



Friendly Giant?

China's Evolving Africa Policy

Asia Paper vol. 2 (5)

24 August 2007

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Abstract: This paper evaluates the extent to which China adapted its Africa policy to external criticism and expectations. It is found that policy modifications mainly occurred when long-term interests were at risk, with regard to issues of limited importance and non-binding initiatives. The article departs from the vast literature on adaptation and tests this concept on several aspects of China's engagement in Africa. This approach not only allows us to revise the PRC's changing Africa policy. It also permits to contribute to the debate whether China is a status-quo or revisionist power. In this regard, it turns out that China's ostensible compliance with the demands of other actors is designed to give leeway to its revisionist aspirations. *Topics:* political economy, international relations

1. Introduction

'We would never had a Berlin Conference in the nineteenth century if international scrutiny was as tough as the world is monitoring China's involvement in Africa today,' asserted a professor at the University of Lubumbashi in Congo.¹ This remarkable statement forms the point of departure for this paper: is China adapting its Africa policy to international criticism? This question allows to revise and to update the impressive pile of publications that express suspicion of the People's Republic's role on the African continent. To which extent are the different concerns still valid? Does the notion of an opportunistic neo-mercantilist policy stand up?² Automatically this premise leads to the broader debate about China's ascent as a global power. That China rises to international prominence is certain, but it remains to be seen *how* this process will interact with the status of other

players in world order. System changes, shifts concerning the power of a particular state, inevitably cause systemic or structural changes, i.e. transformations in the international distribution of power.³ Though, this process can occur in several ways due to different modes of 'interaction change'.⁴ China might for instance opt for a confrontational strategy that validates its economic and diplomatic weight without considering the stakes and interests of other actors. But there are also accommodative approaches in which Beijing seeks to avert frictions and conflicts.

It is from this perspective that 'adaptation' becomes a relevant concept. It is perfectly imaginable that Beijing adapts to external sensitivities and norms to fulfil its aspirations without having to bear the costs of conflict. Diplomacy and empathy are vital tools of statecraft.⁵ Conceptions of national interest that neglect aspirations and values of others bring ruin to the state as well as to its neighbours. Benevolent behaviour consequently becomes a vehicle for realist ambitions. Nowadays, adaptation starts with the idea of international responsibility, or being a good citizen of international society.⁶ The requirements of this global citizenship lay in a common denominator of values and principles between different actors. Socialization, familiarizing with norms and adopting them, occurs in various ways. Constructivists underline the need for a certain match between national political *identity* and external norms and expectations. Rationalists perceive socialization as a functional balancing process between the international and domestic *costs and benefits* of compliance over an extended period of time.⁷ Beyond the state level, rationalists contend that national political elites and administrations need to reconcile external expectations with the maintenance of internal legitimacy.⁸

Several studies built on this theoretical frame-work and assessed the extent to which China altered its policy as a consequence of external expectations and international norms. Most of these analyses found a limited compliance. Ann Kent for instance, focussed on trade and human rights issues, and concludes that the risk of losing control and an ambivalence about globalization resulted in a partial learning with a more subtle use of power and normative hedging against the developed world.⁹ Michel Oksenberg and Elizabeth Economy contend that the influence of different

bureaucratic interests confined the scope for international learning. Instead of compliance, China avoids enduring commitments and holds to its 'moral high ground'.¹⁰ Margret Pearson follows this line of thought and explains that China's adherence to world trade rules followed 'a complex pattern of forward and backward movement'. Simultaneous with the adoption of international standards, Beijing learned to play a sophisticated game of alliance politics to undermine the position of other industrialized countries.¹¹ Samuel Kim observes a maximisation of rights and a minimization of responsibilities.¹² Gerald Chan amalgamates the detailed study of several areas of compliance into the conclusion that China is becoming less self-centred, but that competing interests, different perceptions and values impede far reaching concessions.¹³ Other sounds come from Allen Carlson who describes the overcoming of China's normative obstacles to humanitarian intervention and the UN Security Council's authority to go beyond state sovereignty.¹⁴ Deng Yong agrees to this finding and alleges that while sovereignty remains central to Chinese foreign policy rhetoric; its underlying premises were 'progressively softened and chipped away by the functional and normative requirements of China's integration into the global economy'.¹⁵ At the opposite side is the opinion that China is rather inert to external norms and expectations. In an earlier writing I argued that administrative incapacity, domestic economic needs and distrust lead to cosmetic changes rather than compliance.¹⁶ Several authors also point at the fact that China will not renounce its own principles and interests for international norms that emanate from the United States' hegemonic agenda or the double standards that the West applies to curtail China's development.¹⁷

As a case study of China's compliance, Africa permits us to concentrate on several essential areas of adaptation: economic, environmental, social, diplomatic, security, etc. Studying Africa also highlights that socialization is not a one-way street because the People's Republic is confronted with considerably diverging complexes of standards that are characteristic to developing countries on the one hand, and prosperous Western nations on the other. Moreover, apart from states, NGOs and news media as well play an influential role. First, this paper

describes how China's recent re-emergence ran into fierce international criticism. Subsequently, it is discussed how China reacted to this scrutiny and how far it changed its Africa strategy. I had not the aim to find out whether the expectations and demands are legitimate or sincere; what is most important here is that they are present, and that China has to formulate an appropriate answer.

2. International response to China's Africa offensive

China's re-emergence on the African continent had been going on for a long time before it became the focal point of international attention. Since the mid 1990s, Beijing significantly stepped up its efforts to make its go-out policy successful in this particular region.¹⁸ Officials flew on and off to strengthen Chinese companies' positions as vendors of 'Made in China' goods or as key merchants in raw materials. Furthermore, Beijing was entangled in a symbolically embarrassing race with Taiwan for diplomatic recognition. Only ten years later, around 2002, this venture started to catch international awareness. This interest was elicited by several eye-catching coincidences. First and foremost, the results of a decade of unnoticed efforts became visible in a commercial leap forward. Between 2000 and 2003, China's share in Africa's exports doubled and reached seven percent. This evolution concurred with the completion of ambitious Chinese mining projects in countries like Zambia and Sudan, the construction of showy public infrastructure and the omnipresence of the new Chinese diaspora. However, China appeared not to be Africa's only new trade partner. The growing economic interest for the region's resources from other countries, the United States in particular, but also states like India, Brazil and Canada, made China's competing aspirations developing even more into an issue of concern.¹⁹ The increasing interest for China's economic engagement was funnelled into several concerns about unequal commercial exchange. Various reports claimed that China was driving Africa back in its commodity trap due to the fact that Chinese imports and investments were mainly situated in that particular branch.²⁰ Local development in the secondary

sector was assumed to be threatened by the dumping of Chinese manufactured products.²¹ Moreover, China's economic diplomacy that focuses on political contacts impeded wealth and opportunities proliferating to the private sector and large segments of society. Apart from this unequal exchange, the People's Republic came under fire for being untransparent in its business deals and for externalizing social and ecological costs to the African continent.²²

In addition, the humanitarian catastrophes in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Sudan's Province of Darfur and Zimbabwe enkindled public awareness of China's involvement in these conflict-ridden countries, and made an end to its comfortable *business as usual* approach. In 2001, an expert panel of the UN Security Council pointed at the indirect involvement of Chinese companies in the exploitation of forests in Eastern Congo.²³ In 2002, the NGO Global Witness accused China of sponsoring violence in Liberia by purchasing hard wood from various warlords.²⁴ In 2002, the Zimbabwean government started a brute crackdown of interior social unrest and political opponents. The United States and the European Council adopted restrictive measures like a visa ban and the freeze of assets against the ruling elite. The months afterwards, news media and NGOs emphasized the strong ties that the regime of Robert Mugabe had been developing with Beijing. China was depicted as the president's chief purveyor of arms and economic aid.²⁵ In March 2003, fighting broke out in the Darfur region in western Sudan between government forces and various rebel factions. By the end of that year, Darfur had become a synonym for, quoting UN Emergency Relief Coordinator Hans Egeland, 'one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world'.²⁶ Though, this eruption of violence had not prevented China from strengthening its presence. China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) developed into the dominant player of Sudan's oil industry. In September 2003, the NGO Human Rights Watch was the first to issue a detailed study of China's role in the Darfur emergency.²⁷ Its counterpart Amnesty International followed soon afterwards, as well as several news agencies that picked up the story and pilloried Beijing for fuelling conflicts and human rights violations.²⁸

However, criticism did not develop into a straightforward and coherent package of demands and requirements. There is not even consensus about the principles and norms that should be put forward for compliance. Instead, a fuzzy cacophony of indignation, proselytism and policy recommendations characterizes the international community's reaction to China's Africa offensive. A closer look at reports and policy papers learned that African and Western news media and NGOs mainly focussed on three issues. In order of importance, these are: China involvement in violent conflicts, environmental damage and socioeconomic standards. The policy proposals that emanated from these issues varied significantly. On China's role in Sudan for instance, demands ranged from supporting the Annan Plan that provided in UN troops for Darfur, to a total withdrawal from Chinese economic activities.²⁹ Regarding the environment, the emphasis was mainly on tightening the import of illicitly extracted natural resources (timber and ivory) and proper standards for oil companies' overseas activities. Better working conditions in Chinese companies in Africa and curbing the export of cheap textile were the main requests to improve socioeconomic standards.³⁰ In regard to Chinese extractive industries, the emphasis was on the promotion of transparency of oil revenues and the control of commodities excavated in conflict zones, like diamonds and coltan.³¹

Several of these proposals found their way to the political policy making process. In the US Congress in particular, fierce debates took place about China's obstructive posture in Sudan, filling Congress Members 'with nightmares about the images of wounded and imploded babies and burned villages'.³² In June 2007, 198 members of Congress sent a letter to Chinese President Hu Jintao indicating their intention to link Beijing's hosting of the Summer Olympics the year after with its support to the national government of Sudan. At the same time, the Sudan Disclosure and Enforcement Act, a bipartisan legislation, was tabled to impose penalties on violators of American sanctions against Sudan.³³ Public hearings and debates on China's involvement in Africa were held in the US Congress, the European Parliament and several national parliaments of European member states and African countries. They all resulted in a plea for a more responsible behaviour.³⁴

While civil society and parliaments were successful tabling China's role in Africa as a political issue, only a selected number of concrete proposals made the policy formulation process of national and international governmental bodies. The motivations for this selection are as interesting as to discuss the impact on China. Do the main players like the US and the EU have a coherent Africa strategy themselves? Are current interests in Africa's economy strong enough to put the overall economic relations with the People's Republic at risk? Otherwise, are there shared commercial interests so that particular standards are not attractive to defend? Other powers' stakes in Africa vary strongly from place to place: might it therefore be that China's dispersed impact on the different African countries makes it less easy for Western states to fine-tune their position? These are all pertinent questions, but they go beyond the scope of this paper. Between the governments of most Western and African countries a consensus emerged that China had to put its argument of non-interference out of the way and to allow UN peacekeeping troops to enter Darfur. And, in fact this is about the only issue that has been translated into a more or less collective *démarche* towards Beijing. Several individual European states and to a lesser extent also the European Commission insisted on more transparency in China's African mining ventures.³⁵ African governments like these of South Africa, Namibia, Algeria, Zambia and Kenya, also sought China to take measures to arrive at a more equitable economic relationship.³⁶

These official demands were presented in an accommodating manner, in which communication with China was increased while simultaneously easing public pressure. Although key policymakers publicly made clear to China that it had to reconsider its Africa-strategy; they refrained from fierce allegations. Instead, their discourse seemed to reflect the acceptance of China's interests and highlighted the opportunities that China brought instead of the threats. During her first official visit to Beijing, US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Jendayi Frazer stated that 'China has as great a right to engage in Africa as any other country, [and] there is enough good to be done on the continent'.³⁷ Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair asserted: 'We can work with China to serve the development of Africa in a way which benefits us all.'³⁸ In early 2007, EU

High Representative Javier Solana even wrote an article in a Chinese newspaper to explain that there was a huge common ground still to explore.³⁹ Pragmatic dialogues became the main *modus operandi*. Africa was frequently discussed during meetings of the US-Chinese Senior Dialogue. Since 2006, Washington and Beijing also agreed to start an in-depth Sub-Dialogue on Africa at the level of Assistant Secretary of State. At the EU-China summit in Helsinki in September 2006, both parties started a 'structured dialogue on Africa' and 'to explore avenues for practical cooperation on the ground in partnership with the African side'.⁴⁰ Later that year, the European Commission specified this to the exploration of opportunities for improving aid efficiency and energy security.⁴¹ Since the 1990s, interaction between African states and the Chinese government intensified significantly. At the verge of the new century, governmental platforms were in place at all levels: national, sub-regional and regional. Even though African countries, except the few that maintained diplomatic relations with Taiwan, were very keen to attract more investments and saw China's ascent as a crucial opportunity; critical resonances sounded from time to time. South Africa in particular, but also state leaders from smaller countries asked Beijing to spend more attention to the social impact of its enlarging economic footprint. Likewise, in 2005, the African Union decided to appoint a Task Force to study Africa's relations with emerging powers like China. Its final report expressed firmly that Africa needs 'to be confident about its own abilities and to look for trading and growth opportunities within itself and to avoid a second colonization under the strategic partnership with the emerging powers.'⁴² The document for instance demanded more opportunities for the private sector and improved market access.⁴³

The consequent framework for analyzing the extent to which China adapted its Africa policy is summarized in table 1. After a general introduction, following sections will systematically focus on these issues and expectations. For this study, several sources were consulted. Apart from policy documents, NGO reports, press and academic articles; interviews were carried out with various African, Chinese and European officials and experts, mostly within the period from December 2006 until August 2007.

Key issues	Expectations and focal points	Origin
Security	UN Peacekeepers to Darfur	NGO, UN, AU, EU, US
	Controlling arms exports	NGO, UN
	Curbing trade in 'blood diamonds'	NGO, UN, AU, EU
Environment	Curbing illicit logging	NGO
	Curbing illicit ivory trade	NGO
	Improving corporate practices	NGO
Socio-economic standards	Diversification of African exports	NGO, South Africa, Kenya
	Curbing dumping of cheap goods	NGO, South Africa, Kenya
	Opportunities for the private sector	NGO, AU, South Africa, Kenya
	Labour standards of Chinese investors	NGO, ILO, Zambia, Namibia, Algeria
	Transparency of aid and loans	NGO, OECD, EU Commission
	Transparency in the mining sector	NGO, UK, Germany, EU Commission

Table 1. Framework for evaluating China's adaptation to external expectations. Various sources.

3. China's reaction to external criticism

China never conceived its Africa strategy in a vacuum. From the start of its refurbished Africa policy, Beijing showed itself receptive to external expectations. For instance, the Beijing Declaration of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, drafted in 2000, clearly underlined the importance of the UN Security Council and regional multilateral organisations as guardians of stability and peace in African. Already in the 1990s, Beijing took a more flexible position towards UN peacekeeping operations in Africa.⁴⁴ In 1993, after loud international campaigning and American pressure, China approved measures to limit imports of rhino horn.⁴⁵ However, when China's presence in Africa started to attract more attention in 2002, Beijing turned a deaf ear to news messages and NGO campaigns.

'Initially, the Chinese government did not see a reason to take all allegations seriously,' a Chinese scholar explained, 'it took a while before these voices penetrated to the political agenda, and even then most Chinese officials did not find it necessary to deal with the criticism from, what they, called isolated players.'⁴⁶ Only in 2004, when the public claims were taken up and joined by governments, especially in case of Darfur, international criticism on the Africa policy was put on the agenda of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group.⁴⁷ In October 2006, at the verge of the Third China-Africa Summit in Beijing, State Councillor Tang Jiaxuan explained: 'It is hardly avoidable that some problems may occur in the process of continuous expansion of China-Africa cooperation. These problems are limited in nature and can be resolved through cooperation and consultation in accordance with the principles of equality and mutual accommodation.'

3.1. Rhetorical counter-offensive

The first public reaction was a rhetorical counter-offensive. Ministers and high-ranking officials hurried to deflect allegations and riposted that the West had no right to lecture China. In April 2006, the issue was taken up for the first time by the Foreign Ministry, with the spokesman arguing that 'China is

a responsible country' and that it 'will never follow the same disastrous road of the western colonists who bloodily plundered and violated human rights'.⁴⁸ At a press conference in Egypt in June that year, Prime Minister Wen Jiabao dismissed allegations on China's Africa offensive: 'The hat of neo-colonialism simply doesn't fit China. The Chinese nation knows too well the sufferings caused by colonial rule and the need to fight colonialism. This is a main reason why we have all along supported the national liberation and resurgence of Africa.'⁴⁹ In a series of articles, state-led newspapers started to publish a series of articles that contradicted the 'cooked-up' stories of Western media.⁵⁰ The first pieces of writing emphasized that the West itself was guilty of imperialism. People's Daily wrote: 'Western powers, not China, colonized Africa and looted resources there in the history.'⁵¹ Later, another article explained that 'China's energy cooperation with Africa does not target at any third party and is built on mutual demands and double wins, which is absolutely different from the fire and sword used by Western colonialists in history'.⁵² Apart from historical arguments, the actual practices of the West were taken under fire. In June 2006, People's Daily and its twin brother China Daily focussed extensively on American companies' behaviour in the oil-rich Niger Delta in Nigeria. 'The predatory exploitation of African resources by Western trans-national corporations is a blatant example of the so-called economic colonialism of Africa, which Western media have been accusing China of so enthusiastically,' People's Daily contended, 'large areas of farmland and forest have been burned to ashes. Thick smoke has generated heavy pollution in the air, soil and rivers [...] Long-term exploitation by Western companies has led to recurrent violence in the area.'⁵³ In an opinion article, Huang Zequan, vice president of the government-supported China-Africa Friendship Association, described how many other countries scramble for Africa.⁵⁴ An additional counterargument was the divide and rule strategy that the West was allegedly pursuing. On June 26, the state news agency Xinhua castigated the attempts 'to drive a wedge between China and African countries and to destroy the Sino-Africa Cooperation' in order to 'obstruct Chinese enterprises from accessing the African market and safeguard the interests of Western countries in Africa'. A day later, People's Daily published an opinion article in which a scholar from

the West Asia and Africa Research Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) accused that 'that Western thought is still based on the Cold War mindset'.⁵⁵ Later that year, the emphasis shifted to China's exemplary role. Several African personalities among which Namibia's and Zambia's founding presidents testified about the 'all-weather friendship' between China and Africa.⁵⁶ Ethiopian Prime Minister Zenawi on his turn refuted 'Western media's allegations that China is dumping low-priced and poor-quality goods in Africa, saying that China is selling good-quality goods at relatively low prices and these goods suit the African market'.⁵⁷ Gradually, Chinese journalists started to weaken accusations by describing specific counter-examples. An article under the title 'When Made in China become Made in Africa' showed that the People's Republic was not taking labour away but that it invested in Africa's industrial productivity.⁵⁸ Another writing 'China-Africa cooperation to break products-for-resources doctrine' had to demonstrate that China was not only interested in raw materials and that it was vowed to diversify trade.⁵⁹ Several examples were given of Chinese entrepreneurs who take local regulations seriously and established good relations with local people.⁶⁰

3.2. Addressing the security challenges

Not only the public discourse changed, China also revised several strategies among which its security policy. This section discusses the issues of Darfur, arms trade and 'blood diamonds'. Past decades, China's dealing with violent conflicts on the African continent changed significantly. During the 1960s, Beijing perceived armed skirmishes as a puppet show controlled by the Cold War super powers, and consequently vowed to support factions that took up arms against this alleged imperialist intrusion. When China assumed its membership of the UN Security Council in 1971, it stubbornly opposed all peacekeeping operations. From the 1980s, when great power rivalry started to abate, this position was replaced with a more moderate approach. In China's official discourse Africa's conflicts were at the first place the result of structural violence, i.e. economic and political marginalisation in the world system, and should be addressed in a structural manner. Nevertheless,

Beijing recognized that the United Nations had a role to play in soothing the numerous conflicts, and especially to safeguard the frail states' sovereignty. This reasoning made that China began supporting UN missions that were deployed to implement peace agreements in which all rivaling parties were included, and at the condition of a well defined and restricted mandate. Traditional *peacekeeping* operations like these in Somalia (UNSOM I), Mozambique (ONUMUZ), Rwanda (UNAMIR) and Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) all got its green light. When the Security Council decided to dispatch troops in Liberia (UNMIL) in 2003, China even offered to contribute to this mission, and from then on it gradually stepped up the number of blue helmets to 1,800 in 2007. China's financial support to peacekeeping by the UN but also by regional organisations like the African Union (AU) and the Association for West African States (ECOWAS) increased significantly as well. Though, simultaneously, failed states and national governments that actively participated to atrocities challenged the efficacy of traditional UN operations. China's primacy of sovereignty, implying at least the consent of the state, bumped into the willingness of other players to intervene more aggressively under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. Beijing loudly opposed when European countries pushed for Operation Turquoise in Rwanda, at the moment that Washington instigated to broaden the mandate of UNSOM and gave up its impartiality, or when France demanded an increase of the troop levels of the UN operation in Ivory Coast in 2004. Despite its strong concerns China did not veto these interventions, but abstained and kept aloof of the implementation.

It is exactly this position that became untenable when the crisis in Darfur erupted in 2003. Contrarily to previous disagreements on the dispatching of a UN mission, China was at the centre of the debate from the beginning. This was first and foremost due to its strong economic and diplomatic ties with Khartoum. Within the Security Council China was the only permanent member that had outspoken interests in this North African country, and was in that perspective insulated from the other four. These differences in interests overlapped with sharp disparities in public pressure: the less interests, the more domestic campaigning sought to push governments to act. Contrarily to Somalia, Rwanda in 1994 and Ivory Coast

in 2004, the Sudanese government was still firm in control and confident enough to turn down the demand for flying in peacekeepers to Darfur. This placed China in the middle of three fires: its own interests, the wish to deploy troops and a determined local government. Elsewhere, I give a detailed account about how Beijing addressed this quandary.⁶¹ In the scope of this paper it suffices to summarize that China's diplomacy evolved from playing the messenger man between Khartoum and New York, to active persuasion for the permission to deploy UN troops. For example, during the High Level Consultation on the Situation in Darfur in the African Union's headquarters in Addis Ababa on 16 November 2006, China made important interventions to obtain the acceptance of the Annan Plan, a three-phase road map for the deployment of a hybrid African Union/UN peacekeeping force of 22,000 troops.⁶² In Spring 2006, Chinese diplomats also initiated talks with the Sudanese government to determine common ground and practical options for putting boots on the ground as soon as possible. Hence, even though China abided to its principle of sovereignty and resisted pressuring Khartoum with sanctions, as proposed by Washington and London, Darfur was the first case in which the People's Republic actively interfered to appease an internal conflict by means of an international operation.

Along this course, it followed a two-track approach, combining soft power and economic support to ensure the government's survival on the one hand, and clear pragmatic talks on the other.⁶³ Undoubtedly China achieved to safeguard its economic stronghold. In July 2007 for instance, state-owned China National Petrol Corporation (CNPC) hammered out an exploration concession for 13 oil blocks in the Red Sea.⁶⁴ At the same time, it fostered the notion of an equal dialogue. Instead of an omnipotent superpower, it draw its persuasion from the position as *primus inter pares* and showed a strong mandate to speak on behalf of trustworthy friends like the Arab League and the African Union.⁶⁵ 'We have been playing a role of bridge,' Special Envoy Liu Guijin stated, 'we have been trying to give advice and to persuade Sudan to be more flexible to accept the UN plan.'⁶⁶ These diplomatic efforts formed a learning school. This was not only noticeable in the three cumulative stages of engagement, but also in the extent to which Beijing succeeded to fine-tune the numerous domestic players. Whereas in 2005, different officials voiced

different lines of thought; the official discourse showed much more coherence the year after and statements like 'business is business' became unthinkable. China also understood the necessity to communicate with news media. The initial reluctance to comment on Darfur made place for frequent press conferences and various articles in state news papers. China's involvement in the diplomatic tussle about Darfur was another step forward fostering security and stability in Africa.

China pretends itself to be a role model in preventing **arms** ending up in African conflict zones. Since the 1990s, it implemented various international and national initiatives. In 2002 for instance, Beijing revised its Regulation on Control of Military Products Export and published the Military Products Export Control List that provided in several guidelines for the export of military products. The same year, it inked the Protocol against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms that committed the People's Republic to control the manufacturing, marking, import and export of firearms, and to confiscate and destroy all illicit firearms.⁶⁷ In 2005, the government commenced testing a national information management system for the production, possession and trade of light arms, and introduced a system monitoring end users of Chinese-made weapons to prevent the arms from finding their way via a third parties to 'sensitive regions' around the world.⁶⁸ In 2006, China supported a draft UN resolution on the illicit trade of small arms and light weapons, contrarily to the United States who disapproved.⁶⁹

Though, the impact of these paper commitments has been modest. Not only are the international codes non-binding and elusively formulated; China's interpretation and implementation turns out to be half-hearted. It makes a clear distinction between the necessity of constraints on illicit arms trade and regular trade of conventional weapons. For the later China does not seek to endorse international norms, as became noticeable during the first UN Disarmament Committee in October 2006, where it supported the earlier mentioned draft UN resolution on the illicit trade in small arms, but abstained on the draft arms trade treaty that aimed at establishing legally binding international standards for the transfer of all conventional arms.⁷⁰ Furthermore, the combat against *illicit* weapons loses its significance,

because the Chinese government merely imposes restrictions when it comes to selling arms abroad. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China abides to three principles when it verifies arms exports. They should benefit the 'self-defence capability' of importing countries, they should not impair regional and global peace and stability, and should not be used to interfere with the internal affairs of countries.⁷¹ Important is the absence of criteria related to domestic stability, but even in hotspots where there was a serious spill-over to neighbouring countries, the Chinese government did not intervene. Various experts independently confirmed that Chinese small arms became widely used in Darfur and also found their way to adjacent states like Chad. In 2006 for instance, the Chinese government registered the delivery of 300 firearms to Khartoum.⁷² In 2004, at the height of the bloodshed in Congolese Province of Ituri, Beijing indexed the shipping of 600 firearms to Uganda, a key instigator in Eastern Congo.⁷³ Thus, China's policy on arms trade is characterised by a substantial gap between discourse and deeds. Not the illicit export of Chinese arms is the key problem, but rather the officially monitored trade due to the very lax formulation of requirements and the careless interpretation of 'regional peace'.

Repeatedly China has been asked to ban the export of natural resources that were excavated in conflict zones. The Kimberley Process is the most far-reaching initiative in this field. It concerns a joint government, international diamond industry and civil society initiative to stem the flow of **conflict diamonds**, mainly originating from Africa.⁷⁴ The Kimberley Process Certification Scheme is a voluntary system that imposes extensive requirements on participants to assure that shipments of rough diamonds are free from conflict diamonds. From the start in 2002, China showed itself willing to participate to this venture. In 2003, it classified rough diamonds in its imports and exports catalogue subject to scrutiny by the State Administration of Quality Supervision and Quarantine (AQSIQ).⁷⁵ That year it issued the first Kimberley Process Certificates. Whereas NGOs initially complained that China was not allowing a voluntary peer-reviewing, this monitoring was carried out in December 2005.⁷⁶ The review report concluded that Chinese authorities gave full cooperation, that procedures for the import and export of rough diamonds is 'well documented and highly

regulated', and that the control system even fulfilled several voluntary recommendations.⁷⁷ On the supply of statistics, where it received complaints, China gradually started to live up to the requirements.⁷⁸ In April 2007, the Chinese government sent a delegation AQSIQ-officials to Europe to study customs practices in Antwerp and London. According to the Kimberley Process Secretariat, these representatives were 'technocrats who new what they were dealing with and sought to pick up practical lessons'.⁷⁹ Initiatives like the Kimberley Process are closely related to several other projects that aim at more transparency in Africa's mining industry and a responsible exploitation of forests. However, because of the initiation of these projects was not the consequence of violent conflicts alone, China's response to them is discussed in the two following sections.

3.3. Answering environmental concerns

Since 2006, China spends significant attention to the environmental dimension of its Africa offensive. The Beijing Action Plan on China-Africa Cooperation, endorsed in November that year, enclosed an extensive section on environmental concerns. China vowed to help African countries turning 'their advantages in energy and resources into development strengths, protecting the local environment and promoting sustainable social and economic development in the local areas'.⁸⁰ One specific measure decided on, was the dispatching of environmental protection administrators to Africa and the funding of a China-Africa Environment Centre that works under the banner of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).⁸¹ Action points for this centre are the prevention and control of water pollution and desertification, maintenance of bio-diversity and the development of environmental protection in industry.⁸² China also sought to meet expectations on specific ecological consequences of its economic footprint in Africa.

It took several steps towards a tighter control of illicit **timber** imports. Imposing restrictions on logging was nothing new for the Chinese government, but until then, all measures had been limited to the domestic market. At this stage, international non-governmental organisations became

also involved in the policy formulation process. In 2006, a National Initiative Process was launched to help realize a mutual recognition between China's national and international forest certification standards and to promote the so-called Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) norms for sustainable timber trade.⁸³ Members of the China National Initiative Process Council were mainly recruited from government departments, universities, think tanks and NGOs. Participants to this initiative indicate that China's authorities were willing to take different proposals into consideration and that officials were committed to find ways to monitor and curb foreign supplies of wood.⁸⁴ The involvement of Chinese companies in Africa was one of the focal points of the debate, in addition to Chinese logging projects in Southeast Asia and Latin America.⁸⁵ Simultaneously, the State Forestry Administration (SFA) started drafting guidelines for the establishment of sustainable forest plantations abroad by Chinese enterprises. Also in this case, several NGOs and universities were consulted. In April 2007, the SFA and the Ministry of Commerce started the implementation of the new rules that required all imported timber to be accompanied with legal documents.⁸⁶ This regulation includes bans on illegal logging and clearing of natural forests for plantations.⁸⁷ Chinese customs were also ordered to verify export documents with the authorities of the country of origin in order to 'enhance the effectiveness of the measures'.⁸⁸

The SFA approved similar measures to tackle illicit **ivory** trade. 'Because ivory carving is a part of China's culture and ivory manufacturing is of a economic value that China cannot neglect,' a Chinese SFA official explained, 'we want to safeguard our supply of ivory, what means that we have to make it environmentally sustainable'.⁸⁹ Central to China's policy is the ban on ivory trade, imposed by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) in 1989. Initially, China refused to implement this regulation, what resulted in a soaring trade of illicit tusks. This unwillingness was in contrast with Beijing's forceful reaction to limit trade in rhino horn, and mainly stemmed from the idea that the impact of ivory poaching was not dramatic.⁹⁰ Though, in May 2004, after insistence from CITES, research institutes and international campaigners, the SFA enacted a new national ivory registration system requiring ivory dealers and carvers to

be registered. This scheme was intended to comply with a CITES resolution on domestic controls, to ensure that legalized ivory and imported ivory, will not be re-exported and meets all requirements concerning domestic manufacturing and trade. Beijing also allowed the CITES Secretariat to carry out an annual verification of its ivory control system. In 2005, China applied to CITES to become a legally-approved trading partner for CITES-endorsed ivory stocks and auctions. In 2006, the State Council enacted the Regulation of the People's Republic of China on the Administration of the Import and Export of Endangered Wild Fauna and Flora. This act requires government approval for all export and import wildlife products for non-commercial purposes such as scientific research, breeding or exchanges.⁹¹ Simultaneously with these legal measures, customs controls were tightened. Customs authorities also attempted to stop the ivory commerce at some Chinese internet auction portals.⁹² A new ivory carving association was established for all officially designated ivory dealers. A 2007 field investigation by TRAFFIC, a wildlife trade monitoring network, speaks of an 'unprecedented effort to interdict illicit trade in ivory' and confirms that 'China's law enforcement effort scores have improved markedly', rising from 6 percent in 2002 to 30 percent in 2004 to 58 percent in 2007.⁹³ At a CITES meeting in June that year, the Chinese representative recognized 'that some overseas Chinese involved in the illicit ivory trade in Africa' and announced a information campaign for Chinese embassies in Africa an international passengers at Chinese international airports.⁹⁴

3.4. Socio-economic issues

The China-Africa Summit in November 2006 showed China's willingness to address socio-economic challenges and demands put forward by African governments. Chinese hosts spent particular attention to the appeal to make trade relations more balanced. The most eye-catching decision was the increase of the number of African products allowed into China duty-free from 190 to 440. Another measure to diversify trade was the pledge to establish three to five export processing zones that should allow adding value to Africa's exports.⁹⁵ The call for more private commercial incentives

was reflected in the New Action Plan for China-Africa Cooperation with the agreement to 'strengthen cooperation among small- and medium-sized enterprises'.⁹⁶ This clause was specified into the establishment of a Sino-African Joint Chamber of Commerce and a larger support package for the China-Africa Business Council, the first public-private partnership initiative between China and Africa under the United Nations Development Fund's (UNDP) South-South Cooperation Framework.⁹⁷ In addition, a new five billion USD Development Fund was created to encourage Chinese companies to invest in Africa.⁹⁸ With regard to the labour standards of Chinese investors, officials explained that Beijing was taking steps to make companies respecting social regulations in African partner states. Earlier, in October that year, China concluded a memorandum of understanding with Zambia to 'ensure workers benefit' and to enhance labour law abidance of Chinese investors operating in that country.⁹⁹ Similar promises were made in a less formal way in South Africa and Namibia.

Yet, the impact of these plans is modest. Regarding the diversification of exports, tariff exemptions encompassed mainly raw materials and derivatives of agricultural goods and fishery. Instead of benefiting Africa's secondary sector, advantages are essentially situated in the primary branch, so that the vulnerability to shocks of international commodity prices remains. Regarding the strengthening of Africa's private sector, a large part of the new Development Fund is still expected to be funnelled into ventures of state-owned companies. If it supports private actors, these will be Chinese. The same goes for the Chinese export processing zones where Chinese companies will profit from tax breaks and flexible investment conditions.¹⁰⁰ Certainly, these areas might develop into economic growth poles and boost local employment. But all in all, financial return for Africa remains limited, given the very low taxes and given the fact that Chinese companies will optimally make use of the lowered fiscal barriers within Africa's regional free trade associations. Although Chinese factories will be a significant step forward compared to the past 'excavating-only' strategy; industrial activities are still limited to the processing of raw materials to semi-fabricates or assembling Chinese goods to products for the African market. Concessions on social standards seem to be reserved for

African nations that already have acceptable norms in place or an influential labour movement functioning. The same goes for compromises on anti-dumping. Thus far, Beijing approved voluntarily caps on clothing exports only to South-Africa, the single African state that was able to make a serious case at the World Trade Organisation (WTO), not for instance to weaker players that also suffered losses in their manufacturing sector like Kenya, Tanzania or Uganda. There is also a distinction between the degree to which different categories of Chinese companies wanted to take complaints on social behaviour seriously. Several highly visible state-owned enterprises like China Roads and Bridges (CRB), China National Overseas Engineering Corporation (COVEC) and China National Mining Company (CNMC) took voluntary measures to improve labour conditions. Smaller players merely take remarks of local governments into account and are not bothered with scrutiny by the Chinese government. Thus, as one African politician expressed, 'China is inadequately using plastic surgery to make the patient feel good, but the real problem is much deeper and is merely touched'.¹⁰¹

Repeatedly, Chinese officials maintained that their country was taking a responsible stance towards the exploitation of African natural resources and stressed that Africa's natural richness should benefit the whole local society. However, Beijing has been reluctant to join initiatives that were launched to let the benefits of investments in the African mining industry trickle down. One such project is the Extractive Industries Transparency International (EITI) which supports improved governance in resource-rich countries through the verification and full publication of company payments and government revenues from oil, gas, and mining.¹⁰² Although China was pushed by Berlin and London to join, China reacted unenthusiastically. Whereas South Africa, Russia and the Brazilian oil company Petrobras attended the 2005 EITI Conference in London, China remained absent.¹⁰³ A few days before the second Board Meeting in Berlin in April 2007, Beijing stated that 'each country has its own national conditions' and that 'each country should work out relevant regulations and policies applicable to its own conditions'. Neither did it go along with Belgium's plans to promote good governance in the Democratic Republic of Congo's mining sector. A director of a major Chinese mining company in Zambia

explained that 'his country's projects should not be put at risk by such constraints'.¹⁰⁴ Similarly, China was approached to make its official aid and credits to African governments more transparent. Both the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank suggested sharing the terms of credit agreements with the rest of the donor community.¹⁰⁵ China was also invited by the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC) to observe the peer review of the UK's development aid, but China refused to endorse the Committee's guidelines.

4. Conclusion: between understanding and adaptation

Since the start of the new decade, China modified its Africa policy significantly and showed a responsive attitude to most expectations that were pushed forward by external players. Except for arms exports, transparency in aid and mining activities, Beijing reformulated its official discourse in such a way that it neutralized several points of criticism. Measuring shifts in behaviour is by no means an evident analysis. Chinese state, sub-state, non-governmental and private actors have been swarming out over the African continent with increasing numbers and in growing diversity. Various Chinese actors pursue competing interests and even have cut their ties with the motherland to operate in an autonomous manner. State regulations have to find their way through an intricate structure of institutions and levels of implementation. Yet, despite this problem of *actorness*, national policies can have a far-reaching impact if the political determinedness is present.

This resoluteness in turn depends first and foremost on the perception of the challenges to national economic interests. Beijing was prepared to adapt when economic stakes were limited, as this was the case of the illegal trade in illicit diamonds and ivory. The value of these flows of luxury goods to China's economic development is small. In 2006, processing of the two commodities generated only 40,000 to 50,000 jobs. The Chinese government also back-pedalled when it concluded that the sustainability of particular interests came under threat. The main motivation for the People's

Key issues	Expectations and focal points	Adaptation of discourse change	Adaptation of policy
Security	UN Peacekeepers to Darfur	Yes	Yes
	Controlling arms exports	Limited	Limited
Environment	Curbing trade in 'blood diamonds'	Yes	Yes
	Curbing illicit logging	Yes	Yes
	Curbing illicit ivory trade	Yes	Yes
	Improving corporate practices	Yes	Limited
Socio-economic standards	Diversification of African exports	Yes	Limited
	Curbing dumping of cheap goods	Yes	Limited
	Opportunities for the private sector	Yes	No
	Labour standards of Chinese investors	Yes	Limited
	Transparency of aid and loans	No	No
	Transparency in the mining sector	no	No

Table 2. Evaluation of the evolution of China's Africa policy.

Republic to push the Sudanese government allowing UN troops in Darfur was the gloomy prospect that further escalation would have menaced its long-term interests in Sudan and the Northern African Region. Moreover, it would have defied China's carefully conceived appearance as peacefully and responsibly developing country. Sustainability also played a role in the tightening of regulations of timber import. In 1998, a total prohibition was imposed on domestic logging; since the new decade it became clear that the partial externalisation of environmental costs to the African continent could only be a temporary solution. Alterations with regard to socioeconomic expectations went less far and were too modest to accede to the expectations of African countries and to meet the norms proposed by various international forums. Partial concessions rather than adaptation had to ward off international criticism or opposition in African partner countries. Instead of making trade more balanced, China sought first and foremost to safeguard its capacity to tap Africa as a consumer and commodity market. This pragmatic trade-off also explains the many geographic variations in China's interpretation of responsibility. Its accountability with regard to socioeconomic standards hinges mostly upon the strength and liability of local political elites.

Even though rationalist strategic calculations clearly prevail, several decisions were also influenced by elements that could be rather interpreted from a constructivist angle. China's changing political identity for instance takes NGOs more and more serious, what allowed them to play a role in diverse round tables. The same goes for Chinese think tank experts and scholars, who start to take autonomous positions, strengthened their ties with foreign peers and actively participated in the policy formulation processes like these with regard to timber, diamonds and illicit arms. The Chinese political elite and the *corps diplomatique* divest themselves from their old straitjackets, which makes personal interaction especially in several capitals much more streamlined and strengthens diplomatic empathy. For example, both in Brussels and in Washington China dispatched young and communicative representatives to follow up the Africa agenda. Hence, significant socialisation is taking place and undoubtedly improves China's capacity to understand the different positions. Though between understand-

ing and adaptation lays still the pressing need for swift and sustainable growth.

'Industry, commerce and prudence,' with this formula Alexander Hamilton prescribed the path that a young industrializing nation should follow to defend its economic interests in a global order that was dominated by other powers.¹⁰⁶ In the same way, political empathy and diplomatic flexibility are vital attributes for China to consolidate its development and to keep entries into overseas markets open. This approach also explains China's selective adaptation, which is at the first place an adjustment of diplomatic language and interaction change, instead of a revision of ambitions, i.e. systemic and structural change. It is tempting to consider the People's Republic as a status-quo power because it responds positively to many external demands, norms and values.¹⁰⁷ Yet, in reality these modifications only play a functional role in the profound structural revision of international order that China's ascent inevitably brings. In turn, even within this revisionist agenda, several layers of change should be distinguished. The expansion of economic influence remains the base line of China's aspirations in Africa and elsewhere in the world, and for the years coming, political and military plans will remain to be conceived in function of these interests. China's accommodative gestures are not fundamental; they all revolve around an intransigent and unaffected core of economic ambitions.

5. Consequences for the European Union

The European Union sticks out its chest now that China shows that it has an ear open to its demands. The diplomatic involvement of China in Sudan, its entering into a policy dialogue, and the participation to initiatives like the Kimberley process all seemed to have convinced Europe that it masters the situation. The exchanges between Europe and China contributed indeed to some positive achievements. Talks between officials at all levels defused suspicion and frictions. Both parties might also start with the clarification of their interests on the African continent, and consequently find that these stakes are quite complementary. However, the EU should not overestimate

these advances. First and foremost, China's adaptation is incomplete. Important demands are not met. Second, Beijing became aware of the fact that a lot of the EU's expectations are only half-heartedly supported by the member states. Moreover, several European countries pursue opposite policies. This is most obvious in arms trade, where the interpretation of EU guidelines varies strongly from state to state. Regarding the pledge for making the trade in African ores like coltan and cobalt more transparent, France is opposing the plans of countries like Belgium. While London and Germany are pushing Beijing to revise its financial support to Africa, the Portuguese government decided that national banks should join forces with China. Third, the EU tends to forget that beyond its apparent influence on China's Africa policy, its direct sway on the African continent withers. While talking, the People's Republic and various other countries are strengthening their relative power at the expense of the EU's position. Economic flows and political relations are bending away from Europe. The dialogue with Beijing became an end itself, without taking into account that partnerships are only sustainable if they are backed up by solid economic and diplomatic credence.

The EU seems to be hesitant to handle terms as 'interest' and 'influence' when it deals with China's Africa offensive. Undoubtedly this diffidence stems from the apprehension of the odour of neo-colonialism and the contempt for its own imperial past. But these ethical considerations are not the only explanation. Another problem is that the European Union does not succeed to define its role in Africa. Member states still prefer to chase their diplomatic and commercial ambitions unilaterally. Nor does a consensus exist between the different European institutions or even between the different directorates of the European Commission.

If this evolution persists, the EU might end up as a naked emperor, trying to get its wishes heard, but without the necessary levers and credibility to play a central role in its own backyard. Already, China's Africa strategy becomes much more oriented towards policies of other pretenders like the United States, India, Brazil and Russia. This reflection of the multipolarizing world order also places China for multiple policy choices. What is the relevance of norms about transparency in a context where several other countries are pursuing opportunist strategies to get access to

natural resources? How should it respond to the increasing military presence of the United States in Western and Eastern Africa? Should it increase the accountability of its development aid now that states like India and Russia are starting to step up their non-conditional assistance? It is obvious that for all these choices, Europe will only play a modest role. Addressing China's enlarging foot print is not only a matter of dialogue and joint projects; it also necessitates a comprehensive evaluation of the EU's own stakes. What are the interests? Is it still relevant to maintain influence in Africa? What kind of influence is desirable? How can it be achieved in a context where new actors step up their presence? The EU's answer to powers like the People's Republic should evolve from the current thin diplomacy to a thick strategy that does take the shifts of influence into account.

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