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Sino-African Relations: Historical Development and Long-term Challenges

Jianjun TU

Declared the Year of Africa, 2006 marked a half century of China-African diplomatic relations and was a year of unprecedented Chinese focus on the continent, with significant promises and undertakings made in both the political and economic arenas. On 12 January 2006, Beijing unveiled its first white paper on its relations with Africa, *China's African Policy*, elaborating a detailed plan for long-term ties with Africa covering economic, political, educational, scientific, cultural, environmental, health and social cooperation, as well as peacekeeping and security.¹ China's new strategic partnership with Africa was unveiled at the November 2006 Beijing Summit of the Forum on China and Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). In response to China's ambitious vision, 48 African countries invited to the two-day summit sent 1,700 representatives, with 41 being represented by their head of state. The Summit unanimously adopted the FOCAC Beijing Action Plan and a Declaration, which calls for strategic partnership aiming at strengthened mutual trust and economic cooperation, especially in the area of joint energy exploration.² Unsurprisingly, China has become Africa's third largest trading partner following the United States and France, making Africa China's major foreign source of strategic resources and investment opportunities, and an export market for Chinese commodities.

While the success of the FOCAC clearly indicates that Beijing's sweeping efforts in recent years to form a close business partnership with Africa have

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paid off, China's deepening engagement with Africa is viewed by many policy makers and pundits in the United States and Europe as eroding their own interests and influence on the continent. The aggressive penetration of Chinese national oil companies and Beijing's close ties with the Sudanese government lie at the heart of their concerns.³ However, within Africa, China's expansive engagement has raised the hope that much needed infrastructure will finally be built and that China's strategic approach will raise Africa's global status, intensify political and market competition, create promising new choices in external partnerships, strengthen African capacities to combat malaria and HIV/AIDS, and promote economic growth.⁴

The contradictory views held by different parties certainly illustrate the complicated nature of China's presence in the African continent. To demystify the driving forces behind China's grand African strategy, this article first reviews the historical development of Sino-African ties, then examines the long-term challenges facing China when the goal is to sustain its African policy.

Sino-African Ties: Historical Development

China and Africa are geographically far apart and share neither language nor culture. Yet, in the 10th century BC the Egyptian city of Alexandria started trading with China. Subsequently, Chinese and Africans came into contact as a consequence of Arab and European maritime expeditions occasioned by the slave trade. However, it was only in the second half of the 20th century that China and Africa truly rediscovered each other, most notably at the Bandung Conference on Non-Alignment held 18 to 24 April 1955.⁵

The establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Egypt on 30 May 1956 marked the formal beginning of Sino-African ties. At that time,

¹ "China's African Policy", 12 Jan. 2006. See the China Ministry of Foreign Affairs website at <<http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx/t230615.htm>> [2 Sept. 2007].

² Beijing Summit and Third Ministerial Conference of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation. See *People's Daily Online* at <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/zhuanti/Zhuanti_492_1_1.html> [2 Sept. 2007].

³ See Louisa Lombard, "Africa's China Card", *Foreign Policy* at <www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cm> [Apr. 2006]; Frederick W. Stakelbeck, Jr., "China's Growing Influence in Africa", *American Thinker*, at <http://www.americanthinker.com/2005/05/chinas_growing_influence_in_af.html> [6 May 2005].

⁴ Kwesi Aning and Delphine Lecoutre, "China's Ventures in Africa", *African Security Review* 17, no. 1 (2008): 39–50.

⁵ Ibid.

Beijing was in direct ideological conflict with the West, and most countries outside the Soviet bloc recognised the Kuomintang administration in Taiwan as the sole government of China. In a desperate need to boost the legitimacy of its regime and to counter “American-led imperialism’s encirclement”, China considered Africa a strategically important diplomatic arena. The shared ideological belief of anti-colonialism and Third World cooperation made close bilateral relations desirable for both parties. Moreover, China’s recognition of the importance of economic incentives made Sino-African ties even more appealing. Soon after Sino-Egypt diplomatic recognition, Chinese aid poured into Africa. On 12 October 2006, Deputy Commerce Minister Wei Jianguo revealed that China had helped 49 African countries establish more than 700 projects in fisheries, telecommunication, hydropower, education and health care since 1956.⁶ One of the highest-profile projects in Africa undertaken by China was the construction of the 1,860-kilometre Tanzam Railway between 1970 and 1975. Though often tainted with ideological motivations, many Chinese-aided projects in the early period not only boosted industrial development in the host countries, but also gradually strengthened China’s diplomatic dominance over Taiwan on the continent.

While Beijing’s principle of non-intervention in other countries’ domestic issues was attractive to any country marginalised by the West, China’s sympathy for Africa’s independence movements during the 1960s and 1970s gained particular reciprocal support when Western powers were more inclined to scale back their presence. From the 1960s onwards, nations friendly to the People’s Republic of China, led by Albania, moved an annual resolution in the General Assembly to transfer China’s seat at the United Nations from the Kuomintang administration to the PRC. In comparison, during the 1960s, Taiwan also aggressively targeted countries on the continent with aid packages in a bid to retain its United Nations’ seat. At its peak, Taiwan was recognised by 20 African nations. With substantial help from the United States, each year Taiwan was able to assemble a majority of votes to block the resolution against it. However, the admission to the UN of newly independent developing nations, especially those from the African continent gradually turned the General Assembly from being Western-dominated to being dominated by countries sympathetic to Beijing, and resolution

⁶ “Deputy Commerce Minister Wei Jianguo Talked about Sino-Africa Relations”, China Ministry of Foreign Affairs website at <<http://ipc.fmprc.gov.cn/chn/cfh/t277620.htm>> [5 Sept. 2007].

2758 was finally passed to recognise the PRC as the sole legitimate government of China on 25 October 1971.⁷

Beijing's ideology-driven relations with Africa came with their own problems. In the wake of the Sino-Soviet split in the 1960s, China accused the pro-Soviet communist parties on the African continent of being "revisionists", regarding them as ideological rivals. Based on this political bias, the relations between the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the pro-Soviet political parties in Africa were severed. Moreover, at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, China's Africa policy was affected by an ultra-leftist mentality, with a primary objective of promoting Maoism. Beijing's "export revolution" campaign deviated from China's paramount diplomatic principle of "non-interference of internal affairs" and soon threatened the stability of many African regimes. As a result, only a handful of groups maintained contact with the CPC, and Sino-African ties gradually recovered only after Beijing gave up its "exporting revolution" strategy at the end of the 1960s.⁸

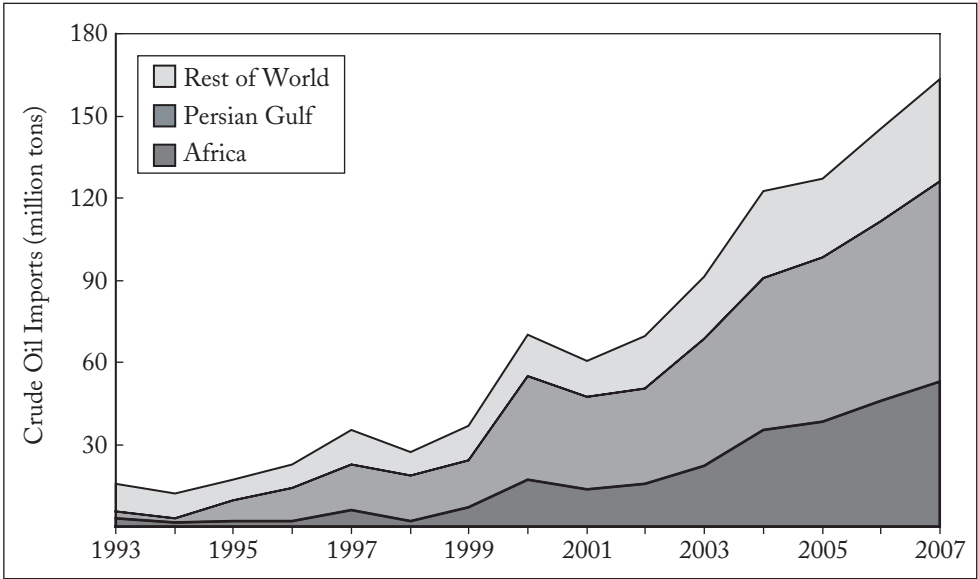
After 1979, when China's late paramount leader, Deng Xiaoping, initiated economic reforms, Beijing's open door policy moved China away from its revolutionary worldview. As the increasingly market-oriented Chinese economy needed to attract overseas investment, China's diplomatic policy became increasingly West-oriented. Even until the late 1980s, Beijing arguably formed a *de facto* alliance with Washington to counter Moscow. Not surprisingly, the strategic importance of Africa seemed more remote from the Chinese side during this period. However, following the violent suppression of the Tiananmen Square protests, the United States and the European Union placed an embargo on weapons sales to the PRC which remains in place.

In comparison, the consistent and unconditional support of many African countries is much appreciated by Beijing. Since 1991, the Chinese foreign minister's first visit abroad each year has always been to the African continent. When the Chinese leadership realised that increasing amounts of oil, gas and other minerals were needed to sustain the booming economy, resource-rich Africa again garnered much attention from China's decision-makers. After China lost its long-cherished status of energy self-reliance in

⁷ *China and the United Nations*, Wikipedia at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/China_and_the_United_Nations> [5 Sept. 2007].

⁸ Anshan Li, "China and Africa: Policy and Challenges", *China Security* 3, no. 3 (2007): 69–93.

Figure 1. *China's Crude Oil Imports, 1993–2007 (million tons)*



Source: China Customs.

1993, the pressure of supply diversification forced major Chinese national oil companies to scour the world for petroleum. Figure 1 shows that China's crude oil imports from Africa have increased at an astonishing rate of 23 per cent annually since 1993, reaching 53 million tons (mt) in 2007. As a result, Africa's share of China's crude imports rose sharply from 18.5 per cent in 1993 to 32.5 per cent in 2007. In most of 2006, Angola even surpassed Saudi Arabia, to become China's largest overseas crude oil supplier.⁹ In 2007, China imported an unprecedented 25 mt of crude oil from Angola, a level only 5 per cent lower than the quantity coming from Saudi Arabia.

China's economic ties with Africa extend far beyond energy cooperation. Its policy in many instances is tied to ambitious commitments to re-construct critical infrastructure and invest in strengthening human skills on a substantial scale. During the December 2006 summit, Chinese president Hu Jintao pledged that China would double its aid, provide three billion US dollars in preferential loans and two billion dollars in preferential buyer's credits. In May 2007, China captured international attention again when it hosted the

⁹ According to China Customs, China imported 23.87 mt and 23.45 mt of crude oil from Saudi Arabia and Angola in 2006, respectively.

annual African Development Bank conference in Shanghai. China agreed to make an additional USD20 billion pledge for infrastructure development in Africa over the next three years.¹⁰ Many of China's national companies are benefiting greatly from close Sino-African economic ties. For example, immediately before the 2006 Beijing Summit, the China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation signed a USD8.3 billion railway agreement with the Nigerian government which is likely China's largest overseas engineering project by value.¹¹

As it was African countries which were critical in the PRC's entry to the United Nations, and given the widening Sino-African engagement, during its re-thinking period, starting in 2000, about the importance of developing countries to China's overall diplomatic policy, Beijing framed its relationship with developing countries within a four-sentence slogan: "great powers are the key; neighbourhood is the priority; developing countries are the foundation; and multilateral cooperation is an important mechanism". This was issued from the 16th National Congress of the CPC in 2002.¹² As a result, China currently still regards its relationship with developing countries including Africa as the most important component of its diplomatic policy.

Beginning with an ideology-driven past, Sino-African relations have become more complex, multidimensional and ambitious over time. On the one hand, China needs Africa for resources to fuel its development goals, for markets to sustain its growing economy, for political alliances to support its sovereignty claim over Taiwan, for its efforts to enhance "soft power", and most importantly, for its aspirations to be a global superpower. On the other hand, Africa needs China to improve its backward infrastructure, raise its global status, create promising choices in external partnerships, and to strengthen African capacities in health care and economic growth.¹³

¹⁰ "China's Loans to Africa are Help not Harm", *People's Daily Online* at <http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2007-08/13/content_6521006.htm> [5 Sept. 2007].

¹¹ "Business Deals Come Ahead of Historical China-Africa Summit", *People's Daily Online* at <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200611/03/eng20061103_318055.html> [5 Sept. 2007].

¹² Tang Shiping, "Zai lun Zhongguo de da zhanlue (Once Again on China's Grand Strategy)", *Zhanlue yu guanli (Strategy and Management)*, no. 4 (2001); Yu Xintian, "China should Transform its Policies toward Developing Countries", *Zhanlue yu guanli (Strategy and Management)*, no. 6 (2003) (in Chinese).

¹³ B. Bates Gill *et al.*, "Assessing China's Growing Influence in Africa", *China Security* 3, no. 3 (2007): 3–21.

China's current engagement with Africa should also be viewed within the context of globalisation in the aftermath of the Cold War. This new relationship focuses on voluntary economic and technological cooperation for the purposes of mutual development. In fact, the current emphasis of China's Africa policy is arguably based on a tripod of three legitimacies, namely: (1) historical legitimacy — historical links to liberation movements; (2) ideological legitimacy — a Third World ideological heritage dating back to the Cold War; and (3) political legitimacy — an evolving partnership based on principles of non-interference and neutrality.¹⁴ However, great prospects impose high risks. While close Sino-African ties are likely to create a win-win situation for both sides in the near future, Beijing still faces significant challenges to sustain relations with Africa in the long run.

Long-term Challenges Ahead

First, China's non-intervention policy is a double-edged sword. China's transformation from an inward-looking, agrarian society into a key force in the global economy has spawned a voracious appetite for raw materials, sending its companies around the globe — sometimes even to lands shunned by the rest of the world as rogue states. While Western oil companies have in the past had a bad record of maintaining relations with oil-rich dictators, they nevertheless have become increasingly sensitive to public diplomacy. In comparison, the Chinese oil companies currently have no qualms about making deals with any regime. As a result, Beijing's willingness to invest in any country that has petroleum resources has not only improved China's energy security by diversifying its oil supply away from the politically unstable Persian Gulf, but has also resulted in significant leverage in oil-rich Africa.

As the Sudanese Government is accused by the United States of genocide in Darfur and is listed as a state supporter of terrorism, American companies are prohibited from investing in Sudan. In comparison, China is in a lucrative partnership with the Sudanese Government that delivers billions of dollars in investment, oil revenues and weapons, as well as diplomatic protection.¹⁵

¹⁴ C. Mbaye, "L'affirmation d'une stratégie de puissance: la politique africaine de la Chine", at <<http://www.diploweb.com/forum/chine07102.htm>> [7 May 2008]. See also Aning and Lecoutre, op. cit.

¹⁵ "China Invests Heavily in Sudan's Oil Industry", *Washington Post*, 23 Dec. 2004, p. A01.

China's oil imports from Sudan increased sharply from 0.27 mt in 1999 to 6.43 mt in 2002.¹⁶ Peter Draper, a research fellow at the South African Institute of International Affairs, asserts that China's non-intervention policy gives it an "ethical advantage" over its rivals.¹⁷ On the other hand, since the West attempts to link economic assistance to reform in Africa, China's non-intervention practice might contradict its strategic goal of portraying itself as a "responsible power". China's commercial relations with Sudan are intensifying human rights concerns outside and also clashing with US policies and interests. Beijing's unwillingness to interfere directly in the Darfur crisis has also stirred widespread criticism from the Western community. Moreover, the instability of the political environment in Sudan has actually hurt Chinese investment, and China's oil imports from Sudan have declined continuously since 2002, dropping to 4.85 mt in 2006. Under tremendous international pressure to help end the conflict in Darfur, Liu Guijin, China's envoy to the region, made an unusual rebuke to Khartoum during a visit there on 24 February 2008 and urged Sudan to remove obstacles to full deployment of a joint UN-African Union peacekeeping force.¹⁸ It will be interesting to see how far China is willing to break its long hold stance of non-intervention policy after the 2008 Olympics, and it is in the African continent where the front line of the struggle, and the expected improvements in China's foreign policy, can be found.

Second, Beijing must watch what the US is doing in Africa with respect to oil. The US currently derives about 22 per cent of its oil imports from Africa as compared to a similar percentage from the Persian Gulf, and is likely to be dependent on Africa for 30 per cent of its oil imports within the next decade. While the crude oil supply of Africa increased only four per cent annually between 2000 and 2007, American and Chinese imports from this region increased 8 per cent and 17 per cent annually during the same period, respectively.¹⁹ Figure 2 compares crude imports from Africa by China and US in 2007. Contrary to the message conveyed by the Western media, China is actually still a relatively small player in the African oil market compared with

¹⁶ China Customs.

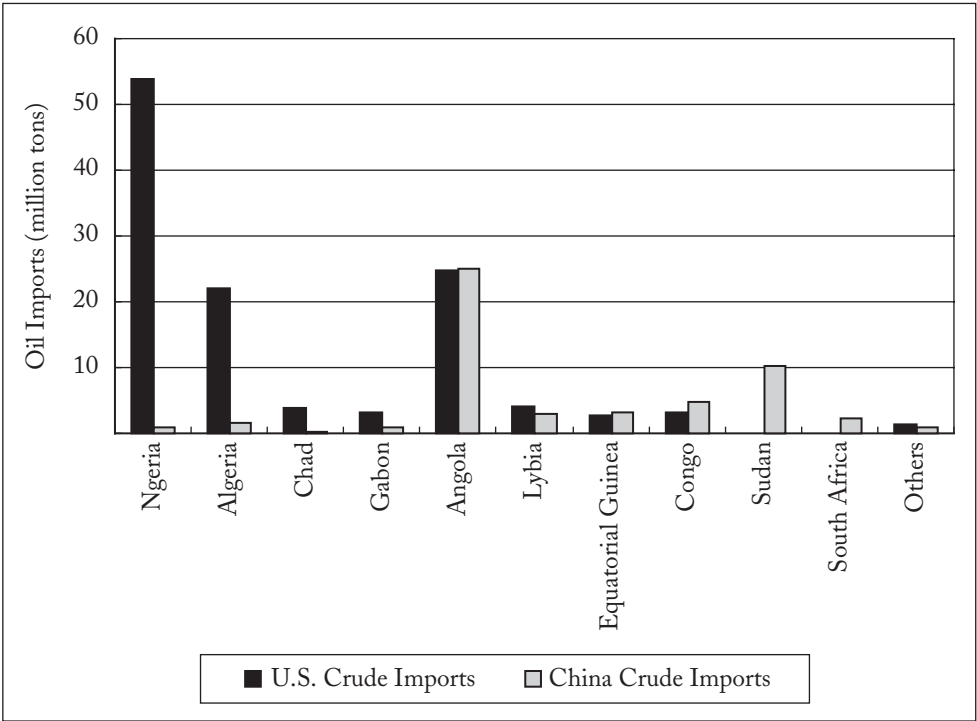
¹⁷ *The Economist*, 27 Nov. 2004, p. 71.

¹⁸ "China Presses Sudan over Darfur Peacekeepers", *Reuters Online* at <<http://africa.reuters.com/world/news/usnL24595391.html>> [18 Apr. 2008].

¹⁹ China Customs, various years; Energy Information Administration, various years; *British Petroleum Statistical Review of World Energy* 2008.

the US. In 2007, American crude oil imports from Nigeria alone were two per cent higher than China’s total imports from the continent. Moreover, except for in a few countries such as Angola, American and Chinese oil companies do not coexist well with each other. While most of the existing market has been taken by US companies, Chinese national oil companies are forced to operate in more risky countries such as Sudan and Congo. If the current trend persists, the competition for access to African oil between the US and China will soon be heated, and the two countries could find themselves at strategic loggerheads not because of shifts in relative power, but over access to oil. This is an example of the “lateral pressure theory”, which states that when a country is forced to look beyond its own borders for new supplies, it will likely run into conflict with existing consumers of that resource. Therefore, as the US and China move closer to power parity, intensifying “lateral pressures” generated

Figure 2. *Crude Oil Imports from Africa: China and the US, 2007*



Note: based on the assumption that one barrel of crude = 0.1364 metric tons (according to *BP Statistical Review of World Energy 2007*).

Source: China Customs and US Energy Information Administration.

by competition for oil imports could become a significant and destabilising factor in Sino-American relations.²⁰

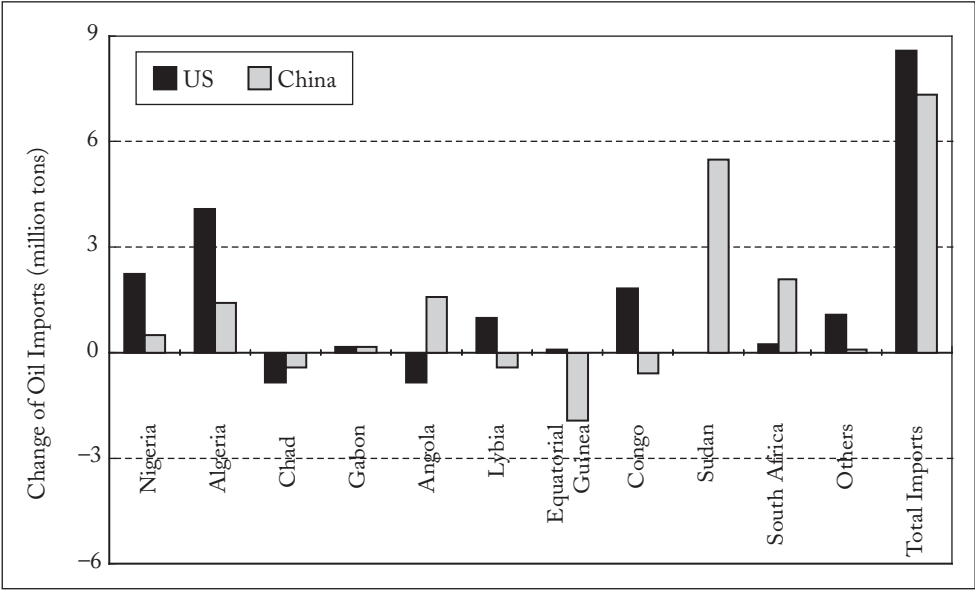
Some commentators find the aforementioned prospect of a forthcoming collision between China and the US over precious oil resources intriguing. However, China's increasing reliance on international trade suggests that its interests may best be served if a cooperative channel can be negotiated with the US to share oil access. As there is only one world oil market, national energy security depends on international energy security, and the major oil consuming countries like China or the US alone cannot solve their own energy security challenges without international cooperation. However, the mistrust generated between Beijing and Washington after the US Congress' vehement intervention in China National Offshore Oil Company's unsuccessful Unocal bid certainly made this task more difficult. Figure 3 illustrates that while China and the US increased their crude oil imports from Africa over 2006–7 by 7.3 and 8.5 mt, respectively, their absolute import changes generally moved in the same direction (either increasing or decreasing) across most African oil exporting countries. Hopefully, China and the US will be able to peacefully share access to petroleum and other natural resources on the African continent in the years to come.

Third, China's leadership believes strongly in the goal of a unified country. With increasing political and economic might, in recent years, Beijing has successfully retarded Taiwan in the diplomatic arena. Malawi cut its diplomatic relationship with Taiwan on 14 January 2008 apparently after receiving USD6 billion in aid and other inducements from Beijing. This left a mere four African states still maintaining official ties with Taipei.²¹ Table 1 reveals that most of the African countries that still maintain diplomatic ties with Taiwan are all relatively small in size, poor and less populous than the world average. Nevertheless, an aggressive diplomatic battle with Taiwan would be costly. When Taiwan's diplomatic base dwindles, perhaps more resources will be available to fight Beijing's efforts to isolate the Island. Interestingly, none of the four African countries nor Malawi attended the 2006 FOCAC Beijing Summit, despite China's high-profile invitations. On 9 September 2007, the

²⁰ Peter Hatemi and Andrew Wedeman, "Oil and Conflicts in Sino-America Relations", *China Security* 3, no. 3 (2007): 95–118.

²¹ "Malawi Cuts Diplomatic Ties With Taiwan", *New York Times* at <<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/15/world/africa/15malawi.html?partner=rssnyt&emc=rs>> [25 Apr. 2008].

Figure 3. *Change in Crude Oil Imports from Africa: China and the US, between 2006 and 2007*



Source: China Customs and US Energy Information Administration.

four diplomatic allies of Taiwan and Malawi even issued a joint declaration to support the island’s bid to join the United Nations.²²

While it is evident that some African countries play Beijing and Taipei off against each other for economic gains, an overly aggressive diplomatic agenda set by China will likely impose a high toll for both sides across the Taiwan Strait, and create an undesirable lose-lose situation. A notable example on the Taiwanese side was the three senior Taiwan officials’ resignation on 6 May 2008, following the revelation that USD30 million of secret diplomatic funds from the Chen Shiu-bian Administration that were apparently used to persuade Papua New Guinea to drop its official recognition of China in favour of Taiwan have gone missing.²³ Fortunately, Taiwan’s new leader (Kuomintang), Ma Ying-jeou was given a strong mandate in Taiwan’s March 2008 presidential election. He has expressed his intention to “stop the zero-sum diplomatic war” with China, and the reaction so far from Beijing has

²² “Five African Allies Support Taiwan’s United Nations Bid”, *China Post* at <<http://www.chinapost.com.tw/news/2007/09/10/121869/Five-African.htm>> [10 Sept. 2007].

²³ “Three Resign over Taiwan Diplomatic Scandal”, see CNN’s website at <<http://edition.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/asiapcf/05/07/taiwan.millions.ap>> [7 May 2008].

Table 1. *African Countries Maintaining Diplomatic Relations with Taiwan*

	Population (thousand)	GDP per capita (USD)	Surface area (km²)
Burkina Faso	14,359	430	274,000
Gambia	1,663	307	11,300
Sao Tome and Principe	155	791	960
Swaziland	1,138	2,327	17,360
World Average	28,930	7,412	592,680

Note: Year 2006 data.

Source: World Development Indicators Online [28 July 2008].

been warm.²⁴ Nevertheless, Taipei's international presence, including that on the African continent, will surely test China's Taiwan policy.

Fourth, while more and more Chinese companies are targeting the African market, how they operate will have a long-term impact on Sino-African relations. Some African commentators have pointed to shortcomings in China's economic involvement in Africa. They have cited some Chinese companies' limited regard for environmental and safety standards, their tendency to bring in Chinese workers rather than hire Africans, and the stiff competition that African manufacturers face from large quantities of low-priced Chinese imports.²⁵ Other concerns are whether the presence of Chinese companies will stimulate local corruption or honour stringent quality standards. These are legitimate concerns Beijing needs to answer in the near future. Noting that most Chinese national oil companies are still too powerful to be tamed by Chinese regulators domestically, these challenges certainly need Beijing's consistent efforts, not merely good will.

Fifth, as China's economy continues to burgeon while most African countries continue to lag far behind, Africa may come to differ with China with respect to some global issues even if they have seen eye-to-eye in the past. For instance, during the climate change negotiations in the 1990s, China aligned itself with most developing countries to form G-77/China, which successfully halted or slowed all binding emission reduction initiatives for developing countries. However, since 2000, China has increased its fossil

²⁴ "Ma Ying-jeou Plans to Stop the Zero-sum Diplomatic War between Taiwan and China After He Takes Office", *Lianhe Zaobao's* at <http://realtime.zaobao.com/2008/04/080423_14.shtml> [25 Apr. 2008].

²⁵ Ernest Harsch, "Big Leap in China-Africa Ties", *Africa Renewal* 20, no. 4 (2007): 3.

fuel consumption at an astonishing rate of 10 per cent annually,²⁶ and the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency even claimed that China's 2006 CO₂ emissions surpassed those of the US by 8 per cent. As a result, China topped the list of CO₂ emitting countries for the first time.²⁷ If global warming takes place as predicted, Africa, one of the most vulnerable regions under a disruptive climate scenario, is likely to criticise China's rising greenhouse gas emissions. While similar differences, pertaining to other global issues, may be expected to be encountered, it is in Beijing's best interests to develop a proactive decision-making framework to address any future potential confrontation with Africa.

Finally, China is definitely approaching global superpower status, but whether Chinese society is prepared for this is still an open question. The country's rapid economic growth has fostered a tourist boom among Mainland Chinese. According to the China National Tourism Administration (CNTA), China's outbound tourism sector has grown 19 per cent annually since 1998, reaching 41 million departures in 2007. Although the number of Chinese tourists to Africa accounted for only 0.6 percent of national outbound tourists, the number reached 0.3 million in 2007, a 36 per cent spike on a year-over-year basis. However, the surge in package tour groups from China is also giving rise to an unflattering stereotype: the loud, rude and culturally naive Chinese tourist.²⁸ In early October 2006, the CNTA and the central government's Office of the Spiritual Civilization Development Steering Commission released a list of "dos and don'ts" for Chinese citizens intending to travel abroad.²⁹ The authorities hope that through regulation and education, Chinese citizens will behave in a more "civilised" way.

While the bad behaviour of Chinese tourists became a policy concern for China's decision makers, a more severe problem, namely racial discrimination, has been largely ignored. Since the late 1970s, expressions of anti-black sentiments in China have periodically caught the world's attention. Demonstrations against African students between 1988 and 1989 received

²⁶ *China Statistical Yearbook*, various years.

²⁷ "China Now No. 1 in CO₂ Emissions; USA in Second Position", *Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency* at <<http://www.mnp.nl/en/dossiers/Climatechange/moreinfo/Chinanowno1inCO2emissionsUSAinsecondposition.html>> [10 Sept. 2007].

²⁸ "Chinese Tourists Getting a Bad Image", *International Herald Tribune*, 23 Oct. 2005.

²⁹ "Chinese Tourists' Bad Behaviour to Be Curbed", *China.org.cn* website at <<http://www.china.org.cn/english/2006/Oct/183079.htm>> [10 Sept. 2007].

considerable negative commentary. Libya even decried the “pressure campaign of a racist nature”, and offered scholarships to all Africans in China to return.³⁰ The Chinese authorities often attribute anti-African incidents to “cultural misunderstanding” and deny racism as the underlining driving force, but anti-black racism is currently growing unchecked as China becomes increasingly wealthy. Even Chinese elites with good educational backgrounds, are seen, for no reason to publicly utter racist comments.³¹ This reform-era racism calls into question China’s credentials as a leader of the Third World. Moreover, as those persecuted were themselves part of the proto-elites of African states, there may be long-term negative consequences for Sino-African relations.³² Chinese racism against Africans (e.g. “*hei-gui*” according to Chinese racists) is an open secret among the elites in China. The absence of open debate about such discrimination poses an important challenge to China’s interactions with African countries, especially at the societal level. Thus, to prevent unchecked spread of racism in China, a top-down paradigm shift of China’s decisions makers is urgently needed, a bottom-up soul-searching process of Chinese civil society as a whole is also required.

African countries have been drawn and will continue to be attracted by China’s economic might and non-intervention policy. However, the historical legacy and good will between China and Africa alone may be insufficient to ensure long-term healthy relations. Instead, proactive decision-making frameworks by both sides and an open-minded attitude from Chinese civil society are the prerequisites to sustain Sino-African ties in the years to come.

³⁰ Barry Sautman, “Anti-Black Racism in Post-Mao China”, *The China Quarterly* 138 (1994): 413–37.

³¹ “Foreign Visitor: I Feel Ashamed for Those Chinese Who Discriminate Against Blacks”, World Executive Blog at <<http://blog.icxo.com/read.jsp?aid=12490&uid=4629>> [10 Sept. 2007] (in Chinese).

³² Sautman, op. cit.