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**BETWEEN THE TIGER AND THE DEEP BLUE  
SEA: A CRITIQUE OF WESTERN PERSPEC-  
TIVES ON CONTEMPORARY  
SINO-AFRICA RELATIONS**

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**ABSTRACT**

Within the last ten years, China has made significant economic and political inroads in Africa. It has enhanced relations with a significant number of African countries and its trade volume increased from US \$20 billion in 2001 to an excess of US \$114.81 billion in 2010. China's involvement in Africa has generated interests from many quarters within the international community. While it appears that most African countries are keen on replicating China's success story in Africa, perspectives on Sino-African relations largely emanating from the West, generally point to some form of continental exploitation by China. These perspectives are based on China's dealings with countries such as Sudan, Zimbabwe and Guinea, largely considered as countries with politically repressive governments, disregard for environmental corollaries, unequal negotiating ground between China and African countries, and excessive control of Africa's resources. Operating from a realist conceptualization of international relations, and using mainly qualitative data, this article presents a critique of the West's perspectives on contemporary Sino-African relations. It proceeds on the hypothesis that contemporary Sino-African relations are mutually beneficial to China and Africa. It concludes that on the basis of the mutual benefits, African countries are likely to sustain their relationships with China.

## **BETWEEN THE TIGER AND THE DEEP BLUE SEA: A CRITIQUE OF WESTERN PERSPECTIVES ON CONTEMPORARY SINO-AFRICA RELATIONS**

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### **1. Introduction**

For nearly sixty years, China to varying degrees has maintained relations with most African countries. China's relationship with Africa is traceable to the 1950s during the independence struggle in several African countries, when it provided covert support to liberation movements (Payne and Veney, 1998). Despite its proclaimed allegiance with 'oppressed peoples' in non-Western countries, it was not until 1955 that China began an overt, sustained and systemic relationship with Africa (Mao, 2001, p.4). Since the end of the Cold War, China has adopted an even more aggressive and focused approach to its relationships in Africa. This is reflected in the strengthening of political and diplomatic relations with fifty out of the fifty-three African countries and the increase in the volume of China's trade with African countries from US \$20 billion in 2001 to approximately US \$100 billion as of 2007 (Cheru, 2008). This recent focus on Africa may be partly explained by China's need for resources, particularly energy, following its emergence as a major global economic power, the relatively cheap availability of such resources in Africa, and the need to build and sustain new alliances especially following the collapse of the erstwhile communist blocs.

With the end of the Cold War and the abandonment of the hitherto ideological divides and support structures, many African nations found themselves somewhat abandoned by their former partners, many of them with new priorities. Thus, the interest from China, it can be argued, therefore merely filled in the vacuum left by other world powers in African affairs. Guided by its Five Principles of Co-existence,<sup>1</sup> China has provided assistance without the imposition of any political system

and ideologies. This approach seems to have given the Chinese a broad appeal – one that China has underlined with the strengthening of political and diplomatic relations in many African countries.

From an African perspective, interest in contemporary Sino-Africa relations focuses on socio-economic development, particularly with regard to how China's strides in development can be beneficial to African countries. China's development cooperation approach appears to be driven by the notions of solidarity, mutual and beneficial economic cooperation, 'common prosperity', and a shared 'developing country' status – elements that are critical to the development of African countries. As a result, a number of African leaders have touted China's role as an excellent example of South-South co-operation, calculated to ensure that Africa benefits equally from development partnerships. Rwandan President Paul Kagame, for instance, is on record suggesting that China's investment and diplomatic relations in Africa have brought the continent forward as the relation is based on flexible trade terms with the right aid for development. Kagame further opined:

The Chinese bring what Africa needs: investment and money for governments and companies. China is investing in infrastructure and building roads. In contrast, the West's involvement has not brought Africa forward ...Western firms have to a large extent polluted Africa and they are still doing it. Think of the dumping of nuclear waste in the Ivory Coast or the fact that Somalia is being used as a rubbish bin by European firms (AFP, Oct. 11 2009)

Antithetically, views largely emanating from Western nations have tended to characterize Sino-Africa relations as mainly exploitative. Such arguments also dwell on the willingness of China to disregard international consensus on aid, political and economic governance. A former President of the World Bank group, Paul Wolfowitz, for instance, observed that Chinese banks are breaking the "Equator Principles" – a generally voluntary code of conduct governing lending relations between states.<sup>2</sup> Wolfowitz's comments fall within the general view that China ignores human rights and democratic governance as preconditions for forging relations with most African states (Human rights Watch, 2006). Some of the other western criticisms on Sino-African relations

border on the disregard of environmentally sustainable forms of resource extraction by Chinese companies, poor labor practices and the dumping of cheap Chinese goods onto African markets.

## **2. Sino-Africa Relations in Historical Perspective**

Following the victory of Mao Zedong's Chinese Communist Party (CCP) over the Kuomintang (the Nationalist government) in 1949, China was expected to become a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council in the place of Taiwan. However, fears of China's territorial and population size and its potential of extending Communism to East Asia led to it being denied the seat. The non-recognition of China, particularly by the United States of America, the continued support of the Nationalist government in Taiwan, the denial of China's place in the Security Council, and the general Cold War environment of mutual distrust and hostility posed a threat to China's existence and potential rise. As a result, China's foreign policy sought to attract allies that would support its bid for international recognition on multilateral platforms. Given the "one country – one vote" arrangements in multilateral organizations, China found in Africa the numbers needed to pursue its national interest on such platforms. It, therefore, placed itself at the frontline of opposition to colonialism and imperialism that defined the international environment of the 1950s and which affected many African countries (Xing, 2000, pp. 375-376). However, given its own socio-economic situation at the time, China could only support Africa on a low key - covertly providing several countries with resources for the independence struggle - due to its inability to compete with the developed countries in Africa (Payne and Veney, 1998).

Although there had been various levels of interaction between China and Africa as stated above, we can trace the formal beginning of Sino-African relations to the Bandung Conference of 1955.<sup>3</sup> The meeting, which brought together twenty-nine Asian and African states aimed at promoting economic and cultural relations between the two continents, especially with regard to the mutual objectives of ending colonialism and imperialism. At Bandung, the Chinese Prime Minister, Zhou En-lai, met with African leaders for the first time. It has been noted that:

The conference enhanced the unity and co-operation of the Asian and African countries, inspired by the people in the colonies to struggle for national liberation and played a significant role in promoting the anti-imperialist and anti-colonial struggle of the Asian and African people (Muekalia, 2004, pp.5-12).

Following this meeting and in recognition of Africa's strategic importance as an "arena in which to achieve its political/ideological objectives" as well as support for its bid to secure international recognition and win the ideological war against the Soviet Union in the mostly non-aligned countries of Africa, China began a sustained engagement with Africa (Yu, 1988, pp. 850-851). Premier Zhou Enlai began a path-breaking African tour between 1963 and 1964 with an entourage of about fifty officials. According to Adie (1964, p.174), the tour came at a time when China had "openly split from Russia and yet remained at odds with America, India and most other countries". The tour was thus a bid to earn friends and garner support. It has been noted that the period also marked the beginning of an upsurge in media reports, academic interest and attention from the West European and American governments on China's interest in Africa (Huang, 1987, pp. 364-373 & Jiasong, 2001, pp.310-311).

The success of Zhou Enlai's tour is difficult to measure since he was met with different levels of enthusiasm.<sup>4</sup> The radical message of China especially as it related to nuclear weapons, its One-China policy, and the support given to some dissident groups in Africa to fight against their own governments had made some African governments wary of China. President Bourguiba of Tunisia summed up the apprehension harbored by several governments, when he reported that:

I told him what shocked us in his manner, style and conceptions. I said, "You come to Africa as the enemy of the Capitalist States, of the West, of the neutralists and the non-aligned, of India, of Tito, of Khrushchev, of everybody. You have not chosen an easy policy. I'll say that. Don't expect to score much in Africa. Others won't tell you straight; I will - you won't get far in this Continent (Adie.1964, p.187).

This skepticism, notwithstanding, China continued to provide support to revolutionary forces in Africa (Segal, 1992, p.118). While declaring support for the march towards political independence by all means necessary and the need for unity among Third World countries, Premier Zhou Enlai also presented China's expectations from Africa, namely recognition of the Peoples' Republic of China as the government of China, support for the liberation of Taiwan from the Nationalist government and the One-China policy, as well as the recognition and restoration of China's place at the United Nations (Yu, 1988, p.852). It was, therefore, clear from the beginning that like every other nation, China's involvement in Africa was expected to yield mutual benefits. The engagement in Africa, however, stalled due to internal challenges in China as a result of the great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in 1966.

In 1970, Chinese interest in Africa was rejuvenated. As China's relationship with the Soviet Union continued to deteriorate, China explored other spheres of influence and rigorously pursued relationships with African countries. In that regard, China committed to prestigious projects all over Africa. In addition to the 1800-km Tanzania-Zambia railway worth over US\$450 million touted as the biggest aid project on the continent in the 1970s, China also undertook construction of buildings, stadia, factories, and numerous infrastructures in a number of African states including Ghana, Djibouti, Mali, Eritrea, Congo (Brazzaville), Mozambique, Togo, Equatorial Guinea, and Guinea, among others. (Van de Looy, 2006). China further continued to support various nationalist movements which were demanding independence and an end to imperialism and, in some instances, provided assistance and military support to various nationalist movements in Africa, including the African National Congress (ANC) and leftist rebels in Congo. In fact, the *Peking Review* of January 26, 1973 legitimized armed opposition, stating that "the armed struggle is the only way through which colonialism, apartheid and racial discrimination in Southern Africa and Guinea can be eliminated" (Van de Looy, 2006, p.4).

China's efforts were rewarded, and, in 1971 the People's Republic of China won the vote to represent China in the United Nations Security Council – with 26 out of the 76 affirmative votes cast being from Africa (Snow, 1988, p.2). By 1975, two of China's expectations had been

realized, namely recognition of the People's Republic of China as the legitimate representative of China and the right to represent China in the United Nations Security Council. The realization of these expectations, coupled with the thaw in the Cold War however led to the decline of Africa's strategic importance to China.

In the late 1970s, China embarked on a modernization plan requiring foreign investment and technological assistance. This plan also required economic investment and a non-conflict approach to international politics. Consequently, China re-oriented its foreign policy to enhance its trade links and cooperation with the United States, Western Europe and Japan – countries which had hitherto been its erstwhile ideological foes. (Taylor, 1998, p.443). This enhanced cooperation meant that China had to tone down its criticism of the United States and Western European nations, countries it expected to engage towards the attainment of its new objectives. Additionally, the thawing of relations between China and the Soviet Union meant that there was also no need for a scramble over spheres of ideological influence, especially in Africa. Consequently, Africa lost its strategic importance in Chinese foreign policy. The South-South rhetoric, the need for Third World unity to fight capitalism and imperialism, was drowned by the noise of development. Clearly, the Sino-Africa "love" relationship was coming to an end.<sup>5</sup> China's relationship with Africa was however somewhat resuscitated after the events of Tiananmen Square. The shooting of demonstrators led to an avalanche of criticisms by China's newfound friends. Although her new friends had been silent on her human rights record prior to the massacre, there was widespread condemnation after the Tiananmen Square shooting. During that period, only China's old and almost abandoned friends showed any sympathy. After a period of introspection, China began a re-engagement of its former friends, with the Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen visiting fourteen African countries between June 1989 and 1992. China also resumed aid to Africa (Taylor, 1998, p.451).



### **3. Theoretical Basis for Contemporary Sino-Africa Relations: In Realism We Trust**

Within the gamut of theoretical persuasions underpinning international relations, the concept of realism appears to best rationalize China's foreign policy thrust in Africa as a bid to appropriate factors needed for its own development within a globally competitive world. In its basic form, realism is derived from an acceptance of the anarchical nature of the international system, a condition that mandates a self-help system if any state is to survive. Thus, in its dealing with Africa, China is without a doubt influenced by a rational cost-benefit analysis, at the root of which is its national interest. The corollary to the above is also true - African countries, in their dealings with China, are also driven by the dictates of realism and by extension, their national interests.

The rapid growth of China's economy has necessitated an increased consumption of resources required to fuel and sustain such growth. Since China does not have all the resources it needs within its borders, it must seek those resources from without, a situation that requires the pursuit and maintenance of vibrant diplomatic relations throughout the world and especially with developing/emerging economies providing a readily accessible and relatively cheaper source of resources. Notably as a case in point, by 1993, China had shifted from being a net oil exporter to becoming the second largest oil importer in the world after the United States. By the end of 2006, it had surpassed the U.S. in terms of energy consumption. China's growing demand for oil was due to its rapidly expanding economy as well as growth in consumption driven by rising standards of living. Accordingly, China's quest to seek new oil supplies to diversify its energy sources has seen its focus on developing and deepening relationships with existing and potential oil rich African countries such as Nigeria, Sudan, Angola, Equatorial Guinea, Algeria, Chad, and Gabon, among others. This approach extends to non-oil primary resources as indicated in China's significant economic interests in timber, cotton and agricultural land in many parts of Africa and its dominant role in the last 20 years in influencing global commodity prices.

#### **4. Overview of China's Role in Africa**

The China–Africa Cooperation Forum (CACF) was founded in 2000 to promote stronger trade and investment relations between China and African countries in both the public and private sectors. According to China, the purpose of the Sino-African Forum was "the construction of an international political and economic order and [to] explore new Sino-African cooperation" (Van de Looy, 2006, p.11). It is also to create a platform for developing countries to discuss issues concerning South-South cooperation, explore the North-South dialogue, generate initiatives for debt relief, and expand Chinese economic cooperation with African states. It was the first large-scale collective dialogue between China and African countries in the twenty-first century and was expected to lay the foundations for the development of Sino-African relations in the new century.

As noted earlier, current trade relations between China and Africa involve a high degree of investment by Chinese companies in Africa, especially in areas of badly needed infrastructure development. These relations have also been actively sustained by dialogue and engagement of various African governments by their Chinese counterparts and vice versa. Since 2004, there have been more than a dozen exchange visits of high-level party and government officials between China and African countries. Most of the exchanges have centered on economic and energy cooperation. For instance, in February 2004, Chinese President Hu Jintao visited Algeria, Gabon, and Nigeria — the three African oil giants — to consolidate further the security of energy supplies. Similarly, in June 2004, Chinese Vice President Zeng Qinghong visited Tunisia, Togo, Benin, and South Africa, all countries with significant mineral reserves. In October–November 2004, National People's Congress Chairman, Wu Bangguo visited Kenya, Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Nigeria. All of these visits focused on joint oil, mineral and renewable resources exploration opportunities in the region. In return, top leaders from Kenya, Liberia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe visited Beijing and secured further investment and economic assistance from China (Muekalia, 2004, pp. 5-12).

The year 2006 marked the 50th anniversary of formal Sino-African diplomatic ties. The first half of that year was also characterized by visits from China's top three executives, starting with the Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing's January trip to six West African nations — Cape Verde, Senegal, Mali, Liberia, Nigeria, and Libya — followed by President Hu Jintao's visit in April and Premier Wen Jiabao's seven African nation visit in June which also included attending the World Economic Forum hosted in Cape Town. In November 2006, a Forum on China-Africa Co-operation (FOCAC) was held in Beijing. The conference produced two key documents, namely the Beijing Declaration and the Program for China-Africa Co-operation in Economic and Social Development. It also launched *China's African Policy*, an official Chinese government white paper aimed at promoting economic and political cooperation as well as joint energy development without interfering in each other's internal affairs. It is a document that embodies a comprehensive and long-term plan to enhance cooperation in Sino-Africa relations. The year 2006 clearly showed China's deepening political and economic footprint within the continent and the pivotal role that Africa would play in Beijing's economic future.

Although China's policy towards Africa expressly rejects political interference in the sovereignty of another state, China has recently been active in peacekeeping operations on the continent under the United Nations peacekeeping force. It is currently a troop contributing country to the United Nations missions in Africa. In January 2005, 598 Chinese soldiers served with the United Nations blue berets in Liberia. China also sent forces, though less numerous, to the Western Sahara as part of the United Nations operations, and also to Sierra Leone. China also actively supports the African Unions' role especially with regards to safeguarding peace and stability in the region and promoting African solidarity and development. This support also extends to assisting sub-regional organizations such as ECOWAS and SADC, among others, in promoting political stability, economic development and regional integration.

In the area of Social Responsibility, China is contributing to the welfare of local people in the area of employment creation and the eradication of HIV/AIDS. China's involvement covers cooperation in the

field of health, including numerous ministerial visits with African leaders to facilitate the regular exchange of medical teams and training for medical professionals. China deployed its first medical team in 1964 at the invitation of the Algerian government, and since then China has cumulatively sent over 15,000 doctors to more than 47 African countries and treated approximately 180 million African patients. In 2003, China deployed a total of 860 medical personnel in 35 teams to 34 countries (Negi, 2008, pp.41-63). China also established a fund that is jointly used by several Chinese ministries, such as those of foreign affairs, commerce, education, and science and technology, and together they are responsible for the training and education of Africans. In 2003, 6,000 Africans were trained and 1,500 students visited China on educational exchange programs. By providing these scholarships, China has contributed significantly to the development of human resources in Africa.

#### **5. China Africa Relations – Reciprocal or Lopsided?**

Without a doubt, China has extensively supported and engaged African governments at various times and to various extents throughout the years. However, there are indications that the relationships between the parties, though seemingly driven mainly by Chinese initiatives, have not been totally one sided especially in the area of diplomatic relations. African governments have supported and defended China's interest on the international level especially in multilateral organizations with "one country – one vote arrangements". In the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, for instance, African countries have frequently played a prominent role in frustrating Western efforts to bring about formal condemnation of China's human rights records (Lafargue, 2010).

Furthermore, the support of African governments has played a critical role in China's effort to isolate Taiwan diplomatically, as the overwhelming majority of African countries, abiding by the one China principle, refuse to have official relations and contacts with Taiwan and support China's cause for reunification (Van de looy, 2006, p.6). The use of its soft power offensive has enabled China to forge diplomatic relations with 48 countries on the continent, with Chad being the last Afri-

can state to switch diplomatic ties from Taipei to the mainland. The soft power diplomacy may be simple in its application, but it is a sophisticated strategy that entwines the use of political non-interference and economic incentives with the rhetoric of non-alignment and other concepts like historical friendship, equality, common development, mutual support and mutually beneficial co-operation which has endeared Beijing to the majority of Africa's leaders.

### **6. Critiquing Western Perspectives of Sino-Africa Relations**

The increased prominence and prevalence of Sino-African relations has generated a lot of attention from around the world and particularly in western circles. China has over the years faced criticisms over its domestic policies on governance and human rights. The international condemnation of the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989 is a clear example of the world's views on China's treatment of issues affecting the right and liberties of its citizens. Concerns about China's role in Africa have been voiced by a range of actors —from both international and national human rights observers, and most severely by the United States and some European countries. The more prevalent current public discourse is that which is promoted by the United States and Africa's former colonial powers, most especially Great Britain and France, who see Chinese influence in Africa as a threat to their vision of a prosperous Africa, governed by democratic leadership that respect human rights, the rule of law and embrace free market economic systems (Brookes & Shin, 2006, pp.1-9).

The United States Government's condemnation of China for its disregard and perceived amorality on human rights in Africa has been channeled not only through its executive branch, but also through the U.S. Congress, Congressional subcommittees, and think tanks including the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). According to the CSIS for instance, "hard national interests and strategic needs" drive China to Africa (Gill, Huang and Morrison, 2007, pp.69-93). Similarly, in the United Kingdom, the Department for International Development (DFID), has persistently criticized China on its dealing with Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe (Brown & Chun, 2010, pp.7-9). A British newspaper in

2006, for instance, accused China of trouncing all hopes of change in Africa by doing deals with its 'kleptocrats', adding cynically that 'China will deal with anyone, even pariah states'.<sup>6</sup> International Organizations such as the Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, the IMF, and World Bank have occasionally joined the criticism of China regarding human rights in Africa and what is described as undermining of Western efforts at political and economic reforms in Africa (Human Right Watch, 2006).

Sino-African relations, structured in line with the five principles of mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence, embodied in the China African Policy-2006, have been the source of these criticisms within the context of human rights and good governance. Particular interest has been paid to the contradictions relating to the democratic principles of good governance, human rights, and the rule of law as the basic norms governing contemporary international relations. The West contends that a politically stable country practicing these democratic principles is likely to accelerate its growth and development in order to improve the living standards of its citizens. Therefore, they posit that Africa, a continent famous for politically unstable governments, lack of transparency, dictatorial, oppressive and exploitative leaderships, poverty, conflicts, and human rights abuses must therefore meet the "Equator Principles" of good governance, rule of law and respect for human rights.<sup>7</sup>

Further to the above, China has also been frequently accused of 'neo-colonialist' and "imperialist" impulses in its hunger for raw materials, financial prowess, and its wide-range investment portfolio throughout Africa.<sup>8</sup> According to the critics, Sino-African relations are all about China getting access to Africa's mineral resources for its own development, contending that the Chinese will not hesitate to manipulate and exploit African leaders and workers for their own national interest. It is also argued that the Chinese government has combined its efforts to secure exclusive access to African natural resources with an aggressive political campaign by carrying out favors with Africa's tyrants and despots. To the critics, this is a negative phenomenon that will

go a long way to aggravate the "resource curse," thus making a mockery of democracy and human rights in Africa. In retrospect, Chinese presence across Africa can be described as partly due to its concentration predominantly in seven strategic oil producing countries — Angola, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Gabon, Nigeria, Sudan, South Africa and Zambia. With the bulk of Chinese investments in extractive industries concentrated in specific enclaves like oil fields in the above-mentioned countries, the disproportionate spread is conspicuous.

China has also been accused of eliminating competition in Africa through negative industrial practices such as underbidding and the displacement of local firms. For instance, there are growing concerns about the influx of Chinese textiles undermining local African production, hiring limited Africans laborers by Chinese companies (about 70 percent of the labor force coming from China) in poor working conditions as well as low pay to African employees. China has also come under criticism for taking advantage of developmental initiatives from other countries and international institutions to Africa. For instance, Chinese investors are setting up factories in Africa to take advantage of the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) agreement for duty-free access to the US market.<sup>9</sup> There is also the issue of China paying bribes and attaching no conditions to business transactions within the continent — practices which are indirectly eliminating other potential investors and opportunities for business in Africa. Again the issue of dumping 'cheap Chinese imported goods' in Africa coupled with claims of China's total disregard for environmentally sustainable forms of resource extraction has resulted in anti-Chinese sentiments and popular antipathy across the African continent (Cheru, 2008).

To a large extent, China's perceived exploitation, cultural insensitivity, lack of corporate transparency and the importation of Chinese workers in a continent facing unemployment challenges are issues to be addressed. It is quite difficult to ignore the plight of domestic suppliers and retailers closing down their businesses due to their inability to compete with the influx of Chinese products and businesses in most African markets. It is important to note, however, that Sino-African relations in recent times have become more pragmatic. Trade for mutual benefit is central in this current partnership. Chinese companies in

Africa are investing in sectors that the West has neglected because they are less profitable. For example, China has reopened the Zambian copper mines and is looking for oil fields off the coast of Gabon. Chinese business practices in Africa are not significantly different from domestic business practices within China. Chinese managerial description of hard work, self-reliance, getting ahead, delayed gratification and sacrifice may differ from African counter-narratives of exploitation, arrogance and insensitivity.

With regard to paying bribes and attaching no conditions, Chinese firms have lower costs and can consequently outbid their western competitors and win contracts for projects. Chinese loans are meant to really benefit the African people. By giving a lot of technical support in Africa, China is focusing more on how to cooperate in alleviating poverty in Africa. One cannot dispute the fact that Chinese firms compete for profitable projects not only with more technologically and politically savvy (shrewd, practical and knowledgeable) international firms, but also with each other. Perhaps, China's shift from direct agricultural aid and big projects to "what works, what will make profit, and simply getting and giving" may be part of a larger and more universal frame of free market capitalism.

Chinese products are well suited to the African market. At the moment, China is in a position to manufacture basic products at very low prices and of satisfactory quality. African traders import Chinese goods that are attractively priced for the African market where purchasing power is limited. African businessmen are increasing their profit margins by cutting out intermediaries and importing products directly from China. Chinese trade with Africa has diversified beyond state-directed enterprises in recent years and it is good for the continent because it brings in a new actor willing to invest.

As a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, China's willingness to support certain regimes in Africa is greatly undermining local and international efforts at increasing good governance and macroeconomic reforms. For example, despite the human rights abuses and ethnic cleansing by the government of Sudan against the large non-Muslim populations in its Darfur region, China continues to



support the government of Omar Al Bashir and has consistently opposed U.N. sanctions against Khartoum.

China has also been criticized for aiding and abetting oppressive African dictatorships that legitimize their misguided policies and praise their development models to suit their national conditions. By supporting undemocratic African regimes through economic transactions as was the case with Captain Moussa Dadis Camara of Guinea<sup>10</sup> and continuously selling arms to repressive governments, China is contradicting the principles of the African Union (AU), and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in their efforts to promote good governance, respect for human rights and the rule of law to curb the spread of undemocratic regimes. Western critics further argue that China's support for politically repressive governments in Africa counters the liberalizing influence of Africa's traditional European and American partners. To them, this relationship has the effect of legitimizing and strengthening Africa's most repressive regimes, thereby increasing the likelihood of weak and failed states on the continent. The West fears that China's activities in Africa will reverse the achievements Africa has made in the area of democracy and stability and erode the influence of global institutions like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) as well as countries like the United States, Britain, and France, among others. It has also been argued that through its policies of non-interference, mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity and mutual non-aggression, China is ironically promoting and encouraging oppressive leadership within the continent. It is against this background that China has received open criticisms in its dealings with countries like Sudan, Zimbabwe and Angola.

Although one cannot dispute the fact that China is dealing with these so called 'rogue regimes' in Africa - a situation that calls for some attention - it is important to note that on grounds of national or strategic interest, a country may be willing to "dine with the devil". Countries like Pakistan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia — huge human rights violators — are being supported by the U.S. and its western allies because of their strategic interests in those countries. It can therefore be argued that China's approach is not significantly different from how any other country pursues its national interests. It is important to note that, though non-

interference keeps other countries away from China's domestic affairs, it has found its application increasingly unhelpful in protecting it in its dealings with repressive governments.

Civil society and the private sector within the continent also criticize China's bilateral dealing with African states. They bemoan the fact that China chooses to deal with individual African states despite the economic disparities between the various countries, rather than engage multilaterally through the sub-regional economic blocs. They argue that bilateral dealings give China an upper hand in trade discussions and, as a result, Africa is not getting a good deal. They accuse China of ignoring the real needs of Africa and exploiting the continent.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, the resistance of individual African countries to the multilateral approach offered by the African Union cannot be ignored.

Reports in various African news media also express some anxieties on the effect of Sino-African relations within the continent. In West Africa, China is being accused of sacrificing human rights protection by repressive governments for natural resources, and that unlike some western countries which restrain companies from their countries from doing business with renegade regimes, China on the other hand insists on dealing with the continent's most brutal and corrupt leaders.<sup>12</sup> In southern Africa, it is suggested that 'Sino-African relations are essentially devoid of any political content and this absence complicates efforts at deepening and strengthening democracy and human rights within the continent,<sup>13</sup> and in East Africa critics identify China's business dealings with pariah states in total disregard of the issue of human rights and accountability.<sup>14</sup> It is important to note that the critics have valid points on the issue of China's quest for unlimited access to the natural resources in Africa, and the use of 'questionable' means and tactics to gain access to resources.

Most African countries continue to have close bonds with their former colonial powers and their allies. As a result, despite China's socio-economic exploits in Africa, it is still to an extent, disadvantaged as it does not have the same political influence on the countries with which it is engaged. It therefore appears that China has chosen to provide African leaders with an incentive which is currently unavailable with their colonial masters and erstwhile friends – political noninterference – to

woo them and stay in the competition for resources in Africa. Indeed, this is in line with the realist theory underlying this study. Thus, it may be conceded that in order to gain access to Africa and its resources, China may have had to resort to sometimes unsavory tactics to further its objectives of acquiring access to mineral resources in a continent almost totally influenced by its former colonial powers. Secondly, although Africa may possess some of the world's largest natural resources, it lacks the infrastructure, techniques and the capital to drive its development and growth. For decades, the continent has relied on its former colonial masters for development, but this has resulted in its total marginalization in the global economy. China, unlike the western countries, offers a strategic bargain with the semblance of a win-win partnership, and Africa has no option but to grab it with open arms so that although Sino-African relations may be criticized as exploitative, the relationships are in fact mutually beneficial with each party pursuing their respective national interests.

It is important to note that unlike Europe, China has hardly ever wavered in its commitment to Africa since the Cold War. China has shown its willingness to support efforts towards African unity and has pledged to work with the African Union in addressing issues of immediate concern. The nature and depth of China's relationship with African countries can therefore be described as unparalleled; yet the lack of a coherent structure of the African Union reflects the weaknesses in the continent's ability to negotiate with China on equal terms.

Overall, Chinese companies see Africa as a burgeoning economic opportunity as more African countries privatize their industries and open their economies to foreign investment. In spite of this assistance, China is portrayed as not only offering poor countries comprehensive trade deals but as being exploitative as well. But the Chinese counter these claims as false and assert that they are giving African governments what they want, no-strings-attached investment and infrastructure. In essence, Chinese companies are merely following in the footsteps of older and larger multinational corporations often from the West.

It is the belief of many that hidden within the castigation of China is the anxiety that the Sino-Africa relationship is undermining West-

ern hegemony in Africa. *The New York Times*, for instance, recently argued that in Africa, "the United States preoccupied with terrorism has seen its dominant status slip."<sup>15</sup>

## **7. Conclusion**

Since the end of the Cold War, the strategic utility of Africa appears to have been blighted by the absence of any superpower rivalry. Consequently, Africa has had to employ demarches like other parts of the world to secure development assistance from global superpowers. In some instances, it is clear that previous relationships with the superpowers are falling apart. For instance, following the 2007 Lisbon Euro-African meetings, President Wade of Senegal succinctly observed, "It is evident that Europe is close to losing Africa" (Tongkeh, 2010, p.1). With regard to China, there is no gainsaying that the present level of relations with Africa is a product of consistency and sustained Chinese interest in Africa that dates back several decades. Additionally, within the context of realism in international relations, it is evident from the above discussion that rational cost-benefit analyses, and one that has continuously confirmed the potential for mutual benefits for the two parties inform Sino-Africa relations. Although some of the criticisms on China's role in Africa are genuine, they often appear lopsided in terms of offering sustainable alternatives. The balance sheet thus continues to show the dominance of benefits over costs. It is, therefore, not surprising that between the Asian tiger and the deep blue sea of unpredictable development partnerships of the western world, Africa is opting to meet the former.

## **ENDNOTES**

1. The Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence, formulated as the first set of key principles for the conduct of Chinese Foreign policy stipulated mutual respect for the sovereignty of all states, non-aggression and non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, equality, mutual benefit and peaceful co-existence in consonance with the Charter of the United Nations.

2. Wolfowitz made these comments in an interview with the French Newspaper *Les Echos* on October 23, 2006. An English recap is provided in South African

Insurance Times and Investment News, available at <http://www.itinews.co.za/news.aspx>. Accessed on February 24, 2010.

3. The conference aimed at promoting Afro-Asian economic and cultural cooperation, fight colonialism and neo-colonialism by the then Super Powers – the United States of America and the United Socialist Soviet Republic. At the end of the Conference, the leaders produced a Ten-point Declaration on the promotion of world peace and cooperation.

4. Chou En-lai had different receptions from various African leaders. Although almost all the countries visited indicated support for China's recognition at the United Nations, there were differences on opinions on several issues. With the exception of Ghana, Mali and Guinea that displayed enthusiasm and support for China, the remaining seven were polite with some such as Algeria and Ethiopia even critical of some of China's policies. For more on this, see Adie, W. A. C. (1964) "Chou En-lai on Safari," *The China Quarterly*, Number 18 (April - June), pp. 174-184.

5. China began an overt criticism of African states and China's Deng Xiaoping is alleged to have told the vice President of Tanzania that socialism did not mean poverty. For more on this, see Ian Taylor, *ibid.*, pp. 443 - 446.

6. *The Times of London*, July 4, 2006, p. 5.

7. A voluntary code of conducts that governs lending relations between states.

8. The Committee on International Relations, House of Representatives, US Congress, (2005) "China's Influence in Africa," Available at [http://www.house.gov/international\\_relations](http://www.house.gov/international_relations), Number 109-74, p 28. Accessed on February 10, 2010.

9. Chinese textiles to the US has begun to flourish and African exporters could not compete despite the African Growth and Opportunity Act, (AGOA), which gave African states full access to the American market.

10. A turbulent military regime from 2008 - 2010, which saw the murder of dozen protesters by soldiers during a rally in Conakry. The incident attracted wide spread international condemnation. And it was in the midst of such confusion that China struck a huge mining and oil deal with the junta.

11. Andani A., in a panel discussion on the topic "China's Special Relationship: Emerging Market Investment into Ghana". Graphic Communication Group Ltd-Ghana, *Daily Graphic*, October 14, 2009.

12. *The Public Agenda* [Accra], November 6, 2006, p. 3.

13. *The Namibian* [Windhoek], January 19, 2007, p. 2.

14. *The East African Business Week* [Kampala], May 1, 2006, p. 4.

15. Traub, J. (2006) "China's African Adventure," Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/19/magazine/19china.html?pagewanted=all>

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