



Africa-China Relations: The View from Washington

James Swan, Deputy Assistant Secretary for African Affairs

Columbia University, School of International and Public Affairs

New York, New York

February 9, 2007

Thank you, [Dean Anderson](#), for that kind introduction. I'm pleased to be here at SIPA to offer the view from Washington on China's involvement in Africa.

China in Africa has become a hot topic. Media outlets churn out stories on the subject. Academics and think tanks have begun mining the issue for papers and conferences, and in some senses, it has become a bona fide growth industry in and of itself. Just yesterday, I attended another conference on this subject organized by a Washington think tank. Not to be left out, the [State Department](#) hosted its own conference on [China in Africa](#) in December.

But this is not a mere academic or policy fad. Rather, interest in China in Africa reflects the very real expansion of China's engagement with the continent. And specific events have focused further attention on the topic. Last November's Forum on China-Africa Cooperation drew 43 heads of state and representatives from 5 other African nations - more than normally attend an African Union summit on the continent! This event signified African leaders' serious interest in China and vice versa.

This week, Chinese President Hu is in the midst of a tour of Africa - his third in as many years. The Sudan portion of the trip has attracted particular attention, and it brings into relief some of the challenges the U.S. faces as we try to engage with China on countries whose records on human rights and democratic governance are poor.

A reader with an interest in the subject of China in Africa is likely to encounter some alarmist views. There seems to be panic in some quarters over Chinese motivations and intentions. What I would like to do today, is offer a sober, realistic look at China's engagement with the nations of sub-Saharan Africa. China has important interests in Africa. These include access to resources, access to markets, and pursuit of diplomatic allies. None of these is inherently threatening to U.S. interests. And because China has real interests there, it will of course be engaged on the continent.

What the United States seeks is for China to serve as a responsible stakeholder in Africa and elsewhere in the world. We want China to act in ways that help bolster the global system and promote peace and prosperity, and exhibit behavior commensurate with its status as a global power.

In recent decades, China has reemerged as a major player on the world scene, as an economic, diplomatic, and military force. As we consider China's role in Africa, it is important that we see China's role on the continent within this broader context.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

To provide that context, I would actually like to start by looking backward. China's involvement in Africa, of course, dates back centuries - to 1000 BC, I've heard the Chinese say - when traders crossed the Indian Ocean. More-recently, in the early days of African nations' independence, the Chinese actively sought to export their revolutionary model, for example, in South Africa and Zimbabwe, among others. Foreign Minister Chou En Lai made a celebrated "Safari to Africa" in the early 1960s. China financed numerous showcase projects, stadiums and people's halls. Yet, for much of this period, the Chinese were focused inward on domestic political and economic challenges.

The Chinese are proud of their great, ancient culture, but recent history has been a mixed picture from their perspective. For example, the Chinese refer to the "hundred years of humiliation." To them, this term connotes their sense that for much of the last 150 years, China has been exploited and weakened by foreign powers, and even in the post-World War II era was often seen as weaker than the other great powers.

It was during the tenure of Deng Xiaoping, that China began to take on a larger role within the international system. Deng's economic reforms in the late 1970s and early 1980s redefined China's national interests, and the country became much more pragmatic -- focused on ensuring prosperity rather than continuing revolution. China's foreign policy changed as well, with Beijing interested in securing access to the resources and markets it views as essential for sustaining economic growth. In many ways, China bet its future on economic globalization.

The Chinese government, formerly isolated, has engaged in international organizations with gusto. Beijing sees involvement in international organizations as a "power multiplier," as well as a boost to the country's prestige. This is particularly true of the United Nations Security Council, where China enjoys status as a permanent member.

Chinese Communist Party leaders believe they remain in power because of the changes they've helped bring about. The economic growth the country has experienced over two generations has boosted Chinese confidence.

The Chinese typically take a longer-term perspective than most American government officials or private businesses. This has the virtue of making the Chinese incredibly patient at times. They are often willing to sow seeds in the international arena that may take decades to blossom. But it also tends to make the Chinese less responsive to issues and events that require urgent action.

CHINESE INTERESTS IN AFRICA

While China has long pursued ties on the continent, the Chinese have been making a more concerted effort to reach out to the countries of sub-Saharan Africa in recent years. And there are good reasons for both sides to seek this expanded relationship. For the Chinese, there are three primary interests: access to resources, access to markets, and securing diplomatic allies. None of these is inherently threatening to U.S. interests. We do not see involvement, economic or diplomatic, in Africa as a zero-sum game for the U.S. and China. The important thing is to encourage China to become involved in Africa in a way that supports international norms, rather than subverts them.

The Chinese economy - including its manufacturing sector - has expanded rapidly in recent years. One result is that the Chinese have needed ready access to energy and other natural resources. As more Chinese have exchanged their bicycles for automobiles, and as the Chinese manufacturing sector has grown, access to oil and other commodities has become crucial.

Some 30% of China's oil imports now come from Africa, with Angola their largest supplier. The Chinese are the largest foreign investors in Sudan's oil sector and are active in petroleum projects in a number of West and Central African countries. As the largest consumer of copper in the world, China has actively sought access to minerals in copper-rich Zambia. And has gained access to platinum mines in increasingly isolated Zimbabwe.

A second driver of current Chinese interest in Africa is the expansion of trade and sales of Chinese products. According to an article in last Friday's *Wall Street Journal*, "Sino-African trade in 2006, more than quadrupled to more than \$55 billion since 2002, and it is expected to hit \$100 billion by 2010."

The 800 million people of sub-Saharan Africa represent a sizable and growing potential market for anything the Chinese produce, including their own versions of traditional African cloths. China is interested in exporting higher-value goods as well, such as automobiles.

As for the third major motivation, China, like any other nation, has sought diplomatic allies. The Chinese seek to align themselves with other nations with shared interests and cultivate support for issues with particular resonance within China. The "One China" policy is a quintessential example. One of the PRC's main foreign policy goals is to reduce the number of countries maintaining diplomatic relations with Taiwan. There are still five in Africa who recognize Taiwan. China recently scored a victory when Chad switched sides in August 2006.

More broadly, China sees sub-Saharan Africa's 48 countries - and their votes -- as significant potential sources of support in the UN and other international fora. African votes were crucial in the 1970s to Beijing's replacing Taipei in the China seat at the United Nations.

CHINA'S APPEAL IN AFRICA

The Africans, of course, have their own interests in relations with China. The Chinese offer a market for African goods, albeit mostly from extractive industries.

Half of Gabon's timber exports go to China. Overall, Asia accounts for 27% of Africa's exports. The Chinese offer a wide array of products at very low prices, which appeals to African consumers.

Moreover, the Chinese government offers generous loans to African governments for development projects and other domestic investments. The Chinese offer aid with no-strings-attached. And they fund visible and much-needed infrastructure projects - railroads, bridges, dams - at a time when Western governments have largely shifted from this sector.

As part of its outreach to Africa, China is also active in security assistance programs. Arms sales are mostly to: [Sudan](#), [Nigeria](#), and [Zimbabwe](#). China also contributes to international peacekeeping operations in Africa, where it has more than 1300 deployed in: [Liberia](#), [Congo](#), and southern Sudan.

More broadly, because China enjoys a dual status -- as both a Great Power and a developing country -- some Africans see China as more understanding of their development challenges.

The Chinese also offer a tradition of reserve with regard to democracy, good governance, and transparency that is appealing to some African leaders. As Western governments increasingly see these elements as essential underpinnings of development, the Chinese are willing to engage African governments even if they have poor records on political and economic reform and respect for human rights.

CHALLENGES TO COLLABORATION

There are a number of reasons why the relationship between China and many African countries is deepening. That is not to say that it is tension-free. Indeed, there are signs that like most dynamic relationships, there are points of disagreement.

For example, relations with China were an election issue in [Zambia](#). There are worries in Africa that the Chinese are flooding African markets with low-priced goods that undercut nascent indigenous industries, for example in the textile sector, especially with the expiration of the multi-fiber agreement in 2005.

There are additional concerns that trade tends to be one way, with Africans as consumers, and that this hurts African producers. Moreover, China's stepped-up lending to African countries risks saddling them with additional debt, just as some are easing that burden through the Highly-Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) program and other initiatives.

Next, while the Chinese are engaged in large infrastructure projects across Africa, there is little transfer of technology. There is also little local job creation; Chinese projects typically employ Chinese workers. China's general unwillingness to coordinate its aid programs with other donors may also reduce their overall impact.

Some worry that the Chinese ignore environmental and labor standards, which has potential negative implications for Africa over the long-term.

Last, the Chinese preferred hands-off approach to human rights and democratic governance increasingly puts China at odds with the African consensus that these are important matters. The approach adds to the perception that China is willing to coddle authoritarian regimes, including that of [Zimbabwe's](#) Robert Mugabe, whose misrule and political repression has led to seven consecutive years of economic decline amid egregious human rights conditions.

The emphasis on good governance by the African Union and the New Partnership for African Development shows that Africans themselves see democracy, transparency, and respect for human rights as foundations for sustainable development.

THE U.S. APPROACH

I would like to turn now to U.S. policy with respect to China in Africa. The U.S. approach to China in Africa and elsewhere is guided by former Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick's framework for "Strategic Dialogue" with the Chinese. The purpose of this dialogue is to encourage China to serve as a responsible stakeholder in Africa and throughout the world - acting in ways that bolster the global system, promote peace and prosperity, and exhibit behavior commensurate with China's status as a global power.

The United States treats China as a serious external player, among various others, in Africa. We see China as another nation with real interests on the continent and that consequently will be active there. Again, the Chinese have long been active in Africa. What attracts attention today is the breadth and intensity of the engagement at a time when China is playing a growing role as a global power.

China's presence in Africa does not represent a zero-sum game for the United States. China is assisting Africa through infrastructure development and other programs that contribute to the broader international aid effort underway in Africa. We will continue to try to engage the Chinese on African issues where there is room for cooperation- for example, by finding complementarity in our aid programs, continuing support for peacekeeping operations, and looking for opportunities to collaborate in the health sector.

We will also work to persuade the Chinese to develop a more comprehensive approach to their foreign policy. We understand Chinese foreign policy to be based narrowly on the non-interference in the internal affairs of other states.

That said, on the issue of Darfur, the Chinese have recently endorsed Kofi Annan's three-phase program for deployment of a peacekeeping force, and shown interest in helping to convince the Sudanese government to accept it. We hope they will keep pressing the Sudanese on this issue.

China's extensive economic involvement in Sudan - the PRC buys over half of Sudan's oil exports - offers China enormous potential leverage over the government in Khartoum. We have made plain to Beijing that while we welcome its diplomatic support, the international community must be prepared to take more forceful action, if Khartoum remains intransigent. The international community will look to China to be part of the solution.

Overall, the U.S. and China have a developing relationship with regard to Africa. Under the rubric of our broader "Strategic Dialogue" with the Chinese, Assistant Secretary for African Affairs [Jendayi Frazer](#) traveled to Beijing in November 2005 to meet with her Chinese counterparts and discuss Africa. More recently, the Bureau of African Affairs hosted a conference on the subject of China in Africa in December 2006.

And just last month, [Andrew Natsios](#), the President's Special Envoy to Sudan, visited China to discuss Sudan. Also in January, the Director of the State Department's Office of Policy Planning met with his Chinese counterpart to discuss a range of issues, including many involving Africa. These specific consultations with the Chinese on Africa are, of course, in addition to our continued contact with them through our embassies in African capitals and in Beijing.

This is the start of a long-term dialogue with China on Africa. Let us keep in mind that the Chinese think in terms of years and decades - not weeks and months. We anticipate continuing, long-term engagement as we work to encourage the Chinese to become responsible stakeholders in Africa and elsewhere in the world.

CONCLUSION

In closing, I would like to thank you for inviting me to join you today to offer our views on China's role in Africa. Again, China has real interests there and consequently will be engaged in Africa. We understand China's interest in the continent, and Africans' interest in China.

The Chinese are a rising strategic power throughout the world. China's outlook and interests are increasingly global - and this includes Africa. The Chinese - among many others - will continue to be important actors on the continent.

The U.S. interest is not to curtail China's involvement in Africa, but to seek cooperation where possible, moderate negative influences in some key areas (especially governance and human rights) and continue efforts to nudge China toward becoming a responsible international stakeholder.

Thank you very much.

Released on February 12, 2007

