China's 2006 commitment in the framework of the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) to help Africa combat the illicit trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) has yet to be implemented (for an account of the FOCAC meetings see Taylor 2011). The November 2009 FOCAC meeting in Sharm el-Sheik was dominated, as expected, by the

economic relationship between Africa and China in the face of the global recession (Taylor 2011). The fight against the illicit arms trade dropped off the agenda, with no specific references to SALW made in the agreed-upon Action Plan, clearly suggesting that the issue is now less of a priority in China–Africa dialogue (Saferworld 2011).

## Limits to Socialization, Limits to Cooperation

The European Union has welcomed China's renewed interest in Africa, a notion confirmed by Anna Stahl's paper. The European Commission and the European Council stressed that China's expanding economic ties with the continent are an important opportunity for growth and development. To optimize the benefits for Africa, they suggested coordinating policies and setting up a trilateral dialogue. Peace and security are important elements in this cooperation. The 2008 Communication of the Commission, for example, proposes to

cooperate in order to promote stability and prosperity in African countries and to work with the African Union (AU) and in the United Nations with China to strengthen the development of the African Peace and Security Architecture and assist with AU peacekeeping operations, capacity-building and training (European Commission 2008).

The expectation has been that by inviting China to participate in frequent exchanges, it will gradually adapt its behaviour and embrace European norms in addressing and preventing security challenges in Africa. Three main assumptions implicitly and explicitly underpin this engagement policy. First, given its strong relations and its proximate geopolitical position, the European Union has an important interest in maintaining stability in Africa. It shares this interest with other prominent partners like China, the United States and India. Policies and actions by third parties that destabilize African countries indirectly threaten the security of the European Union. Second, in a region where instability still looms large, it is vital to coordinate policies and jointly strengthen the coordinating role of regional actors and the UN Security Council. Third, combating corruption and promoting effective governance are necessary steps in the prevention of political tensions and violence. Each society has the right to pursue its own development model. But as an important economic partner and donor, external partners can expect that their investments contribute to sustainable and equitable development.

Cooperation with China has been promising, yet remained disappointing in terms of outputs. If anything, the research on which this thematic issue of the *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* is based found that there is no evidence yet that China will assume a level of responsibility in African security affairs that is commensurate with its strong economic presence in the region. China still has a penchant for security freeloading. Its support to regional organizations remains nominal: In cases of political unrest, China has remained disinclined to work with the international and African regional community and has opted for a business-as-usual attitude. Even its mediation in Darfur cannot be considered a departure from its traditional hands-off approach. Beijing refused to use its growing economic leverage to help combat corruption. Its arms trade policy also shows that even when China does pledge to take measures, implementation remains problematic (Saferworld 2011).

China wants to be seen as a responsible partner in Africa, but responsibility tends to be conceived from the narrow perspective of local political elites rather than African societies. This helps to expand economic relations with governments that still act as gatekeepers to Africa's natural resources. Whenever violent contingencies occur, the Chinese government tends to step up support for political elites, by providing financial aid, military assistance, and diplomatic backing. The contributors to this volume, however, assess differently the degree to which China still views non-interference as the best way to defend its interests. Stahl, for example, observes a retreat from the strict interpretation of the principle of non-interference, whereas Van Hoeymissen points out that not a lot has changed in practice and that China is supportive of the rather "sovereignist" agenda of African regional organizations. The growing security challenges have thus clearly pushed China to an important juncture, but how much it will adjust its state-centric policies remains to be seen. Is the "subtle change" of China's posturing in Libya and Egypt truly a harbinger of a fundamental policy shift? Will China reach out more to political opposition groups?

China's growing contribution to peacekeeping operations and its recent participation in the anti-piracy operation in the Gulf of Aden could express its growing preparedness to join the international community in promoting security in Africa. Yet here as well, it is still too early to formulate such conclusions. Whereas China now supports UN peacekeeping operations, its posture in the Security Council is still very conservative. In addition, the costs for China to participate in such operations

were fairly low. China does not yet contribute much to the UN budget for peacekeeping, while dispatching blue helmets is a vital opportunity to gain military experience, collect intelligence, and guard economic interests. This also applies to the operation in the Gulf of Aden, where China decided not to cooperate with the West in patrolling the large joint corridor that was agreed upon by most of the Western countries. All in all, coordination with the European Union or the major powers on military operations in Africa is negligible.

Many of these issues are fairly new to China. One could thus assume that it may take some time for China to figure out that business as usual is no longer a viable strategy for contributing to Africa's stability or for protecting China's long-term interests. Yet, China's new Africa offensive has been exposed to security challenges for more than ten years now, and its dialogue with the European Union on African affairs goes back to 2005. The fact that no significant shifts occurred might indicate that Europe's engagement policy is failing and that there will be no convergence in terms of policies in the foreseeable future.

There are several explanations for China's intransigence and the failure to develop cooperation with the European Union. First, China still experiences strong pressure to secure its supplies of raw materials (Raine 2009; Taylor 2006; Naidu 2010). Second, many Chinese sincerely believe that as long as China creates opportunities for Africa to grow, it automatically contributes to political stability there. It is also widely accepted that some corruption is inevitable in Africa's economic take-off (He 2004; Wang 2002; Li 2003). Third, there are several constituencies in the Chinese decision-making process that have not been affected much by Europe's engagement policy, such as the armed forces, conservative members in central party organs, and leaders of state-owned mining companies. Fourth, China might have become more confident in its Africa policies because it has not been confronted with major setbacks and because African leaders have frequently expressed their appreciation (Naidu 2010; Van Hoeymissen 2010). While civil society actors in Africa have at times shown their disaffection for China's military cooperation with Africa – African trade unions' reactions to the 2008 arms shipment to Zimbabwe being a case in point – in general, views of China still tend to be quite favourable among the African public. Finally, China is not impressed by the European Union as a security actor in Africa. Many Chinese tend to believe that some member states want to obstruct China or that they cannot be trusted because of their colonial past (He 2004;

Tao 2009; Ling 2010). Member states have also failed to coordinate *ad hoc* synergies with China at the level of the European institutions. Decision makers also stress that the United States is the main security actor in Africa and that the latter also has not taken Europe's Africa policies very seriously.

## Options for Europe

The European Union remains a key security actor in Africa, but emerging powers like China have not entirely recognized this. This is partially because Europe has done a bad job streamlining policies beyond a few occasional operations, developing the internal mechanisms to pool initiatives toward other protagonists like China, and explaining its concerns to these players. From a strategic point of view, the European Union can be an indispensable partner if it manages to address these shortcomings, which is made very clear in Anna Stahl's paper. Compared to China and even the United States, it has a natural geo-political advantage due to its proximity. Europe also has the advantage that it is not a strategic challenger to the United States, China or India and that it could gain tremendous leverage vis-à-vis these powers by playing a proactive intermediary role. In spite of their enthusiasm about the emerging powers, African countries will need Europe to keep the aspirations of their new partners in check. In order for the EU to be regarded by China and the US as a relevant dialogue partner on African security, it is necessary for the EU to increase its visibility as a security actor in the region. There are several levels at which Europe could improve its performance. All in all, the challenge is to take small steps toward a consistent strategy for engaging emerging powers like China.

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