

Africa between China and the West: The New War of Influence

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On his way to attend the 5th Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC, November 4-5, 2006, Beijing), President Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal stopped over in Washington, DC and had discussions with American policymakers. In one of the meetings, the subject of China came up and Wade was asked if Africans were aware that China was only interested in Africa's oil and other raw materials. President Wade responded by asking: "Do you think we are children?" A few months ago, when she addressed a group of development specialists in Washington, DC, Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was also asked about China in Liberia. Her response was that in her short term in office, she has learned that China always delivers fast on its promises. During a banquet honoring the visiting Chinese President in Abuja in April 2006, Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo said "We want China to lead the world, and we will be right behind you!"

Presidents Sirleaf of Liberia, Wade of Senegal as well as Obasanjo joined more than forty African leaders in Beijing for the FOCAC. China and the US have similar interests in Africa: both need mineral resources that the continent has in abundance. The potentials of a huge consumer market also form part of the equation. For the past years, both countries have tried to develop close economic ties with African nations. Unlike Europe, neither the US nor China have a past colonial history with the continent.

The anxiety of US policymakers about China's growing influence in Africa is well justified. At the current trend, China would become the number one trade partner of Africa by the end of the decade. Trade between China and Africa has grown by 700 percent just in the past decade. According to the International Monetary Fund, economic exchanges between China and Africa grew from under \$2 billions in 1995 to \$50 billions in 2006. During the FOCAC, Beijing authorities promised to reach the \$100 billion mark by 2010. Angola has surpassed Saudi Arabia as the number one supplier of oil to China. China is now fourth as Africa's trade partner according to the Council on Foreign

Relations (January 12, 2006). Princeton Lyman, a senior fellow at the Washington, DC office of the think tank said that the continent's extraordinary growth – more than 5 percent – is mainly due to trade with China. For example, thanks to China's presence on the world steel market, Liberia will be reaping close to \$70 for a ton of iron ore instead of the paltry \$19 it received just a few years ago.

Europe & Africa

Historically, interaction between Europe and Africa has been tainted by memories of the colonial era. This unbalanced relationship that always kept Africa at the receiving end continued throughout the years of the Cold War. The continent served as an economic battleground between East and West during the Cold War. Those countries that sided with the West received easy access to credit but are now indebted beyond salvation, while those that subscribed to USSR- led socialism sunk into abject poverty. Ethiopia under Mengistu and Liberia under Samuel Doe are two good examples of this scenario.

From overt military presence as in Cote d' Ivoire to subtle advisory capacity such in Zaire under Mobutu, European powers shadowed African governments with "experts" specialized in a new branch of colonial anthropology called "development." Subjected to new catch phrases such as "transfer of technology" to "structural adjustment programs" and now to "poverty reduction", Africa became a laboratory for bureaucrats who invented social and economic programs as they moved from one country to another without ever having to prove that their theories worked. Billions of easy money from the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and other institutions funded these "development schemes" and indebted poor nations.

It now appears clearly that many of the "aid programs" from the West, be it Europe or the US rarely benefit Africans. Addressing the European Development Day Forum in November 2006, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf said that "it is unclear how much money is being spent by bi-lateral and multi-lateral organizations in the name of Liberia." A Liberian political analyst, Mr. Nat Galarea Gbessagee writes on a Liberian website: "The \$520 plus million dollars collected with fanfare in New York under the Transitional Government disappeared in thin air without Bryant knowing how the money was spent, and millions of dollars more are being collected in the name of Liberia and spent without President Sirleaf knowing anything about it. So who is really benefiting from the monies collected--the Liberian people or the foreign consultants?" In next door Côte d' Ivoire, Ivorians complains about the billions "given" to them but wonder where all the money went.

There is disenchantment in Africa about the Western approach to issues regarding development. China is a welcoming change because there is little disguise in the terms of engagement.

The US & Africa

In the 1960s, the US was in the same position as China today vis-à-vis Africa. The continent was buoyant with new ideals and looked to start partnerships with a giant that had no colonial past with the new nations. But in the realms of Cold War politics and in a sort of international division of labor, the US refrained from direct engagement in Africa, leaving its European allies to deal with the continent. By the late 1980s, every country in Africa was in a “zone” controlled by either the West or the Soviet Union. The US was absent, as it focused on Latin America, Asia and Europe.

Instead of designing its own paradigm of relationship with the continent, the US followed in the footsteps of Europe, looking at Africa through the prism of colonialism. This borrowed and narrow vision undermined the effectiveness of even the best and most creative attempts of American governments to establish contacts with Africa.

Beyond the fact that it was never party to colonialism on the continent, the large population of Americans of African descent could have served to establish linkages in many areas.

In the late 1990s, President Bill Clinton signed into law the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) that allows African countries to export certain commodities onto the American market. President George W. Bush followed up on this commercial treaty with the Millennium Challenge Account (MCA) that is meant to provide grants rather than loans to “qualified” African nations. Although very innovative in essence, both of these schemes functioned as “clubs for a privileged few”, accessible only to those nations that met a certain criteria set by Washington. Acceptance in these programs is still based on fulfillment of what Washington considers to be the tenets of “good governance”. Therefore, a country such as Liberia with all the promises of progress and historical ties to the US would have to wait a long time to get in because it will have to meet so many bench marks.

For example, on the MCA website, it is said that “For a country to be selected as eligible for an MCC assistance program, it must demonstrate a commitment to policies that promote political and economic freedom, investments in education and health, control of corruption, and respect for civil liberties and the rule of law by performing well on 16 different policy indicators.” The US government relies on findings by the World Bank

(Institute) and Freedom House to extend grants by the MCA. In the case of AGOA, “market openness” is the key phrase. But as said a Ghanaian minister at the recent AGOA Forum in Washington, DC, Africa never had the luxury or the capacity to close or open its markets. The major problem with these programs is that are presented as “gifts” to Africa, because Africans have no saying as to who benefits from them and how the policies are implemented. The US could decide to cancel both programs at anytime or suspend the participation of any country if dissatisfied with a country’ s new political orientation, as experienced by Gambia’ s Yahiya who moved too closed too Venezuela and Iran.

Notwithstanding the great promises, these programs follow a trend in the relationship between the West and Africa: one side dictates all. It is the Us that decides what African countries can enter its markets and what products can be brought in and at what price. Meanwhile, US subsidies to its farmers virtually make it impossible for Africans to trade on US market, even if they were to get in.

The skyrocketing debts many countries have to service limit their capacity to provide basic services towards health, education and roads. In as much as the US has been very active in tackling many of the issues that confront post Cold war Africa, including refugees, peacekeeping and HIV-AIDS. But it has been slow in acting on two of the most important issues that could change the outlook of Africa: the debt problem and unfair trade practices that include agricultural subsidies. Again, African policy makers blame most of these ills on their relationships with the West, going as far as back as 600 years ago.

Can the US adjust its African policies to the new era and become more proactive? Africa has greatly evolved since the 1970-1980s. Less it takes these new political realities into account, the US could lose the opportunity of building an important partnership with Africa. The changing global market and new geo-political alliances between Europe and China and China and Africa are transforming the international market place. The rest of the world has moved far beyond the Cold war.

The Chinese African Formula

In flocking in such great numbers to China, African leaders are motivated by the prospect of signing lucrative contracts. They are also drawn by the respect China shows to them. Although it may be exploitative in the end, Sino-Africa relations do not carry the patronizing attitude of the West. Many African leaders say openly that they are tired of “receiving lessons” from the West, as none other than Mr. Ping, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Gabon said: “We are tired of receiving lessons!”

Respect is an important factor dealing with people who, for centuries, have never had the chance to decide for themselves what is good for them or what is bad. There is a new pragmatism developing on the continent and that attitude may tend to identify more with a China that was just a few years ago at the bottom of human development index but is now a major player on the international. “If China can do it, so could Africa” seems to be the thinking. As the oldest nation-state in the world, China attached a great importance to the notion of sovereignty and does not get involved in “domestic affairs” of its partners. This is well appreciated by African whose sovereignty have been so sorely battered since independence by Western powers, through their lending institutions, “experts’ in every possible social and economic issue.

There is also another factor belying Sino-China relationship. Because of the Taiwan issue, China has had, over the years, to court every African nation to establish and maintain diplomatic relationships, sometimes at a price. China was clear about its needs when it approached Africa.

China will have an impact on the lending practices in the international financial market because it has cash in excess that it can give freely without bureaucratic bottlenecks. China can dish out money and African raw materials may have a new and more profitable destination. In a not too long a distant future, one could imagine Africans borrowing from China to pay off high interest loans from Western financial institutions. Unlike former colonial powers that have tried to keep special relations mostly with their former colonies, China is present everywhere on the continent and in every sector. According to Antoine Glaser, publisher of the very influential Paris-based *Lettre du Continent*, a newsletter focused on Africa, “this strategy runs contrary to the Western consensus approach to Africa based on a vision directed mostly by the World Bank and IMF” .

According to another observer of African politics, Jean Pierre Cabestin, a fellow at France’ s Centre National de Recherche Scientifique, (CNRS), and Beijing played its relationship with Africa on two levels. He says that China came to Africa as a “big Third World nation,” – sort of a big brother - who could relate to the problems faced by the continent. At a second level, it presents itself as “major power” with an incontestable position on the international scene.

Looking at the Past to Forge Forward

Africans will have to draw lessons from the past. Flying to Beijing is not a panacea for success. Self-reliance, self-determination and nationalism that served as pillars to China’ s growth are not transferable commodities. Dancing between China and the West will not bring the deep structural changes needed on the continent.

Africans will have to learn to be more aggressive in the pursuit of national interests on the international market place. For example, very few of the countries that qualified to take advantage of AGOA ever penetrated the American market to establish business linkages. Most African governments seemed to have reduced AGOA to a forum where they go and beg for new sorts of aid. Trade and aid don't belong in the same sentence. Governments and NGOs dominated the last AGOA forum in Washington, DC while the private sector that should have been at the center of the conference was but a side show with a few merchants peddling old masks and recipe books.

The essence of the comment by President Abdoulaye Wade is that Africans will not fall prey to the false dichotomies of the Cold War years. Those Western policy makers warning Africa about China remain silent when their corporate and political leaders run to Beijing to make deals. How could they convince Africans while they remain silent when their leaders crisscross China in search of billion dollars contracts without addressing human rights and environmental issues? How can they warn Africa about China's disregards for the environment when Western companies plundered African forests and foraged for oil, diamonds and gold for decades without raising issue about the plight of populations or the damages caused to the environment?

In as much as China may be attractive to Africa, lessons of the past are important to ponder. Democracy, protection of basic human rights, accountability and transparency as well as the protection of the environment are making their way into governance on the continent. These gains came through painful sacrifices and must not be wasted.

The lessons Africa can learn from China and that may benefit the continent are of many folds. The first and foremost is a renewed sense of nationalism that would bring dignity and respect to Africans. Hearts can move mountains. Africans stopped believing in their capacity to effect change, when in the 1980s, governments were overthrown almost on a daily basis, at the wish of Western or Eastern power and human rights abuses escalated. This, combined with the rise in corruption and brutality by governments run by the likes of Mobutu, Doe, Moussa Traore and Bokassa just to name a few led to the massive brain drain.

Fighting corruption that cost the continent more than \$160 billions a year according to the ECA (Economic Commission on Africa) would be another added valued to a renewed African spirit of nationalism. While African leaders fly all over the world to beg for a few million dollars here and there, the coffers of the continent are drained every day of billions.

China moved fast because of, among things the size of its market. With 900 million inhabitants, Africa could also become an economic giant, if leaders stop paying lip service to regional integration. A business person trying to get from Monrovia to Abidjan, for a 70 minute-flight has to wait two days in either city, or fly to Europe and back to next door. Sometimes it could take up to three or more days to travel from part of the continent to another, by air. Mismanagement and corruption got the best of most African airlines.

No sense of urgency should force Africans to sell and export their commodities without insisting on at least a first stage of industrial processing, that would not only add values but also create jobs on the continent. This is also one way of stopping the continent from being the dumping ground for cheap Chinese manufactured goods. But so far, African goods are moving faster to China than the other way around. This is a positive that need to be maintained.

Finally, and most importantly, as China did, companies investing in Africa must go into joint ventures with local business partners. This would not only ensure a transfer of technology, but also would stop the flight of capital.

As for the US, it will have to start looking at Africa with its own eyes and develop a consistent policy, as Mel Foote, the head of Constituency for Africa (CFA) said a few years ago when lamenting about the state of US approach to Africa. If the US does not develop a new approach to Africa beyond energy and security issues, it would lose the war of influence on the continent. It can and must use its power to address those issues that are dear to Africans. By listening, Americans may learn that African worry more about malaria than HIV-AIDS. Malaria is the cause of 47 percent of all deaths in Liberia and the rate is even higher in some countries.