

AFRICA AND CHINA'S STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

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China's phenomenal economic growth rate has seen the country rise to world leadership status, causing many analysts to ponder its regional and international intentions and goals. China's unique position in the community of nations means that it is able to straddle both the developed (as a member of the UN Security Council) and the developing worlds. Its linkage with the developing world dates back to the Bandung Conference of 1955, with China sharing developing nations' sense of humiliation, the urge to restore dignity and a determination to take control of its own destiny. Over the years China has changed its foreign policy from confrontation to co-operation, from revolution to economic development, and from isolation to international engagement. It has recently begun capitalising on its linkage with the developing world, witnessed in increased, though little noticed, Sino-Africa relations in the form of high-level official exchanges, trade and co-operation with African countries. It is argued that China sees Africa as a partner in the fulfillment of its strategic goals, namely: energy, trade and geopolitical interests.

Introduction

China's remarkable economic recovery in the past three decades has gained considerable world attention, stunning critics and friends alike. With record economic growth rates, China has become the second largest recipient of the world's investment capital. This newly acquired wealth, including unprecedented foreign reserves, provided Beijing the opportunity to embark on a military modernisation and build-up programme, to inject new life into its space programme and to slowly rise to world leadership status. Many analysts have come to question China's intentions in the region and its overall long-term strategic goals. If history

is any guide, precise answers to these questions will remain illusive.

China's position is unique. It has one foot in the developing world and another in the developed one with a seat on the UN Security Council. This dual status gives it a considerable political and diplomatic advantage in the pursuit of its interests. China's overall political, economic and foreign policies leave no doubt that the country is on a mission to restore its dignity and to conquer what it understands to be its place in the community of nations.

This paper will focus on a little noticed trend in China's foreign policy; namely, Sino-Africa relations. American media and Sinologists have paid little, if any, attention to the growing trend

of high-level official exchanges, trade and co-operation, which may well prove to be an important aspect of Beijing's long-term strategy. After a review of the historical background, the paper will focus in some detail on the latest developments and will demonstrate that China sees Africa as a partner in the fulfillment of its strategic goals.

Historical background

The People's Republic of China was founded at a time when most of today's developing world was still under the yoke of colonialism. Beijing's early view of the world was more in line with that of the former Soviet Union according to which the world was divided into two camps: the forces of socialism and those of imperialism. However, as nations in the colonised world began demanding self-determination—setting in motion the independence movement and the wars for national liberation—competing views between China and the Soviet Union emerged, unleashing a struggle for influence on the continent. Chinese leaders reassessed their views recognising the newly independent countries and the developing world as an important force in world affairs. Consequently, China and India in 1954 agreed on Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence,¹ which were later adopted by 29 Asian and African countries at the Bandung Conference of 1955. The conference called for economic and cultural co-operation with in the South, self-determination and human rights, and addressed the question of people in dependent countries.

The Conference enhanced the unity and co-operation of the Asian and African countries, inspired the people in the colonies to struggle for national liberation and played a significant role in promoting the anti-imperialist and anti-colonial struggle of the Asian and African people.²

In his book, *The Color Curtain*, Richard Wright seems to have captured the spirit, mood and importance of the moment with following passage:

The despised, the insulted, the hurt, and the dispossessed—in short, the under-

dogs of the human race were meeting. Here were class and race and religious consciousness on a global scale ... And what had these nations in common? Nothing, it seems to me, but what their past relationship to the Western world had made them feel. This meeting of the rejected was in itself a kind of judgement upon the Western world.³

China shared with these nations a sense of humiliation, the urge to restore dignity and a determination to take control of its own destiny. The leaders present at Bandung sought to affirm their nations' independence from 'Western imperialism' while keeping the Soviet Union at a distance. This strategy laid the foundation for what later came to be known as the Non-Aligned Movement.

China enters the African scene

In a revealing statement, Chairman Mao said: "What the imperialists fear most is the awakening of the Asian, African and Latin American peoples ... we should unite and drive the US imperialism from Asia, Africa and Latin America back to where it came from."⁴ Following the Bandung Conference, China began to cultivate ties and offered economic, technical and military support to African countries and liberation movements in an effort to encourage wars of national liberation and revolution as part of an international united front against both superpowers. In addition, "the 1960s have seen great numbers of Chinese traders come to settle in Africa."⁵ Under Chairman Mao, support was given to countries, organisations and liberation movements stretching from Egypt, to South Africa. Premier Chou Enlai made a tour of 10 Africa states between December 1963 and February 1964 and asserted that "revolutionary prospects are excellent throughout the African continent".⁶ To his adversaries, the statement meant that Africa was ripe for China-inspired revolution, raising tensions even further. Although Chinese efforts did not achieve the desired continent-wide revolution, their symbolism and impact on the world stage were quite significant. Martin Meredith, an African historian, wrote:

The West tended to regard with suspicion and distrust any links between Africa and the socialist world. But an even fiercer contest for influence was waged between the Russians and the Chinese ... the Russians were worried that China's emphasis on revolutionary activity would lead to ... greater Western intervention, as had happened in the Congo, and would also alarm moderate governments which the Russians valued as trading partners ... Trade and aid were important elements in Soviet foreign policy towards Africa, whereas the Chinese, lacking the economic resources to compete on the same level, hoped to gain more by spreading revolutionary ideology.⁷

On the political and ideological fronts, Chairman Mao conceived his theory of the 'Three Worlds', presented publicly for the first time in 1974 by Deng Xiaoping at the UN. According to this theory, the First World comprised the two superpowers, both 'imperialist aggressors', whose rivalry was the greatest cause of impending world war; the Second World comprised the developed countries of Europe and Japan, which could either oppress or join the Third World in opposing the superpowers; and the Third World, comprised all developing countries. The theory aimed at increasing solidarity, unity and co-operation within the Third World, in view of protecting its interests and advancing revolution against the 'imperialistic aggressors'.

China changes course

With the death of Chairman Mao and rise of Deng Xiaoping, China reassessed its tactics and began putting more emphasis on its economic development. Its foreign policy emphasised the principles of sovereignty, opposition to hegemony and self-reliance, in tandem with calls for a new international economic order. These calls for a new economic order found sympathy on the continent and many African leaders adopted a similar discourse at international fora. However, in this period of the late 1970s early 1980s, Sino-Africa relations experienced their lowest

point. In addition to Beijing's tactical retreat, the political situation on the continent had changed dramatically. All but a few African nations were independent and the political elites were no longer responsive to calls for a revolutionary struggle.

In 1980 China joined the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and it was well on the way to economic recovery. More foreign investment was coming in; technical assistance and foreign loans were multiplying. As it strove to steer its economic recovery, China's foreign policy stressed the development of friendly relations with other nations without regard to their social systems or ideological orientation. The Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence were reiterated as the basis for its foreign relations. China had gradually changed its tactics from confrontation to co-operation, from revolution to economic development, and from isolation to international engagement.

Revival of relations with Africa

The end of the Cold War, and the fall of the Soviet Union in particular, have changed the role and the place of China in the world. A unipolar world emerged; Marxism as an ideology was in decline and Socialism as a system of government was discredited. China was now playing the dual role as the sole balancing power to the US and as torchbearer for the Third World. Economically stronger than ever, carrying out a profound modernisation of its military and relishing its ascending international clout, China has redefined its geo-strategic vision, calling for multi-polarity and a new economic and political international order, and has re-engaged Africa at a scale never seen before. Throughout the 1990s China sought to strengthen its relations with individual African countries ranging from political, economic, trade and military, to co-operation on multilateral issues. An emphasis was clearly put on oil-producing countries and those with growing economies. An unusually high number of visits by high-level government and military officials took place in both directions. Chinese visitors to Africa included former presidents Yang Shangkun in 1992 and Jiang Zeming in 1995,

1996 and 2000. From Africa, 30 heads of state or heads of government have visited China since 1997. During the 1996 visit Jiang Zeming promoted a new economic aid regime. "Under the new regime, the old no-interest lending was replaced by China-subsidised preferential loans conditional on the Chinese being party to economically feasible Africa-based enterprises."⁸ Furthermore, China is taking part in peace-keeping operations in Liberia and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

A Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) paper on Sino-Africa relations points out that China shipped US\$1 billion worth of arms to both sides in the Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict between 1998 and 2000. It supplied heavy military equipment to Kabila in Congo in 1997 and 1998, fuelled with heavy weapons the conflict in Sierra Leone, and continues to supply the Sudanese government with all kinds of military equipment. In 1999 China-Africa trade totalled US\$6.5 billion jumping to US\$10 billion in 2000—an increase of 60% in a single year. China imported in 2002 a record US\$3 billion of oil from Nigeria and Angola, in addition to its imports from Sudan where China National Petroleum Corporation owns 40% of Sudan's largest oil venture.

After remaining dormant for thirty years, China's contemporary engagement in Africa reflects the emergence of a new and ambitious vision. Whereas Beijing was not long ago content to compete with Taipei for African states' diplomatic recognition, today, energy, trade and, increasingly, geopolitical interests figure prominently in the agenda China actively pursues in Africa.⁹

The CSIS is calling for a Sino-US dialogue on Africa to fashion a US response to China's emerging engagement and to seek eventual areas of co-operation. Given the competing nature of Sino-US strategic interests, this proposition may prove difficult to materialise.

In October 1999, Jian Zeming wrote a letter to the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) president and other African heads of state proposing the creation of a China-Africa Co-operation Forum. China was ready to go beyond individual bilateral relations and to

engage the continent as a single partner and market; an ambitious undertaking. African leaders responded enthusiastically to the proposal and preparations were quickly set in motion for the meeting in Beijing. Meanwhile, Jian Zeming travelled to South Africa in April 2000, where he signed the Pretoria Declaration with his counterpart, President Thabo Mbeki. In essence it calls for increased co-operation in economic areas and in international affairs with a view to creating a new political and economic order. It is worth noting that trade between the two countries reached a record US\$3 billion in 2000—30% of all trade with the continent.

The 'great leap forward'

One year after Jian Zeming's proposal, the first ever China-Africa Co-operation Forum was held in Beijing from 11–12 October 2000. Forty-four African countries, bringing in 80 ministers, attended the forum. In his opening address Jian Zeming said that:

China is the largest developing country in the world and Africa is the continent with the largest number of developing countries ... China and Africa are faced with both historical opportunities for greater development and unprecedented challenges. At this historical juncture, an in-depth discussion between us on how to strengthen co-operation and promote common development will undoubtedly exert a far-reaching important impact on the cross-century development of Sino-African relations, closer South-South co-operation and the establishment of an equitable and just new international political and economic order.

Jian Zeming went on to say that hegemonism and power politics still existed, and talked about a disturbing 'digital divide' between the South and the North. He called for the democratisation of international political institutions, the cancellation of the debt owed by African countries, and called for consultation in addressing international issues. The forum produced two documents: The Beijing Declaration¹⁰ and the Programme for China-Africa Co-operation in Economics and Social

Development.¹¹ To better understand the scope and ambitious vision set out by this conference, some key extracts from the Programme for Co-operation are set out below.

The operative paragraphs read:

In view of the present unjust and inequitable world order, China and African countries should position themselves to influence the establishment of the new world order which will advance their needs and interests. To this end, they agree to adopt a workable programme towards the creation of a new strategic partnership for sustainable development in the 21st century ... Globalisation currently presents more challenges and risks than opportunities to the vast number of developing countries and therefore [parties] express their determination to strengthen the existing co-operation between China and African countries in all fields.

On investment:

The Chinese side will set aside special funds to support and encourage investment by well-established Chinese enterprises in African countries to set up joint equity or co-operation projects adapted to local conditions in terms of job creation and transfer of technologies ... the Chinese side may also consider accepting various forms of payment such as payment in kind, to ease African countries' financial burden and help increase their exports to China.

On financial co-operation:

It is imperative to continue to enhance financial co-operation between China and the African Development Bank Group (ADB), the Eastern and Southern African Trade and Development Bank (PTA) and other multilateral financial institutions in Africa.

On debt relief and cancellation:

The Chinese side expresses its readiness to help relieve the debt burden of African countries. In this connection, the Chinese side undertakes to reduce or cancel debt amounting to 10 billion RMB Yuan owed by the heavily indebt-

ed poor countries and least developed countries in Africa in the coming two years ... The Ministers recognise that China, as member of the United Nations Security Council, is a significant partner in developing support around the issue of debt relief for Africa.

On agricultural co-operation:

Realising the vital importance of agricultural development to eliminating poverty and ensuring security, the Ministers are determined to take all the necessary measures to ensure successful co-operation in this area ... the two sides agree to further explore effective ways of trilateral co-operation among China, African countries and the relevant international institutions such as UN Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO).

On natural resources and energy:

China agrees that Africa needs to benefit from its agricultural, mineral and metallurgical resources, in order to generate industrial economic activities. In this regard, China agrees to promote investment in, and explore the beneficiation of metallurgical resources and that such beneficiation should take place in Africa ... The Ministers agree to facilitate the exploration and beneficiation of such resources on a reciprocity basis with due consideration to sound environmental practices.

On education:

The Chinese side pledges to grant more scholarships to African students to study in China, continue to send teachers to Africa to help local institutions of higher learning improve their discipline and specialties and set up a channel of communication between universities on the two sides for the study of the Chinese and African civilizations, and establish an African Human Resource Development Fund and gradually increase financial contribution to the Fund for the training of professionals of different disciplines for Africa countries.

On multilateral co-operation:

Strengthen co-operation and consultation on multilateral institutions such as

the UN and the WTO [World Trade Organisation], so as to safeguard the common interests of the developing countries ... Co-ordinate positions on reforming multilateral economic and trade regimes and formulating new rules, with a view to increasing the collective bargaining capacity of developing countries and make efforts towards the democratisation of international relations and the establishment of a just and equitable new international economic order ... The Ministers agree to work for the reform of the United Nations and particularly the UN Security Council that will be geographically representative.

A strategic partnership

While the practical implementation of this programme is an open question, there is no doubt that it represents a forward-looking, bold and comprehensive initiative inspired by a long-term strategic vision. The events following 9/11 have certainly affected the momentum of this initiative. However, the trade volume has increased and the foundation for this co-operation has solidified. The second China-Africa Forum conference took place in Addis Ababa from 15–17 December 2003. The conference reviewed the implementation of the two documents adopted at the first meeting and explored new initiatives and measures to move forward. Premier Wen delivered a speech at the opening ceremony making a positive assessment of the past three years. He pointed out that two-way trade had increased by 20%, 117 new China-invested enterprises were up and running in Africa, 7,000 African personnel were trained in a wide variety of professions, and that bilateral co-operation in energy development and high-tech was getting off the ground. Premier Wen went on to say that the people of the world share aspirations for peace, stability and development, but “hegemonism is raising its ugly head”.¹²

China’s geopolitical benefits from this co-operation include the affirmation of the One China Policy, increased support for its world

vision of multi-polarity and the ability to compete for markets, alternative energy sources and strategic space against equally increasing US engagement. By positioning itself at the helm of a coalition of African developing countries China will leverage its position on the UN Security Council and improve its bargaining power in other international institutions. The constant references to the need to create a new, equitable political and economic order reflect China’s competitive instinct against the US in the international arena.

As far as energy is concerned China, according to the CSIS report, is expected to depend on imports for 45% of its oil consumption in 2010. To cope with this growing demand it needs to secure such sources, and the volatility of the Middle East security situation increases Africa’s importance in this regard. In addition, “China is poor in natural resources and raw materials are well-abundant in Africa”.¹³

China’s Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs, Li Zhaoxing, announced on 28 September 2002 that “China will make agricultural co-operation with Africa a key area of co-operation in the coming years”.¹⁴ There is no doubt that Chinese technologies in this field will help increase productivity in Africa, reduce hunger and create jobs. However, for China this is not a mere commercial venture. According to China Development Gateway, “many Chinese officials and farmers thought of investing in Africa when they consider ways to cope with the challenges brought by the WTO entry”.¹⁵ Government-sponsored seminars have been held in different provinces of China to brief farmers about conditions in Africa and related government incentive policies for investment. In addition, factories, roads, warehouses and the modernisation of transportation take up land.

Rapid industrialisation is already taking a toll, as grain area has dropped from 90.8 million hectares in 1990 to an estimated 85.7 million hectares in 1994. This annual drop of 1.4% is likely to endure as long as rapid economic growth continues.¹⁶

This loss of cropland against the unavoidable population growth means that China will have to rely heavily on grain imports in the

future. China's current grain yield per hectare is already considered quite high by international standards, ruling out its increase.

As China pursues its global strategy, Chinese military leaders are likely to increase relations with their counterparts on the continent. As reported by China Information Centre in late 2000:

To express the common aspirations of the China and African peoples for peace, the marine fleet of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) paid a friendly visit to Tanzania on 28–29 July 2000, the first of its kind since 1949.¹⁷

In other words, since the founding of the People's Republic of China this was the first time that a PLA fleet called on an African port. A global military vision would be flawed if China overlooks Africa as a strategic space.

China has some advantages over the US including its identity as a developing country, its centralised political system—which makes decisions easier to take without regard to social or political considerations—the growing economy, low-cost technology and the willingness of its people to work in inhospitable places. It certainly also has disadvantages, but we will not go into those here. On their part, African leaders seem to welcome economic aid not attached to political conditions or transparency requirements.

China-Africa co-operation will surely go through highs and lows, but it would not be far-fetched to conclude that China is engaging Africa in a long-term strategic partnership for international leadership, markets, energy and space.

Notes

1 The five principles of peaceful co-existence were put forward in line with the reality of a multipolar world. Respect for sovereignty is the most fundamental principle in a new type of international relations. Mutual non-aggression means to get rid of the threat of using arms and armed threat in the internal relations among countries.

Non-interference in each other's national affairs is the most important principle in international relations to guarantee each country's right to take care of its own internal affairs. Equality and mutual benefit mean political equality, economic equality, co-operation, mutual benefit, and supplementing each other's needs. Peaceful co-existence calls on all countries to seek common interests, to reserve differences, to respect each other, to maintain friendly co-operation and to live in harmony regardless of differences in their social systems and ideologies. <<http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/china/19990914A128.html>>

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- 6 M Meredith, *The first dance of freedom: Black Africa in the post war era*, Hamilton Ltd, London, 1984, p 177.
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- 12 Speech by Premier Wen at the opening ceremony of the China-Africa Co-operation Forum. Addis Ababa. <http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2003-12/15/content_1233811.htm>
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- 14 Africa: Top option for China's agricultural investment. China Development Gateway. <www.chinagate.com.cn/english/2925.htm>
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