

African Management of China's Interest for the Continent: A Missed Opportunity?

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Abstract

Owing to the impressive scale and scope of China's engagement towards Africa, it may be considered as one of the most significant developments that the continent has known in the recent years. This uniqueness has been analysed, extolled and questioned. A lot has been said about China's policy towards Africa, but the important question that deserves to be asked is: How are African countries responding to China's growing interest for the continent? And do they succeed in taking full advantage of it?

Key words: China, Interest, Africa, Management, Opportunity.

Introduction

Chinese foreign policy in general, and its policy towards the African continent in particular is like all other countries' foreign policies, self-serving and based on economic and strategic calculations aiming first at serving its national interest. Indeed, China is not different from the other powers, in that it rationally aims at strengthening its power and enhancing its influence. Its expansion into Africa is a natural extension of China's opening up to the world and its pursuit of great power status. China's involvement into the African continent is part of its global strategy whose main objective is to make of China a great power. An objective that could not be attained without setting up a strategy that would be applied to all the geopolitical groups of the planet including Africa which presents many advantages to China. In fact, the increasing interest that China has for the African continent is primarily nourished by economic considerations as Africa per-

fectly suits to the needs of China's growing economy as a source of energy and other natural resources, as a large market for China's consumer goods, and also as important opportunities of investment for Chinese enterprises encouraged to invest abroad within China's "going out strategy". That is how, China became since 2009 the main trading partner of the continent, and also one of its most important investors and donors of development aid.

China also relies on the political support of African states to its stances in the international fora, and essentially to its "One China Policy" aiming at isolating Taiwan on the international scene.

China's rising interests in Africa led it to be more involved in the security issues of the continent in order to protect its interests and the safety of its nationals present on the ground. Its approach to global security issues became, with its widespread interests, more pragmatic leading to call into question one of the most sacred principles of its foreign policy which is that of non interference in other countries' internal affairs, pushing the limits of its non interference policy until opening a military base in Djibouti, which is the first one in China's history, giving clear evidence of what Africa represents for China's interest.

What about Africa's place in this relation? Is it merely a passive agent or a real actor following a well established strategy in order to take full advantage of China's interest for the continent?

African perceptions of china's engagement in Africa

I-African leaders perceptions

After decades of dominance by European colonial powers, followed by other decades of Western aid and investment provided under unfair conditions, many African leaders appreciate China's "No strings attached" approach. In pledging not to interfere in African countries' internal affairs, whether through political pressures or conditionality, China's ap-

proach is seen as less constraining than the West's insistence on imposing requirements related to transparency, human rights, democratisation, and other Western priorities on their aid and investment⁽¹⁾. These criteria, when combined with the concrete practices of western developmental aid and the one-sided policies of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, have shown their high ideological character, as proven by the disastrous outcomes of the structural adjustments programs. The practices of the West combined to past colonialism and present imperialism make Chinese practices appear distinctive to African leaders⁽²⁾, and contribute to their positive perception of China.

Senegalese President Abdoulaye Wade expressed his preference for working with China by citing the absence of project planning and management procedures prevalent in Western-funded efforts: "I have found that a contract that would take five years to discuss, negotiate and sign with the World Bank takes only three months when we have dealt with Chinese authorities. I am a firm believer in good governance and the rule of law. But when bureaucracy impedes our ability to act -and when poverty persists while international functionaries drag their feet- African leaders have an obligation to opt for swifter solutions. I achieved more in my one hour meeting with President Hu Jintao during the recent G8 meeting in Heiligendamm than I did during the entire, orchestrated meeting of world leaders at the summit"⁽³⁾.

In the same vein, Kenyan government spokesman, Alfred Mutua, describes China as an easy country to do business with because "The Chinese do not peg their economic activity or aid to political conditions... You never hear the Chinese saying that they will not finish a project because the government has not done enough to tackle corruption. If they are going to build a road, then it will be built"⁽⁴⁾.

While criticising the Western world for having precipitated the weakening of the continent's economic systems and for having tried to

“re-colonise” Africa, Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi said that “China, with its extraordinary resurgence and its commitment to a win-win partnership, is one of the reasons behind the African renaissance”, and that the economic emergence of Asia, especially China, is “an opportunity for Africa to build and rebuild partnerships”⁽⁵⁾.

On the other hand, other African leaders have warned that China’s approach to Africa resembles a second “scramble for Africa” by reproducing the unequal dynamics of the colonial era, in which powers acquired resources while creating markets for their manufactured goods and preventing the emergence of local value-added production. The governor of Nigeria’s Central Bank, Lamido Sanusi, wrote in a 2013 Financial Times editorial, “In much of Africa, they have set up huge mining operations. They have also built infrastructure, but with exceptions, they have done so using equipment and labour imported from home, without transferring skills to local communities. So, China takes our primary goods and sells us manufactured ones. This was also the essence of colonialism. . . . Africa is now willingly opening itself up to a new form of imperialism”⁽⁶⁾. During his unsuccessful 2006 campaign for the Zambian presidency, Michael Sata called Chinese “Infesters” rather than “Investors”, threatened to kick out Chinese workers, and pledged to implement foreign exchange controls that would prevent Chinese firms from repatriating their profits⁽⁷⁾. He also pledged to recognise Taiwan if elected, provoking condemnation from the Chinese ambassador in Zambia. In 2010, he accused Chinese mining companies of using Zambians as “Slave labour” in harsh working conditions. In 2011, when he ran a successful presidential campaign, he complained that “Zambia has become a province of China, and the Chinese are the most unpopular people in the country because no one trusts them. The Chinaman is coming just to invade and exploit Africa”⁽⁸⁾.

Few other African leaders have addressed such harsh criticism to China, and even China’s strident opponent Michael Sata changed his tune after taking office in September 2011. Sata’s first official meeting after

his inauguration as president was with the Chinese ambassador. During a one-week visit to China in April 2013, Sata signed several investment agreements and requested that Chinese companies invest in railways, agriculture, and mining⁽⁹⁾. A shift that translates the importance that China's presence represents for African economy and thus for its leaders once in power.

II- African Popular perceptions of China's engagement

Africans hold generally positive views of China, and welcome its engagement because increased trade, aid, investment, education, vocational training and debt relief have all benefited these societies⁽¹⁰⁾. For many Africans, there exists a "Chinese model," now often labelled the "Beijing Consensus" that stands in contrast to the "Washington Consensus". It is an image of a developing state that does not fully implement western prescriptions, does not impose onerous conditions on African states' policies, and is more active than the West in promoting industrialism in the global South. According to one South African scholar, China has succeeded in creating "a somewhat idealistic impression of the distant partner or big brother in the East"⁽¹¹⁾.

Opinion polls show generally positive views of China as a whole but mixed and even critical views regarding specific aspects of Chinese engagement in Africa.

A survey led in January 2010 by Afrobarometer (a research project that measures the social, political, and economic atmosphere in Africa) in 20 African countries found that the number of people in Africa who view China favourably is twice that of Africans who view it unfavourably. In 2013, Pew Global Attitudes (Pew Research Centre, 2013) found that substantial majorities in six Sub-Saharan African countries believed that China had a good influence on their countries' and their economies, and Africans believed, to a far greater extent than people from other parts of the world, that China considers their countries' interests when making

foreign policy decisions⁽¹²⁾. In the Pew Global Attitudes survey for 2015, African respondents had a significantly more positive view of China (70% with a favourable view) than respondents in other regions such as Europe (41%), Asia (57%), or Latin America (57%)⁽¹³⁾. In the Pew Global Attitudes survey for 2019, Majorities or pluralities in almost all the sub-Saharan African countries surveyed have a favorable view of China, including 70% who have a favorable opinion in Nigeria⁽¹⁴⁾.

If China attracts popular support in Africa, it is in part because its experience as a developing country is more similar to that of African countries than the western countries' one, and its success in transforming its own economy offers hope for African countries that they can accomplish the same through a comprehensive partnership⁽¹⁵⁾. Africans are also fascinated by the Chinese migrants hard working. They compare them to western workers who insist on better living conditions and thicker profit margins. The Chinese, however, work harder in harsher conditions and accept thinner margins⁽¹⁶⁾. They prove, as they always did outside China, that they were dynamic and well-organised enough, to maximise their skills and talents, and to succeed in their business activities⁽¹⁷⁾.

Nevertheless, Africans' views remain mitigated and the public opinion widely divided: For example, whereas cheap Chinese consumer goods, are appreciated by poorer Africans for their low prices, many Africans are frustrated by their omnipresence and their poor quality. Inexpensive Chinese imports have also forced less competitive local manufacturers to close, eliminating thousands of jobs⁽¹⁸⁾. There is also a growing hostility towards Chinese migrants employed in the small scale and informal service sector who are perceived to be taking away jobs from Africans⁽¹⁹⁾.

Another negative perception in African public opinion of China is that working conditions at Chinese-managed mines, factories, and facilities are dangerous and that African workers are abused, underpaid, and prevented from assuming managerial positions⁽²⁰⁾. "Social relations between

ordinary Africans and Chinese,” writes cultural anthropologist Stephanie Rupp, “are marked by a tension between mutual admiration and mutual loathing.” Chinese are admired for their work ethic yet simultaneously disdained for being strict bosses, remaining separate and aloof, and offering hard competition to local traders. Chinese engagements in Africa still face a lot of hostility and suspicion from African populations and mainstream media outlets. Some of this is due to some bad experiences, while much of this is also the consequence of pure misinformation or suspicions based on the unknown other⁽²¹⁾.

III- Popular reactions to China's presence on the continent

Negative opinions of Chinese companies have affected many Africans' views of individual Chinese -both the workers sent to Africa to work on large-scale industrial projects and the hundreds of thousands of Chinese in Africa who work as merchants, traders, and small businesspeople who became targets of anti-Chinese sentiment generated by opposition to labour abuses, competition, poor quality goods⁽²²⁾, counterfeit products (especially medicine), environmental standards, and corporate social responsibility⁽²³⁾.

This negative impact has led to multiple violent anti-Chinese protest in several African countries. Tensions also exist between Africans and Chinese nationals who have set down roots in African countries and generally operate small businesses. Many of them migrated to Africa to seek economic opportunities, though some-particularly those with few skills or education-came to Africa to work on large construction projects and decided to stay on the continent. While some of these migrants open legal businesses (stores, import-export businesses, etc.), others engage in illegal economic activities occasioning conflicts with locals. In Ghana (Africa's second-largest gold producer), thousands of Chinese immigrants operated local mining activities in violation of the existing laws that prohibit foreigners from acquiring small-scale mining licenses. This situation led to violent conflicts with locals⁽²⁴⁾.

Both categories of Chinese in Africa—those working for a few years on specific projects and those that have set up their own businesses in Africa—have failed to assimilate into their communities, exacerbating tensions with local residents. Few Chinese workers on large construction or industrial projects speak a local language. They typically live in walled compounds, and their rare interactions with local residents⁽²⁵⁾ often create impressions that they are aloof and unfriendly⁽²⁶⁾.

In several African countries, the anti-Chinese feeling has forced the government to react. China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) is aware of the tensions between Chinese nationals and local African populations. While acknowledging that the MFA "cannot keep tabs on all Chinese living in Africa at all times," one senior MFA official said that the MFA, through diplomatic and media channels, tries to encourage Chinese businessmen "not to be so competitive," to "be aware of their social responsibility," and to "make efforts to mingle with the local population"⁽²⁷⁾.

Overall, African perceptions of China are obviously mixed. A general positive perception of Chinese engagement in Africa is tempered by negative impressions of Chinese goods, competition to local businesses, working conditions at Chinese enterprises, links to corrupt officials, and environmental violations. China is increasingly aware that Africans' negative perceptions of Chinese presence have the potential to undermine its broader political and economic objectives. As a result, in recent years, the Chinese government has increasingly intensified its efforts to promote its image, build a wider range of cultural ties, and ensure that its commercial activities are seen as a "win-win" partnership aiming at generating long-term economic benefits for Africa as well as for China. While many of the efforts China has made include substantive development initiatives and reforms to the ways Chinese enterprises do business, it has also pursued a strong and wide public diplomacy campaign to improve its image, using

different instruments to enhance its soft power on the continent, and creating the FOCAC gathering which is one of the most important Chinese initiatives aiming at giving evidence of the African continent's rising importance in China's strategy.

- **African management of China's interest for the continent**

Having seen that China's impact on the African continent has been mitigated, giving positive as well as negative results, it is necessary to understand how African counterparts managed the interest that China has for their countries, and how they responded to China's African policy.

- **Differences in African countries' dealing with economic opportunities**

Some African countries took advantage from China's interest, by directing China's investments towards industries that employ local labour and thus result in technology transfer. They also grasped the opportunity of high revenues, partly due to increasing Chinese imports of commodities, in order to build diversified economies and to interrupt their reliance on raw materials' exports.

As Paul Collier, an Oxford economist assessed: "The past decade has been very benign for Africa, the period began, with debt relief, before commodity prices went through the roof. The combination of low debt and high revenue allowed many African governments to tap capital markets for the first time. This was the biggest opportunity Africa ever had but it has broadly been a missed opportunity."

African governments have been very different in managing China's interest for their countries. More than any other country in Africa, Ethiopia has made concerted efforts to build an industrial base. Chinese companies, many of them private, have been among the most enthusiastic investors especially in the leather industry⁽²⁸⁾. Ethiopia has also taken a local approach to develop its agricultural sector, and provides agricultural inputs and technical know-how to millions of smallholder farmers. As a result, the

country doubled its maize production over a twenty year period, and is now the second-largest maize producer in sub-Saharan Africa⁽²⁹⁾.

As Ha-Joon Chang, a development economist at Cambridge University asserted: “Beijing’s growing presence in Africa has been largely beneficial. The most important thing is that there is competition. For African countries, there used to be only one bank: the World Bank. Ethiopia has found Chinese finance smoother and faster. African nations, must wean themselves off simply digging things out of the ground. Instead, they need to move to an early industrial phase in the mould of now-wealthy South Korea, whose GDP per capita in 1960 was half that of Ghana’s. One of South Korea’s first successful industrial experiments was wig-making, he says, a labour-intensive operation that required workers to attach individual strands of hair”.

Even if China’s economy may be slowing, it is unlikely to grind to a halt. Even at 5 per cent growth, it will imply a steady, albeit more moderate, demand for African raw materials, meaning that opportunity is likely to last longer for African countries. It is all in their management of these offered opportunities.

The next decade or so, as Ha-Joon Chang predicts, will see a sharp divergence between countries with good policies and those without. China’s interest in Africa, albeit tempered by its current slowdown, means that opportunity will continue to knock. But it will not knock equally. As Howard French assessed: The trick is to harness the new opportunities provided by Chinese interest for the continent. If governments respond with the right incentives, as Ethiopia has tried to do, by encouraging manufacturers to invest locally, transfer technology and employ local staff, China can be more a boon than a threat⁽³⁰⁾.

- **China's unilateral control over Sino-African relations**

The main presentation of Sino-African relations is that of China giving presents to Africa and accomplishing acts of largesse towards recipient African countries competing for the gifts, far from the pattern of equal counterparts sharing ideas and cooperating as partners.

Evidence can be given by the functioning of FOCAC meetings where China, as the financier of the projects, has always been in the driving seat and despite all the discourse about “win-win” partnership, Africa continues to appear as the passive object of Chinese interest at these meetings. Whilst mutual cooperation is talked about, it is still difficult to identify African agency in the proceedings⁽³¹⁾. African states, in their majority, do not formulate projects or suggestions to China before the meeting, letting China on the command of the forum following its own agenda.

FOCAC is one of the key occasions for African governments to engage China as a group. However, what is really missing is a structured and strategic framework for response that links the continental, regional and national levels. Difficulties lie in the coordination between African states owing to diversity, fragmentation and competition. Disjointed efforts within countries across the African continent do not allow a common position or a united front when engaged with China or other external powers⁽³²⁾.

At all FOCAC meetings until now, Africa has been unsuccessful in developing a combined negotiating approach and shaping the debate to the advantage of the Continent. Rather than working as a bloc, Africa continues to negotiate bilaterally with China on a country-by-country basis. Sino-African engagement at regional or continental policy level is limited. As a result, Africa is largely left on the side-lines at what turns out to be a Chinese extravaganza of largesse and ostensible generosity. Instead of making from FOCAC meetings a framework for Sino-African cooperation

and mutual exchange, where African countries are unified to promote the continent development, the reality was thus very different⁽³³⁾ and Africa, another time, missed a historical opportunity which merited to be seized.

The most important obstacle that prevents African states from taking advantage from the interest that China has for their continent, is that they lack a consistent and unified collective policy towards China. There is an obvious problem of collective action. That “China has an Africa policy. Africa doesn’t have a China policy”⁽³⁴⁾.

- **The role of the African Union: Speaking with a unified voice**

The interest that China has for Africa has not conferred tangible benefits because Africa has not positioned itself to reap the vast benefits that strong Africa-China ties can produce⁽³⁵⁾. The interests between African states and China can actually coincide and can, indeed, create better win-win situations, if the African side negotiates more strongly the deals, because the advantages are unlikely to be given by a benevolent Beijing without tough negotiations⁽³⁶⁾.

The role of the African Union becomes, within this context, of paramount importance. As the continental body, it has the mandate and the ability to harmonise the continent’s policy positions⁽³⁷⁾. The African Union Commission became a full FOCAC member in 2010 and has benefitted from the highly symbolic donation of a headquarter building entirely funded by the Chinese government. Yet, its role in the elaboration of China Africa relations remains negligible⁽³⁸⁾, and has to be promoted.

African countries must show more dynamism, have to be more implicated, and must actively participate and manage FOCAC in the aim to readdress the asymmetrical relation due to China’s unilateral command of the forum. Advantages can only be concretised if a practical and clearly-identified agenda is jointly dressed by the two sides⁽³⁹⁾.

To take advantage of China's increasing interest for Africa, African countries individually and collectively need to have a better understanding of China's goals and how those goals coincide with African requirements⁽⁴⁰⁾. It is vital that strategies and priorities for Africa will line up alongside the agenda that China seems to be setting, and that African objectives will be adapted to China's aspirations⁽⁴¹⁾. Thus, whilst agricultural transformation may be a priority for Africa, how is this in China's interests? Investment in industry is also an imperative to contribute to Africa's structural transformation and diversification of production. Where are these African ambitions in China's priorities?⁽⁴²⁾ So, high levels of coordination and a clear sense of objectives and outcomes are needed.

It would be important for all African members after determining the fields in what they want to cooperate on with China, to integrate these requests with each country's workable plan⁽⁴³⁾. For a list of priorities, Beijing then can choose what it has on offer and can provide (taking into account the supply-side). This does, however, require the African side to reject the projects that are not explicitly requested, and that are judged unnecessary⁽⁴⁴⁾.

African regional economic communities have to be implicated in this process. The East African Community, for instance, has a joint population of 150 million representing a more interesting market and area of engagement for Chinese companies than individual, small countries. Interlocutors in Beijing often repeat that if projects are presented in an overall worthwhile manner from a regional perspective, then even some parts that are not generating profit in themselves stand a good chance of being included. The East African railway refurbishment might be a good example: the envisaged extension of the railway network to Rwanda and Burundi would not be viable as a separate project in itself, and only makes sense from a regional perspective⁽⁴⁵⁾.

Borrowing Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's term, China and Africa need to develop their "community of responsibility". To further develop

China-Africa relations, both parties should take the building of the interest-responsibility-destiny community as a common strategic goal⁽⁴⁶⁾.

Chinese ministers and diplomats are reinforcing the message of “sustainability” in a bid to change the perception of Chinese businesses and entrepreneurs⁽⁴⁷⁾. It is now to African governments to be more positively engaged and more implicated to steer these promises and pledges towards concretisation.

China could be an efficient partner to African states at various levels, provided that African countries become more consistently engaged on the basis of a common set agenda. Only then, can African governments achieve the best results and take full advantage from the interest that China has for their continent.

Recommendations

If China’s balance sheet in Africa is mitigated, it has actually some positive impact but more can still be achieved. What is missing is a lack of strategic engagement on a long term basis that would have a broader impact on the continent’s economic development. Africa must strive more to leverage Chinese engagement for maximum benefit. The stream of trade, investment and aid gives African countries a unique opportunity to translate these external supports into overall gains.

Beginning by the investment field, Africa must establish a constructive policy framework that will ensure that Foreign Direct Investment helps to make a positive net contribution to African economies and societies. African countries have to negotiate better terms with Chinese investors adopting practices that are rooted in a commitment to implement the demands that meet the real needs of the African continent. African countries need to encourage Chinese investment into more labour intensive sectors as Africa’s population is growing faster than anywhere else in the world, and that job creation is becoming a top priority.

In their trading interactions with China, and in order to obtain better terms of trade, African governments must deploy more efforts to obtain from China wider market access for African goods, and to continue to reduce tariff barriers for the less African developed countries. By dealing multi-laterally with China according to a coordinated policy, African countries could diversify their exports to China based on their respective comparative advantage, and set common prices for exports.

African countries should also grasp the opportunity of China's generous aid policy and tailor it according to their own needs and make well-calculated demands.

African countries must strive to use all these opportunities in order to diversify their economies by developing their agriculture and manufacturing sectors, the main sources of value addition and employment, and thus economic development. Some African countries succeeded in taking advantage from China's interest, by directing China's investments towards industries that employ local labour and thus result in technology transfer. They also grasped the opportunity of high revenues, partly due to increasing Chinese imports of commodities, in order to build diversified economies and to reduce their exclusive reliance on raw materials' exports. The most obvious example is that of Ethiopia which more than any other country in Africa, has made concerted efforts to build an industrial base.

If such a strategic vision is followed by the other African countries, China could then play a big role in African economic development process for three reasons: First, China is a potential source of employment for the other countries: with the increase in income per capita in China, the costs of labour also increase, pushing manufacturers in China to outsource activities in many developing countries. Second, China remains a large export

market for the rest of the world; as its per capita income continues to rise, the demands for semi-processed or even processed goods will too. Third, increased trade (export or import) in manufactured goods with China will increase the technology and R&D (Research and Development) spill-over. Indeed, China's roles as a provider of employment, an export market destination, and a source of technology and R&D spill-over deserve serious consideration⁽⁴⁸⁾.

China's interest in Africa means that opportunity will continue to knock, but it will not knock equally for all African countries. As Howard French assessed: "The trick is to harness the new opportunities provided by Chinese interest for the continent. If governments respond with the right incentives, as Ethiopia has tried to do, by encouraging manufacturers to invest locally, transfer technology and employ local staff, China can be more a boon than a threat"⁽⁴⁹⁾.

Conclusion

Many assume that if African governments don't succeed in taking full advantage from their relation with China and play a limited role in negotiating with the Chinese, it is because of African countries' relative inferiority in size and power, compared to China, making of them powerless counterparts. This situation could be redressed and African countries could take full advantage from their relationships with China, but only if African governments negotiate not only as leaders of individual countries, but also as members of the collective mechanism of the African Union. Africa's failure to form a unified voice hampered its ability to determine the terms and general direction of the interaction because rather than working as a bloc, Africa continues to negotiate with China on a country-by-country basis.

China has a considerable interest for the African countries, and this interest must be converted into a negotiating power towards maximising

gains from their interactions with China on one hand, and, on the other hand, attaining more balanced relations with the other powers competing with China on the continent. The Chinese are knocking on the door, but the African governments must decide whether, and under what conditions, to give them entrance.

The interests between African states and China can actually coincide and can, indeed, create better win-win situations, if the African side negotiates more strongly the deals, because the advantages are unlikely to be given by a benevolent China without tough negotiations. Otherwise, if China's engagement will continue to be poorly managed, Africa risks Chinese exploitation, and ultimately misses a unique opportunity to advance its political, economic and social development.

As Ed Brown, a Ghanaian senior executive at one of his country's leading independent think tanks said: "This [relationship] is going to determine Africa's future for the next fifty years. The big question is whether African countries are dynamic enough to take advantage, and whether they'll end up being the appendage of somebody else all over again".

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