China’s African Strategy

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After a period of relative absence, Beijing is back in Africa. The impact of its ubiquitous presence, the low cost of its products and services, and a total absence of conditionality are creating a true “Chinese model” throughout the African continent, which exchanges raw materials for consumer goods. But this largely predatory system is increasingly being questioned in Africa itself, and raises the question of China’s genuine integration into the community of world powers. [foreign policy]

It is a sign of the new ”China fever” that over 130,000 Chinese are thought to be currently living in Africa, mainly in Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Angola and the Republic of Guinea. There are now direct air links between Angola and the Chinese People’s Republic (PRC), and between Zimbabwe and the PRC. Chinese president Hu Jintao makes frequent high-level visits to Africa, but China’s interest in the continent is far from recent.

Political and strategic aspects of China’s Africa policy

Following a period of comparative retreat, from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s, arising from an essentially bilateral issue – the Taiwan question – the scope of China’s Africa policy now reaches well beyond the African continent. Far from abandoning old themes, Beijing is also employing a South-South “third world” form of discourse, based on a constantly reinvoked past of common struggle against “all forms of imperialism”.

The Taiwan question

This is no longer the primary element of the PRC’s African strategy. In 1998, South Africa recognised the PRC and broke off diplomatic relations with Taipei while retaining close economic ties. In 2004, Senegal re-established diplomatic relations with Beijing for the third time, followed by Liberia in 2005. The strategy of marginalising Taiwan diplomatically on the African continent is thus (as everywhere else) enjoying success, all the more so since Beijing can now, like Taipei (and perhaps more easily, thanks to its huge economic potential) wield the power of the chequebook, long the sole prerogative of the Taiwanese government. Today only six countries out of fifty-three – the most important being Chad, with whom, unusually, the PRC has developed informal relations because of its potential energy reserves – still recognise Taiwan.

The United Nations dimension

The United Nations dimension remains central. As General Xiong Guangkai pointed out, African countries alone represent over a third of the membership of the UN,[1] but this dimension has also undergone changes. Until the early 2000s, the question of the vote within the UN Commission on Human Rights was a major factor, but its importance has waned since the great powers have ceased tabling “anti-Chinese” resolutions. New factors have appeared, however, which confirm the importance of African votes: reform of the UN and the possibility that Japan may join the Security Council. Here we have seen a veritable diplomatic battle between Beijing and Tokyo, with Africa as its setting. Similarly, the PRC is trying to obtain the support of African countries at the UN on the question of defining exclusive economic areas, an issue that brings it into conflict with Tokyo in the China Sea.[2] Conversely, Beijing can offer its African partners a "diplomatic package" – an option that is not available to Japan or Taiwan. China thus exploits its double status as both a developing country and a great power able to punch its weight in the arena of world politics. The case of Resolution 1567 on Darfur, adopted in 2004, but much diluted by China, is a good illustration.[3]

<u>The multilateral dimension</u>

The PRC's African policy also takes place in the wider framework of a strategy designed to circumvent or weaken the Western powers – principally the United States – and those aligned with them, in a world situation described in Beijing as "complex", in other words (to decode the official terminology), unfavourable to Chinese interests.[4] The South-South dialogue advocated by the PRC still harks back to1960s "third-worldism", a discourse that is all the more powerful since it rests on the longevity of African elites. By playing this card, China, an emerging power, is also able to retain its status as spokesperson for developing countries, even if their interests are in fact widely divergent, especially within the World Trade Organisation (WTO). In this context, China's African policy aims to mark itself out by the emphasis officially placed on "respect for the interests of African countries", in contrast to the traditional neo-colonialist model. The White Paper on China's African policy, first published in Beijing in January 2006, states: "China is working to establish and develop a new type of strategic partnership, characterised by equality and mutual confidence and trust in the political sphere and cooperation in a spirit of 'win-win' in the economic sphere."[5] This position returns to the general principles of peaceful coexistence – which Beijing sees as still valid – and has been expressed in almost the same terms from the declaration published at the time of Jiang Zemin's visit in 1996, to the foundation of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FCAC), in 2000.[6] For the PRC it is a matter of developing trade by increasing the number of high-level visits that emphasise the importance of Africa, increasing aid "without political conditions", persuading the international community to increase its support and defending Africa's role on the world stage.[7] This strategy involves, in particular, marginalised (even "quasi-rogue") states, to whom China offers a strategic partnership based on punctilious observance of the principle of non-interference, on rejection of any notion of Western moral legitimacy, and on putting forward the idea of the specificity of values, in contrast with Western universalism. Beijing thus condemns any form of interference in African affairs. In Chinese discourse, this strategy is expressed in terms of defending a "more just" economic and political order, which indisputably meets with a response all over the African continent. Here again, China presents itself as a model, not to say a leader, playing on its position as the "world's greatest developing power", a position nobody could deny it.[8] Incidentally, this strategy corresponds with a certain expectation among Africans, who, since the end of the Cold War, have not failed to observe a retreat on the part of the West. Robert Mugabe expressed the same thought when in May 2005, on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of Zimbabwe's independence, he said: "We must turn our faces to the East, where the sun rises".[9]

Implementing a Chinese model

It is thus a genuinely Chinese model that is emerging from these elements, and that Beijing is attempting to impose in direct opposition to Western and Japanese models of cooperation and development aid. In its dealings with African countries, the PRC puts forward its own model of development, based on the deliberate decoupling of economic development and political reform within a policy that accepts the survival of authoritarian regimes. Rejection of interference also takes the form of an attack on theories of "regime change", or on peaceful change, denounced as a new form of imperialism. China thus emphasises its "effectiveness" – attracting a degree of envy, it would seem, from some African elites.[10] Beijing may also pride itself on its lack of a "civilising mission", since access to civilisation as such – in other words, Chinese civilisation as opposed to barbarism – is in essence unimaginable.

The elements of military cooperation

Beijing no longer supports African liberation movements in the way it supported Unita in Angola or Frelimo in Mozambique in the 1970s. Nevertheless, for essentially commercial reasons, China is the principal supplier of light weapons to the armed groups that are currently tearing the African continent apart, as well as to African governments. These arms may be manufactured locally: the PRC has opened three factories making light arms in Sudan, near Khartoum, and munitions and light arms factories have been built in Zimbabwe and Mali.[11] The PRC has also signed agreements to supply military hardware to Namibia, Angola, Botswana, Sudan, Eritrea, Zimbabwe and Sierra Leone. In 2005, cooperation with the Comoros and the Republic of Congo, whose chief of staff visited China in 2005 to sign an military cooperation agreement, was significantly increased. Quite apart from the relative lack of competition, the African market enables the PRC to test hardware that is still rudimentary. It is in Africa that the PRC has found markets for its K8 "training" aircraft, which have been supplied to Namibia, Sudan and Zimbabwe. China supplies helicopters to Mali, Angola and Ghana, light artillery and armoured vehicles to almost every country in the region, as well as army lorries, uniforms, communications equipment, and … bicycles – proof that the Chinese offer is well matched with the needs of local armed forces.[12] Cooperation with Zimbabwe has been especially close since the early 1980s and was enhanced in 2004. Beijing supplies it with tanks, artillery and armoured vehicles, as well as lorries, high-speed patrol boats and anti-aircraft batteries. The PRC likewise offers many African countries extensive training programmes, held in China for officers who attend courses lasting several months, or organised locally, with Chinese instructors. Africa – and this also applies to Japan – is also a new field for Chinese participation in UN peace-keeping operations, although in fact the PRC has been involved in conflict resolution to only a very limited extent, and has been very reluctant to take sides.. In January 2003, a first contingent was sent to Congo (as part of MONUC, the UN Mission to Congo), to carry out reconstruction and monitoring. A second contingent of 598 men was sent to Liberia in 2005 (within MINUL**,** the UN Mission to Liberia), after Monrovia recognised the PRC. Today there are 1,500 Chinese soldiers on the ground in Africa as part of UN peace-keeping operations, enabling Beijing to develop forms of military cooperation and training support in cooperation with countries with a heavy involvement in the region, such as France and the United Kingdom.

The Chinese economic offensive in Africa

The political and strategic aspects of China’s interest in Africa are complemented, with an exceptionally high degree of synergy, by an economic presence that is highly diversified and of increasing importance. Since the early 2000s, China has developed a very aggressive strategy of capturing interests and markets in the key area of energy, as well as minerals, construction and civil engineering, and staple commodities. For China, Africa offers the two-fold attraction of being both a reservoir of resources and a vast market for Chinese products.

<u>How China’s economic strategy works</u>

In December 2003, alongside the second ministerial conference of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation in Addis Ababa, the first conference on Sino-African trade was organised on the initiative of the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade (CCPIT). In the same year, on the initiative this time of the China Chamber of Commerce for the Import and Export of Machinery and Electronic Products, the first Sino-African Chamber of Commerce was opened in Cameroon. At the time of his visit in January 2004, President Hu Jintao also referred to the formation of a Council for China-Africa trade, designed to encourage Chinese private investment in Africa. At present, China has trade delegations in 49 African countries. Unlike the old colonial powers, the PRC has no privileged areas in which to operate, and selects its resource opportunities (even when they are uncertain) and its potential markets, where they present themselves.[13] While the situation in Ivory Coast is deteriorating, the Chinese presence in West Africa appears to be increasing. China thus tends to fill the gap created when Western countries retreat from high-risk areas, or from “failed states”. That is the case in Sierra Leone, where the Chinese presence has also increased. As in Southeast and Central Asia, the PRC wishes to establish a free-trade agreement with the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA). Its most important member is South Africa, which is also the PRC’s leading trade partner, accounting for 20% of trade.

<u>A steady increase in trade</u>

Africa’s share of the PRC’s overall trade is still very small: 3% in 2005. Nevertheless, this figure is in keeping with Africa’s overall share of world trade: a little over 2%. (For purposes of comparison, Asia as a whole accounts for over a quarter of world trade.) However, the volume of this trade has grown remarkably, rising by 535% since 1995, and today China is Africa’s third largest trading partner, behind France and the United States.[14] The traditional model of this Sino-African trade is one in which Africa was an exporter of energy and raw materials (minerals, precious stones, timber, cotton, fish products) and an importer of consumer goods, machine tools and textiles. On the other hand, while China’s oil imports have greatly increased since 2000, taking the continent as a whole, trade is in balance, which was not previously the case. In 2005, Chinese exports to Africa rose to 15.25 billion dollars, and imports to 16.92 billion. But if we look at the results country by country, we see that if a country exports no oil to China, there is then a pronounced trade imbalance.[15]

<u>Chinese imports</u>

Oil ranks first among Chinese imports, accounting for 60% of the total. Imports from Africa now represent 25% of all China's imports of oil, and this proportion is increasing. Since 2004, China has been the second-largest importer of oil from Africa, behind the United States and ahead of Japan. Beijing imports oil from about a dozen African countries, chiefly Sudan (12% of imports) and Angola.[16] The size of the Chinese market is vital for these two countries, since 60% of Sudan's oil production and a quarter of Angola's is exported to China.[17] Countries in the Gulf of Guinea – Equatorial Guinea and Gabon – are increasing in importance, and President Hu Jintao visited the region in 2004 to develop the oil agreements with Cameroon and Nigeria,[18] and again in 2006 to sign further agreements with Kenya and Nigeria. Chad is also a new target-country for Beijing, although N'djamena has no diplomatic relations with Beijing. China also has an interest in the raw materials and minerals needed to feed its growth, such as copper, nickel, iron, bauxite and uranium (found in the Central African Republic). In 2004, 20% of Africa's production of mineral ores was exported to China.[19] China is also one of the major importers of African timber, and here too, Chinese companies have come to dominate markets that were traditionally the preserve of French timber companies, the timber trade being one of those most severely affected by trafficking and the flouting of international conventions on the protection of tropical forests. The Chinese market is thus vital to African countries, who enjoy privileged relations with the PRC. Zimbabwe, for example, today has no difficulty in exporting to China almost the entirety of its tobacco production.[20] China also imports most of the cotton grown in Africa.

The African market

China's African market emerged relatively recently, but very rapidly. It offers a very good match between basic, very cheap consumer goods – boubous, blankets, plastic and tinplate items, toys, office equipment, motorcycles, domestic electrical goods, etc., and a level of purchasing power among African consumers that excludes Western or Japanese products. China now makes 12% of the world's simple manufactured goods, mainly for the export market. In the late 1990s, the Hisense group, which makes black and white television sets, entered the South African market and is now that country's leading supplier of domestic electrical goods.[21] However, this massive importation of Chinese goods is having a deleterious effect on African manufacturing industries that occupy the same niche, especially in the case of textiles. The PRC also appears as a new competitor in more sophisticated sectors, such as telecommunications, and (to a still limited degree) civil aviation. For example, China has supplied Zimbabwe with 50-seater *Xinzhou 60* transporter planes, built in Xian.[22] It is also a major player in the market for hydroelectricity and power stations, including nuclear stations in South Africa.

Chinese investment in Africa

In addition to trading activity, Africa is a favoured target for Chinese investment, a springboard for the government-approved strategy of globalising major Chinese enterprises: in 2004 Hu Jintao announced that a policy of globalisation was a priority for the Chinese economy.[23] Africa offers conditions that are particularly favourable for Chinese investment and Chinese companies, which frequently encounter only limited competition, due to the

West's loss of interest after the end of the Cold War.[24] The cost regimes adhered to by Chinese companies, and the fact that Beijing prefers "empty" areas, in which the safety of neither investments nor personnel is guaranteed, make the Chinese offensive considerably easier. China takes the kind of risks that would be inconceivable for major Western companies. One reason why the PRC is Sudan's largest customer for oil is that Chinese companies created the Sudanese oil industry, from exploration to refining and transportation. In Mali, the Chinese company Sinopec undertook exploratory operations with absolutely no certainty that they would bear fruit. As in the way it sets up special partnerships, China also benefits from not imposing conditions and not requiring that the rules of transparency and good governance are observed, in contrast with Western investment programmes. Africa also offers new prospects for corrupt practices, which are an inextricable feature of the Chinese political system. It was not until January 2006 that the PRC ratified the United Nations Convention against Corruption, while at the same time rejecting the restrictive clauses that provide for recourse to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in the case of dispute, or if arbitration procedures fail. In 2004, Chinese investment in Africa rose to a cumulative total since1979 of 925 million dollars; for the year 2005 alone, the figure was 175 million. These investment programmes involve 820 companies, active in 49 countries.[25] While it is government policy to encourage Chinese companies to invest in Africa, at present (in the case of "official" programmes which certainly do not cover the entirety of Chinese activities in Africa) this means for the most part state enterprises, which account for over 50% of the total in the case of the construction industry. Here, the PRC enjoys an undeniable advantage in terms of cost. In the area of infrastructural development, Western companies (especially French ones) whose costs are over 50% higher than those of the Chinese, are bound to be driven out. Outside the construction sector, Chinese investment is concentrated on sectors of particular interest to the Chinese economy, such as energy, raw materials and mining, and increasingly, the agricultural sector. In the energy field, China has a strong presence in the oil industry, especially in Sudan, where the state-owned China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) has a 40% stake in the Greater Nile Petroleum Operational Company (GNPOC). Chinese companies have also built a 1,500 kilometre pipeline and a refinery for Sudan.[26] China has also increased its presence in Angola (in cooperation with BP), in Mali, and wherever there are opportunities of developing oil production, especially in the countries round the Gulf of Guinea, where it is increasingly becoming the second-largest importer, behind the United States. In construction and civil engineering, the Chinese presence is almost ubiquitous, especially in the shape of the Beijing Urban Construction Group (BUCG), in the case of building projects that are formally defined as "aid": stadiums, government offices, prestigious hospitals, or presidential palaces, a traditional expression of the Chinese presence that still survives, and fosters friendship between Beijing and African governments. The BUGC's activity is also reflected in the construction of roads and bridges, railways and major hydrological projects, under infrastructural projects funded by international organisations such as the World Bank, or in tourism-related activities, such as hotel-building, in unstable areas like Sierra Leone.[27] China also creates free zones for the benefit of Chinese companies, as for example in the textile industry in Mauritius.[28] It also invests in cement works, which may provide a front for mining exploration. As far as raw materials are concerned, the PRC has an especially strong presence in the timber trade in Liberia, Gabon, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Since 2003, the Hong Kong company Vickwood has taken over control of Western companies in Congo and

Cameroon, as well as their huge areas of timber operations. Over 80% of African timber, whether or not it is produced by Chinese companies, is exported to the PRC. To this should be added the kind of illegal trading that is often talked about, but for which statistics are difficult to establish or to verify.[29] In terms of mining, Chinese companies are particularly active in the copper and cobalt sectors in the DRC, and in bauxite and aluminium in the Republic of Guinea, with the China Nonferrous Metals International Mining Co. Ltd (CNMIM), another major state enterprise, and Chalco (China Aluminium Company). Beijing also has uranium interests in Niger, where, in the face of Chinese competition, Cogema (the French-owned nuclear group) appears recently to have encountered difficulties in renewing its operating agreements.[30] In the shape of the Bao Steel company, China is also the leading investor in Zimbabwe, which holds the world's second-largest reserves of ferro-chrome. Telecommunications, both civil and military, is another important sector for Beijing. In the DRC, Congo-China Telecom, which is 51% Chinese-owned, is setting up the internet communications network. However, cooperation with France is still possible in this field via Alcatel's Chinese subsidiary, Alcatel Shanghai Bell. In Ghana, in cooperation with Ghana Telecom, Alcatel Shanghai Bell won a contract to supply equipment with a value of 75 million dollars. Chinese companies have made massive investments in agricultural enterprises that operate totally, through the China Food and Food Industries Corporation, especially in areas liberated by the departure of existing farmers whose land has been requisitioned, as has happened in Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Rwanda and South Africa. At present, he PRC controls over 20,000 hectares of agricultural land, spread over a dozen centres of production.[31] Food production supplies local markets, the Chinese market, and even more, world markets. Chinese agricultural enterprises specialise in growing rice, market garden produce, and industrial crops, such as sisal, for export. The PRC also invests heavily in fishing and allied industries, and in fish-farming (especially prawns), notably in Mozambique and Mauritania, where over 1,000 Chinese residents out of 1,500 recorded in an official census were said to be working in the fishing industry.

China's strategy in Africa is thus highly dynamic, and plays openly on a principle of "non-interference" that is in contrast with the options preferred by the Western powers or by Japan. But this strategy may perhaps be risky in the long term. Its open support for some particularly dubious regimes, such as Sudan or Zimbabwe, puts the PRC at odds with the whole community of "responsible" nations, and thus contradicts Beijing's official discourse on peaceful evolution and the role of great power that China aspires to play on the international stage. In the economic sphere, the PRC appears as a real competitor in areas that have always been the preserve of the former colonial powers. The PRC's offensive also provokes anxiety in some of its African partners. Regarding textiles, the ending of the Multi-fibre Arrangement (MFA) in January 2005, and the surge in Chinese exports, including those to African countries, seriously destabilised some major producer countries, such as Morocco, Mauritius, Tunisia, Madagascar and Lesotho, whose textile industries used to represent between 30 and 50% of their gross domestic product (GDP). The African continent sometimes seems like a vast area ripe for exploitation by a Chinese power that is practising globalisation on its own terms. Apart from legal trading, Chinese interests appear to be involved in many forms of illegal trafficking – in timber, fishing, ivory and diamonds. China is also the main supplier of counterfeit goods, including textiles, electrical appliances and, more dangerously, medicines (Africa being the principal market for such medicines due to its small-scale distribution systems), and for automotive spare parts. The PRC is heavily involved in corrupt local networks that enable it to avoid paying duty levied on imports, as in Senegal. Channels for illegal immigration to Europe, of Chinese origin, are also said to have been set up in Mauritania, Niger and the Republic of Congo. Many dubiously profitable investments in hotels, casinos and restaurants, notably in Mauritania, Ghana, Angola and Sierra Leone, would seem to suggest the rapid development of money-laundering operations in various African countries. Africa confirms Beijing's undeniable sense of power and influence. Sino-African relations, especially in the economic sphere, are presented as a perfect example of South-South cooperation, based on equality, respect for mutual interests and non-interference. China may also flatter certain countries, for example by agreeing to launch the first Nigerian satellite. Nevertheless, relations are described as problematical by Chinese analysts as soon as the African partner shows that it is less open to China's interests. Thus, in terms of investment in agriculture, Mauritania is described as a failure. Despite investments "agreed to" on the Chinese side, Beijing could not but see the Mauritanian government's policy of agricultural price-control, which limited profits accruing to China, as leading to a withdrawal by Chinese investors who no longer saw any reason to remain.[32] This is in sharp contrast with official expressions of concern for "development" on the part of the Chinese government. Dissatisfaction has thus been expressed by a certain number of Beijing's African partners. South Africa, concerned about the deficit in its balance of trade, which has increased tenfold in six years, has initiated several anti-dumping actions against China under the auspices of WTO. In Dakar, demonstrations against "invasion" by Chinese businesses have been organised by the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, despite being banned by the authorities. In Zimbabwe, local producers have demanded the imposition of increased customs duties on Chinese products, a demand that was rejected in the name of the country's long-standing friendship with Beijing. In Angola, local construction firms have complained of competition from Chinese companies that are able to capture their markets by virtue of their extremely low prices. China's image in Africa is thus essentially that of a predator, on the same pattern as the old colonial powers. Beijing's strategy enables the region's most dubious regimes to build a rentier economy based on massive exploitation of natural resources, without any real transfer of wealth or skills to local populations; in addition, it makes less effective any pressure toward improving governance or democratising existing regimes.[33] In this sense, the Chinese presence in Africa, which is of increasing importance in all spheres of economic activity, also marks the limits of China's integration into the global post-Cold War political system.

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