

Go Global, Meet the Locals: Pragmatism, Plunder, and Anti-Chinese Populism in Africa

by Richard Aidoo

INTRODUCTION

From Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward to Deng Xiaoping's Opening Up, through Jiang Zemin's Going Out (also known as the Going Global strategy) to Xi Jinping's recent Chinese Dream, China has pursued diverse diplomatic engagements with African countries within these broad development visions. These engagements have evolved along with Africa's changing political and economic circumstances, as well as China's resurgence as a global economic power. Most significantly, in large parts of the developing world (including Africa), China has shifted away from its support for the struggle for ideological identity to assume geopolitical and geo-economic weight, as anti-imperialism rhetoric and support have given way to its business-is-business mantra, and noninterference diplomacy.¹ In other words, from the late 1970s, Africa encountered Beijing's gradual shift away from an ideological proselytizer to a global economic adventurer. After the Cold War, Chinese influence in Africa has grown significantly as it has traded, invested, and constructed its way to the most relevant economic partner to African economies. Chinese capital, aid, expertise, and diplomacy have brought increasing numbers of Chinese to the continent to serve as expatriate workers as they heed the call to "go out" and enhance the national ambitions and seek personal fortunes.²

In the past two decades, it has been remarkably evident that the relationship between China and Africa has entered into a different phase. Contrary to the rather simplistic and unilinear account of China's scramble of the African continent, current engagements are rather complex with China as a pragmatic economic actor with both complementary and competitive impacts that draw different reactions from African populations – from the often reported embrace to intense local anger in certain parts. Along

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with a political independent and largely democratically governed Africa, China is also currently engaging mostly empowered African populations who will readily assert and preserve their sovereignties, political rights and civil liberties through public protests, pronouncements and political competitions like elections, and referendums. So, in spite of Beijing's touted African embrace as the partner-in-development option for African states, some growing popular resentment for "most things Chinese" in some parts of Africa is confronting China as it deals with a continent in transition. Alternatively, though the effectiveness of popular African reactions towards the Chinese in African countries may be shaped by factors such as regime type, and economic status of the state in question,³ sustainability and long-term impacts of these people centered movements depend on more than any visceral efforts. Consequently, how will Beijing's motives and strategies in Africa be impacted by popular reactions as African populations look to the past and present?

This article highlights the fact that as Chinese engagements continue to increase in Africa, the disenchanted portions of African populations will likely continue to perceive China as a domestic competitor and plunderer of African resources, even as China continues to pursue a diplomatic agenda that mainly attempts to distinguish itself and its actions in Africa away from past Western influences on the continent. Moreover, the emerging anti-China populism in various African countries can have a lasting effect on the support of the proper socio-political and economic institutional frameworks, which protect the political rights and well being of the people.

CHINA IN AFRICA: THE PAST, PRESENT AND POPULISM

From its earlier trade links with Africa dating back from 206 BCE to 220 CE, China's relationship with the continent has been a significant and enduring one, albeit with some diplomatic twists and turns in particular countries and regions in Africa. While the earlier origins of this relationship have been mostly characterized by trade, exploration and discovery during different Chinese dynasties, there is also collections of bitter accounts of exploitation, forced labor and diplomatic wrangling, specifically this is evident in country cases across the continent. Shipments of elephant tusks, rhinoceros horns, precious stones, and rare plants with medicinal potency from Africa to China preceded and continued along with the tales of about 63,695 indentured Chinese laborers in the Transvaal gold mines in South Africa in the early 20th century.⁴ In most of the 20th and early 21st centuries, China's interests have evolved along with the major changes on the continent – anti-colonial

struggles, end of colonialism, cold war politics, and the third wave of democratization, globalization and ascendancy of populism characterized by the domino effect of the Arab Spring across North Africa. In spite of the intermittent exchanges through the many decades of China-Africa engagement, the Afro-Asian meeting at Bandung in Indonesia, in 1955 serves as an important milestone, and a guidepost to the development of Chinese diplomacy toward Africa, and the developing world in general. Though the fostering of fraternal relations at Bandung and its immediate aftermath has largely been posited as possessing deep ideological undertones,⁵ this meeting indelibly imbued China-Africa diplomacy with two signature narratives that continue to shape contemporary aspects of this relationship – South-South cooperation and the noninterference principle.

At Bandung, the African leaders envisioned their people's embrace of China as their ideologies and diplomatic objectives were akin to each other. For instance, Kahin notes that then leader of the Gold Coast (now Ghana) Kwame Nkrumah's clarion call to racial equality and political revolution were consistent with China's position on Afro-Asian unity which further highlighted fraternal links in the Third World.⁶ Prime Minister Nehru also captured this likeness in vision in his speech at Bandung as he asserted that: "We are brothers not only because we are Asians and Africans, but also because we are linked by the immeasurable wish for peace, resolute resistance to all dictates, firm determination to raise ourselves from backwardness."⁷ These were not only in broad rhetorical anecdotes but were closely knitted into the anti-colonialist struggles that were raging in Africa as African nationalists were inspired by Chinese visions and visionaries. Kwame Nkrumah's requirement of a "bitter and vigorous struggle" for freedom was ideology gleaned from Mao Zedong.⁸ Along with the ideological solidarity, loans and other forms of economic support were also extended to African countries right after the Bandung gathering, making this one of the most productive historical confluences between China and Africa. Beijing has continuously evoked memories of the bond that was established at Bandung to remind Africans (and their leaders) of China's long suffering and destined support to see African people through their march toward economic self-determination – a major effort to establish dissimilarity to the West's past and present encounters in Africa.

Another effort to clearly distinguish and detour away from the patterned behavior of a colonizer in Africa has been continuous Chinese insistence on the noninterference principle, which is meant to be a sacrosanct preservation of sovereignty (especially in a continent that has witnessed so much interference from West powers). Drawn from the Five Principles of

Peaceful Coexistence, this principle has been repeatedly used to qualify China's action or otherwise in apposition with the seeming unceasing Western interference in the politics and economics of African countries. From Bandung to the recent economic diplomacy, China has rhetorically devised a different path to global power status, one that is characterized by the noninvolvement and passivity in the affairs of other states, toward their development.⁹ George Yu asserts that post-Bandung, China saw itself as an alternative development model to the Western liberal ideology connected to the colonizers and United States.¹⁰ As the actors and outcomes of Bandung have evolved, the ideological fervor has ebbed into economic dialectics with Beijing stepping into its present role in Africa – a pragmatic economic actor.

Following Jiang Zemin's urgings to usher China into a new global post Cold War order, which will see it to the forefront of a globalized world with increased movement of people, capital, goods and experiences. This is after a decade that many in the developing world agitated for a new international economic order to account for equitable development between the developed and the developing world. Zemin's "going out" (*zou chuqu*) policy witnessed Chinese capital access foreign markets and resources. In Africa, there were natural resources to access, growing markets to trade with, and abundant investment opportunities for foreign capital and entrepreneurship, particularly after the decade of the 1980s, perceived as Africa's lost decade.¹¹ With the Cold War and Tiananmen protests in its rear view, China took advantage of the relative disinterest in Africa by the usual Western powers, with clear geopolitical motives rather than its initial ideological intents and encounters in Africa. Beijing beckoned to a world order based on the three worlds frame earlier enunciated by Deng Xiaoping. China saw itself as a major part of the developing world (third world) where it would be an "all weather friend" – engaging in both political and economic diplomacy while respecting each other's sovereignty (nonintervention).¹² So, as China became a net importer of petroleum in 1993, it equally expanded its trade and access to other raw materials, as well as export of its manufactured goods to Africa. As African countries held on to their colonial ties, and developed closer relations with the United States (away from the Soviet Union), China honed in on being a more pragmatic economic actor and partner-in-development with a rhetorical de-emphasis on politics, and broader engagement in economics – trade, investment, extension of aid and loans, and technical expertise.¹³ This has led to an impressive expansion of trade from a meager \$1 billion to over \$ 200 billion elevating China to the biggest investor status in Africa.¹⁴ However, as the Chinese investments, trade, and constructions have increased, so have Chinese living and working

in Africa seen an equally exponentially expansion.¹⁵ With scholars' reference to the 1 million Chinese living in Africa,¹⁶ there are reports and research on emerging anti-China populism,¹⁷ a phenomenon that indicates two significant developments in the evolution of China's relations with Africa. First is the obvious friction created by competition between African and Chinese workers as capital, labor and trade grows in Africa. The second is significantly democratically empowered African populations who can now assert their political rights to vote and protest against any matter perceived as inimical to their development and well being.

In the past decade, Beijing has had a honeymoon with what has been depicted as a continental embrace in diverse surveys and anecdotes. This has been particularly so, as most African governments have found Beijing as a welcome alternative to the conditional help and resources from Western capitals like Washington and London. However, contrary to this generalization of a total continental embrace along with the expansion of China's economic engagement, African populations still consider their colonial ties and relationship with the West as the most significant. Hence though African leaders and elites may fully embrace China's approach to diplomacy and business, the general masses in these populations have a much different gauge. Though Chinese trade and investments have far outpaced the US, a 2014 Gallup survey of 11 African countries shows higher approval rating for US leadership over China's.¹⁸ Further confirmation exists in a 2016 Afrobarometer survey of 36 African countries which concludes that the United States is the most popular model for national development while former colonial powers remain the greatest external influence for most of these countries – a shift in mood right within the decade.¹⁹ The ensuing parts of this article explore and explain some of the reasons for this change in popularity. As China experiences global economic expansion and political relevance, the evolution of its relations with Africa remains a test tube that has witnessed experiments with ideological diplomacy, giving way to wider economic engagements, both of which has increased Beijing's influence and led to varied African popular reactions.

BUSINESS IS BUSINESS: CHINA IS NOT THE WEST

How has China been able to steer clear popular anger, and calmly engage African countries, away from the accusations and pronouncements of colonialism, imperialism and scramble for African resources that are hurled at its engagements? China has made every effort to establish a different identity and narrative away from past Western engagements through

insistence on its noninterference policy in diplomatic engagements in Africa, and has also invoked the spirit and tenets that undergird the South-South cooperation. As much as popular reactions toward these two arrangements have been reported as generally positive, the responses are much more nuanced than the general perceptions, which offer some clarity about why anti-Chinese fervor is on the rise despite all the complementary efforts such as construction of infrastructure, provision of loans and technical aid.

Noninterference principle has enabled China to operate its business-is-business mantra throughout Africa. From safe, stable and small economic engagements like Ghana, Mauritius, and Cape Verde to large, complex, and uncertain partners like Nigeria, South Africa and Angola, China's call to action on different issues taking place in Africa has simply received the retort of noninterference in the domestic affairs of partners. The principle which has a deeper historical place in China's diplomacy toward the developing world beginning with an encounter between India's Jawaharlal Nehru and Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai in 1954,²⁰ has been suspiciously perceived by actors in the developed world (especially the West) as Beijing's irresponsibility in a region of world that should be responsibly nudged into pertinent reforms for the well being of its people. Comparably, contemporary African leaders are perceived as having embraced noninterference as their predecessors did decades ago at Bandung, which has granted China more access in African administrative capitals as well as resource deals made in spite of the domestic political situation(s).

Popular sentiments among African populations are however diverse and more nuanced as they often show concerns with the policy. When Sautman and Hairong surveyed respondents in nine African countries, they indicated that though many saw the policy as a good one, many more had qualms with the policy, except for Sudan, which has vast Chinese oil investments.²¹ Popular vexation with the policy of noninterference can be attributed to two nagging concerns among African populations. First, Beijing's policy of noninterference is often perceived as connivance with leaders and elites who appreciate China's noninterference in domestic politics, unlike Western actors that repeatedly prod and penalize leaders and their cronies for rogue behavior. So, this celebrated identity of Chinese engagement of African countries, which sets China apart from the West is also a perceived degeneration of government accountability towards the people. Second, linked to the first challenge, noninterference as a policy does not encourage institutional reforms as political leaders are not pushed to institute economic and political reforms as is often requested under Western pre-conditioned aid and other forms of financial arrangement.

In many ways, and hotspots around Africa, China's inaction at local levels such as in South Sudan has agitated sympathizers at the international level, and incensed people at the local level. These reactions represent frustration toward China's seeming disregard for accountability and institutional reforms – both essential elements for the sustenance of democracy.

One narrative with implications for policy and institutional development is South-South Cooperation, which is the bedrock of the Non Aligned Movement (NAM) conceived during the Bandung conference in 1955. The sentiments and rhetoric that powered this movement and organization from Bandung have continuously served as the geopolitical conscience of the global South that impinges on the actions or inactions of the developed North. Thus, it galvanizes support and intents from the developing South to help present a united front on issues that impact it. In definition of China's global identity, Deng Xiaoping announced during his speech to the United Nations in 1974 that China was a socialist and developing country that identified with the Third World. Additionally, he asserted that "China is not a superpower, nor will she ever seek to be one."²² A rather astute and indelible way to couch an "us versus them" scenario, which places China in the South, and in opposition to the Soviet Union (now Russia) and the United States identified as the second and first worlds respectively. With its stated allegiance toward the developing world, popular support for the Chinese has been eminent at different points in the history of post-colonial Africa. This support is encapsulated in the African popular respect for China's tried and tested development path, which is known to have lifted millions of Chinese out of poverty, and the possibility of its replication in Africa. An essential survey question that captures this among different African populations is whether China is a positive development model for your country or is China's development path a negative one for your country? In the 2009 survey by Sautman and Hairong, almost all 9 selected African countries (except for South Africa) posted high levels of positive perception of China as a development model for African countries.²³

Interestingly, half a decade later, the Afrobarometer survey of 36 African countries reveals that China ranks second to the United States, which is the preferred model for national development.²⁴ The Afrobarometer survey mirrors the 2014 Gallup survey, which also registered higher approval rating for the United States as a model for development.²⁵ So, though China remains very influential in the economies of these countries, the respect accorded to Beijing as the ideological or pragmatic high ground for development has seen some depreciation – an effect of the increase in anti-Chinese populism. China's allegiance to the global developing South

may hold some relevance and currency for its recent engagements in Africa because it clearly sets its agenda apart from the historical course chart by Western powers from the pre-colonial to post-colonial Africa. Most significantly, it has enabled Chinese private and state-sponsored business interests to conveniently claim the business-is-business mantra. As China complements development in African economies along with its strategic diplomatic devices like noninterference and South-South Cooperation to help distinguish and distance itself from the past efforts of the West, it must do more to avoid any realities or semblances of colonialism which will further increase popular resentment toward all things Chinese.

POLITICS OF PLUNDER: GHOSTS OF COLONIALISM AND ANTI-CHINESE POPULISM

With the initiation of the “Going Out” policy, China’s outward look at the global economic system led to reaching out and increasing engagements around the world, particularly in resource-endowed regions of Africa, which fit perfectly in Jiang Zemin’s vision as he sought for more cooperation during his six-nation African tour.²⁶ With a promising start at the Afro-Asian conference at Bandung, and a confluence of diplomatic wants and resource needs in a post Cold War era, China expanded its interests in Africa through the “Going Out” policy in the 1990s. This increase was characterized by a surge in investments by Chinese companies (mostly state backed), proliferation of Chinese infrastructure projects, extension of diverse forms of loans to African governments, and most vividly the presence of Chinese labor across the continent. This momentous economic engagement in Africa by China has revived memories of colonialism and its attendant exploitative measures as the latter has visibly and directly engaged the former in two significant ways akin to Western colonizers – resource extractive deals, and labor arrangements – which is both perceived to benefit Beijing more than its African partners. In the past decade, China has been contending with accusations (particularly from the West) of colonialism and the initiation of a new scramble for Africa. These claims have heightened as China’s investments in Africa have expanded and diversified along with other storylines depicting China as an opportunist, resource exploiter, and a foreign investor with utter disregard for local legal precepts that safeguard the environment and worker’s right. However, besides the global scrutiny, are the varied local African responses to Chinese engagement, which seem to be generally positive through the various surveys (from both individual researchers and institutions), as well as the anecdotes from African leaders and elites. Con-

versely, these surveys and general rhetoric also reveals growing patterns of Anti-Chinese populism as diverse populations in Africa rise to protest, vote against, and in some extreme instances engage the Chinese violently leading to deaths and destruction of properties. How have the complementary efforts of the Chinese in African countries elicited these populist movements, and what does this mean for the China-Africa relationship?

The single most recurring subject about Chinese objectives and engagements in Africa is access to resources like oil, hard minerals, and land (but mostly oil). As significant Chinese oil fields pass their peak production, 31 percent of the country's oil comes from Africa with Angola as the major supplier.²⁷ Taylor argues that this has become a problem for the West (especially the US) with concerns of China's attempts to lock up barrels of oil at their sources, and thereby limiting supply unto the global market.²⁸ Like most Western critics, the US Council on Foreign Relations states that "China seeks not only to gain access to resources, but also to control resource production and distribution, perhaps positioning itself for priority access to these resources as they become scarcer."²⁹ The Chinese oil grab in Africa goes in tandem with its reach for other minerals like gold, copper, diamond and many more across the continent. With significant holds in places like the Zambian Copperbelt and Bauxite Mine in Ghana, China has made significant inroads into the petroleum and mining sectors of most African economies. In several of the cases, African leaders hail China's interests in these sectors as complementary, as Beijing extends enormous financial resources to their African countries through loans and grants. Angola has been a serial beneficiary of major Chinese loan packages, even when it was impossible to access Western financial resources to rebuild infrastructure after years of civil war, due to the poor human rights and democratic records of President Dos Santos and the People Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA).³⁰ After securing one of the largest Chinese loan deals in Africa in 2012, then Vice President John Dramani Mahama of Ghana quickly admitted the enormity of the \$3 billion credit facility to his country as he stated that "With the current financial crisis, it's very difficult to go anywhere in this world and get \$3 billion."³¹ The \$3 billion loan meant for infrastructure development was then guaranteed with Ghana's newly discovered oil. Though these Chinese loans and investments in oil and other mineral resources are seen as complementary efforts toward development, their tendency to wilt established institutions as the mostly non-conditional (or with less conditions) financial packages serve as disincentives to rogue regimes in countries like Zimbabwe, Sudan, and Equatorial Guinea.

With weakened institutions and powerful friends in high places,

Chinese businesses and actors outcompete the locals and sometimes disregard the local laws to gain access to minerals and other forms of natural resources. In Ghana, large numbers of Chinese have been deported for illegal gold mining (locally referred to as *galamsey*) as Chinese involvement in the unregulated mining activity has incited local anger, especially as the local population blame some local traditional leaders for being complicit and enabling the Chinese operatives.³² In the 35-country Afrobarometer survey, 10 percent of the respondents say China's extraction of resources in Africa contributes to a negative perception of China in the various countries. In Ghana where the issue of Chinese illegal gold mining is rife, 43 percent of the respondents saw extraction of resources as helping depict the Chinese in a negative image.³³ Beijing's resource diplomacy in Africa has been seen as a welcome competition in a global resource market that has been dominated by Western buyers, yet as the deals are reached between the Chinese and African government elites without regard to the local people and the institutions, it then becomes an issue of contention, which easily gins up anti-Chinese sentiments that easily galvanizes support for anti-Chinese populism.

In the 2016 Afrobarometer survey on China-Africa relations, 14 percent of respondents complained that taking jobs or businesses away from the locals gives China a negative image in the various African countries. An interesting twist in this data was from Algeria and Egypt, two of the Arab Spring countries where youth unemployment led to popular uprisings that deposed various elites and leaders. In Algeria, 27 percent of the respondents (the highest in this category of the survey) said taking jobs or businesses from locals affected China's image negatively while 26 percent of Egyptian respondents (the second highest in this category of the survey) saw China's image affected by taking jobs or businesses away from locals.³⁴ Two major issues stem out of the China-Africa labor issues. First is the significant manner in which Chinese labor displaces African labor at different skill competencies. Most infrastructure or construction sites see a combination of skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled Chinese labor, which are often part of the Chinese financial agreements that support these projects. Competition between locals and Chinese businesses are obvious across multiple sectors. After their 10-country safari recording Chinese engagements across Africa, Michel, Beuret and Woods report that even Chinese sex workers in Cameroon outcompete their local counterparts by charging only 40 percent of their price, a rate they are able to maintain since most of them also hold "day jobs" in Chinese-owned shops where they are able to supplement their incomes.³⁵ This resulted in local protests by domestic sex workers against their Chinese counterparts. The second China-Africa labor issue that incense

popular anger is the treatment of African labor by their Chinese employers or fellow workers.³⁶ For instance, in 2005, 49 workers died at a Chinese explosive factory in Zambia. In Zambia's Copperbelt, labor wrangling between local workers and Chinese managers over wages and safety protocols led to kidnappings and shootings. Popular protests against labor malpractices have occurred in Zambia, Kenya, South Africa, and Ethiopia just to mention some of the African countries that have witnessed excesses as a result of Chinese labor arrangements and practices. Sadly, some of these labor issues have occurred and festered as a result of weak monitoring institutions needed to establish and enforce labor laws. The investment codes in some African countries allow for foreign capital to be only invested in manufacturing industries and not general trading, which is largely the preserve of the locals, but the Chinese (and other foreigners) often flout these investment codes without any punitive measures from monitoring agencies, which are sometimes in connivance with these investors. Excessive disregard of labor laws by the Chinese is bound to incite local anger leading to anti-Chinese protests.³⁷

To conclude, China-Africa relations have evolved through many centuries of change, with recent decades featuring years of anti-colonial struggles where Chinese ideological engagements won African support and fraternity with aid to fight off colonizers, to recent years of economic pragmatism as Beijing is focused on setting a distinct economic agenda away from past Western involvement in Africa. China's interests in African resources, investments and markets have been controversial and provoked different popular reactions. The recent upsurge of anti-Chinese populism may continue, discounting the fact that Beijing's economic and diplomatic path and performance in Africa differs from that of the West, if China's present engagements on the continent have semblances and reminders of the past, particularly during colonialism.

NOTES

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