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China's Presence in Africa: Seeds of the Next Cold War?

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In November 2006, senior officials from 48 African nations—43 of whom were heads of state—gathered for a major diplomatic summit. This summit, however, was not convened in Johannesburg, Lagos or Cairo, and the main topic was not Darfur, inflation, regional trade or the rise in Islamic extremism. Rather, the largely ceremonial three-day meeting in Beijing was the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, reflecting China's recent dedicated efforts to spread its diplomatic and economic influence to Africa. Not even at a typical African Union summit do 43 heads of state come together.

China's storied economic growth is nothing new. However, it seems that in recent days its global ambitions have finally caught up with its economic prowess. China's need to secure new sources of energy and natural resources has made Beijing focus on Africa—and to a lesser extent, Latin America—as a new locus for economic growth and building goodwill through infrastructure and development aid. Africa's underserved populace of 890 million also makes it an attractive market for the continuous flow of Chinese exports.

This brand of foreign overtures has been monopolized by the United States and Europe since the end of the colonial era. Therefore, there is potential for tension as China competes for economic, cultural and even military influence with Western powers. In February 2007, President Hu completed his third official visit to Africa in as many years.

Chinese interests in the African continent are deep. Thirty percent of China's oil comes from Africa, with Angola and Sudan—Africa's fourth- and seventh-largest producers, respectively—the two leading suppliers; Angola sends 42 percent of its oil exports to China, and Sudan more than 50 percent. Beyond oil, China has sought Guinea's bauxite, Namibia's uranium and an assortment of rare metals found in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). There are 1,300 Chinese peacekeepers in Liberia, the DRC and southern Sudan, all protecting natural-resource interests. Overall, Sino-African 2006 trade was valued at \$55 billion, a sum that has quadrupled since 2002 and is expected to nearly double to \$100 billion by 2010. Foreign direct investment jumped from \$300 million to \$900 million from 2004 to 2005.¹ Chinese manufacturers are seeking new destinations for their low-cost products, as Europe stagnates and political opposition to the Chinese trade deficit builds in the United States.

Additionally, China's interest is diplomatic. It is seeking to expunge the continent, if not the world, of countries that officially recognize Taiwan and not China. There are five such countries remaining in Africa, none of which sent a representative to the Beijing

¹ Yaroslav Trofimov, "In Africa, China's Expansion Begins to Stir Resentment," *Wall Street Journal*, February 2, 2007.

forum. Most recently, Senegal switched allegiance to China in October 2005, amid accusations from Taipei of buying favor with millions of dollars in development aid.

There are very key differences that mark the Chinese-African relationship, which juxtapose against Africa's long-standing relations with the West. China gave material and diplomatic support to many African liberation struggles in the mid-20th century, winning it many friends on the continent. Conversely, Africa views China with less suspicion, because China was never a colonial power. China's status as a developing country with still widespread rural poverty has also helped it gain sympathy in Africa.² Most significant, however, is China's lack of any moral or social objectives when providing development aid or making low-interest loans or business deals. This is in stark contrast to the United States, which ties in conditions of democracy, good governance and human rights to recipients of its aid, particularly in the Millennium Challenge Account.

China's strategy of noninterference in the domestic policies of its trading partners and aid recipients has been popular among many African leaders, who resent Western moralizing, but has caused friction elsewhere. South Africa's President Thabo Mbeki has cautioned that China is on course to replicate the colonial relationships that pervaded the continent for so long. Beijing has continued to give Sudan diplomatic cover in the UN Security Council and has sold arms to the governments of Sudan, Nigeria and Zimbabwe, to the ire of the United States and Europe. Among the African people, there has also been growing discontent with the Chinese presence. In Zambia, dozens of workers died in an explosion at a Chinese-owned copper mine last year, and Chinese security opened fire on ensuing protests, garnering a furor of anti-Chinese sentiment. At the same mine, Chinese management paid workers less than the minimum wage and threatened "severe action" against anyone who attempted to unionize. The opposition presidential candidate, Michael Sata, ran on an overtly anti-Chinese platform in the fall of 2006, with populist rhetoric reminiscent of Hugo Chavez against the United States. "Zambia risks becoming a province—no, a district—of China," Sata thundered. Although he lost the election, he uncovered a strong current of discontent in the country.³

Additional African concerns surround the fact that Chinese companies bring their own workforce and do not employ many Africans. There has therefore been relatively little transfer of technology and expertise, and extraction of natural resources tends not to be the most popular form of foreign investment, in a host country. Chinese laborers have settled in African villages, opening businesses that undercut local African shops. In addition, the African textile sector has been particularly hurt by Chinese imports since

² H.E. Ambassador Tens Chisola Kapoma, Permanent Mission of Zambia to the UN, in a speech at Columbia University, February 9, 2007.

³ Trofimav, "In Africa, China's Expansion Begins to Stir Resentment."

tariffs disappeared in 2005, exposing an industry that had been protected for more than 30 years. And as many Africans of all backgrounds resent their governments for corruption and poor governance, there is much popular disgust with China's overt support for African leaders who suppress democracy and human rights.

There are also fears that the Chinese-African relationship disproportionately benefits the Chinese. Critics compare China to India, whose many investments in Africa are geared more toward value-added manufacturing and generate African employment and technology transfer. However, the continent-wide 2005 growth rate reached an all-time high of 5.2 percent, and many people credit Chinese investment as the catalyst. China has also left a legacy of improved infrastructure and has forgiven \$10 billion in African debt since 2000.⁴

Officially, the United States has been cautiously supportive of China's African ventures. According to Jim Swan, deputy assistant secretary of state for African affairs, the United States recognizes that China has strong interests in Africa and only wants China to be a responsible stakeholder in the continent's future. China should work toward peace and prosperity and advance values commensurate with its status as a global power. Beijing's involvement in Africa does not directly threaten any of Washington's interests, so there is not a sense that this is a zero-sum competition. Swan also points out that most African countries have relatively strong civil society institutions and a free press and that it would be unfortunate if China influenced these traditions in the wrong direction.⁵

However, in February 2007 the Pentagon announced that it was creating a new military command for Africa. It cited the continent's growing strategic importance and the need to unify Africa under a single command; the continent had been under the dual jurisdictions of the European and Central Commands. One has to wonder if this is in part intended to counter China's growing influence. It will also be interesting to observe if China responds in kind. Not since the Cold War has the United States had to compete for commercial and military influence in third world countries, particularly with a rival with strong ideological differences.

⁴ Council on Foreign Relations.

⁵ Swan in a speech at Columbia University, February 9, 2007.