



INTO AFRICA: CHINA'S QUEST FOR RESOURCES AND INFLUENCE

by Jacques deLisle

Chinese President and Communist Party chief Hu Jintao's recent African sojourn reveals both China's newfound global clout and the persisting limits to the PRC's stature as an aspiring great power, especially outside its region.

CHINA'S ECONOMIC LEVERAGE

Hu's February 2007 swing through eight African nations--following the lavish China-Africa summit (the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation) Beijing hosted for leaders from 48 of Africa's 53 states last fall, two prior state visits in the last four years, and numerous other high-level contacts--reflects the muscle that a quarter-century of near double-digit growth has given the PRC and demonstrates the Chinese leadership's will to use that economic power to serve foreign policy goals. Beijing is wooing Africa by checkbook diplomacy with Chinese characteristics, its aid and trade binge underwritten by China's recently accumulated wealth and its vast foreign exchange reserves. It has promised African nations several billion dollars in new aid, in the form of soft loans for infrastructure, favorable export credits, debt forgiveness, and conventional development assistance. Trade relations--from the African side largely in the form of exporting raw materials to China--have dwarfed aid programs, with bilateral trade reaching \$50 billion in 2006. China's stature as donor and trade partner for Africa now is on the same scale as that of the United States.

Part of this growing Sino-African web is Chinese investment, with nearly \$8 billion already in place and Hu pledging billions more by decade's end. Major state-owned and state-linked Chinese companies are already on the ground or soon will be, largely through investments to develop Sudanese oil, Zambian copper, and other African resources for export. Much of the development assistance that Beijing has been dispensing is "tied." PRC companies do the work that Chinese aid money funds.

CHINA'S POLITICAL APPEAL

In addition to the leverage it can gain from such largesse, Beijing proffers a three-pronged political line that is saleable to African regimes. This line has deep roots in PRC foreign policy, a feature that assures sophistication in its presentation and insulation from charges of opportunism or insincerity.

First and most prominently, China embraces a "strong" or "black box" conception of state sovereignty, which holds that a state's internal affairs and domestic political order are only rarely and in limited ways a legitimate concern of the international community and almost never warrant military action by foreign powers. Over the course of Hu's trip, this element was most visible in his comments on Darfur. Bending only slightly to calls from Washington and elsewhere to pressure Sudan on what much of the world regards as a severe human rights problem, Hu told Sudanese ruler Omar al-Bashir that "Darfur is a part of Sudan and you have to resolve this problem." Although Hu did endorse a "constructive role" for the United Nations and the African Union, his comments were vague and prefaced by language that affirmed China's general view that "problems" are to be resolved by the problematic state itself.

Moreover, Hu's oblique call for Sudan to solve the Darfur problem and his tepid embrace of international organizations' roles coincided with his sharper insistence that other states "respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Sudan." Hu's remarks also came against the backdrop of numerous earlier high-level statements that China opposed sanctions or other pressure on Sudan and that it had no intention of significantly modifying its policy of attaching no political strings to its aid. Beijing's uncritical dealing with Zimbabwe (not a stop on Hu's tour) has been another prominent and, to critics, disturbing example of the PRC's deference to and defense of sovereignty to the exclusion of concern with African regimes' human rights abuses.

This emphasis on sovereignty has long been a central theme of China's foreign relations. The PRC's "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence," which date to the 1950s and have enjoyed a reform-era revival, reject "interference" in other states' sovereign discretion and authority at home and insist on "respect" for other states' sovereignty. Predictably, the Five

Principles won prominent mention in the Declaration and the Action Plan that emerged from the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation.

Beijing's strident objection to forcible intervention also has a lengthy pedigree. It was central to Mao-era critiques of Soviet invasions undertaken to prevent socialist apostasy in Eastern Europe. It continued through the U.S.-led NATO actions in the former Yugoslavia, which China denounced as "hegemonist" moves, under the pretext of humanitarian aims, to create a regime more to the West's liking. Beijing has been similarly averse to milder means for trying to alter other states' domestic orders, including their human rights practices. China's responses to the annual U.S. State Department reports on human rights, which routinely include a denunciation of Washington's "meddling" in China's internal affairs, provide examples of this approach. The PRC's condemnation of the perceived U.S. strategy of "peaceful evolution"--transforming China politically without coercing it militarily--is a version of the same basic position. At the 2006 Sino-African summit in Beijing, a top PRC Foreign Ministry official underlined that the point extended to Africa as well, chastising Western powers' non-adherence to China's approach of not imposing its "ideology, values, or development model" on African countries.

Second, China invokes norms of "solidarity" with fellow developing and postcolonial countries. Here, Beijing's views resonate strongly for African regimes. During his Africa trip, Hu invoked the unhappy histories that bound China and Africa and underscored the contrast between China, which had never invaded or colonized Africa, and the less savory past behavior of the continent's other prominent aid donors and trading partners. During his visit to Pretoria, he invoked the century of "colonial aggression and oppression by foreign powers" that the Chinese people had endured and its resemblance to the "suffering and agony" that Africans had faced. In light of this common experience and China's never having "imposed its will or unequal practices" on other countries, Africa could count on China never to do so in the future. Similarly, the November 2006 summit in Beijing was replete with imagery and rhetoric of the host's standing as the guests' fellow developing state. The Declaration issued at the forum's conclusion described China as "the world's largest developing country."

This theme is a venerable and central one in PRC foreign policy. The idea that China could enhance its international influence by emphasizing its own membership in the club of developing states blossomed with the "Bandung Line" of the middle 1950s, when Beijing cast its ideological lot with the "non-aligned movement" and declared itself a fellow enemy and victim of the American and Soviet versions of aggressive, if usually informal, imperialism. The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence targeted primarily this same audience. In more radical moments, notions derived from the Chinese communist peasant revolutionary experience morphed into doctrines of supporting the global "countryside" (the developing world) in its struggles against the global "city" (the powerful, developed nations). Even when its means were far more modest, Beijing offered at least symbolic assistance to some third world regimes and to nationalist struggles in not-yet-decolonized areas in Africa. With China's vastly expanded aid budget and trade agenda in the 2000s, this previously mostly sentimental or symbolic theme has gained significant material foundations and prospects for influence in Africa and beyond.

Third, Beijing's engagement with Africa holds China out as a model for African states to emulate and, thus, a state with which to forge closer ties. The 2006 Beijing summit Declaration proclaimed that African states were "greatly inspired" by China's "rapid economic development," and its Action Plan pledged Chinese cooperation to speed Africa's march down a similar path. This message holds much appeal for its African audience, for whom economic development is a desperately pressing concern. The PRC has no peer as a recent exemplar of rapid development from a very low baseline. The techniques China used to achieve that spectacular growth reflect the currently dominant paradigm that African leaders appear to have come to accept (including market-oriented policies at home) or pursue (including reliance on investment from abroad).

Political stability is another paramount concern in Africa, where regimes face chronic threats of civil strife and pursue development policies that, when successful, generate politically stressful social and economic changes. Here too, China provides an appealing template, having maintained political order and control throughout a quarter-century of wrenching economic and social change. Moreover, for the authoritarian regimes that rule many African states, the PRC offers the last great avatar of the East Asian Model of development without democratization. The CCP and its leaders have remained immune from electoral and other institutionalized popular accountability while the country has achieved a level of wealth and economic transformation that the rulers of most African states--whether democratic or authoritarian--cannot expect their nations to reach during their remaining time in power.

RISKS TO CHINESE INTERESTS

While these economic and political resources make Beijing's Africa initiative something to be taken seriously, the agenda they serve is not an unmitigated triumph for Beijing. The PRC's relationship with Africa entails three significant risks for Chinese foreign policy. First, Hu's pointed refusal to press Khartoum harder on Darfur; China's extensive dealings with al-Bashir's Sudan (including buying two-thirds of its oil output), Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe and other rogue or pariah regimes in the region; and Beijing's general eschewal of the Western-led agenda for addressing human rights and governance problems in Africa all undercut the PRC's quest for acceptance as a respectable power. Much of Hu's high-visibility African jaunt reinforces the image of China's failure to behave, in former Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick's phrase, as a "responsible stakeholder" in the international system. Instead, China appears to offer material and political support to problematic African regimes, complicating other powers' efforts to drive those regimes to reform. Beijing's *Afrikapolitik* contrasts starkly with the role that Beijing has cultivated as the host and indispensable power in the six-party process for addressing the North Korean nuclear crisis.

Second, Beijing's Africa agenda risks deepening U.S. and international concern that China's engagement with the international economy is mercantilist and strategic rather than market-based and collaborative. The tone and content of Hu's trip and the Sino-African conclave several months earlier resonate with other recent Chinese actions that have raised such worries. Beijing's recent dealings with Africa are easily read as an attempt to lock up oil and other vital resources, with Chinese aid and diplomatic support serving as additional inducements to assure China's preferential access. Such moves resonate with malign readings of the state-owned China National Offshore Oil Company subsidiary's 2005 bid for Unocal, other recent Chinese plays for energy resources in Central Asia and North America, and, more broadly, Beijing's zeal for the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, an ASEAN-China free trade area and a possible East Asian community.

All of this nurtures an image of the PRC as a state that views economic relations in zero-sum and heavily political terms and that is bent on building regional blocs that exclude the U.S. and other outside powers and are detrimental to those powers' interests. To be sure, the U.S. and others have not been free from the same sins this interpretation imputes to the PRC. But that does not preclude China's behavior from now being a source of significant friction and suspicion in its relations with the great powers. The potential political costs for China are significant in an era when the U.S. and other economically powerful states have embraced a predominantly market-based vision of the international economic order. Much of China's Africa policy, and other Chinese actions that raise similar suspicions, risk eroding the foreign relations benefits that Beijing has reaped from the more benign image it has cultivated through its expanded openness to foreign investment and its implementation of a more liberal approach to international trade as an aspiring and admitted member of the WTO.

Third, China's growing stake--especially its on-the-ground economic presence--in some African states raises the prospect of unwanted and costly entanglements in the politics of troubled states. As the U.S. and European powers have learned repeatedly and painfully, investing in resource-rich and governance-poor countries in the less-developed world can create powerful and unwanted forces of political gravity. When, as all too often occurs, the host state faces turmoil or crisis, the remote power quickly comes to face seemingly irresistible pressures and temptations to intervene to safeguard the material stakes of its national companies (which are passing the \$10 billion mark for China in Africa) or to secure the physical safety of its citizens (who for China now number in the thousands in some African states), and to shore up or install pliable leaders, and so on.

LIMITS TO CHINA'S INFLUENCE

Hu's visit and China's Africa policy also show how the PRC still falls short of being a true great power or a U.S. rival in the region or globally. Beijing's limitations are evident in three significant and interrelated areas. First, the Sino-African relationship remains overwhelmingly economic, and the still-modest but rapidly growing economic relationship itself remains narrow. The principal driver of the relationship continues to be one-dimensional and one-sided: China's ravenous demand for African raw material inputs to feed its fast-growing industries. Chinese investment in the region is primarily a means to this extractive end. PRC development assistance appears to be little more than a loss-leader to a shopping spree for oil, copper, cobalt, cotton, timber, iron ore and the like. For China today, Africa seems poised to reprise an economic role that it played for its colonial masters, particularly in the Europe-excoriating account of African nationalists and theorists who saw "underdevelopment" as a transitive verb: exploited provider of raw materials that more developed countries needed to make themselves richer.

If China's emerging relationship to Africa starts to look too much like that of great powers from an earlier era, it is not the kind of relationship that many in Africa will long welcome. Indeed, the strain already has begun to show despite the Chinese president's assertion that Sino-African economic relations are "win-win." South African president Thabo Mbeki has warned his colleagues against allowing Chinese investment to create a "colonial relationship." Complaints about safety and working conditions in Chinese-run mines, and the broader issue of Chinese economic exploitation, have become fodder for opposition politicians in Zambia and prompted the cancellation of Hu's planned visit to the country's copper-producing region.

Moreover, African resentment of China's economic role is not limited to those aspects that echo European colonialism. It also has a distinctly modern tone familiar to reform-era China's more established economic partners: Africans increasingly chafe and worry about growing trade deficits and the displacement of local industries by Chinese imports and local businesses by newly arrived Chinese competitors.¹

In addition, China's role on the continent seems destined to remain much more shallow and more purely economic than that of the former metropolitan powers—or even the EU states and the U.S. today—which, for better and worse, have played major roles in local politics, governance and state-building efforts in Africa. China's capacity for any such undertakings remains very limited and its inclination seems weaker still. The agenda would be sharply at odds with the dominant themes of strong sovereignty and noninterference in the PRC's Africa policies. It also would require a radical expansion of the political demands that Beijing has made of its African partners which heretofore have consisted of little more than fealty toward the PRC's one-China policy and calls on Taiwan's few diplomatic partners in the region to switch ties from Taipei to Beijing.

Second, Hu's African journey and the earlier Beijing summit indicated, largely by omission, the limits to China's hard power. Beijing's high-profile diplomacy with smaller and weaker states has most often involved its near neighbors, for whom the

¹ See Nicholas R. Lardy, *China's Economy: Problems and Prospects*, FPRI E-Note, February 2007.

PRC's recently enhanced and still growing military prowess is a significant factor. This is often merely in the background but sometimes it figures more prominently, as it has perennially in cross-Strait relations, episodically in disputes and rare skirmishes over territorial claims in the South China Sea, and increasingly in the context of Chinese interest in building a blue water navy for patrolling the sea lanes through which China's trade flows.

This shadow of Chinese military power plainly does not extend to Africa. Beijing's Africa policy has brought no security alliance or significant military assistance. The Forum's Declaration and Plan of Action had nothing to say on the subject, its comments on security affairs limited to brief and relatively vacuous commitments to cooperate against terrorism, oppose nuclear proliferation, address non-traditional security threats and pursue the resolution of regional conflicts. China's involvement in military affairs on the continent has made little headway beyond earlier desultory and often unhappy support for factions in African civil conflicts and modest weapons sales that represent a small fraction of China's business as a major global arms merchant.

Military equipment sales to Sudan have been among the more significant transfers of materiel from China to Africa. While these surely have enhanced Beijing's influence in Khartoum, they are still relatively small in scale and yet have exposed the PRC to additional criticism for facilitating the atrocities in Darfur. As part of the PRC's growing participation in U.N. peacekeeping activities around the world, Beijing has made modest staff contributions to most of the several missions currently at work in Africa. But this is far short of a meaningful military presence in the region. China's security and strategic role in Africa, thus, still pales in comparison to that of the United States, which recently announced an enhanced military focus on Africa, and the European former colonial powers, which remain entangled in their former possessions' turbulent politics through assistance programs and lead roles in international interventions.

Third, China's Africa policy highlights continuing limitations to China's soft power. The obverse of the central role of a crabbed agenda of raw materials acquisition is the relatively marginal place for the "big ideas" or "values" that are important components of soft power. Seemingly the most central concept at play in China's Africa gambit--the notion that states should be opaque to foreign criticism--is transparently thin in content and surely appeals in large part because it justifies or excuses a blank check for rulers who would pursue a variety of oppressive or exploitative agendas at home.

Beijing's general emphasis on state sovereignty and Hu's demurral on Darfur shows China's pointed rejection of the human rights and good governance agenda that have been among the more powerful items on contemporary international "values" agendas. Another principal arrow in Beijing's quiver, bare-knuckled developmentalism, is rather thin and unsatisfying. It also faces erosion as a Chinese foreign policy tactic in light of the official criticism it now faces at home in an era of rising populism, pledges to focus on "human development" and a quest for a "harmonious society." One of the seemingly more substantive or value-suffused themes in Beijing's repertoire--a version of the "Asian values" argument--has little purchase on the far side of the Indian Ocean.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE U.S.: A RIVALRY'S ARRIVAL?

President Hu's trip through Africa and the broadening and deepening Chinese relationship with Africa that it represents mark a watershed, but not yet a sea change, in China's international role beyond East Asia. They are striking indications of the global economic and political significance of China's growing economic prowess and rising political ambition. But the narrow economics and shallow politics that still mark China's approach to Africa (and much of the world outside its immediate region) and the dangers for important Chinese foreign policy interests that may flow from its African engagement show the limitations and difficulties that still cabin China's prospects for becoming a full-fledged global great power.

Still, the trend lines are unmistakable as Chinese aid and trade levels in Africa continue to soar, and as Beijing has gone on the diplomatic and political offensive with arguments and approaches at odds with those of the U.S. and its allies. Greater competition over African resources, obviously divergent agendas for African politics, and seemingly narrowing gaps in hard and soft power resources create the prospect--though not the certainty--of significantly increased friction in U.S.-China relations.

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