



Strengthening Africa's Economic Performance

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Fitting China In

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Introduction

China's irruption onto the African scene has been the most dramatic and important factor in the external relations of the continent – perhaps in the development of Africa as a whole – since the end of the Cold War. The speed and scale of the increase especially in trade relations between African states and the PRC is by any standards astonishing. Economic relationships that appeared to be set in stone, and notably those between Africa and the former colonising states now grouped in the European Union, are being transformed before our eyes. Unlike the Soviet Union's engagement with Africa during the Cold War, moreover, China's involvement shows every sign of being a lasting one, and is indeed likely to be extended and entrenched in the years ahead. Whereas the USSR attempted to build relationships with Africa as one element in a strategic contest which it was ultimately unable to sustain, China is doing so as an integral part of the expansion of its own economy, and of its insertion as a major player into the global economic order.

In sounding a note of caution as to the likely impact of China's role in Africa, I therefore certainly do not wish to downplay either its scale or its likely permanence. I assume, rather, that it will both broaden and deepen, displacing in the process many of the ties that have been established especially with Western states since the colonial era and before. In fitting China into the broader picture of Africa's development and its relations with the wider world, however, I hope that it will be helpful to indicate some of the constraints that have historically affected Africa's external engagement, which continue to do so in the present, and which are likely to prove extremely resistant to change. Seen in this light, China's appearance, however dramatic, fits into patterns that have been long-established, and that Africans have historically absorbed and adapted. There is, I believe, every prospect that China will conform to those patterns, rather than transforming them.

The Intractability of African Governmentalities

For a start, Africa's states and societies have historically proved extremely intractable to grand projects of social and economic transformation – far more so, indeed, than have Asian states and societies such as the PRC itself. This intractability, and the problems of governance associated with it, ultimately derive, as Jeffrey Herbst reminds us,¹ from the enduring features of the continent's demography. With a population sparsely and very unevenly spread over an extremely large land area, it has been difficult to control not only in terms of simple physical communications, daunting though those have been, but still more importantly in terms of the attitudes, assumptions and forms of social organisation – governmentalities, to appropriate Foucault's useful term – that Africans have developed over a very long period as an eminently rational response to the situations in which they have found themselves. Established territorial states have historically been extremely difficult to maintain, and institutionalised forms of social

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¹ Jeffrey Herbst, *States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control* (Princeton UP, 2000)

organisation appropriate (not least in China) to the management of densely settled populations have given way to expedients in which personal pre-eminence, genealogical (or pseudo-genealogical) relationships, and various forms of spiritual authority, have instead played major roles. Africa is, in short, an extremely difficult space to organise and manage, and these difficulties, which have deeply affected both the colonial project and the articulation of modern forms of statehood by Africans themselves, will likewise form an enduring backdrop to the Chinese presence – all the more exasperating, in all likelihood, because they run so sharply counter to equally embedded but markedly contrasting Chinese attitudes and trajectories.

Patterns of Extraversion

To these essentially indigenous factors must then be added the peculiar, and often intensely damaging, nature of Africa's forcible incorporation into the global economy and structure of government. This has characteristically taken the form of incursions by external forces, guided by a premise of inequality and indeed superiority to the African populations whom they sought to exploit. Even though China's arrival is in no way remotely equivalent to the role of the slave traders or colonialists who characterised previous episodes in Africa's encounter with the wider world, nor can it be fitted, except in the most facile rhetorical terms, into the ideal of equality in which politicians both Chinese and African have recently sought to clothe it. Despite the claim that both China and Africa are part of the 'developing world', this is a deeply unequal relationship. South Africa apart, there is no African economy that can even begin to engage with China in the way that China is engaging with Africa; and the size of South Africa's economy – by far the largest and most developed in the continent – is trivial by comparison with that of the East Asian leviathan. While China has developed with astonishing speed into Africa's third-largest trading partner, and may well if current trends continue even for a few more years reach the number one position, Africa accounts for no more than some 3% of China's total overseas trade. Although other indices of comparative strength are more difficult to measure, there is no point at which they can plausibly be reckoned to run in Africa's favour.

Africans, nonetheless, have long-established mechanisms for coping with their accustomed position on the downside of relationships of inequality, and have historically adapted with considerable skill to each new manifestation of them. One such mechanism, identified by Jean-François Bayart as 'extraversion',² is the appropriation by African elites of resources provided by external actors in order to consolidate their own authority. One very important reason why China's involvement in Africa has been so widely welcomed and readily accommodated has been that it fits so neatly into the familiar patterns of rentier statehood and politics with which Africa's rulers have been accustomed to maintain themselves. After a brief period following the end of the Cold War, when the political terms of trade between Africa and the newly hegemonic states of the West turned so sharply to the latter's advantage that African bargaining power was drastically reduced, China has provided a counterweight to the governance agendas promoted by the 'Washington consensus'. When Zhou en Lai in his 1964 visit proclaimed Africa to be a continent 'ripe for revolution', he presented China correspondingly as a challenge to Africa's place in the existing global order. In the current era, on the other hand, far from providing any new model for Africa's involvement in the global economy and political system, China's role has been precisely to reinforce the old one.

One corollary of this is that if – as we can confidently assume – China becomes permanently engaged as a major player in Africa, it will need to go through the same learning processes that other outside powers have had to resort to in the past, and is likely to come up with similar responses to similar predicaments. In particular, both

² Jean-François Bayart, *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly* (London: Longman, 1993).

Chinese companies and the Chinese state itself will need to grapple with ways to protect their own political and economic investments, within the uncertain and potentially rapidly changing environment that Africa provides.

One element that is likely to be modified in this process of adaptation is the insistence on the ideology of unfettered state 'sovereignty', with which China has made very welcome common cause with its African partners, in striking contrast to the 'conditionalities' insisted on by its Western competitors. This is not to deny that China's commitment to sovereignty has a genuine resonance in that country's own historical (and even very recent) experience: it is far more than a mere tactical response to the need to gain favours in Africa. It is worth remembering, even so, that 'sovereignty' was a doctrine developed by the states of Western Europe, in response to their own distinctive predicaments, but came to be eroded by those states, in their relationships not only with Africa but with one another, once it had ceased to serve its purpose. China, certainly, is unlikely to experience the conditions that led to the decay in the idea of sovereignty in Europe, but this is nonetheless a paradoxical doctrine for a very large and powerful state to adopt in its dealings with very small and weak ones, and it is not difficult to envisage the circumstances in which it may fade.

In Africa, support for the doctrine of sovereignty by external patrons has served – as it did for both Western states and the Soviet Union during the Cold War – to promote a particular response to the ongoing problem of maintaining 'political stability'. It translates in practice into an attempt by the patron to protect its investment within an African state by providing almost unconditional support for that state's existing political order, and indeed in many cases for the individual ruler who currently controls it. For so long as that ruler is able both to remain in power, and to project effective control over the parts of the national territory in which the patron is particularly interested, it generally works very well, subject only to the danger that the client ruler may seek to throw off the yoke of an overbearing patron, and look for an alternative one.

Over time, however, the deficiencies of this strategy became increasingly apparent to the patrons who initially adopted it during the Cold War, and are likely to become equally evident to the latest incomer to the African scene. One problem is that it locks the patron into support for a client ruler who may become extremely unpopular with his own people, and whose demise then triggers a reversal in external alliances. A much more basic difficulty, however, is the decreasing viability of a formal doctrine of sovereignty in coping with situations in which the state's actual level of control over its own territory and population is progressively eroded. A classic indicator of this is the counter-productive impact of external arms supplies, which have characteristically been one of the most important mechanisms through which the external patron enabled the domestic client to maintain control. The central problem of 'stability' in Africa has been the weakness not of physical control (or in other words the possession by the state of the weapons needed to secure compliance), but rather of social control (or in other words the capacity to create the forms of authority needed to secure voluntary obedience). When, as readily happens in fractured African states, control over weapons escapes the grasp of the formal state structures which they were originally intended to support, these weapons rapidly become an extremely dangerous element in the *destabilisation* of the very territories that they were supposed to stabilise. Given China's recent emergence as a major source of arms supply to Africa, it cannot be long before the PRC comes to appreciate the threat that such arms present to the vastly more important priority of maintaining stable access to mineral supplies and other resources. The threat is all the greater in that – given the vast size of the Africa continent, and the distance of many sources of production (as in the Democratic Republic of Congo) from their port of transshipment to China, stability of supply entails not just point defence of specific installations, but the control of long and vulnerable lines of communication.

The sovereignty doctrine fails, in short, when it translates into support for a state structure that is itself incapable of ensuring control over the resources needed by its external backer. In the short (and maybe medium) term, actors such as mining companies, which need to maintain the conditions under which they can extract minerals, are obliged to do deals with local actors ('traditional' authorities, disruptive local protesters, even criminal gangs), simply because these actors, and not the state, effectively manage the local political terrain. Western oil companies operating in the Niger Delta provide a case in point. Chinese oil companies coming to terms with the same predicament are unlikely to be any different. Were they to seek instead to increase the coercive capacity of the state, in the belief that this could then 'secure' their own installations and lines of communication, they would very rapidly discover their mistake.

In the longer term, no external power with long-term economic interests in Africa, especially in vulnerable enterprises such as mineral extraction, can escape the issue of 'governance', because this is the essential precondition for maintaining stable economic relationships. If this issue cannot be handled, as European powers first sought to do, by the direct imposition of external colonialism, then it has to be handled instead through other mechanisms, such as the establishment of an effective legal order, and forms of accountability that link state power to the welfare of local populations. Though the 'Beijing consensus' provides a doctrine suited to the needs of an incoming operator on the African scene, seeking to build a continental presence through linkages with particular regimes that have specific reasons for welcoming its arrival, established economic actors such as China is likely to become, will have every reason to turn to its 'Washington' equivalent.

An Inherently Limited Engagement

There are likewise constraints on China's capacity to develop long-term relationships in Africa, that derive from the problems of inserting itself into a set of structures that are already deeply established, and which extend well beyond the limited range of Chinese interests and involvement. Essentially, what China and other Asian states (including India and other East and Southeast Asian states such as Korea and Malaysia) are seeking to do, is to insert themselves into an existing bilateral relationship between Africa and the West, converting it into a triangular one. This does not however involve any change in Africa's role within either system as a supplier of raw materials. China's dramatic arrival in Africa has not led, as Nicolas Pinaud has demonstrated, to any change in the composition of African exports; it has led only to the diversion of those exports away from Western economies, and towards East Asia. Indeed, the extraordinary efficiency and low cost of Chinese industrial production is already deeply undermining African attempts to break out of the historic dependence on primary production, a challenge that especially affects the high-cost, unionised and often undercapitalised industries of its principal African competitor, South Africa.

In striking contrast to the role that the PRC at least aspired to play during the Maoist era, there is absolutely no 'project of transformation' for Africa involved in China's extremely successful project of transforming its own economy, by inserting it into a particular niche in the global division of labour. The rhetoric of solidarity apart, Africa today is in no way what China was in 1949, nor is there any remotely plausible agenda for Africa in the future to become what China is now. Such feelings of solidarity as China is currently able to draw on in Africa – and these appear to be heavily oriented towards governing elites for whom China's presence provides tangible benefits – are unlikely to be able to survive for long in the face of the structural divergence in the interests of the two parties.

At this point, the narrowness of China's engagement in Africa is likely to prove damaging. At one level, certainly, the fact that China seeks to impose no ideological agenda of its own on Africa – in contrast to ideological concomitants of Western capitalism – means that it poses less of a 'threat' than its often overbearing Western counterparts. But 'ideology', no matter how great the arrogance with which external powers seek to promote it, is not merely an alien imposition on unwilling Africans. It also strikes a local resonance, and serves to build moral linkages that extend beyond mere economic interests. For Africans who have been subjected to sometimes appallingly brutal domestic regimes, the demand for 'human rights' strikes a deep and legitimate chord. Equally, no matter how great the difficulties of instituting multi-party democracies in many parts of Africa, there is a significant part of the continent in which considerably more accountable regimes have been installed since the end of the Cold War, and despite the enduring problems of converting new political forms into economic welfare, still represent a very substantial improvement for local populations on military dictatorship or single-party rule. In cutting itself off from changes in African governance over the past two decades, China runs the risk of presenting itself merely as an interloper bent on short-term economic gain.

Nor is there any spiritual dimension to the Chinese presence, even in the form once presented by Maoist Marxism. It must strike any observer of the African scene that this is a deeply, indeed intensely, spiritual continent, in which the rival agendas of Christianity and Islam, along with extensive indigenous systems of belief, are best understood not merely as some new kind of religious Cold War, but as an extremely important part of ongoing attempts to make sense of human life under rapidly changing and often deeply troubling circumstances. China does not engage Africa in the way that both radical Islam and numerous and competing forms of Christianity create linkages with the Arab and Western worlds.

No matter how exploitative the African experience of Western colonialism may have been, it created linkages that have proved enduring because – despite Western indifference or even hostility – they have come to be valued by Africans themselves. Given the chance (which European immigration policies increasingly deny them), Africans readily gravitate to those states which once colonised them: Congolese to Belgium, Senegalese to France, Eritreans to Italy, Ghanaians and Nigerians to Britain. The United States and indeed the Scandinavian countries provide a ready magnet for Africans of all descriptions. Regardless of the prospects of an 'Africa without Europeans', a Europe (let alone an America, with its still deeper and more wounding relationship with Africa created by slavery rather than colonialism) without Africans is now simply inconceivable. China remains entirely outside this pattern of relationships, and – given the deep ambivalences and continuing problems that it embodies – would certainly wish to remain so. But their absence nonetheless casts it as only a partial participant in Africa's engagement with the wider world.

None of this analysis, to repeat, is intended to downplay the striking changes that China's recent engagement with Africa have brought especially to the continent's economies, or to cast doubt on the likelihood that the new relationships between Africa and the world's most dynamic industrialising power will continue and even deepen. It does however very strongly indicate that China is likely to adapt to and modify the African experience, but is extremely unlikely fundamentally to change it.