

EU, China and Africa; The Sudanese Experience

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July 8, 2007 — In the Sudan Tribune of 29th. June 2007, it was mentioned that the **European Union aims to set up a strategic partnership** with Africa to meet the continent's most important needs and match growing Chinese influence, the officials said.

I remember I was attending a conference in Johannesburg in October 2005 with the title "China in Africa; Mercantilist Predator or Development Partner?". The conference was supported by the South African Institute for International Affairs, Institute for International Dialogue of South Africa and Fredrich Egbert Foundation. For them I was extremely grateful because it gave me a very interesting dimension of how China is having its influence on Africa and on some of the African intellectuals (!!)and also gave me the chance to produce a small book in which I have made a comparison between China of Chairman Mao and present day China that had thrown away its ideological and moral gown and entered into the world market in mid seventies and still keeping the influence of its Communist Party.

At that conference I have presented a paper trying to compare between two situations in Sudan's experience with China. In 1976 while working as Economic Advisor to the late Minister of Finance and ex-President of the African Development Bank (Mamoun Bheiry) who asked me to undertake a study in which I should try to explain why the Sudanese people are so much infatuated and crazy about the Chinese performance in Sudan specially while working hand in hand with the Sudanese in the various development projects .The article which I have prepared was later published in 'Sudan Notes and Records', No.57,Vol.LVIII,1976, University of Khartoum and present day relations between Sudan and China. The difference is unbelievable as will be explained. In that conference I ended my presentation by saying that 'China became an elephant because of the stupidity and narrow -mindedness of other elephants!'. I remember I was asked by some one probably Dr. Elisabeth Economy of the Foreign Relations in New York, as to who are the other elephants. I remember I replied by saying that the person

who asked is intelligent enough to know and added who else other than USA and Europe!!

Now the questions that one wishes to ask is first: why was China able to out compete both Europe and USA in gaining the hearts and minds of the people of Africa? Second is all that is done by China in Africa at the moment fully acceptable to Africans? We will try to answer these two questions reflecting on the experience of the Sudan leaving other issues for some future opportunity.

This concept of non-interference in the internal affairs of countries with which China developed its relation with is a concept that was developed at the time of late Chairman Mao. Such a concept was very clear and direct that China had nothing to do with the political shape of such countries, whether they were adopting a socialist, capitalist or Islamist political system. They always concentrated on the economic and trade and aid relations. The Chinese knew very well that any imposition of any kind of conditions prior to aid or trade might not be acceptable to the leaders of these countries. They were after spreading their ideology in these countries through their unusual behaviour when they are constructing projects or provided aid and trade. They were at that time using both ideology and morals that is why they kept a very interesting behaviour of dedication, self denial and respect for peoples culture and high respect for the laws of the land they worked in. Even such commitment used to be included in the agreements made with every country including the Sudan. They worked in an unusual partnership teaching the Sudanese the various crafts etc .At that time Sudan was under a military government headed by Nimeiri. He visited China in early seventies and was able to develop a good relation with the Chinese leadership headed by Mao. They were even extremely honest in their advice to ex-President Nimeiri when he requested them to help Sudan explore its oil potential. The Chinese told Nimeri at that time that it will be better if Sudan resorted to the USA which possesses the required technology and financial abilities which China did not have. One should remember that this advice was given to Sudan at the time of the Cold War. That also explains why Nimeiri resorted to the USA for a company which will explore oil for Sudan. It was Chevron which was able to prove the presence of oil in Sudan. Unfortunately and as a result of the civil war in South Sudan Chevron had to close down and the oil wells remained sealed until the starting of oil exploration in 1999 by the present government. This advice made the Sudanese authorities to have considerable confidence in the Chinese. In addition to the assistance given in the seventies which was more than any other Socialist country and the dedicated behaviour and training of the Sudanese in the various projects (Friendship Hall, Hantoub Bridge, Medical help etc.) made the Sudanese people more crazy about these wonderful people who bring the assistance, build projects with all self denial and high integrity, train the

Sudanese and go back to China leaving behind them an unusual impression and feeling of an honest friendship. When I was visiting the site of the present Friendship Hall during construction in 1976, I asked a Chinese engineer as to why he had requested a Sudanese engineer, his counterpart, to dismantle and reassemble a huge sound machine three times without allowing him to go to his family? The Chinese engineer replied :Oh this is a good question, because when we go back home (China),we do not want you to bring an imperialist engineer to repair the sound machine!! They did the same when they were building the railroad for Tanzania. In the case of Sudan there were two additional historical factors which were the Chinese belief that the Sudanese had revenged for them by killing General Gordon of Khartoum, who gave the Chinese a hard time during the Opium War and, the second that Sudan was one of the first countries in Africa to recognize China's entry in the United Nations in 1959.Things remained at a low level until 1989 when the present Islamic government came in 1989. In fact in the year 1989 Sudan exported to China only US \$0.9 million!!'

When Sudan was boycotted by the West and some Arab countries because of its position in the Gulf war when Saddam invaded Kuwait, the Sudan tried first to persuade Chevron to come back and the government promised to provide it with all the necessary protection, Chevron refused because it could not have come to Sudan in defiance of the boycott rules by the USA government .In fact all bilateral assistance (around US400-500 million annually)which used to serve as a counterpart to the Sudanese budget from drawn from Western and some Arab assistance dried down by 1992.Therefore ,Sudan had to go East and seek the help of China ,Malaysia etc. because the Sudan's finances were in an acute shape. Again China came in with its full force not giving any thought as to the previous advice given Chairman Mao to ex-President Nimeri or who was at the helm in Sudan. Therefore while the West led by the USA and Europe cut off their aid relations with Sudan, China was more than ready to come in without any preconditions. The same happened after 1959 when the government at that time supported the entry of China in the UN. When Nimeiri executed the leaders of the Sudan Communist Party (SCP) in1971),China still continued to deal with the Sudan. Even when the government turned Islamist, China continued transacting with the present government and was very instrumental in making together with the other members of the oil consortium the Sudan an oil exporting country for the first time in its recent history. If USA and Europe closed their doors in the face of the Sudanese (sanctions, boycott etc.) shall they wait until both USA and Europe (particularly USA) are both convinced that Sudan had become a good obedient boy?!!

As to the second question ,is all that China is doing for Sudan and even Africa acceptable ?

Since the adoption of the economic reforms in China in mid seventies China had become another place, another country, another policy. In a paper by Professor Suisheng Zhao of the University of Denver, USA ,presented to the Johannesburg conference referred to above ,he summarized this change by saying that;

"The peaceful rise concept is in line with China's pragmatic engagement strategy that has taken shape since the early 1990.In the early years of the PRC, Chinese foreign policy was made mostly based on communist ideology principles. Pragmatic calculation of power interest were relegated to a secondary position. These ideology/morality driven policies, however caused more harm than good to the communist regime. After the inception of Deng's market oriented economic reform, the emphasis on economic modernization and opening up to the outside world have propelled China's foreign policy towards pragmatism. The importance of ideology/moral principles has dramatically lost salience to the motivation of power politics/national interest" unquote.

Sudan's recent relationship was activated after China had gone through this change i.e. its entry into the market system after more than fifty years of isolation. Moreover it became a very effective member of the international community and a member of the Security Council with a Veto right. China took the chance of being invited to explore Sudan's oil potential. Although China came within an oil Consortium, but remained the senior partner. When it came to the oil business in Sudan China was already growing at about 10 % annual growth and hungry for every kind of raw material specially oil because its own reserves dwindled. In fact Sudan became a spring board for China because after Sudan, China moved to Libya, Algeria, Mauritania, Nigeria Guinea etc. China purchased about 81 % of Sudan's crude during the years 2001-2004.Now China is Sudan major trading partner after this position alternated between the EU and Saudi Arabia, and maybe the second after South Africa. Sudan exports in 2006 went up to US \$ 4.2 billion representing 75 % of Sudan's total exports. Total exports of oil amounted to US \$ 5.1 billion out of which China got US \$ 4.1 b, 82.3 % of total exports of oil. Imports from China reached US \$ 1.7 billion out of a total imports of US\$ 8.1 billion. Therefore the trade balance is in favour of Sudan, but China seems to press hard to increase its exports to Sudan to reduce the trade balance. Sudan's imports from other Asia amounted to US\$ 2.7 in the same year 2006.

The number of Chinese workers in the various projects in Sudan are no less than 100,000 persons. The nature of this labour is very disciplined giving the impression to some that they must be originally from an organized force. The way they sit in aircrafts carrying them from or to China and the way they move when they arrive Sudan indicate to that but it cannot be proved.. Unlike in the seventies when the Chinese used to train the

Sudanese and go back to China, this present labour is very keen to remain in the country in many cases by avoiding to train the Sudanese .They are usually happy when Sudanese leave their jobs in any project, because they immediately try to replace them with Chinese. They have their own Travel Agency thus depriving the local Sudanese travel agencies, who pay taxes.

Recent news indicates that China Airline will start a direct flight from China to Khartoum, thus depriving many Arab carriers as well as Ethiopian Airline from carrying this cascade of Chinese labour. The movement seems to be very significant such that Qatar Airways had employed Chinese hostesses in addition to adopting the Chinese language in their flights to China!! They also have established their own motels to host their incoming staff and labour until such time they move to the field or their place of work .

Some have opened shops in which they sell Chinese goods cheaper than what is imported by Sudanese traders. Many traditional Sudanese traders have stopped dealing in Chinese goods because they cannot compete with the Chinese traders. Some of the Chinese diplomats who are trusted by their governments come back indicating that they have credit facilities in billions of US Dollars which they are ready to provide to the Sudanese authorities. When some Sudanese contractors win certain contracts Chinese companies immediately try to take over such contracts from the Sudanese contractors. Some accept to save themselves the trouble and some refuse. Even a good number of Chinese labour who come to Sudan do not abide by the immigration laws for the lame reason that they do not speak the language of the country This is being taken care of now for all foreign labour including the Chinese. On top of all this they are (according to a very reliable resource) contemplating to establish their own town in the capital Khartoum which means that the Chinese are intent to stay in Sudan for good. It will not be surprising to see Chinese towns mushrooming over the Sudanese space in the coming years!!!

As for Africa there are many stories as to how the Chinese are gradually taking jobs, replacing the locals ,undermining domestic contractors and paving their way to obtain what they wish to grab since they have a different understanding of what the market system is about !! Coming out to the world after more than fifty years of ideological rule could confuse the human mind which had been closed for decades.

But why are people in Sudan and also in Africa patient about such practices?

First of all not everyone knows the damage that the Chinese presence is doing (to environment etc.) except for those who work closely with them. Moreover, they usually

keep a relatively low profile and when they happen to be moving, they do that in groups to safeguard themselves against any hazard. But the Sudanese are very peaceful people. The Sudanese might not like their behaviour which is in full contrast to their behaviour in the seventies before the introduction of the economic reforms, but they do not molest the Chinese. The view of a good number is that Sudan had no choice but to go East and make friends with Asia since the Americans and the Europeans cannot throw away their upper look at their ex colonies and the people who live there. Moreover they are not aware of their needs and always want to impose their own ideas and values ignoring local cultures and beliefs which were in existence long before the USA was discovered by Colombus. Therefore, Sudan and other African countries were forced to go East and would not have waited until they are in the good books of USA and Europe. This reminds me of an incident which is illustrative of locals' morals .In 1988 when Sudan suffered from a very severe drought specially in Western Sudan, USA under late President Reagan sent a sizeable relief to the Sudan. In that very year a good number of newly born children were named after Reagan! Naming a child after some body is usually a sign of great appreciation and respect.

Surely it is not all well with the Chinese , but the reluctance of USA and Europe to deal with the Africans on the basis of conditionality and paternalism are the main reasons why China is gaining ground and USA and Europe losing their place in the minds and hearts of the simple African people. No one wise government wishes to put all its eggs in one basket only when it is forced to. There is no denial that the statement made by the Secretary For European Affairs, Manuel Lobo Antunes is most welcome, because most African countries including the Sudan are after a sort of balance between East and West and a stable relation with all the world. Although this realization by EU came a bit late, but better late than never. However ,it will not be an easy task to come out with a strategic partnership, since China itself is not without its own designs and strategies in Africa. It is planning to commit many African countries to sign many agreements accepting Chinese help and assistance to reform almost all existing ministries ,institutions ,universities, the military, police etc. in the African countries. This is very serious because it seems that China is not only content with insuring the smooth flow of energy and raw materials to its ever hungry economy ,but it is hoping to help restructuring institutions in order to be able to have a very strong hold on the decision making process in African countries. This is a situation where China is trying to succeed. If it did then I would venture to describe it as "voluntary colonialism"!! The lack of attention to the former colonies by Europeans is a very very grave mistake. One hopes that the statement made by Mr. Lobo of the EU will be taken seriously by the EU. Last but not least can one naively hope for a better Europe, a better China or even a better USA?!!!

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