



No.277 / January 2009

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IIS Discussion Paper No. 277

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FLEXIGEMONY AND FORCE IN CHINA'S GEOECONOMIC STRATEGY IN AFRICA: SUDAN AND ZAMBIA COMPARED*

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Abstract: *The Chinese government and its companies have dramatically increased their presence in Africa in the last decade. There has been much media interest and commentary on the impacts of China on governance in Africa, as it is often seen to be strengthening authoritarian states such as Sudan and Zimbabwe (Arrighi 2007). However, China is also engaging with more democratic states and spaces, such as Zambia. This paper seeks to explore the impacts of China's increased engagement with Africa on governance through a comparative case study of two contrasting cases: Sudan and Zambia, using the concept of flexigemony. Contrary to popular perception, China has sometimes been a moderating force in Sudan, while provoking violence in Zambia.*

China's rapid economic expansion over the past three decades has attracted increasing academic, media and government attention. As China has moved from being an exporter of raw materials and minerals to a large-scale importer, its global resource diplomacy has attracted particular interest; it now consumes one third of global steel output, 40% of cement and 26% of the world's copper. Crucially, China's trade with developing countries grew 88% faster than its trade with developed ones from 1999 to 2003 (Eisenman, Heginbotham et al. 2008). However, relatively little critical, analytical and systematic case-study based work has analysed the governance implications of this phenomenon.

Recent influential books identify China's rise as of epochal and global significance (see Arrighi, 2007; Kurlantzick, 2007). However, this paper argues that characterizations of China's global resource diplomacy as a form of Nyeian "soft power", *a la* Kurlantzick, are problematic for a variety of reasons. For instance, it is not at all clear that China's global resource diplomacy relies solely on "soft power", as allies often receive military equipment training and support; sometimes used to deadly effect, as in Sudan. The Chinese state certainly does not shy away from engaging with autocratic

states, when material interests dictate (Eisenman 2007). As Chinese Communist Party rule is dependent on economic growth and accumulation for regime legitimisation it is authoritarian, and consequently a “no questions asked policy” is adopted towards suppliers of critical natural resources, underpinned by mercantilism, that ironically makes it a ‘purer’ form of a capitalist state than the US, for example. As an authoritarian state itself, China seems to find relations with other authoritarian states, which keep themselves closer to China, less problematic than with more democratic states.

Through two African-based case studies of Sudan and Zambia, this article seeks to reframe the debate on China’s governance impact in Africa. We characterise China’s resource or geo-economic strategy in Africa as being embodied by different strands of engagement and modes of governance: clientelism, proxy force and hegemony. Together these constitute an incipient new form of what we term “flexigemony”, whereby Chinese actors adapt their strategies geographically to suit the particular histories and geographies of the African states with which they engage. This new configuration, of course, is unstable and has its own internal contradictions, which emerge in different spatial contexts. For example, in Sudan the Chinese government has recently been active in attempting to broker a peace deal in Darfur, whereas in previously peaceful Zambia, increased Chinese investment and migration has generated riots, strikes and shootings. The apparent contrast between war-torn Sudan and “peaceful” Zambia is then interrogated to show how greater Chinese investment in resource extraction has led to outbreaks of, or a renewal of, violence in both cases. Chinese strategies of engagement then are informed by the necessity to moderate the impacts of resource-based capital accumulation, which in other contexts has generated “ungovernability” (Watts 2007).

“Soft Power” or Flexigemony: Strategy for an Emerging Presence in Africa

With the end of the Cold War, the USA appeared as the world’s dominant power, militarily, if not economically. In concert with its European allies, it promoted through the international financial institutions and through its bilateral diplomacy and aid programmes a particular neoliberal normalizing vision of what constituted “good governance” in African states. The details of its modalities have been described elsewhere in detail (Craig and Porter 2006). The model essentially comprised a free

market economy and liberal democratic polity. This hegemonic geopolitical and economic vision was informed by both material interests and ideals. A free market economy allowed for penetration by Western capital and continued resource exportation, while liberal democracy was seen to prevent “excessive” government intervention in the economy (Joseph, 1999). While the Western powers had supported brutal autocrats, such as Mobutu in Zaire, during the Cold War as anti-communist bulwarks, during the 1990s their supposed ‘natural preference for democracy’ reasserted itself (Sandbrook 1993). While this Western reform programme encountered limited acceptance and also resistance (Van de Walle 2001), its overall impacts were to reinscribe Western dominance on the continent. This presented a challenge for Chinese actors in asserting their presence and influence (and securing resource access) as the 2000s progressed.

In Western media accounts China’s “march into Africa” is often presented as a threat to both Western interests and African populations (Mawdsley 2008). However, China’s trade with Africa accounts for only 3% of its total international trade and its expansion in Africa is part of its broader global expansion (Kurlantzick, 2007). Nonetheless, Africa is perhaps more important than suggested by the global trade statistics, with Angola being China’s single largest supplier of oil in some years. While the US imports only 19% of its oil from Africa, the figure for China is 31%, making it of far greater strategic importance for that country (Taylor 2009). For Africa’s part, Chinese involvement in Africa is arguably the most momentous development on the continent since the end of the Cold War.

According to Tony Blair (2008), over the course of the last few years China has gone from a ‘standing start’ to being the most influential country on the continent (Blair 2008). Kurlantzick (2007: xi) attributes this to the fact that ‘in a short period of time, China appears to have created a systematic, coherent soft power strategy, and a set of power tools to implement that strategy’. Kurlantzick then goes on to assert however that “soft power” for the Chinese is different as ‘it means anything outside of the military and security realm, including not only popular culture and public diplomacy but also more coercive economic and diplomatic levers like aid and investment and participation in multilateral organizations’ (p. 6). The basis for this exceptionalism, or who is defining soft power in this way is left unexplained. Rather, it would appear that the Chinese use,

for the most part, hard economic power softly. This more closely approximates Joseph Nye's more recent formulation of "smart power" (Nye 2008). However, China has also been willing to use its military technology and capabilities in Africa, through arming clients, such as Sudan. Hence we argue that the concept of flexigemony is better suited to understand the way in which the Chinese have emerged from "under the radar" to become, arguably, some of the most powerful actors on the African continent.

China's strategy has been guided by the philosophy of *heping juequi* or peaceful rise. This is perhaps the only option for China to seek space in the international system, given the overwhelming preponderance of American military force, as the US now spends 45% of the world's total military spending (Stockholm Peace Research Institute 2005). According to the Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jibao, the country's ascent in the international hierarchy would 'not come at the cost of any other country, will not stand in the way of any other country, nor pose a threat to any other country' (quoted in Kurlantzick, 2007: 38). This pragmatic approach sought then not to transform other countries in the model of China (*contra* the neoconservative vision in the US) but rather work through and with existing social relations and formations. Whereas neoliberal "virtualism" (Carrier and Miller 1998) sought to make the real world of existing social relations conform to the ideal, Chinese interests dictate a more bottom-up approach, using existing, and creating new, networks of influence.

One of the reasons why state elites have so eagerly received the Chinese in Africa is that their involvement supports prevailing distributions of power and patterns of neopatrimonial governance (Clapham 2007). Thus, paradoxically while seeking to displace Western "hegemonism" China is, in part, a *status quo* power in terms of domestic governance patterns and modalities in Africa (Taylor 2007). Whereas former President of the World Bank James Wolfensohn (1998, 11, quoted in Slater 2004) argued that in today's global economy it was "the *totality* of change in a country that matters" (original emphasis), the Chinese government is very much less prescriptive about domestic governance (and disorder) arrangements and has shown itself to work with and through both highly authoritarian states, such as Sudan and Zimbabwe, and more democratic polities and spaces such as Zambia.

Rather than seeking a societal transformation, which is unlikely to be achieved in any event, the Chinese focus on two core aims: natural resource exports and expansion of recognition for the one China policy. There are of course other subsidiary motivations and dimensions to Chinese geoeconomic and geopolitical strategy in Africa, which have been described elsewhere (Carmody and Owusu 2007).

The key elements of Chinese flexigemony in Africa might be summarized as:

- In line with the global regime of flexible accumulation (Harvey, 1989) and Beijing's "go global" or "go out" policy for its companies, announced in 2003, it prioritizes the economic over political and security concerns.
- It uses a combination of economic, political and military levers in flexible strategic combinations to ensure continued raw material supplies.
- It does not use direct military force to secure interests, but rather proxy sub-contracting and the use of direct economic power.
- It is domestic and international sovereignty-strengthening for partner states: that is to say it is not normalizing, but works through extant institutions and diverse state-society formations.
- It is reinforced by frequent high-level state visits as a form of public diplomacy and to build inter-state trust in line with the Five Principles discussed later (political "coming out", as a compliment to economic "going out").

We aim to demonstrate the above with reference to two case studies in Africa.

Chinese and Sudan: Obstruction, But Also Evolution

Chinese companies are now Sudan's largest investors and according to a study by PFC Strategic Studies, the Sudanese government could collect as much as \$30 billion or more in total oil revenue by 2012 (*Washington Post*, December 23, 2004). The bulk of this will come from Chinese-operated oil wells; China currently imports 60 percent of Sudan's oil output. Given the extent of Chinese sunk costs in Sudan, it is arguably over an (oil) barrel in its dealings with Khartoum. Indeed, Beijing's relationship with Khartoum has become a major cause célèbre and the campaign to link Chinese support for Khartoum and what is going on in Darfur with the 2008 Beijing Olympics was perhaps the most public

manifestation of this. In turn, a full-scale foreign policy to play up China's contribution to conflict resolution in Africa took place in response.

Analysis of the conflict in Darfur has been covered in depth elsewhere: suffice to say that the UN Security Council has been involved in trying to find a resolution to the crisis. For a long time, China sought to hamper or undermine such efforts. However, this has somewhat changed in recent years as Chinese flexigemony has developed. Indeed, Beijing's obstructionist policy began to *tentatively* shift from 2005 onwards. For instance, the Security Council passed three key Resolutions in March 2005, where 'the Chinese representative [began to strike] a more conciliatory tone and showed willingness to discuss the resolutions provided that the integrity of the country [Sudan] would be guaranteed' (*New Vision* [Kampala], June 16, 2007). Resolution 1593 (adopted on March 31, 2005) referred the situation in Darfur to the International Criminal Court (ICC). The resolution was adopted under Chapter VII of the UN Charter authorizing the coercive measures for non-compliance. China abstained, but noted that it 'believed that the perpetrators must be brought to justice'. Interestingly, this did not please Khartoum as the Sudanese second vice president Ali Osman Mohamed Taha had told Sudan's cabinet he had had Chinese assurances the resolution would not be passed (*Reuters* [Khartoum], December 17, 2005). China's 'abstention rather than a veto embarrassed Taha within the government' and 'the crowd following the ICC referral criticized China for not blocking the resolution' (*Sudan Tribune* [Paris], January 15, 2007).

However, Beijing's overall position of either abstaining from UN Resolutions or seeking to water them down provoked a grass-roots movement, primarily in the United States, that called for a campaign to highlight China's complicity in the conflict in Darfur. This was then directly linked to Beijing's hosting of the 2008 Olympics, with campaigners re-naming the event the "Genocide Olympics". Editorials in the United States in late 2006 began declaring that 'The Chinese leadership must be forced to make a choice: work now to halt genocide in Darfur, or see the Olympic Games used, at every turn, as a means of highlighting the Chinese role in sustaining the ultimate human crime' (*Sunday Boston Globe* [Boston], December 17, 2006).

Frightened by the possibility that China's "coming out" party might be tarnished, Beijing embarked on a major public relations exercise to convince the world of its

positive role in Sudan. This was particularly spurred on when, in April 2007 the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Joseph Biden and 96 other Senators wrote a letter to Hu Jintao calling on China to use its influence to help end the violence in Darfur. Soon after, on May 10, 2007, the Chinese Government appointed Ambassador Liu Guijin as the special representative of African affairs, with a particular remit for Darfur. According to one Chinese informant, it was the Senate letter regarding Darfur and the Olympics that was the tipping point. China's foreign policy is still predicated on essentially state-to-state relations and whilst the "Genocide Olympics" campaign remained nongovernmental it was felt it could be ignored. However, once this drew in legislators and the American state apparatus, Beijing felt compelled to move on the issue.¹

Meanwhile, the Chinese media began to publicise claims that Beijing had played a constructive role in Sudan, with the *Beijing Review* typically declaring that 'Since the Darfur issue emerged, China has been in constant communication with the relevant people, playing mediator, promoting dialogue between top leaders, dispatching envoys, discussing the problem in the UN assembly' (*Beijing Review* (Beijing), June 7, 2007). Those involved in the Darfur issue at the diplomatic level largely saw these developments as positive. Certainly, Western diplomats began to assert that there had been a sea-change in China's position. Thus American special envoy to Sudan, Andrew Natsios, told a Senate panel that China 'have been largely supportive of our efforts to resolve the Darfur situation' (State Department, 2007). The then British Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett joined in, asserting that 'On Sudan, I know there has been some criticism of China, but actually China has played really quite a positive role, particularly in the negotiation of the Darfur peace agreement' (*Financial Times* (London), May 18, 2007).

A Change in China's Position?

It is absolutely true that China began to publicly advise Sudan to be more "flexible" in accepting UN peace support personnel under the "AU/UN hybrid" proposal. And it began to give briefings on how much of a positive role China had been playing in Sudan. It is quite clear that as 2007 developed, Beijing began to be ever more sensitive of accusations

¹ Interview with He Wenping, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing, China, September 18, 2007.

that it had colluded with a tyrannical regime. As a result, behind the scenes Chinese diplomats sought to move Khartoum to a more accommodatory stance on Darfur and outside involvement. Yet, China has at all times been hidebound by its intimate economic relationship with Khartoum and the billions of dollars worth of investment in Sudan, as well as the position that ‘China does not support bad governments. What it does is engage with them but does not tell them what to do’.² This means that Beijing is limited in the pressure it is able and/or willing to place on the Sudanese government.

However, Chinese diplomacy vis-à-vis Darfur is not simply about oil (although that is a major part of the equation). Critics of China might like to consider that, as far as the Chinese are concerned, there are important principles at stake in dealing with Khartoum. Chinese foreign policy remains wedded to the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence, formulated in 1954 and setting out the guidelines for Beijing’s foreign policy and its relations with other countries.³ These Five Principles are namely, mutual respect for each other’s territorial integrity; non-aggression; non-interference in each other’s internal affairs; equality and mutual benefit; and peaceful coexistence (see Taylor, 1998). From the Chinese position, ‘human rights are something covered by the sovereignty of a country. A country’s sovereignty is the foremost collective human right...And sovereignty is the guarantor of human rights’ (*Xinhua*, December 12, 2005). China is a state generally defensive of traditional beliefs about sovereignty when events deemed by policymakers to be threatening Chinese interests are occurring. Certainly a belief that non-intervention in the domestic affairs of states is vital for preserving international peace and stability (i.e. the Westphalian peace) has underpinned Beijing’s international relations and is enshrined in the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence. More recently these principles have been updated through the “28-character guidepost” stated by Deng in 1989 – the so-called “New Security Concept” of China’s peaceful rise. The twenty eight characters were based on old Chinese sayings: “watch and analyse developments calmly; secure our own positions, deal with change with confidence; conceal our capacities; be good at keeping a low profile; never become the leader and make some contributions” (Zhao 1996; Teng 2007). These characters fit well with the idea of

² Interview with Chinese diplomat, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, May 15, 2007.

³ Interview with Acting Head, Political Affairs Section, Chinese Embassy, Windhoek, Namibia, August 13, 2006.

flexigemony where power and leadership in international relations are obscured through the idea of South-South cooperation and “win-win” scenarios.

China has traditionally maintained that state sovereignty and the principle of non-interference must serve as the basis for international relations between states, though it needs emphasizing that this position is not static—as Beijing’s movement on Darfur demonstrates. China has customarily emphasized the sovereignty of states in resolving issues amongst themselves also because of Beijing’s sensitivity to possible outside involvement in affairs perceived by China as strictly domestic matters, such as Tibet and Taiwan.⁴ The avoidance of establishing international precedents that may be later utilized in attempting to deal with China’s “domestic” issues is a policy thus scrupulously pursued by Beijing, even though it occasionally invites cynicism from non-Chinese observers.

However, it needs emphasizing that rhetoric contained in official Chinese pronouncements ‘has led many observers to reach the premature conclusion that Beijing opposes all forms of intervention and is wedded to an antiquated approach to sovereignty’ (Carlson, 2006:218). In fact, it is possible to discern a subtle shift in China’s position regarding state sovereignty,⁵ in keeping with the flexigemony concept outlined above. Four official guidelines on legitimate intervention now dictate Chinese positions: intervention must first proceed with respect for the concerned state’s sovereignty; United Nations’ authorization must be gained; the invitation of the concerned state must be secured; and force should only ever be used when all other possible options have been proven ineffective (Carlson, 2004). This set of necessary conditions demonstrates that there has been movement in Beijing from a previous hard stand on state sovereignty and noninterference (Taylor, 2008). Darfur is a case in point.

According to UN law, the Westphalian notion of state sovereignty (which China has long promoted in its foreign policy) ‘shall not prejudice the application of enforcement measures under Chapter VII’ (Article 2 IV). This is a problem for Beijing, as Darfur exemplifies. In the post-Brahimi Report era,⁶ Chinese foreign policy vis-à-vis peace operations has had to face a number of other thorny issues, particularly as the peace

⁴ Interview with Shu Zhan, Chinese ambassador, Asmara, Eritrea, June 29, 2006.

⁵ Interview with He Wenping, CASS, Beijing, China, September 18, 2007.

⁶ This report undertook a comprehensive review of UN peacekeeping operations.

support aspect of peace operations is a quite novel type of peacekeeping (Bellamy and Williams, 2004). For the Chinese, traditional peacekeeping 'is organized and deployed directly by the UN *with the consent of all parties*' [emphasis added] (Zhang Li, 2003: 209). This has had implications for the China's reactions to attempts to mediate in the Darfur issue and the material aspect i.e. oil is not the only explanatory variable in accounting for China's policy stance regarding the ongoing crisis in Sudan (Fitzgerald 2008b). Yet movement on the issue does reflect flexibility in Chinese foreign policy that many observers have previously overlooked.

Chinese Flexipower and its Limits: The Zambian Case

While Chinese engagement and investment in Sudan have attracted international attention, the increased Chinese footprint in Zambia has also proven to be particularly controversial, domestically in particular. Consequently Chinese foreign policy in Zambia has also seen evolution in recent years.

Zambia's experience with World Bank/International Monetary Fund structural adjustment during the 1990s was a painful and immiserating one, marked by deindustrialization which, according to a World Bank official, was the outcome of 'mark my words, the dogma of liberalization'⁷. This provided an opening for an alternative economic philosophy and there are now discussions of a return to (some) development planning in Zambia, with the publication of the Fifth National Development Plan in 2006, rather than a new World Bank-inspired Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) (Larmer and Fraser 2007). In part this reorientation of development policy is a response to public pressure over China's role in the continent and the national division of rents from natural resources.

Zambia is the third largest recipient of Chinese foreign investment in Africa and the nineteenth largest in the world (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development 2007). China is now the world's largest consumer of copper, and consequently Zambia is of significant strategic importance. There are now an estimated 200 Chinese companies operating in Zambia (Bastholm and Kragelund 2007) and the Chinese government is building a US\$800m multi-facility economic zone in the

⁷ Interview with World Bank official, Lusaka, January 10th, 2007.

Copperbelt; one of five officially declared Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in Africa. The special economic zone (SEZ) in Zambia is partly to offset criticism about the effects of Chinese imports on local manufacturers, although it is to be anchored by a copper smelter, reducing transportation costs to China. Furthermore like some of the other smaller “undeclared” zones in post-conflict countries such as Sierra Leone and Liberia, the zone in Zambia can take advantages of the market opportunities offered in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Certainly, the Chinese presence in conflict and post-conflict situations around the continent grants Chinese actors first mover advantages in these “frontier markets” (Child and White, 2005). Consequently, the Chembe bridge project between Zambia and the DRC is to be constructed by a Chinese company (RoZ, 2006) and fifty Chinese companies have pledged investments worth up to, by some estimates, US\$900m for the SEZ (Mwanawina, 2008).

At the same time, Chinese investment in Zambia has been highly controversial. Forty nine miners were killed in an explosion at the Chinese copper mine in the country in 2005, which operated a harsh labour regime, with miners reporting only being paid US\$30 a month and forced to work seven day weeks (Kurlantzick 2007). The Minister of Southern Province reportedly wept when she saw the working conditions in the Chinese coal mine in Kafue (Mwanawina, 2008). The impacts of Chinese traders and the leasing of one of the main markets to Chinese management in the capital in Lusaka have also been highly contentious, as local traders are displaced. Many women traders selling imported second-hand clothes (*saluala*) find it difficult to compete with cheaper new Chinese imports.

These developments came together during the 2006 election, where the main opposition candidate Michael Sata ran on an explicitly populist anti-Chinese platform. According to Sata ‘Chinese investment has not added any value to the people of Zambia’ and ‘we need investors, not infestors’ (quoted in Kurlantzick 2007:163 and Fitzgerald 2008b). In fact similar sentiments had been expressed even by the minister for commerce, trade and industry who argued that China was “displacing local people and causing a lot of friction. You have Chinese laborers here moving wheelbarrows. That’s not the kind of investment we need. I understand they have 1.2 billion people, but they don’t have to send them to Africa” (Patel quoted in McGreal 2007 in Rupp 2008:72)

Prior to the election the Chinese ambassador threatened to cut diplomatic relations if Sata won, the first time since the era of Mao that China had attempted to influence the outcome of an African election. Ultimately, Sata achieved a plurality of votes in the two regions with the greatest Chinese presence: the capital city Lusaka and the Copperbelt in the north of the country and when he lost the election there were anti-Chinese riots in the capital. In the Copperbelt there have been riots, strikes and kidnapping of Chinese management and the Chinese President had to cancel a planned visit to the Copperbelt in 2007 to lay the foundation stone for a new Chinese-built national stadium for fear of the public reaction (Taylor 2009). However, in an effort to defuse criticism of China's presence in Zambia, President HU offered Zambia \$800 million in soft loans, cancelled \$350 m of bilateral debt and announced the establishment of the special economic zone (Jiang 2008).

Paradoxically it is Lusaka and the Copperbelt which have seen the most dramatic reductions in poverty in recent years (Carmody 2009), but there is a general feeling that after years of immiseration Zambians have not benefiting proportionately from the recent economic recovery (Negi, 2008) – a different type of resource conflict from more recent varieties (Le Billon 2004). This sentiment was reinforced by the closure in 2007 of the Zambia-China Mulungushi Textile Joint Venture with the Chinese state (McGreal 2007). It couldn't compete with Asian imports⁸. This was the largest textile factory in Zambia, producing seventeen million metres of fabric a year, in addition to 100,000 pieces of clothing; employing 1,000 people directly and around 5,000 cotton growers indirectly (Taylor 2006).

As the Zambian case shows, the Chinese government is not averse to using the threat of economic force (i.e. through cutting investment and trade relations) even in relatively more democratic states. However, this economic stick is also used as a carrot as China builds manufacturing zones, SEZs, removes tariffs on African imports etc. It can be averred that Beijing uses economic liberalization strategically to grant duty free “early harvest” arrangements for African and Southeast Asian states to the Chinese market as a means to offset the market's polarizing tendencies (Glosny 2007). Given that Zambia is sometimes cited as “China's Perfect Storm” (Alden 2007), the government is keen to

⁸ University of Zambia economist interview Lusaka 1/9/07.

repair its image there. One Chinese journalist reports that China is developing ways to monitor its investment and nationals in Africa in order to repair its image (Negi 2008). However, this will prove increasingly difficult given the effects of economic liberalization in China (Taylor 2009). Also, more unrest in Zambia looks likely as the effects of the global economic crisis begin to take their toll through mine closures and the price of maize meal (the staple food) doubled from November to December 2008 (Anonymous 2008).

The Evolution of China's Africa Policy

James Tang (2006: 31) has remarked that 'as China has become more involved in regions where the Chinese presence formerly was limited, Beijing has encountered new challenges, such as the humanitarian problem in Sudan'. It might be averred that the strategies adopted by an incoming power, seeking to grab opportunities wherever it can, and those of a more established power, looking to protect its investments in an unstable environment, are intrinsically different and account for some of China's recent actions. Equally, and this needs emphasising, Chinese corporations and the Chinese state are not the only actors involved with unsavoury regimes in Africa. It has long been shown that Western companies, with the tacit approval of their home governments, have used all sorts of means to craft oil deals with African regimes and have overlooked notions of democracy and human rights (Shaxson 2007). In some cases this is not even tacit but quite open.

Paradoxically, keeping good relationships with major Western powers is a key foreign policy concern for Chinese policymakers, particularly given the control which the US navy has worldwide of vital shipping routes (Teng 2007) – a kind of “choke space”, instead of the “choke points” the United States faces, in the Suez Canal for example. The events surrounding aspects of Chinese activities in Sudan arguably threatened this, or at least play into the hands of critics of China and those who like to speak of the “China threat”. Chinese diplomats seem aware of this, asserting that “China's policy of non-interference is appropriate for Beijing's diplomacy, but China has not been very

successful in explaining this to the world. Consequently, we are concerned that people are ‘misinterpreting’ our diplomacy”.⁹

Features of Chinese involvement in Sudan’s oil industry unquestionably fit with ongoing external interactions with Africa. After all, French policy towards the oil-rich parts of the continent—such as Gabon—has never been guided by liberty, equality and fraternity and other Western actors in Africa do not possess exemplary records. Washington’s relations with oil-rich nations such as Equatorial Guinea are not guided by concerns over democracy. Business, as far as many actors are concerned, is business and in this sense criticism of China’s oil diplomacy in Africa is somewhat hypocritical,¹⁰ although the scale of the genocide in Sudan does make it an exceptional case.

This is not the whole story, however. There is a growing consensus among the more serious governments in Africa of where they wish the continent to be heading. Yet, ‘While in some countries China’s involvement appears benign, in others its approach undercuts efforts by the African Union (AU) and Western partners to make government and business more transparent and accountable’ (*Africa Research Bulletin*, February 16–March 15, 2006: 16855). Indeed, a key concern is that some of Beijing’s activities in pursuit of resources threaten to reinforce patrimonial states and practices that the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) and the African Union are ostensibly seeking to move away from (see Taylor, 2005).

Problems are compounded when one combines the nature of an African state such as Sudan with the way it is constituted through the so-called “Resource Curse”. Here, Chinese interest in African oil mirrors the issues that other actors have to confront. The broader character of the oil industry and the way it has tended to undermine democracy and accountability in the developing world, particularly in Africa, is longstanding. China’s experiences in Sudan are not particularly unique and Chinese corporations have had to deal with equally thorny issues in places such as Nigeria (Taylor, 2007b). Leonard and Straus (2003: 13) argue that enclave economies in Africa (economies that export extractive products concentrated in relatively small geographic areas) are particularly problematic. Revenue generation is physically confined to small locales, with the prime

⁹ Interview with Chinese diplomat, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, May 15, 2007.

¹⁰ Interview with Robin Sherborne, editor of *Insight*, Namibian political magazine, Namibia, Windhoek, August 14, 2006.

markets for the products being external (the international market). This makes ‘the general economic health of areas outside the enclave quite secondary, if not irrelevant. In enclave economies, then, elites gain little from any deep, growing, economic prosperity of the masses of the population’. Thus whilst individuals who have gained access to rents from such enclaves may benefit handsomely, the system fundamentally fails to promote wider economic growth and development. The fact that in Zambia some of the main perceived beneficiaries of “enclave-led growth” are Chinese has fuelled conflict there. In Sudan the beneficiaries are drawn almost exclusively from Northern Sudanese ethnic cliques detailed in the “Black Book” (El-Tom 2003). Thus, part of the problem in the way in which Chinese engagement with Africa is reinscribing this conflictual geography across regime types.

Problematically, a distinct opaqueness in Chinese dealings in Africa compounds suspicions of Chinese motives, Sudan and Zambia being but two examples. As a Chinese scholar has noted, ‘China shoulders much of the blame, as it has been poor at making its energy transactions with countries such as Iran and Sudan transparent. Lack of transparency fuels speculation that China has a well-coordinated project for countering US influence’ (Zhao, 1996: 183-184).

Yet, it is important to note that the “China Inc.” model of a Beijing advancing centralized strategies around the world is passé. As Downs (2007: 48) has noted with regard to Chinese National Oil Companies (NOCs) in Africa, ‘when it comes to choosing where to invest, the companies are almost always in the driver’s seat and the Chinese government, while occasionally offering general advice about the direction they should travel (for example, “invest in Morocco”), is often just along for the ride with little idea of the final destination. Sudan’s recent omission from the Chinese government’s catalogue of countries that Chinese companies are encouraged to invest in is a case in point, but this absence has not prevented CNPC [Chinese National Petroleum Company] from continuing to invest there’. Indeed as of 2003 Sudan was the country with the greatest investment in it by the CNPC (Yufeng 2007).

It is important not exaggerate the capacity of the Chinese state in its ability to manage broad Chinese engagement with the African continent, but it would appear that Chinese foreign policy uses different instruments and shows different faces to different audiences: it is Janus-faced. For example, China is building the new Presidential Palace in Sudan, leaving

no doubt as to its commitment to the country, international (public) relations notwithstanding. However, the fact that Sudan is no longer a priority country for investment will reassure international investor particularly after the flotation of one China's NOCs on the New York stock exchange had to be withdrawn and reshaped after concerns over its investment in Sudan. Yet China's stance of non-interference means that the values and interests of Sudan's elites exclusively decide domestic conduct. In short, until and unless the Khartoum elites themselves advance transparency, pro-development policies and equitable growth (and are prepared to and competent enough to put them into force), no such course of action will be taken. Given the history of Sudan post-independence the prospects for this are not encouraging.

Yet the international community, when looking at Chinese activity regarding energy in somewhere such as Sudan is generally preoccupied with analyzing how China can match its growing commercial influence with responsibility. In turn, Beijing is increasingly zealous in reassuring the world of its desire to be a responsible power. As one commentator noted, 'The challenge is for China and other leading energy-consuming countries to cooperate in defining and addressing the political and social challenges that arise in many of the oil states of the world' (Zhao, 1996: 183). Chinese policymakers do appear to be realizing this, although—as with Western policymakers—commercial considerations have a habit of trumping the best intentions.

Conclusion

China uses strategic levers and pressure points, including force, in its dealings with African states. There are ostensible soft power elements to this, such as the fact that China has reportedly sent 10,000 agricultural experts to Africa (Guijin 2004 cited in Eisenman 2007) and China Export-Import Bank is now the largest supplier of loans to the continent. In order to induce Chad to switch recognition away from Taipei in 2006, the Chinese government utilized economic and infrastructure packages, in addition to a commitment to reduce its support for Chad's rebels (Eisenman, 2007). Yet, in Sudan Beijing has also supplied the government with weapons and built three arms factories, including one to assemble tanks. Cynics might state that keeping client states authoritarian will also keep them closer to China (Barma and Ratner 2006).

China is emerging, as Robert Mugabe would have it, as an ‘alternative global power point in Africa’ (quoted in Eisenman 2007). This position of influence is being constructed through economic global production networks, bilateral state-to-state ties and multilateral institutions and fora such as the Forum on China Africa Cooperation. In competing with the US and Europe for influence its strategy can be compared to judo: to flexibly exploit opponent’s strengths as weaknesses, such as the greater separation between Western corporations and governments, against them. Like the Chinese strategy game of Go, one way to win is to build relationships with small players until your rival is surrounded (Kurlantzick 2007).

China is pursuing a policy of what we can think of as platform growth and diplomacy. It uses its seat at the high table of international relations to protect and deeper embed client states, such as Sudan and the diplomatic support it garners from African states can then be used as a platform to further protect and project its power. It is leveraging uneven development, using Africa and other global peripheries, as raw materials springboards, and the developed states as markets to fuel its economic rise. This ascent is cloaked in the rhetoric of ‘win-win’ and ‘South-South’ cooperation. However, the wins in Africa would appear to be primarily for elites and this rhetoric disguises the massive power inequalities between African states and China, despite the fact that China’s gross domestic product per capita is far below that of some African countries (Weiping, 2007). Nonetheless as this strategy will allow China to overtake the US as the world’s largest economy, by most estimates, it can be seen through the prism of what we have termed flexigemony.

If US hegemony is coercion informed by consent to achieve neoliberal normalization, flexigemony is a more geographically differentiated strategy which varies the mix between these two elements more, without attracting the wrath of the hegemon. It more closely approximates the British policy of indirect rule which worked through extant institutions, although without formal juridical control, than the hegemonic geopolitical model and vision born and projected during the Fordist era in the United States (see Rupert, 1995; Agnew, 2005). Another analogy is the tributary state system which used soft power to have neighbouring kingdoms emulate Chinese civilization.

Deng Xiaoping famously noted that the colour of the cat does not matter, as long as it catches the mouse. However, his was still a historical materialist project and perspective (Taylor 2009). Kurlantzick (2007) notes that whole regions of the world may become ensnared in a mercantilist cycle where they sell raw materials in exchange for Chinese manufactures and in this light, African publics must be wary of being the mouse caught by the new cat, whatever its colour. Despite its stated policy of non-interference, selling arms to Sudan or Zimbabwe has dramatic implications for those countries' populations and could be viewed as perhaps the most dramatic form of interference in internal affairs as their peoples' struggle for democracy and a fairer sharing of their countries' wealth.

The Chinese state has been described as ruthlessly developmental. While Ramo (2004) argues that the Beijing Consensus opens up policy space for developing countries to leapfrog over their static comparative advantage into higher technology economic activities, in Africa there is as yet little evidence of this. Rather the Consensus appears to be for African state elites you can do whatever you like, as long as you are open to Chinese trade and investment. In its foreign policy, China arguably does not prioritise the responsibility to protect (R2P), but instead the responsibility to profit. In some cases T-55 tank assembly plants serve Chinese interests, whereas multi-facility SEZs work better in other countries. Flexigemony is first and foremost about economics and the politics required to support China's continued economic ascent.

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