



Africa's New Hegemon. From Cape to Cairo via Beijing

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Hu Jintao, president of China, has just completed an eight-nation tour of Africa--a visit that comes on the heels of a meeting in Beijing attended by some 40 African heads of state. Both the recent visit and the Beijing summit on China-Africa cooperation in November reflect China's determination to establish itself as the benevolent, non-Western continental hegemon, concerned about the plight of historically impoverished and exploited African lands. Through patient diplomatic, military, and especially economic overtures, a resource-hungry China with an eye on Africa's oil has been extending its reach across the continent.

Thus, wherever he went, Hu doled out gifts: \$100 million in grants and "soft loans" to Cameroon, a sports

stadium for Zambia, a military hospital for Guinea-Bissau. Many of the grants come with no obvious strings attached. The day before Hu left for Africa, the Chinese Commerce Ministry announced it would write off 33 African countries' debts to China.

Trade is booming. Last year, China's trade with Africa increased 40 percent, having already quadrupled since 2001. It reached \$45 billion in the first ten months of 2006. China recently surpassed Britain as the continent's third-largest trading partner, after the United States and France. China--unburdened at home by opposition parties, human rights watchdogs, or a free press--asks no questions about its trading partners' domestic repression. Instead, its "mutual noninterference policy"

makes it the ideal partner for despotic African states.

With all of the money China throws at Africa for infrastructure and general economic aid, its more modest military backing for African dictators is the least-noticed aspect of its involvement in the continent. Yet it is also the most unsettling, considering where this assistance has been directed.

China was an early supporter of Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwean African National Union (ZANU) during the struggle against white rule in what was still Rhodesia in the 1970s. Indeed, China helped fuel something of an intra-revolutionary proxy war between ZANU and the Russian-backed Zimbabwean African People's Union (ZAPU). Since Mugabe took control of the country in 1980, China--along with, to its shame, democratic South Africa--has been his leading military supplier.

In December, the Chinese ambassador to Zimbabwe paid a visit to the annual meeting of Mugabe's party, the thuggish organization through which he has ruled the country uninterrupted for 27 years. In 2004, the Zimbabwean government bought \$240 million worth of military equipment from China. In May of last year, the Chinese donated \$1.5 million worth of machinery to Zimbabwe's military. And last August, Zimbabwe purchased six fighter jets from China. The Chinese have also sent the Zimbabweans riot control gear and have trained senior military officers, both of which must

have helped Mugabe last week as he violently suppressed opposition protests outside Harare.

Similarly, the Chinese have exacerbated at every turn what is now the gravest military and humanitarian crisis in Africa, the four-year slaughter in Darfur. At the Beijing summit, Sudanese president Omar Hassan al-Bashir thanked the Chinese government for blocking a U.S.-sponsored resolution in the United Nations Security Council that called for an international peacekeeping force to be deployed in Darfur, where Khartoum has abetted a genocide that has taken hundreds of thousands of lives. And that's not all al-Bashir has to be grateful for: His country's economy is expected to grow by a whopping 13 percent this year thanks in no small part to Chinese trade and infrastructure assistance. "Unless the international community--in particular China, host of the 2008 Olympics--finds the will to confront Khartoum over its intransigence, a savage genocide by attrition will continue indefinitely," Eric Reeves, an American Darfur expert, recently told Reuters.

China also supplies arms to Khartoum in violation of the letter of a U.N. arms embargo and the spirit of countless U.N. resolutions calling on international actors to refrain from inflaming the crisis. The Chinese are unapologetic: In January the Chinese assistant foreign minister said, "With Sudan, we have cooperation in many aspects, including military cooperation. In this, we have nothing to hide."

When Hu visited al-Bashir in Khartoum, all he had to offer the genocidal leader on the subject of Darfur was a polite request that the Sudanese president play a more "constructive role in realizing peace." Just days earlier, a Sudanese government official had accused the United States of "dismantling the Sudanese government from within" and trying to spur "international pressure on Khartoum through human rights institutions and by bringing into the country elements opposed to the government." As long as the Sudanese keep their oil spigots open, they will continue to reap Chinese rewards: During his visit, Hu bestowed on al-Bashir a \$13 million interest-free loan to construct a new presidential palace and cancelled \$70 million in debt. In return, China receives 60 percent of Sudan's oil output and is the country's largest foreign investor.

In addition to its military support for the odious regimes in Khartoum and Harare, China sold arms to both Ethiopia and Eritrea during those countries' civil wars and has generally flooded the continent with weaponry, sometimes selling guns both to governments and to the rebel groups who fight them.

According to Herman Cohen, a 38-year State Department veteran who served as ambassador to Senegal and Gambia and, in the first Bush administration, as assistant secretary of state for Africa, China's interest in the continent is nothing new. Since the 1960s, he says, China has been intimately involved in African affairs. It sought to exert influ-

ence as a Cold War power by cultivating relations with like-minded Marxist regimes; then in the past decade or so, as it emerged as a potential world power with a ravenous need for raw materials, China came to see Africa more as a land of natural resources to be exploited than as a place to win hearts and minds. Oil, simply put, drives Chinese policy in Africa.

Next to the United States and the nations of the former Soviet Union, China has the most oil-intensive economy in the world. Africa is the source of only about 10 percent of China's oil imports (with Sudan representing 1.7 percent of the total), but that's enough, in absolute terms, to make African suppliers giddy. Domestic oil production is declining faster in China than in the United States, and consumption is increasing at an even higher rate, making the Chinese quest for fossil fuels all the more desperate. China's share of world oil consumption is expected to increase dramatically, from 7 percent to 12 percent, between 2002 and 2025, while the U.S. share is expected to drop from 47 percent to 35 percent over the same period. In just over a decade, China went from being a net exporter of oil to being the world's second largest importer, behind the United States. Indeed, increasing Chinese demand is one of the primary factors driving the price of oil so high.

To meet its energy needs, China has depended on a rogues' gallery of international oil producers. Defying American entreaties to isolate Iran, for example, China in 2004 signed a

\$70 million oil and gas contract with Tehran. It also buys oil from Sudan and, prior to the coalition invasion of Iraq in 2003, was one of the most vociferous opponents of the U.N. sanctions regime that reduced Saddam Hussein's ability to sell oil on the international market. With the United States now occupying Iraq, China has been forced to look elsewhere for oil, and African states have been all too happy to oblige, waiting in the wings to overtake the volatile Middle East as China's chief supplier. Already Angola is China's third largest oil trading partner, following Iran and Saudi Arabia. (Total Chinese trade with the Saudis grew 30 percent between 2005 and 2006.)

In the United States, domestic pressure has long influenced foreign policy; student protests over Sudanese human rights abuses, for example, played a role in getting the U.S. government to prevent American companies from doing business in Sudan and in forcing American universities to divest themselves of holdings in companies doing business there. By contrast, China, an authoritarian state, suffers no such meddling influences. Indeed, the only condition the Chinese impose on African states in exchange for aid seems to be nonrecognition of Taiwan.

"The Western approach of imposing its values and political system on other countries is not acceptable to China," Wang Hongyi of the China Institute of International Studies told the *New York Times* last year. While the United States and West-

ern lending organizations like the World Bank and IMF tend to make democratization and respect for private property and human rights a factor in their international dealings, China demands no such assurances from its partners. In 2005, an adviser to the Chinese government was blunt in explaining his country's oil trading policies to the *Washington Post*: "No matter if it's rogue's oil or a friend's oil, we don't care. Human rights? We don't care. We care about oil. Whether Iran would have nuclear weapons or not is not our business. America cares, but Iran is not our neighbor. Anyone who helps China with energy is a friend." Should Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez ever decide to cut off all oil sales to the United States (a potentially devastating occurrence, considering that Venezuela is America's fourth largest supplier), his Chinese buyers, he has proudly noted, will help him afford the move.

While the United States sits on its hands, there are positive signs that Africans are beginning to realize the consequences of sucking so hard at the Chinese teat. In Zambia, once a Cold War ally, mine workers have protested the hazardous working environment and low pay at the Chinese-owned Chambishi copper mine. Two years ago, 51 workers died at the mine, leading to increased skepticism among Zambians regarding their country's ties to the Asian behemoth. A report released by the British human rights group Christian Aid found that the idea persists in the Zambian popular imagination that "Chinese bosses were uniquely brutal and exploita-

tive, and that the Zambian state's relationship to them was too close."

Chinese influence in Zambia played a major role in that country's September presidential election, when the opposition party made the government's close ties to China a campaign issue, nearly unseating the president. "They are out to colonize Africa economically," the opposition party's general secretary told the *Daily Telegraph*. Late last year, the first Chinese-owned casino opened in the Zambian capital, Lusaka, and the Chinese are currently building a five-star hotel in Livingstone, another major city.

Meanwhile, the Chinese are flooding Africa with cheap goods and cheap labor, to the detriment of African economic development. Cohen says that the Chinese often staff their mines with unpaid prison labor brought from China. Small businessmen across the continent regu-

larly complain about the difficulty they have competing with Chinese who open shops in town centers stocked with cheap Chinese goods. These practices contrast with those of American businesses, which usually send junior executives, not unskilled laborers or shopowners, to Africa to train local people in competitive enterprise and management.

Cohen says that in Kano, a major city in Nigeria's north, a Chinese-owned textile factory has forced all of the city's other textile companies to close, and that the factory's raw materials are purchased in China, not Africa. "They tend to be like old fashioned imperialists," Cohen says. For their part, African leaders "get snookered into thinking they're in solidarity with the third world" by tying their fates so closely to the Chinese. To that extent, China's charm offensive in Africa appears to be working.