



Back to the Maoist Future China's African ambitions

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Amid festering concerns about China's burgeoning global power, Beijing has set its sights on expanding its influence in Africa. In a throwback to the Maoist revolutionary days of the 1960s and '70s, Beijing has once again identified the 53-nation African continent as an area of strategic interest. But this time it's not interested in exporting communism. Instead, it's wholly concerned with international trade.

Seeking new markets for its export-driven economy and unimpeded access to Africa's abundant natural resources, China lavishes African leaders with diplomatic pomp and circumstance as well as financial, commercial, and military assistance. Unfortunately, the policies of the People's Republic of China are aid-

ing and abetting oppression, human rights abuses, poor governance, and economic stagnation, while shoring up some of Africa's most odious regimes.

Across the planet, China is aggressively seeking new friends and allies, and proving to be a less-demanding alternative to the more scrupulous United States and European nations. Africa's traditional European colonial and American partners now find their vision of a continent governed by free-market democracies and the rule of law challenged by Beijing's scramble for influence and resources.

Nothing is driving China into Africa more than its insatiable appetite for oil and gas. For the past decade, the

Chinese economy has expanded annually at near double-digit rates, requiring an enormous influx of resources. China is already the world's second largest energy consumer, leading Beijing to Africa's door in an effort to reduce its reliance on volatile Middle Eastern sources. Today, Africa provides China with 30 percent of its energy imports.

Beijing is building ties with African energy suppliers through investment, aid, high-level visits, and a strict policy of "noninterference in internal affairs" that Africa's strongmen find comforting. China has invested billions in resource development and infrastructure--and written off billions more in debt--to help build cozy relationships with dozens of African countries. For instance, facing rebel attacks against their country's oil infrastructure and foreign oil workers, and disappointed in the U.S. response, Nigeria (the world's eighth largest oil exporter) turned to China for military aid. This generous assistance will not only protect Beijing's \$3 billion oil investment in Nigeria, but will likely lead to additional lucrative oil concessions from Abuja. In Angola, another African energy giant, a \$2 billion credit line for much-needed infrastructure projects secured Chinese access to coveted offshore oil fields, making China Luanda's second-largest oil customer after the United States.

Sudan presents the most pernicious example of China's new Africa policy, where Beijing combines its drive for exclusive access to natural resources with an aggressive political

campaign to ingratiate itself with the continent's despots. While the United States, the European Union, Japan, and others sought to impose U.N. sanctions on the Sudanese regime over Khartoum's support for the genocide in Darfur, China strenuously opposed Security Council actions. Why? To prevent international economic sanctions from interfering with China's \$3 billion investment in Sudan's oil and gas industry.

In fact, while 4,000 Chinese People's Liberation Army troops guarded oil pipelines, Sudanese government forces and government-aligned militias attacked rebels and hundreds of towns and villages around oil installations, forcing the dislocation of hundreds of thousands. Tragically, Khartoum has doubled its defense budget in recent years, spending 60 percent to 80 percent of its estimated \$500 million in annual oil revenue--half of it from China--on weapons. Moreover, with Chinese assistance, the Sudanese government recently built three weapons factories, complicating international arms embargoes against Khartoum.

The comment of Chinese ambassador to the United States Zhou Wenzhong, while he was deputy foreign minister, reflects Beijing's Africa policy: "Business is business. We try to separate politics from business. Secondly, I think the internal situation in the Sudan is an internal affair, and we are not in a position to impose upon them."

Other African countries are regular purchasers of Chinese weapons and

military equipment, too, providing political and economic access for China while allowing African authoritarians to quash political opposition and stifle democracy. In Zimbabwe, for example, President Robert Mugabe's repeated political and human rights abuses led the United States and the E.U. to impose punitive sanctions against the regime. Beijing's response was to sell Zimbabwe over \$200 million worth of fighter aircraft and military vehicles. Beijing also provided equipment for jamming antigovernment media broadcasts and gave electronic surveillance equipment to Harare's security services to monitor political opponents.

Zimbabwe, the world's second largest exporter of platinum, also gets China's support internationally. Last summer, Britain and the United States backed yet another U.N. Security Council resolution condemning Mugabe's policies. Meanwhile, Mugabe flew to Beijing, seeking a handout for his beggared economy and Chinese support at the U.N.--which Beijing gave, killing the resolution. Not surprisingly, Beijing publicly praises Mugabe, who impoverished the once-prosperous Zimbabwe, as "a man of great achievements, devoted to world peace and a good friend of the Chinese people."

China's ideological support for African despots like Mugabe lends these leaders a kind of pseudo-legitimacy both at home and abroad, blunting pressure for human rights, economic openness, and political freedom. In return, China receives sup-

port at the U.N. and in other forums for its causes, such as isolating Taiwan. As China's power grows, Beijing will become more willing to challenge the United States, the E.U. nations, and others to protect its interests in Africa--and elsewhere.

While China-Africa trade soared to \$30 billion last year, bringing critical revenue to some of the world's poorest nations, Beijing also actively promotes its development model, based on a limited market economy controlled by a totalitarian government. Many authoritarian African regimes, desperate to invigorate their lackluster economies while maintaining a strong grip on political power, find China's modernization model preferable to the difficult free-market and democratic reforms advocated by the United States and the European Union.

While some Africans see the Chinese as kindred spirits who understand Africa's development plight and welcome the Chinese infrastructure projects, the PRC presence is also a source of consternation. Chinese firms underbid local companies, and PRC contractors often use cheap, imported Chinese labor, adding little to local employment or skill development. Moreover, cheap Chinese goods flood African markets, especially textiles, shuttering factories across the continent. And concessionary PRC loans have put International Monetary Fund and other bank projects on hold because of concerns about economic mismanagement and corruption.

China is rapidly expanding its influence in Africa to secure natural resources, expand Beijing's influence, and even isolate Taiwan through generous but self-serving diplomatic, financial, and military assistance. Chinese policies are endangering U.S. goals by supporting African dictatorships, hindering economic development, and exacerbating conflicts and human rights abuses in troubled countries such as Sudan and Zimbabwe.

What is needed is a comprehensive U.S. strategy that encourages de-

mocratic principles, human rights, free markets, and cooperation in regional security and energy development in concert with like-minded partners, looking beyond traditional European friends to democratic Asian and Latin American nations for support. Otherwise, China's broad energy, trade, political, diplomatic, and, yes, military interests threaten to undermine long-standing efforts to promote peace, prosperity, and democracy in Africa.

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