

## **Africa-China-EU Relations: A View From Africa**

Mwesiga Baregu

**Abstract:** Africa stands at a very critical historical conjuncture. The future of the continent in terms of the fundamental twin tasks of economic transformation and socio-political stability will depend on how effectively it will be able to address these challenges. The rapid integration and growth of the European and North American economies and the steady centralization of political authority, particularly in Europe, stands in stark contrast to the marginalization, impoverishment, disintegration and fragmentation on the African continent due to its dependency on the West long since and its colonial relations with Europe in history. Political integration should go before economic one. Africa has yet to agree on the arrangements of the Economic Partnership Agreements. The rises of China and India offer a great chance to Africa, though China is accused by West and Africa of its activities in Africa. Africa needs to formulate a coherent and unified ‘China Strategy’ particularly focusing on engaging China to bring about fundamental economic transformation in Africa.

**Key words:** EU African policy, Economic Partnership Agreements, Sino-African relations, African development issue

**About the Author:** Professor of Politics and International Relations, University of Dares Salaam

### **Introduction**

**A**t the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and on the threshold of fifty years of independence, Africa stands at a very critical historical conjuncture. This conjuncture is defined by at least three inter-related challenges which must, of necessity, be addressed simultaneously for Africa to move ahead. It is the main contention of this paper that the

future of the continent in terms of the fundamental twin tasks of economic transformation and socio-political stability will depend on how effectively it will be able to address these challenges. The first and overriding, challenge facing the African continent is its steady marginalization and near exclusion from the world economy. With the notable exception of supplying raw materials to industrialised countries, Africa's position and role in global production and consumption has been declining. Attempts to create an African Economic Community and to stimulate the domestic market have, so far, failed. This is because this task has been approached based the false assumption that gradual economic integration can eventually lead to political unity. The opposite may actually be the case. This assumption has to be reversed by revisiting Kwame Nkrumah's approach, i.e. seek thee the political kingdom and all else shall be added to it!<sup>①</sup>

In order to address the marginalization and possible eventual exclusion challenge it is proposed that Africa needs to centralise political authority (a union government) before it can successfully integrate its economies. This is a necessary condition in order for Africa to find, for itself, a new economic space in the highly competitive and rapidly changing global economy. Without centralized political authority Africa will find it very difficult to stabilise its societies, integrate and transform its economies and negotiate from a position of credibility and strength in the international system. I therefore agree with Kwame Nkrumah and Julius Nyerere, that without unity Africa has no future.

The second challenge arises from Africa's historical colonial relationship with Europe. For over forty years now, from the Yaunde Convention in 1963 to the ACP in 1975 and on to the present Cotonou Agreement, Africa, along with other ex-European colonies, has maintained close economic ties with Europe. This relationship has been guided by two main assumptions. One is that the arrangement would help to bring about development in the continent and the other is that Africa has limited to no options in its choice of economic strategy. Experience has shown, however, that the relationship has failed to bring about development and current developments are opening up options for Africa to forge new relationships.

At this juncture, therefore, Africa has to decide on whether its long term interests can best be served by extending and deepening the

---

<sup>①</sup> Kwame Nkrumah, *Africa Must Unite*. London, Panaf Books, 1970.

present relationship with Europe through such arrangements as the evolving Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) under the Cotonou Agreement or if it should curtail and cut back its engagements with Europe to allow for a process of meaningful and focussed forging of new relationships. This is currently a highly controversial issue with some African countries taking diametrically opposed and potentially divisive positions – some in support of EPAs and others in opposition. Many would like to have more time. Meanwhile the EU continues to exert pressures on African countries to sign on to EPAs in the shortest time possible. It is clear that most of this pressure, as Rob Davis, South Africa's deputy minister of industry and trade, has put it, arises, because "...the EU is afraid that it will lose its foothold on the African continent and wants to prevent this at any cost"<sup>①</sup>

The third challenge, which is closely related to the second, emanates from the rise of China, its rapid economic growth and the fast deepening economic relationship with Africa particularly in the raw materials sector. As Rob Davis puts it: "China and India, due to their industrialization, offer developing countries higher prices for natural resources, they do not force us to lower our tariffs, contrary to Europe."<sup>②</sup> The emergence of China and how it may affect Africa's role and interests in the global economy raises a number of interesting questions. What are China's goals and Africa's goals in the emerging relationship? Can China present the opportunities that could enable Africa to find the new economic space or does it pose predatory threats which can further marginalise Africa? What are the possibilities of China-European collaboration in the exploitation of Africa. What are the critical challenges for Africa if the new Sino-African relationship is to be made to work to Africa's advantage? Is Africa, in its present form, ready to maximise its benefits in a relationship with China? What kind of relationship? In this paper we shall deal with the latter two challenges with the objective of providing the context within which the first can be addressed.

## **Africa in Global Change**

Among the major contradictions of globalization is the tendency to integrate and centralise certain regions while disintegrating and

---

<sup>①</sup> Miriam Mannak, "Trade: EPAs born of EU's concern with China in Africa", *IPS*, Feb. 26, 2008.

<sup>②</sup> *Ibid.*

marginalizing other regions from the global system. While the former process has produced large and powerful blocks such as the EU, the latter process tends to produce what Castells has, quite aptly, described as “black holes in informational capitalism: regions where [there is] no escape from suffering and deprivation.”<sup>①</sup> Africa is progressively acquiring that image. The rapid integration and growth of the European and North American economies and the steady centralization of political authority, particularly in Europe, stands in stark contrast to the marginalization, impoverishment, disintegration and fragmentation on the African continent. The failure of African countries to integrate meaningfully is, at least in part, attributed to these divergent but interconnected processes.

Almost all of the African countries, though playing a marginal and steadily diminishing role in the European economy, still remain vertically integrated to the European countries creating a situation of persistent structural dependence. This dependence is in the course of being re-enforced by the signing of Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) between the EU and ACP under the Cotonou Convention which will open up Africa’s resources to European multinationals, block Africa’s integration and obstruct south-south cooperation. This fact of being appendages of the European economies, by itself, constitutes a major obstacle to horizontal integration between the African countries themselves and may create obstacles in Africa’s relations with China.

Thus the irony is that while Europe is deepening its union and creating greater unity through an expanded EU, Africa, under EU pressure, is disintegrating into regional Economic Partnership Agreements linked to the EU with the effect of weakening the existing Regional Economic Communities (RECs) and eventually scuttling the dream of a politically unified Africa. There are four such EPAs proposed for Africa (West Africa, Central Africa, Eastern and Southern Africa, the Southern African Development Community) and one each for the Caribbean and the Pacific.

In Africa the EPAs create new regions on top of existing RECs. It is not surprising therefore that whereas European trade Commissioner, Barroso at the Lisbon EU-Africa summit in December 2007, claimed that the EPAs “...will turn our trading relationship into a healthy, diversified, development oriented partnership”, Senegalese president Abdoulaye Wade countered by saying: “It is clear that Africa rejects the EPA...the

---

<sup>①</sup> Quoted by Joel Netshitenzhe, “Article: Letter from Tshwane, Survival in the global jungle”, *GCIS*, South Africa.

EU was losing out to China in Africa...Europe is about to lose the battle of competition in Africa.”<sup>①</sup> African Union president Konare highlighted the danger of interim agreements playing African regions off against each other. He appealed for more time.

Almost invariably, Africa’s vertical integration to Europe has entrenched economic dependence, weakened the African states and facilitated the plunder of Africa’s resources. The weakness and dependence of the state undermines its capacity rendering it unable to exercise effective control over its national resources. Loss of control over resources combines with structural dependence and indebtedness to produce what Beckford described as ‘persistent poverty’ for the majority of the population.<sup>②</sup> Persistent poverty precipitates the disintegration of national societies as well as the fragmentation and polarization of ethnic communities. It is the politicization of polarized ethnic communities by political elites that produces and sustains many conflicts in the continent. The convergence of external integration and internal disintegration also creates a crisis of legitimacy of the African state resulting in authoritarian rule, state failure/collapse, ethnic conflicts and internecine warfare. In brief for Africa globalization has unleashed a chain reaction which may be depicted as follows: Economic marginalization, resource plunder, impoverishment, state failure, political disintegration, social fragmentation, community polarization, conflicts.

Ironically, the process that has brought about the socio-economic marginalization of Africa in terms of its share of international production, consumption and trade as well as its impoverishment, is the very same process which is intensifying and centralizing the exploitation of Africa’s resources. Africa’s position and role in the international division of labour, which has gone through at least three phases, is changing yet again. As is always the case such transitions present challenges as well as opportunities. All the prior phases of Africa’s history over the last five hundred years have been driven by external forces and promoted the interests of those forces. The crucial question, this time around, is whether Africa will seize the opportunity to shape and drive its own future to serve its own interests.

In the first phase during the slave trade Africans provide the labour that opened up the New World and supplied the commodities that led to

---

<sup>①</sup> EU-Africa Summit fails on trade. 10 Dec. 2007. [www.euractiv.com](http://www.euractiv.com).

<sup>②</sup> George Beckford, *Persistent Poverty: Underdevelopment in Plantation Economies*. London, Oxford University Press, 1972.

the industrialization of Europe. In this phase Africa not only lost most of its able-bodied population, but the continent was also depopulated thus losing the population pressure that could have provided the spurt for transformation a la Boserup.<sup>①</sup> To this day, one of the most contentious issues in assessing the impact of the slave trade particularly on Africa's development is the number of people pressed into slavery by the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Estimates range from ten to one hundred million.

Demographically, two things are clear however. One is that the so-called trade basically removed the young and able bodied people leaving the continent's demographic structure tilted towards the very young and the very old for a very long time. Secondly, the three centuries of slave trading decimated Africa's population. The continent's population growth remained either static or declined in both absolute (population size) and relative (share of world's population) terms. In terms of size Africa's population stagnated at around 100million over the period having lost nearly 100million to the slave trade and the violence it precipitated on the continent. It is estimated by some that for every one person transported into slavery sixteen were lost.<sup>②</sup> In relative terms, Africa's share of world population declined from nearly 15% in 1500 to approximately 7% around 1900. Socially, slave raiding and catching left a legacy of what Rodney describes as social violence which survives to this day. Politically, the slave trade, not only destroyed stable and expanding empires but it also perverted political authority. From protecting the people and promoting their interests African political systems instead, exposed their publics to external danger and predation. This affliction continues to reproduce itself and to haunt the post-colonial state. To the extent that the African state continues to serve external interests and to neglect internal needs this affliction is the source of endemic political instability and underlies legitimacy deficit of the state.

When the slave trade was no longer economically viable and politically sustainable, Europe embarked upon the scramble for Africa which culminated in the Berlin Conference and the partition of the continent in 1884. During the nearly eighty years of colonial occupation that followed, from being exported as slave labour, Africans were, through forced labour, made to produce industrial and food commodities

---

<sup>①</sup> Esther Boserup, *Population and Technological Change*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1981.

<sup>②</sup> Louise-Marie Diop-Maes, *Demography and History in Sub-saharan Africa*. [www.ankhonline.com/africa\\_population](http://www.ankhonline.com/africa_population).

for Europe on their own land. This period was in many respects even worse than the slave trade period. Population declined so precipitously that it prompted some observers of the situation to remark that “Africa was able to survive the three centuries of slavery but is likely to succumb to one century of colonization”<sup>①</sup> This condition has largely persisted over the post-independence period with Africa continuing to produce and export colonial crops and, almost invariably, failing to create ‘new economic space’ for itself.<sup>②</sup> Meanwhile, the traditional markets of the colonial crops in particular, have been collapsing either from oversupply, growth of substitutes or changing tastes in the European countries.

### **Africa’s Contemporary Threats**

The current global changes have also ushered in contradictions of their own. Perhaps the most glaring and disturbing contradiction arises from the fact that in the first and second phases Africans were required either as slave labour or as colonial corvee labour, respectively. In the current period, however, owing to technological advances, lack of skills and the overproduction or growth of substitutes of their traditional exports, African labour power is no longer required either to extract Africa’s resources or to supply agricultural and industrial commodities. It has become dispensable rendering Africans redundant in the global division of labour. The popular saying that “we produce what we do not consume and consume what we do not produce” is no longer tenable. We may be producing what we do not consume but we consume very little of what we don’t produce. This too has progressively assumed the form of ‘mitumba’ – the proverbial used products of all kinds that have become the hall mark of African markets.

Meanwhile Africa’s resources are becoming globally demanded and exploited at an inverse rate to the marginalization and steady exclusion of its people. The rampant plunder of Africa’s resources by external agents is rapidly becoming reminiscent of the plunder of its population during the slave trade. On the production front traditional agricultural export

---

<sup>①</sup> M. Reinhard and A. Armegaud, *Histoire generale de la polulation mondiale*. Paris, Montchrestien, 1961.

<sup>②</sup> The concept of ‘new economic space’ was coined by Arthur Lewis in dealing with the options available to primary commodity producers when they lose their traditional colonial markets. Sir W.A. Lewis, “The state of development theory”. *American Economic Review*. Vol.74, March, 1984.

markets are failing while the continent suffers from structural food shortages because of producing non-food commodities. In industry production is encumbered by high production costs, narrow domestic demand due to low incomes, and stringent export markets due to supply and quality conditions. Raw material production, including mining and logging, is rising under predatory conditions precipitating violent conflicts and generating low returns to the countries concerned. Capital intensive methods of production and demand for highly skilled labour mean low employment creation for manual as well as unskilled labour.

This situation engenders both positive and negative implications for Africa. On the negative side it exacerbates the crisis of unemployment in at least two senses. One sense is in absolute terms through the growing army of unemployed youth – structural unemployment. Secondly is the relative sense in which peasants continue to produce agricultural crops at prices far below their costs of production – relative unemployment. Either way this situation is largely responsible for the persistent poverty that has become the hallmark of the continent.

On the positive side, however, this process is shattering the long held illusion embedded in such arrangements as the ACP-EU Cotonou (formerly Lome) agreements that the colonial pattern of production and trade can bring about long-term transformation in Africa. By shattering this illusion it liberates the mind and opens it up to new ideas in contemplating the challenges and opportunities facing the continent. By making African labour redundant in the emerging international division of labour it frees it up making it potentially available, for the first time since the slave trade, to be re-allocated, reorganized and mobilized to stimulate, produce and supply domestic markets. Africa is being forced to reposition itself and create new roles for itself. In rising to this challenge, Africa will, for once, have to pose and answer the three basic economic questions: *What to produce; For whom to produce and How to produce.*

The marginalization of Africa also creates new opportunities for African countries including East Africa. As the bonds with the west become loosened Africa has at least two windows of opportunity. One is to embark seriously upon regional integration and continental unity realising that this is a necessary condition for transformation and reconstruction. This is a precondition for taking advantage of the second window and is the subject of the following section. The second window

is the opportunity to forge new relationships particularly with the rapidly growing economies of China and India. A symbiotic relationship can grow with these countries and create a new and different economic space. These countries have a high demand for raw materials which Africa still has while Africa suffers from a major deficit in technology. Rather than exporting their commodities in return for dollar earnings Africa could negotiate resource-for-technology deals with these countries. It is the combination of these two windows i.e. African integration and repositioning of Africa that holds the prospects for fundamental and sustainable transformation.

### **Africa-China relations**

China's relations with post-independence Africa have always aroused considerable anxiety from the west and stirred up some controversy both within Africa and between Africa and the West.<sup>①</sup> Western anxiety may partly arise from the symbolic image of China as a dragon. There exist two contradictory mythical images of a dragon held by the east and the west. In Chinese mythology the dragon is a "...a divine, mythical creature that brings good fortune, prosperity and bounty...eastern dragons [in general] are perceived as good and benevolent, western dragons are all fire and flinging their tails about and biting heads off".<sup>②</sup> More realistically however, western hostility stems from a suspicion of China's motives towards Africa – a traditional sphere of western influence and source of resources. In a nutshell, the question has been whether China, like the west itself, has its own designs for the exploitation of Africa or whether, as China would claim, "Sincerity, equality and mutual benefit, solidarity and common development-[these] are the principles guiding China-Africa exchange and cooperation and the driving force to lasting China-Africa relations"<sup>③</sup>

The controversy, particularly within Africa, has revolved around whether, regardless of China's own stated motives, Africa can forge a new and gainful relationship with China. Specifically the issue has been whether China provides a unique and productive opportunity for Africa

---

<sup>①</sup> An interesting on-line debate between Brautigam and Gaye under the title: "Is Chinese investment good for Africa? "Will be found on the Council for Foreign relations website [www.cfr.org/publications](http://www.cfr.org/publications).

<sup>②</sup> "Dragons: A history of mythology and beliefs", [www.darkfiredragons.com](http://www.darkfiredragons.com)

<sup>③</sup> "China's African Policy", January 2006. [www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng).

to realize its development aspirations as is anticipated by the joint statement that emerged from the Beijing Summit of Forum on China-Africa Cooperation in November 2006. Adopted by the leaders of 48 African countries and China, the statement proclaimed the establishment of “a new type of strategic partnership” featuring political equality and mutual trust, economic win-win cooperation and cultural exchanges”. The statement also stresses the point that China and Africa have common development goals and converging interests “...which offer a broad prospects for cooperation...between Africa and ‘the world’s largest developing country”<sup>①</sup>

In the early 1960s, as newly independent African countries groped around and reached out to China and the Soviet Union, in particular, in the quest to forge new relations with the outside world, the stock response, particularly from the West was that China was motivated by material and ideological interests and that Africa was being rather naïve in flirting with China – the dragon as serpent! This relationship, it was constantly argued, could not be good for Africa since not only would Africa be encroached upon by communism but also that it stood to lose its resources to the teeming millions of China. This was in the context of the cold war in which countries and regions were judged by the sphere of influence they belonged to – western (capitalist) or Eastern (socialist/communist).

Post-independence Africa was seen in the cold war as the new prize to be won by the east or lost by the west which had just reluctantly yielded to Africa’s demands for political independence but wanted to continue with economic domination. The underlying, though unstated, assumption by the west was that singly and collectively the African countries did not have interests of their own to protect or pursue. It was in this context that Kwame Nkrumah protested in exasperation making the now famous statement; “We face neither East nor West, we face forward” adding, in the same context, that it was far easier “...for the proverbial camel to pass through the needle’s eye, hump and all, than for an erstwhile colonial administration to give sound and honest counsel of a political nature to its liberated territory”. To the extent that the imagery of China as a dragon made any sense to them, the African countries, at least in the 1960s and 70s, subscribed to the eastern benevolent view.

---

<sup>①</sup> “Beijing Summit and Third Ministerial Conference of Forum on China-Africa Cooperation”. Beijing Summit adopts declaration, highlighting China-Africa strategic partnership, 2006-11-05. <http://english.focac.org>.

Despite the fact that African leaders have variously continued to protest and uphold Nkrumah's position, this patronizing attitude on the part of the west does not seem to have changed much over the years. With the end of the cold war and China's economic break through in the last decade, western attention has now been turned to China's strategic objectives in Africa. This is summed up by Derek Quinn of Radio Canada International: "As China gains more power in Africa, it will increasingly become a major power for countries in Africa and the Middle east to turn to for support against the United States and Europe. In establishing closer ties in Africa, China is setting up geopolitical alliances so it can become a global superpower.<sup>①</sup> More recently in the run up to the November 2006 summit Time asserted that: "The primary impetus for China's drive into Africa is the raging thirst for oil for its booming economy..."<sup>②</sup>

Again no credit is given to Africa for seeking, in its own interests, to form a strategic relationship with China. Responding more recently to the western claim that the development of China poses a threat to Africa, Tanzania's President Kikwete in a speech on the occasion of the visit of Premier Wen Jiabao to Tanzania in June, 2006, had the following to say:

*The Tanzanian and African people strongly oppose such a claim. In the past, China, though not rich helped the African people in our struggle for independence and liberation. Today, the developing China is again helping us to cope with the challenges brought about by globalization.*<sup>③</sup>

But it is not enough for Africa to defend China and to take its motives for granted. It would certainly be wrong to assess modern China's motives on the basis of the 'proletarian internationalism' of Maoist China. The more urgent task is for Africa to clearly define its interests with China and to pursue these interests with consistency and vigor. Just as China unveiled its 'Africa Strategy' in early 2006, so does Africa need to formulate an articulate a coherent and unified 'China Strategy' particularly focusing on the engaging China to bring about fundamental economic transformation in Africa.

## **Prospects and Conditions for China-Africa engagement**

<sup>①</sup> Radio Canada international, "China's Influence in Africa", July 18<sup>th</sup>, 2005.

<sup>②</sup> *Time*, Fri. Nov. 30, 2006.

<sup>③</sup> Premier Wen Jiabao Holds talks with Tanzanian Presedent Jakaya Kikwete. 2006/06/23, www.fmprc.gov.cn..

China's renewed and growing engagement with Africa will remain rather enigmatic for quite a while. That is because quite clearly China's emerging policy towards Africa is progressively acquiring a realist image in which her interests will be the major driving force. This does not mean however that China's interests and Africa's interests are diametrically opposed. They can be mutually reinforcing such that the 'win-win' outcomes espoused by China's policy statements are achievable. This will depend much more on objective conditions rather than subjective conditions though the latter in the form of 'political will' on the part of China, will play a major part. On the whole on a scale of threats and opportunities China represents more opportunity than threat to Africa in general and Tanzania, in particular. Through the China-Africa Cooperation Forum (FOCAC) African countries are coming closer together with the opportunity to form a strong united forum of their own in dealing with China. This is certainly a more coherent and newer opportunity than Nepad or Cotonou's EPAs.

The objective conditions include but are not confined to the practical circumstances or imperatives which necessitate or in any way conduce this kind of positive-sum game. Some of these conditions are the following;

- China and Africa were roughly at the same level of development until recently when China made an economic leap forward. Africa has a lot to learn from the Chinese path and hopefully, China is keen to share its remarkable experience through training opportunities in China.
- China's demand for resources which is growing can be turned into an opportunity for Africa to industrialise Africa. The level of technology particularly the labour intensity in Chinese production is certainly more appropriate. This creates an opportunity for resources-for-technology barter arrangements between Africa and China. This can create more employment and create more opportunities for artisanal miners, for example.
- This kind of technology transfer can also be done through resource-for-technology barter exchanges bypassing the traditional trade with hard currency with its constraints.
- China offers Africa an opportunity to diversify its composition of production in manufacturing and agriculture using its massive market size. The possibility of a new division of labour exists.

- China needs Africa as an ally in the struggle against US hegemony. A stronger ally, i.e. less subservient to the US is preferable. This is particularly the case with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the current counter-terrorism crusade.

The subjective conditions revolve around what Africa, in particular, must fulfill to realize its aspirations in the relationship. Some are the following:
- Political will which is well grounded in the recognition and commitment to mutual interest and trust between Africa and China. Since political will is a function of interests it will be necessary for Africa and China to identify and negotiate their interest with openness and honesty particularly with the view not simply of promoting trade but industrial transformation in Africa.
- The second condition is the capacity to take risks. Africa as a whole has tended to exhibit risk aversive behavior when it comes to braving the frontiers of diversifying their economies away from traditional patterns of trade and investment. Whereas it is clear that centuries of linkage to western markets have not brought about prosperity to Africa, it remains less clear to Africa that China offers a unique opportunity to transform its economy and break away from structural dependence.
- The third condition is the necessity of African countries to define their strategic goals vis-à-vis china together. China is a mammoth market with many potential opportunities but so does it entail a number of potential pitfalls. China is too big for individual African countries to gain from the relationship. The China-Africa Forum should not be conceived simply in terms of structuring china-africa relations but also in terms of Africa collectively defining and articulating its strategic goals with China. Large scale industrial, irrigation or hydro power projects will vitally depend on economies of scale. In this sense China-Africa relations could accelerate the long stalled African integration project.
- The fourth condition is to develop a sense of African resource nationalism a la Venezuela under Hugo Chavez in response to its own economic transformation needs and China's resource hunger. In this connection Africa needs to prepare a comprehensive resource

- survey, exploitation and utilization plan akin to that proposed by Cheik Anta Diop in the early 1970s.<sup>①</sup>
- The fifth condition is to marshal strategic economic information on global traditional and emerging markets mapping out Africa's current position and role in the international division labour and seeking to carve out a new economic space that would reposition Africa in the emerging international division of labour.

---

<sup>①</sup> Cheik Anta Diop, *Black Africa: The Economic and Cultural Basis for a Federated Republic*, Westport, Conn., Lawrence Hill & Co., 1974.