

Sino-African Cooperation and the Question of Interpretations

Okeke Tochukwu*

Department of History and Diplomatic Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Abuja, Mohammed Maccido Rd, Nigeria

***Corresponding author**

Okeke Tochukwu

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Abstract: The study of Sino-African cooperation is evolving as a very significant area of research. So far, students, scholars, diplomats, journalists and other observers have produced an avalanche of works on the subject, each focusing on an aspect or aspects of the theme, from different perspectives. These differing views and perspectives convey opinions that converge and or diverge in substance and analysis, even as they enrich (and sometimes confuse) our understanding of the evolving cross continental reality. In view of this, this paper studies the theme of Sino-African cooperation with a specific focus on analyzing the issues/opinions that exist along three different schools of thought. The paper defines the perceptions vis-à-vis the underlying factors that drive their expressions, and submits that interests and changing international circumstances form the foundation upon which not only perceptions are made, but how responses are constructed.

Keywords: *predator-prey, Africa engagements, Cold War.*

INTRODUCTION

United by a common purpose, many countries of the Global South converged in Bandung in 1955 and charted a path of South-South cooperation. On the heels of Bandung, official relations between China and African countries increased sharply, compelling further analyses of the evolving engagements.

From the benefits of hindsight, it has become pertinent to highlight the debates that erupted during, and continued after, the Cold War, in the context of which the frameworks of analyzing Sino-Africa interactions are usually constructed.

Although an evolving area of interest before the commencement of the Cold War, intellectual debates on Sino-Africa engagements have produced a glut of publications since 1945. Certainly, this is a consequence of the increasingly complex interactions between China and African countries, cutting across diplomatic, economic, cultural and political realms, with profound implications for both as well as for the world generally. Attempts at understanding and explaining the driving forces behind these phenomenal ties across the Indian Ocean have produced opinions that can be roughly grouped into three components. As echoed by Yang and Rupp, one school of analysis project China as a major threat to African development, while the other school firmly holds that, as ever, China's engagements with Africa clearly (promise to) set the continent on the path of development [1]. For the third, it *bites and benefits* Africa at varying degrees with minimal costs to China, hence requiring continuous review for more positive outcomes for both sides.

On this note, it is pertinent to observe how remarkable insights into the discourses on Sino-Africa relations are, and particularly how they have enriched our appreciation of the subject matter. As noted earlier, three schools are reflected in the avalanche of existing literature; the *China Threat*, the *Win-Win* and the *Mixed Impact* schools of analyses.

The *China Threat* school of analysis

Within the period and context of the Cold War and its accompanying politics of ideology, most *vocal* literatures on Sino-Africa relations were projected towards demonizing China's roles in Africa. According to Large [2], leading debates and literatures produced in the West in the 1960s show that some recent, as well as many, Cold War texts [3] express convergent views and concerns on the negative aspects of China's reengagements in Africa and, perhaps, offering only passing comments on the positive sides of it. In agreement, Mohan points out such literatures *present China's presence as necessarily venal and implicitly a threat to US interests* [4]. The *threat* theory tenaciously holds the view that China is a major impediment to African development, and by extension, Western interests. Proponents of this view feel that China-Africa relation is essentially a *predator-prey* relationship [5] dressed in the garb of *win-win* cooperation. This is because they believe that China's strategy in Africa

reverses Western attempts at building up the basic structures on which sustainable developments in Africa can firmly take roots. In their views, China is intensely criticized for its Africa policies that advance exploitation, imperialism and other forms of self-serving agenda. In effect, these policies clearly benefit China, and in Africa, they mostly embolden authoritarian regimes, as well as discourage good governance standards such as transparency and accountability. Also, China has been under seemingly coordinated attacks from this school for what has been termed support for the violations of the environment, human rights, democracy and exacerbation of Africa's dependency status as exporter of primary products, etc [6]. Segments of the Western media, government institutions, academics and other components of their intelligentsia seem to be the leading proponents of this school of analysis [7].

Although some of their criticisms seem well thought out, they appear to be paranoid just as they give the impression that China-Africa engagements must strictly adhere with Western values and standards. As noted by Mohan and Large, plenty of *anecdotal evidence* and paucity of *systematic data* seem to have created room for speculations, paranoia and exaggerated extrapolation, in which a case of China's less positive engagement with a few African countries is projected as representative of the entire China-Africa relationship [8]. Perhaps, this approach sustains the notion that it allows little room for deeper understanding of China's unique approach and the philosophies driving its activities in Africa. Engaging China on those (less positive) issues more constructively holds the potentials of improving on those areas of concern, while consolidating on the very positive areas, hence paving the way for developments that benefit all.

The Win-Win school of analysis

Vehemently opposed to the threat theory, the proponents of the win-win school [9] believe that Sino-Africa relation is a viable form of partnership for development. From the neo-liberal ideological standpoint and the philosophy of South-South cooperation, the school maintains that the relationship is poised to encourage positive development, not just in China and Africa, but across the globe. Over the years, various Chinese leaderships are well known to have espoused the philosophy of the win-win cooperation strategy. Reiterating this in 2006, President Hu Jintao told Nigeria's Federal Legislature that *China's development will not bring a threat to anyone but, instead, will bring more opportunities and space for development to the world* [10]. This statement has a wider significance for it was a well calculated message, not only meant for his immediate audience, but as a response to those that subscribe to the idea of Chinese

threat. Although with a note of caution, Rotberg contends that *...China's current thrust into sub-Saharan Africa promises to do more for economic growth and poverty alleviation there than anything attempted by Western colonialism or the massive initiatives of the international lending agencies and other donor* [11]. The central message of this school of thought is that China is neither altruistic, nor is it playing a zero-sum game in its relations with Africa. They argue that the transformatory power of this relationship draws from the comparative advantage of both sides, in which each side balances its deficits with surpluses accessible from the other partner, hence encouraging healthy developments for both sides. In effect China and Africa seek to maintain a mutually beneficial relationship devoid of exploitation, inequality, disrespect and violation of sovereignty.

Admittedly, the win-win theory and its associated principles are often used as political polemics. Nevertheless, it is discernible that most Chinese and some other writers that hold this view are keen to study how China aids Africa, or how the continent benefits from China, without devoting a corresponding measure of their energies and writings to studying how China also benefits from Africa [12]. This imbalance that runs through their works presents unique problems. This is because, rather than sustain the win-win argument through emphasizing a trend of interdependent relationship, this style of writing often reflects dependency, feeds the scathing criticisms against the relationship and presents the win-win arguments as mere rhetoric.

The Mixed Impact school of interpretation

The third school in this debate is of the view that the impacts of China in Africa are mixed. That is, much as it has very positive influences in the continent, some of Chinese strategies are less positive with varying degrees of consequences on Africa's sustainable development. Therefore, it is neither gloomy nor glorious as the earlier schools mostly contend. Rather, they contend that practices which further sustain the positive impacts should be encouraged while those that produce the negative consequences must be addressed through a review of the rules and strategies of engagement. The report of a study on China in Africa, published in 2007, concludes thus; *The study found that China's economic profile in Africa has produced a 'mixed bag' of effects and responses among all groups of stakeholders* [13]. Although Tull agrees that Beijing's economic impact on Africa is perhaps a *mixed blessing*, he describes the political impact as ultimately *deleterious*. In his words, *there is virtually no way around the conclusion that China's massive return to Africa presents a negative political development that 'almost certainly does not contribute to the promotion*

of peace, prosperity and democracy on the continent' [14]. But another scholar, Taylor, observes that this way of perceiving China in Africa *misses the point* [15]. In his article, Taylor analyses the implications of China's engagements in Africa for human rights, democracy and good governance in the continent. He graphically demonstrates that there is a connection between China's rising economic profile in Africa and sustained Western criticisms *via* its (and some African) media, NGOs as well as government institutions. For instance, both Human Rights Watch (HRW) and Amnesty International (AI) condemned China for its Africa policies that embolden African autocrats and human right abusers. By providing them with easy access to resources, development aids, arms, and other forms of support, rather than taking steps to contain their authoritarian tendencies, China is held culpable for undermining Western efforts at taming repressive governments in Africa [16], the question of sovereignty notwithstanding. Also, for not ensuring that their projects in the continent meet both environmental and social standards, Paul Wolfowitz, the former World Bank president accused China of breaking the *Equator Principles* [17]. But to what extent do these really apply?

Contexts of human rights and national interests

Conflicting conceptions and interpretations of human right seem to be at the heart of the issues because as examined by Taylor, *Chinese conceptions of human rights in Beijing's diplomacy* contrast with the Western idea of it [18]. While China promotes and prioritizes economic rights with emphasis on economic development and social welfare/stability, the West values the notion of the individual's civil and political rights more, such as the right to freedom of thought, opinion, expression, conscience, religion as well as freedom of peaceful assembly, association among others. As aptly captured by Burstein and de Keijzer, *To the Chinese, the human rights to food, clothing, shelter, economic development, and security...are paramount over traditional Western-style individual political liberties. Judged by this standard, China in the last twenty years is a leader, not a laggard, in promoting the human rights of its peoples* [19]. Chinese government officials have been very vocal in confirming this argument. For instance, while Chinese foreign minister Li Zhaoxing defined human right as *survival and development*, its ambassador to Eritrea dismissed the idea of rouge states [20] (and by extension interventionist measures). The Chinese position on the human right issue is consistent with China's policy of non-interference, respect for sovereignty and the UN basic principles of Universal Declaration of Human Rights *vis-à-vis* Article 25 of the document. Along with the case studies of Zimbabwe, Sudan, Angola, etc., Taylor demonstrates how the ideals and principles of New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD), contrasts with and, can be undermined by China's policies in Africa, particularly as regards its disinterest

with containing the excesses of African despots [21].

The West's and China's stance on human rights are clear but conflicting. In this circumstance, this paper submits that the issue of human rights in Africa should be principally Africa's responsibility, but also welcome institutional support for the continent's governments, NGOs, civil societies, opposition parties and organized groups, in a way that does not undermine their sovereignty and independence. Simultaneously, measures to improve the lives and economies of African nations should be encouraged. It must be realized that Africa's problems are not defined by the refusal of China to interfere in their internal affairs to enforce human rights. Certainly, it goes beyond that. It is squarely a function of elite predation. To this extent, constructive engagement with China, rather than feeling threatened over Beijing's activities in Africa is the best approach.

Closely related to the above is the question of national interests and their pursuits in the international environment. Taylor has studied the evolution of *China's foreign policy towards Africa in the 1990s* [22]. In the study, the author opines that Beijing's return to Africa in the 1990s should be understood as an outcome of the June 4th 1989 crisis at the Tiananmen Square, Beijing. Previously, although China remained friendly to, and worked quietly in Africa [23], its pursuit of economic modernization programs at home took it closer to the US, Japan and Western Europe from where it received development aids. Eventually after 1989, China reviewed its foreign policy towards Africa in response to the solidarity shown to it by a number of African countries as it grappled with diplomatic rifts it had with the West [24]. From then onwards, Taylor argues that the previously ignored human right abuses in China took center stage in international discussions. However, under the banner of South-South solidarity, Afro-Asian countries rallied to reject neo-imperialism and veiled interference in their domestic affairs, hence facilitating closer ties. Consequently, official visits were highly encouraged between China and Africa, and with it came development cooperation, commercial linkages, trade, joint ventures and aids [25]. The fourteen African countries tour of the Chinese Foreign Minister, Qian Qichen, between June 1989 and June 1992 was very remarkable. Also, many African government officials visited China.

From Taylor's submissions above, it is interesting to observe the connection between China's modernization efforts and her closer ties with the West, while *distancing* from Africa. Also, while Sino-Western cooperation waxed stronger, China in 1989 rebuffed Western attempts at supporting democratization of China, leading to a crack in their ties. The Cold War was beginning to end with the fall of Berlin Walls and the rise of democracy in all of Germany. Certainly, the

West worked to replicate the Berlin experience in Beijing, but clearly met a brutal resistance, upsetting their burgeoning ties. Consequently, China reviewed its foreign policy towards willing African countries, and pursued it vigorously. What is most evident is the centrality of national interests and changing international circumstances as fundamental determinants of their behavior. These clearly feed the narratives and underscore their interpretations.

CONCLUSION

At this juncture, it is pertinent to state unambiguously that both the West and China are primarily pursuing their political and economic objectives in Africa and have inevitably reached a point where their interests conflict. This clash of interests now manifests in their opposing approach to the pursuit of their objectives, of which Africa's development is secondary. Certainly, the reemergence of China in Africa is a welcome development to most of Africa as recent trends indicate. It drastically reduces Western attempts to dictate for Africa, and restores some measure of dignity to the continent which strives to shake off the neocolonial status imposed by its skewed post-colonial relationship with the West. Okeke has examined Sino-Africa resource-for-infrastructure strategy as an element of how China's reengagement with Africa seeks to support development in a sector largely ignored by the West [26]. While focusing on the positive components of China in Africa, the doctoral thesis also interrogates the problems emerging from the resource-for-infrastructure strategy, recommends sustainable solutions to those problems within the framework of China's *evolving and maturing* strategies in the continent.

The partnership between China and Africa has been largely successful for both sides. It has aided China's ascendancy in the UN (where it displaced Taiwan in 1971), even as China uses its position to defend Africa's interests in the international forum. Sino-Africa cooperation is also aiding the dismantling of post-Cold War hegemonism and erecting a new world order in which multilateralism, partnership, international cooperation and equality are promoted as guiding principles. At their local levels, in spite of some challenges, Sino-African cooperation has achieved a lot and the evolving pattern of the interaction suggests that the engagements hold a big promise for the future. This study on the interpretation of the trends reveals the compartmentalization into three ideological schools. These schools of thought clearly illustrates the divergent biases of writers whose arguments offer the opportunity to review the historical, geopolitical, economic and ideological contexts in which Sino-Africa interactions are being explained.

Endnotes

¹ Yang Jiemian, 'A Note on Sino-Africa Relations to the World' in Liu Hongwu and Yang Jiemian (eds.), *Fifty Years of Sino-Africa Cooperation: Background, Progress and Significance, Chinese Perspectives on Sino-Africa Relations*, Yunnan University Press, 2009, pp. 1-3. Stephanie Rupp, 'Africa and China: Engaging Post-colonial Interdependencies' in Robert I. Rotberg (ed.), *China into Africa; Trade, Aid and Influence*, Brookings Institution Press, Washington, D.C., 2008, pp. 65-66

² Daniel Large, "Beyond the 'Dragon in the Bush': the Study of China-Africa Relations", *African Affairs*, 107/426, Oxford University Press, April 2008, p. 48

³ American African Affairs Association, *Red China in Africa* (1966); Peter Lessing, *Africa's Red Harvest* (Michael Joseph, London, 1962); Robert Scalapino, 'On the Trail of Chou En-Lai in Africa' (Rand Corporation, April 1964). Also see Cooley, *East Wind Over Africa*, Colin Legum, 'Peking's Strategic Priorities', *Africa Report*, 10, 1 (January 1965)

⁴ Giles Mohan, 'China in Africa: A Review Essay', *Review of African Political Economy*, 35, 1, 2008, p. 2

⁵ Peter Navarro, *Death by China, Confronting the Dragon- A call to action for the Western World*, Pearson Education Inc., New Jersey, 2011

⁶ Anthony Lake and Christine Todd Whitman, *More than Humanitarianism: A Strategic U.S. Approach Towards Africa*, Report of an Independent Taskforce sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations, New York, 2006, pp. 40-54

⁷ Daniel Large, *ibid.*, pp. 57-58

⁸ Giles Mohan, *ibid.*, and Daniel Large, *ibid.*, pp. 56-57

⁹ This ideological school is mainly composed of Chinese and many African government officials, their citizens, and a handful of Western scholars, although opinions slightly differ. See Yang Jiemian, *ibid.*

¹⁰ Howard W. French, 'Commentary: China and Africa', *African Affairs*, 106/422, 2006, p. 128

¹¹ Robert I. Rotberg (ed.), *China into Africa; Trade, Aid and Influence*, Brookings Institution Press, Washington D.C., 2008, p. viii

¹² For attempts to balance this skewed narrative, see Okeke, Tochukwu I., 'Africa and the Ascendancy of Modern China in the International System since 1971; A Historical Appraisal', *International Affairs and Global Strategy*, Vol. 7, 2013, pp. 1-10, (<http://www.iiste.org/Journals/index.php/IAGS/article/v>)

[iew/4271](#)) and Okeke, Tochukwu I., 'A Historical Assessment of the Roles of African Nations towards Energy Security and Economic Development of Modern China, 1979-2009', *Review of Nigerian Political Economy*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2011, pp. 160-171

¹³ Africappractice, *The Impact of the Chinese Presence in Africa*, JETRO, London, 26th April 2007, p. 3

¹⁴ Denis M. Tull, 'China's engagement in Africa: scope, significance and consequences', *Journal of modern African Studies*, Cambridge University Press, 44, 3, 2006, p. 476

¹⁵ Ian Taylor, 'Sino-African relations and the problem of human rights', *African Affairs*, 107/426, Oxford University Press, p. 84

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 64

¹⁷ Cited in Ian Taylor, *ibid.*, pp. 64-65. Equator Principles refer to a voluntary code of conduct for lending that calls for lenders to ensure that projects they fund meet environmental and social standards, including human rights.

¹⁸ Ian Taylor, *ibid*

¹⁹ Daniel Burstein and Arne de Keijzer, *Big Dragon: the future of China: what it means for business, the economy, and the global order* (Touchstone, New York, NY, 1999), P. 136, cited in Taylor, *ibid.*, p. 66

²⁰ Ian Taylor, *ibid.*, p. 67

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Ian Taylor, 'China's Foreign Policy towards Africa in the 1990s', *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 3, Sept., 1998, pp. 443-460

²³ Deborah Brautigam, 'China's Foreign Aid in Africa: What Do We Know?', Rotberg (ed.), *ibid.*, p. 198

²⁴ Liu Hongwu, 'Fifty Years of Sino-African Cooperation Relations: Background, Progress and Significance', in Liu Hongwu and Yang Jiemian (eds), *ibid.*, pp. 34-36

²⁵ Ian Taylor, 'China's Foreign Policy towards Africa in the 1990s', *ibid.*, p. 450, Brautigam, *ibid.*, pp. 197-213, Liu Hongwu, *ibid.*

²⁶ Okeke, Tochukwu I., 'Sino-African Interdependencies: A comparative study of Sino-Nigeria and Sino-Angola Oil-for-Infrastructure diplomacy, 1976-2009', PhD Thesis, submitted to

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