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The Chinese Influence in Africa: Neocolonialism or Genuine Cooperation?

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Abstract: *The scope of the paper provides a different view than the current debate that tracks the historical trajectory of the relationship between China and Africa. The widely discussed economic influence of China in Africa comes from the end of WWII and has not been built in the last decade, as has been recently reported in many parts of the press. To understand this international relationship, it is important to put the events in the right historical perspective. This aspect is particularly true for a nation like China, which has a long-term vision for its diplomacy with respect to Western countries. However, the main economic and political connections between China and Africa and their mutual influences are examined in detail.*

Keywords – China, Africa, international relations, economics, underdevelopment, diplomacy.

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the Chinese influence in Africa and how their mutual relations have transformed from the end of WWII to the current era, and it follows the political and economic questions and their mutual influences.

II. HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND MAIN FACTS

Although it has been widely debated in the last years and described in a great part of the press as a recent phenomenon, the strategy of the Chinese influence in Africa in fact began immediately after WWII when China started to provide weapons and economic resources to the local groups of African rebels who were fighting against the colonial powers, many of which were Western European countries and thus implicit allies of the USA. This bias in the perception is mainly due to studies of the Cold War that shed light on the two big powers, the USA and the USSR, leaving other geographic areas, in our case China and Africa, aside. The main paradigm in international relations is the West-East dualism and the presence of ideologically oriented debates. Thus, the attention dedicated to China and its foreign policy is reduced. It is useful to highlight that, during the 1950s, China was not considered a global player but an underdeveloped country that was taking its first steps toward a slow development process and did not have big ambitions [1], [2].

On the African side, it is useful to remember that the greater part of the nations obtained independence in the next decade, i.e. from the 1960s to the 1970s [3]. At the end of WWII, the British Empire, which was composed of dominions, colonies, protectorates, mandates, and other territories ruled or administered by the United Kingdom, started a rapid process of transformation that culminated with the recognition of the independence of numerous nations from the former colonial power. [3].

In the following map (Fig. 1), we report the data on the dates of independence of nations across the African continent.

Fig. 1 – African national independence: date of independence of each nation



Source: ceppes.wordpress.com (<https://ceppes.wordpress.com/decolonization-in-africa-2/>).

It is useful to recall that, in many cases, this process of decolonization was not accompanied by a sustainable development process for the individual country involved; therefore, political independence was incomplete in some aspects because it remained economically dependent in the complex context of the Cold War. In many nations, political power remained concentrated among small groups (elites) without the formation of a new establishment. This aspect influenced the trajectory of many countries as the development projects financed by the World Bank did not reach the intended targets [4]. This specific aspect will be examined in the next sections; however, in general, the lack of public education together with high levels of corruption determined antidemocratic conditions, and often the democratization process was halted by a dictatorship that was generally tolerated by the developed countries for ideological motives. [5].

To this end, it is useful to recall four bloodthirsty dictators who dominated the scene over different decades: Idi Amin in Uganda (1971-1979), Jean-Bédél Bokassa in the Central African Republic (1966-1979), Mobutu Sese Seko in the Democratic Republic of the Congo/Zaire (1965-1997), and Francisco Macias Nguema in Equatorial Guinea (1968-1979). All of them seized power with a *coup d'état* and, for the most part, had the tacit support of the colonial powers like France, the United Kingdom, and the United States, generally with the

clear scope to contain the expansion of the socialist ideology in Africa and consequently the influence of the USSR. However, in this typical Cold War scenario, other African countries assumed different trajectories [1].

In 1955, the famous Bandung Conference announced the beginning of a new deal for the Afro-Asian nations based on pacifism, and the progressive decolonization process combined with the birth of the political independence movement in Africa, managed by a new generation of African political leaders, accelerated deep transformations on that continent toward democratic governments, albeit not always with success. A relevant role was played by the Chinese delegation headed by Zhou Enlai, which laid the foundations for the forum known as the *Non-Aligned Movement*. This new political subject offered China a new space in a world that was polarized by the dualism of West-East.

A review of the European newspapers during the 1960s evinces an intense development of the relations between China and many African countries in search of a new political deal. In this respect, the support offered by China to the construction of the Tanzania-Zambia Railway in 1967 (Tazara Railway) after the colonial power and the World Bank had rejected the financing of this project is emblematic. The project, which started in 1970, involved more than 30,000 workers (a great part of whom were Chinese blue-collar workers), and it was completed in 1975, two years before the planned end date. In logistical terms, the Tazara provided Zambia and Tanzania with a strategic tool to increase their exports, limiting their dependence on the countries to the west, such as Rhodesia (modern Zimbabwe). Moreover, from a political point of view, it became a symbol of revolutionary solidarity and of anti-colonialism, which had oppressed Africa for many centuries [5]. For China, which was considered a “Third World” country, the support it provided for the building of this infrastructure was an important step because it was an opportunity to contest the hegemony of the USA and USSR in Africa; on the other side, the perception of China in Tanzania was that there was not an imperialist attitude in such a project but solidarity among two “Third World” countries and “South-South” cooperation [1].

From the 1960s, the importance of Africa to China increased rapidly. The increasing contrasts between China and the USSR regarding the concept of “socialism” accelerated this process. China superseded the USSR as the leader of the socialist revolution, so the scope of Chinese diplomacy extended to the African leaders as both the USSR and the USA, as the world’s major powers, sought to obtain a global hegemony over the developing countries. The tools adopted in this period were bilateral relationships, Chinese diplomatic efforts to recognize the Sub-Saharan countries, and increasing its cooperation with them [1]. As an example, it is interesting to remember the foundation of the *Chinese-African People’s Friendship Association*, founded in 1960, which had a wide scope to increase the level of friendship between Chinese and African people, promote trade and cooperation, intensify their common development, and promote world peace. China became a model for the undeveloped countries and created close alliances for anti-colonialist cooperation.

In 1964, the Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai, a leader at the Bandung Conference, which influenced Chinese foreign policy over the next decades, visited many African countries to sign cooperation agreements and offer support in economic and military terms to the newly independent nations. The main tools used were:

- Bilateral agreements, which involved technological solutions, technological know-how, or credit lines without interest rates, and
- Military and logistical support for the rebel movements during the African nations’ processes of independence.

With respect to the second tool, which is controversial and not transparent, it is opportune to specify that China adopted an unorthodox strategy of influence, which included clandestine support for the rebel groups involved in the liberation movements, generating mainly a competition with the USSR. An example is the case of Zimbabwe, where the USSR supported the ZAPU (Zimbabwe African People’s Union), whereas China sustained the ZANU (Zimbabwe African National Union). In Mozambique, the situation was different; the FRELIMO (Frente de Libertação de Moçambique) obtained economic and military support from both China and the USSR during the war for independence and after it because there were few rival organizations and these lacked adequate leadership and territory control [1], [5].

In Angola, the situation during the war of independence assumed a complex configuration. At the beginning, the intention of China was to support the MPLA (Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola), but this movement was closely supported by the Soviet Union. Subsequently, China changed its alliance in favor of

the FNLA (Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola). After 1964, China supported a third group, the UNITA (União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola), which was born from the FNLA and adopted a position close to the Maoist ideas with an opposing socialist doctrine to that of the Soviet Union. Successively, it became a military arm of the USA. However, during the 1970s, China abandoned the UNITA and became the main supporter of the MPLA and, one year later, the FNLA. After the independence of Angola from Portugal (1975) and during the Angolan Civil War, China secretly supported both the FNLA and the UNITA, not for political purposes but to reduce the influence of the Soviet Union, which was the major ally of the MPLA, in the country [1], [5].

In short, the principles that oriented the strategy of China in Africa from the 1970s were subject to a major change that came from an important internal political factor. The Cultural Revolution in 1966 modified the internal equilibrium in China, which gradually abandoned its support for the rebel movements that it had offered in the past decades because this tool had not reached its objectives but fed the instability in the African countries. The target of the Chinese foreign policy during the 1970s became limiting the influence of the USSR on the African continent, and in this trajectory, it was even useful to temporarily align its position with the USA, which was also invested in containing the expansion of the USSR.

In 1974, during a meeting at the UN, the Chinese vision of the world was expressed by Deng Xiaoping. On this occasion, he expounded on the Three World Theory formulated by Mao Zedong in 1958. The Chinese Communist party rejected the Soviet assertion that the Cold War, characterized by the conflict between communism and capitalism, had concluded. The world, following the Chinese conception, is not bipolar but composed of three macro blocs. The first includes the USA and the USSR, the second bloc is made up of the developed countries, and the third is composed of the underdeveloped countries from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Therefore, China aspired to become the leader of this third bloc as an emerging power and a leader of the anti-hegemony front.

During the 1970s, after the death of Deng Xiapoing, the internal priorities in China were destined to change. In particular, more attention was reserved for the modernization of the country. Its diplomacy seemed more oriented toward stabilizing its diplomatic and commercial relationship with the USA, without explicit implications on its military and defense agreements. The focus of its foreign policy was to maintain an equilibrium between the two major powers, which appeared, in the long run, as a strategy to accreditate itself as a third player in the global world. Thus, the Chinese establishment spoke about “South-South” cooperation and support for conflicts aimed at the liberation of the African countries. [5].

During the UN meeting with the African establishment, a great part of the focus was dedicated to the mutual benefits that could be obtained from a partnership with China. In this decade, the reputation of the major powers (USA and USSR), with respect to the underdeveloped countries, was very low because it seemed clear that the interests of both were principally associated with a hegemonic vision.

From the middle of the 1980s, it seemed clear that China had abandoned its interest in Africa, and the domestic modernization process in which China had invested and its need to increase and pump out exports of manufactured products in the direction of the developed countries required another foreign policy strategy. In this framework, the main objective became the consolidation of relationships with countries that could offer know-how useful to the modernization process, so China directed its attention to Japan and other similar countries and offered itself for a delocalization process aimed at acquiring technological know-how. Of course, to reach this target, Africa was not the right tool.

However, the real motivation was that the new Chinese establishment was attempting to develop a path of foreign policy that was equidistant between the USA and the USSR to rebalance the hegemony of the two superpowers.

In 1989, the Tiananmen Square protests in Beijing changed the internal and external equilibrium in China and modified the course of history. The protest was strangled by the government, and the escalation of the violence ended up with the declaration of the introduction of martial law on 20 May 1989. The eyes of the world were all looking at this event that marked the beginning of the decline of the communist system, which would be accomplished before the end of the year. The implementation of economic reforms in China increased the consensus of the central government, which was in serious difficulty after the violent reaction to the protest, that it was evident that this event had necessitated turning China’s attention back toward Africa.

During the 1990s, after the Tiananmen Square protests, China returned to manifest its interest in Africa. In this period, its international relationships evolved, pushed by:

- The need to explore new markets to which to export manufactured goods, and
- The need to maintain alliances and acquire new allies (in particular, with the underdeveloped and African nations) in the UN context for support in responding to the question of human rights because, after the Tiananmen Square protests, this topic became the main subject of inquiry of the Western countries to the Chinese authorities. Furthermore, this aspect was also pushed to maintain the isolation of Taiwan, which was and is an internal threat to the Chinese establishment [5].

The Chinese criticism of the multiparty political system sustained in Africa by the Western countries arrived punctually when the democratization process seemed to have reached an impasse.

In the 1990s and 2000s, the interest of China in Africa increased once again and started a new era of reciprocal cooperation [5]. 1995 was a decisive year in the relationship between China and Africa. The Chinese President announced the “going out” strategy to the major Chinese companies, and on the occasion of his tour of six African countries, the leader announced a programmatic plan entitled “Toward a new historical milestone of Sino-African friendship,” which was an introduction to the “Five-Point Proposal,” a strategy for the development of the China-Africa relationship in the long term, based on reciprocal cooperation. This strategy is synthesizable in the following five points:

- To promote genuine friendships between the parties to become reliable and reciprocal “all-weather friends.”
- To hold mutual respect for sovereigns and not to intrude in internal affairs.
- To reach a common development based on reciprocal advantages.
- To enhance mutual consultation and cooperation in international affairs.
- To look to the future to promote peace and improve the world.

An aspect that appears relevant is that the Chinese strategy was conducted in an unorthodox way for Western diplomacy. It was conducted on a bilateral basis, with a regional diplomacy system, and often at a multilateral level. This “three-dimensional approach” seemed particularly efficient because it created an intersection on two different planes: an institutional one with ministers and a personal one with the African leaders, who appreciated this approach. Visible in this *modus operandi* is the intelligence of Chinese diplomacy, which was able to pursue its interests without excessive effort [5].

The first *Forum on China-Africa Cooperation* (FOCAC) in October 2000 in Beijing included the participation of 80 ministries from 45 African countries. These meetings, which have a triennial frequency, have two main objectives:

- To show to the African countries the results obtained with the socialist political system by an underdeveloped country like China, which wanted to be recognized as a model for the African countries.
- To establish the Chinese global strategy, which ultimately aimed to reform the political and economic order by reducing the USA’s hegemony, which was considered negative both for China and, by extension, for all underdeveloped countries.

On that occasion, the Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji affirmed that the development of Sino-African relationships was particularly relevant to obtain mutual advantages and to ensure that their economic interests threatened by the globalization process designed for increase the benefits of the developed countries. [1].

The results of the first FOCAC highlight the priority that Beijing offered to the African continent from the beginning of the 21st century. Furthermore, it represented a long-term initiative from China, although the events and the consequences of 11 September 2001 influenced this program. The volume of international trade started to increase strongly with this renewed Sino-African cooperation [5].

The second FOCAC in 2003 recognized the progress obtained and confirmed that the trajectory of the Sino-African relationship of cooperation started with this kind of instrument. It is worth recalling the concept of

multipolarity in which China and Africa would play a determinant role between the developing countries, though it is evident that China would be the leader of this set.

The third FOCAC held in 2006 saw the vast participation of 48 African countries (with respect to the total of 53 in the African Union). This meeting consolidated the relationship between China and the African Union. In this context, China recalled its fundamental principles, which are the promotion of peace between people, the stimulus of development and progress in many fields (economy, health, education, scientific research), and last but not least, the consideration that relations must be inspired by the principle of parity among both parties (China and Africa). China also reiterated the principle according to which it did not intend to interfere in the internal affairs (human rights or internal political questions) of the individual African countries.

III. ECONOMIC EVOLUTION IN RECENT DECADES

Since 2000, China has increased the volume of goods traded with Africa, increasing from 6.5 billion USD to 55 billion USD in 2006. From this year, the commercial relations raised exponentially and reached 300 billion USD in 2015. Within a decade, China had become the main player on the African continent, surpassing the USA, UK, and France, all of which have a historical tradition of commercial relations with Africa [6].

The amount of foreign direct investment (FDI) in Africa grew from 2011 to 2016 in general terms, but the major increase came from China because its presence grew exponentially by 213% in the period 2011-2016, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Top ten countries by FDI stock in Africa in 2011-2016 (billions of USD).

Country	2011	2016	Range (2016-2011)	Increase in %
USA	57	57	0	0.0%
UK	54	55	1	1.9%
France	52	49	-3	-5.8%
China	16	40	34	213.0%
South Africa	23	24	1	4.3%
Italy	13	23	10	77.0%
Singapore	16	17	1	6.3%
India	16	14	-2	-13.0%
Hong Kong, China	7	13	6	86.0%
Switzerland	11	13	2	18.2%

Source: UNCTAD, *World Investment Report 2018* [7].

This boom was facilitated by many banking and financial institutions that were founded in the 1990s by China to implement its economic policy and support international trade. We can mention the following:

- China Eximbank (CEB), founded in 1994, is the only institution that is authorized to issue concessional loans.
- The China Development Bank (CDB) offers medium- and long-term lending and investment to support the implementation of major strategies for the medium- and long-term development of China's national economy. The majority stake is owned by the Chinese state via the Ministry of Finance and the government-owned Central Huijin Investment Ltd.
- The China-Africa Development Fund (CADF) is a Chinese private equity fund solely funded by the CDB. It was founded in 2007 with the scope to stimulate investment in Africa by Chinese companies in power generation, transportation infrastructure, natural resources, manufacturing, and other sectors.
- The China Investment Corporation (CIC) is a sovereign wealth fund responsible for managing part of the People's Republic of China's foreign exchange reserves. The CIC was founded in 2007 with the intent of utilizing these reserves for the benefit of the state.

- The China-Africa Business Council (CABC), a direct result of the FOCAC, is dedicated to the economic development of Africa and submits suggestions to governmental agencies based on the opinions and demands of its companies, searches for international opportunities for its members, provides consulting on investment financing, and promotes self-discipline among its members.
- The Chinese Embassies around the world aim to maintain contact with the local decision-makers and acquire the information required for business intelligence.
- The Trade and Economic Cooperation Zones (ECZs) have the scope to facilitate the start-up of investments' production and manufacturing operations with fiscal discounts, reduced bureaucracy, and other facilitations [6].

In 2006, the Africa-China relationship reached its peak because China announced its desire to proceed to further expand its ECZs, and consequently the flow of FDI accelerated until the peak shown in Table 1 above.

IV. POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

The continuous growth of the presence of China in the African economy has been accompanied by a new model in the international relationship. After the decolonization era and the collapse of the Berlin Wall, it appeared clear to China that the greater part of African nations wanted to link their development path to China rather than the countries of the West, which were, in great part, the actors of the old colonial empires (France, the UK, Portugal, etc.).

The Chinese strategy consisted in adapting its leadership and dialogue to the exigencies of the different countries. One of the strong points of Chinese diplomacy is its capability to adapt itself to the various circumstances and establish strong links with the African establishment without setting conditions (respect for human rights, social or environmental responsibility, etc.) for the FDI and for conducting business in general. To understand the strategy adopted by the Chinese diplomats with respect to their African counterparts, it appears useful to start from the analysis proposed by the eminent scholar Chris Alden [8].

Starting from the degree of democracy reached, Alden has defined three different categories of African states:

- Pariah partnerships,
- Illiberal regimes/weak democracies with commodity-based economies, and
- Democracies with diversified economies.

The so-called "pariah" states are characterized by a strong dichotomy between the massive poverty of the masses and the presence of a strict and arrogant elite that is in conflict with itself over the government of the country and the appropriation of its national resources. In these countries, the violation of human rights is an emblematic and constant feature [9]. The approach adopted by China is one of acceptance without further attention. The scope is to exploit the "pariah" state's isolation from the international community to obtain access to a commodities market generally dominated by the former colonial powers. For these countries, China represents a strategic partner to obtain technical assistance without the acceptance of conditions. Zimbabwe and Sudan are two emblematic examples of nations subjected to sanctions and isolation during the Cold War and unable to attract FDI, international financing, and loans to effect the policies adopted by the Western powers. In particular, in Zimbabwe, President Robert Mugabe, after a major economic crisis in 2003 and the impossibility to ask for support from the IMF and the World Bank because of Zimbabwe's isolation, decided to ask China for financial support. Thus, during the second FOCAC meeting, China inserted Zimbabwe into the Chinese "Eight-point proposal supporting African development," and its external debts were canceled. Consequently, in 2005, China opened a new credit line for Zimbabwe to develop its agriculture and the mining sectors without inserting conditions regarding human rights and transparency in the decisional process, as per the Chinese diplomatic tradition. This credit was covered with the concession of extracted materials from mining operations, in particular diamonds, to Chinese multinationals. In short order, the credit line that opened for the modernization of Zimbabwean infrastructure and other investments disappeared in its corrupt system, so for Beijing, this lack of profitability, combined with the protests of the international community and the *coup d'état* against Mugabe

in 2017, accelerated its decision to leave Zimbabwe to its destiny. This case represents a failure of the Chinese policy of credit concessions without conditionality [6].

The second category, defined as illiberal regimes/weak democracies with commodity-based economies, includes all the countries that have survived conflicts and undergone a recent process of democratization in which the elite manage the greater part of the national resources, thus representing a weak level of democratization, and in which the economic system is based on the export of commodities and raw goods. Among these countries, we can include Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Angola, all of which have passed through conflicts, as well as Nigeria, Tanzania, and Zambia. All of these countries present a form of governance that need a similar response. These countries consider China a strategic partner for FDI, and it does not interfere with internal affairs such as the social conditions of the workers. Angola is probably a peculiar case of success in the Chinese investment strategy. In 2003, after the end of the civil war, the country requested a loan from the IMF, which refused to finance the reconstruction of the nation because it did not satisfy the conditions of transparency and good governance to access the financial program. At this point, China manifested its clear intention to provide loans and finance not only for the reconstruction of Angola but even for its oil sector, which is a pillar of the Angolan economy. Thus, in summary, Angola became a big exporter of crude oil, and China became the main importer of oil from Angola. Further, considering the advantages in terms of the labor cost, Chinese firms excluded foreign firms and even Angolan firms from the competition. However, the use of Chinese firms limited the transfer of know-how from China to the local firms, which was an objective of the new Angolan establishment [6]. Today, China is the primary holder of the Angolan external debt.

The third category of democracies with diversified economies is characterized by an inclusive democracy with an economy in different stages, which corresponds to South Africa. The relationship of this country with China is more complex because China is not only a strategic partner and a resource for FDI in South Africa at a high technological level but also, at the same time, a competitor to the local firms, which are able to offer the same services but at higher costs. However, with respect to the other African nations, South Africa's consumer market is more vast and well-developed, so it presents good opportunities for Chinese goods and investments. Furthermore, it represents the future direction of many African countries, so it is an interesting business environment to test new consumer trends. The presence of excellent resources from mining (diamonds, gold) is an element of attraction for China, which is poor in terms of natural resources. Last but not least, from a political point of view, China and South Africa, after an initial period of reciprocal diffidence in the 1990s, started a process of progressive political convergence in favor of a reform of the UN that sought to increase the weight of both nations in the international community [6].

From the short examples expounded on above, it appears evident that, in Africa, the picture is complex and needs differentiated sets of proposals to obtain the right tuning with every country. However, the strength of China is in its capability to adapt itself to multiple contexts.

Today, more so than in the past, China is a complex country with an enormous manufacturing sector capable of producing every consumer or intermediate good to a competitive level in terms of costs, which are often less than other underdeveloped countries. However, it is important to highlight that, at the same time, the country has developed a high-tech economy, in particular in electronic and IT equipment, satellite and aerospace technologies, and the widely discussed 5G connection, and thus it seems able to absorb the advantages of all sectors. For this purpose, its collocation in the global market escapes the rigid classification used by many Western analysts.

V. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, to answer the question in the title of the current article, is China a new colonizer or a fair partner? In short, there is not a single Chinese foreign policy. As emerged from our extremely synthesized analysis, the variables which influence Chinese foreign policy are the time and the place, whereas a constant in China's international relationships is the lack of interference in the internal affairs of the partner country, which means not interfering in human rights issues and social responsibility related to business activity. These aspects seem particularly appreciated by the so-called autocracies on the continent that are particularly intolerant of such debates.

However, in our view, the success of Chinese international relations seems mainly related to its capability to adapt its strategy to different contexts. It is useful to remember this in accordance with Sun Tzu's doctrine that was masterfully expressed in his famous *Art of War*:

"The greatest victory is that which requires no battle."

It is important to observe that China's "economic conquest" of Africa has been reached without one shot being fired, which is not common among the big powers [10].

This dynamic equilibrium in international relations has been built on an accurate oscillation between hegemony and cooperation that seems to be the real key to the success of Chinese diplomacy, combined with patience (particularly present in the Eastern culture) and to a long-term vision of its relationships, which appear static if observed from the Western point of view, but in reality show a slow and constant evolution.

VI. Acknowledgements

I am grateful to my co-authors for their excellent work and inspiration in the discussions that helped to prepare this paper. Only the exchange of ideas and opinions can produce a cultural richness accompanied by new points of view. It is important that the next generations manifest interest in international questions. The world belongs to them, and in the future, it will be more globalized than in the past. Therefore, it is important to offer the right key readings for the future, which come in great part from an understanding of the past.

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