A challenge to the global liberal order?
The growing Chinese relationship with Africa

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The expansion of Chinese political and corporate interests into Africa is arguably the most important development for the continent since the end of the Cold War. Official trade figures alone bear testimony to the exponential speed with which the Chinese presence in Africa has grown in recent times. China is now Africa’s second largest bilateral trading partner, behind the USA, but ahead of both France and the United Kingdom, despite the latter two’s historic and long-standing relations with the continent. Published trade figures are indicative of this massive surge in Chinese economic interest in Africa. In 1996, the value of China’s trade with Africa was US $4,000m.; by 2008, this had grown to $106,700m.

Much of this expansion is driven by a desire to obtain sources of raw materials and energy for China’s ongoing economic growth and new export markets for Chinese producers and traders compelled to seek new markets by domestic dynamics within China’s economy. Official trade between Africa and China began noticeably to accelerate around 2000 and, between 2001 and 2006, Africa’s exports to China rose at an annual rate of over 40% (Wang, J. 2007, 5). This chapter seeks to place China’s role in Africa into its historical context as well as examine the political and economic implications for Africa of an increase in the Chinese presence on the continent.

China’s Africa policies

Domestically, the post-Mao Chinese state has been arguably based on ‘an unwritten social contract between the party and the people where the people do not compete with the party for political power as long as the party looks after their economic fortunes’ (Breslin 2005, 749). Externally, ‘foreign policy that sustains an international environment supportive of economic growth and stability in China serves these objectives’ (Sutter 2008, 2). The developing world has long been a particular area where the Chinese government’s foreign policy has been pursued actively, using the development of ‘common interests’ with the South to raise China’s global stature and increase China’s bargaining leverage with the USA. Economically, Africa has emerged as a relatively important factor in Chinese calculations at multiple levels, whether state, provincial, municipal or individual. Within such calculations, the need to project China’s peaceful development (heping fazhan) provides a broad framework, albeit often constrained and/or frustrated by the actions of China’s growing diversity of actors.

Chinese engagement with Africa is long-standing (see Duyvendak 1949; Hutchison 1975; Snow 1988; Han 1990; Taylor 2006a). Politically, Africa has been diplomatically important for China since the late 1950s, when Chinese diplomacy began to emerge from the fall-out of the Korean War and the shadow of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).
During the early period of Sino-African interaction, China’s role was ideologically motivated and included support for national liberation movements as well as direct state-to-state aid, most noticeably with Tanzania (Yu, G. 1970, 1975). Indeed, by the mid-1970s, China had a greater amount of aid projects in Africa than the USA.

Yet, as the Socialist Modernization programme picked up under Deng Xiaoping from the late 1970s onwards, there was a concomitant scaling-down of Chinese interest in the continent, although Chinese policy-makers have always denied this (see Taylor 1997). This can in part be explained by the fact that:

Africa’s failure to develop its economies efficiently and open up to the international market militated against Chinese policy aims, and the increasing extraneous role the continent played in global (read superpower) geopolitics resulted in a halt to closer Chinese involvement. Essentially, Beijing not only viewed Africa as largely immaterial in its quest for modernization, but also saw that the rationale behind its support for anti-Soviet elements in the continent was no longer valid.

(Taylor 1998, 443–444)

In contrast to the past, Chinese ties with Africa were based on the cool realities of trade and profit. However, an event and two processes—one within Africa and the other within China—came together to stimulate the current close involvement of Chinese actors in Africa. First, the events of 4 June 1989 following the pro-democracy protests in and around Tiananmen Square meant that the Chinese government underwent a major re-evaluation of its foreign policy towards the developing world. While Tiananmen Square resulted in an (albeit temporary) crisis in China’s relations with the West, Africa’s reaction was far more muted, if not openly supportive. As the then Chinese Minister for Foreign Affairs, Qian Qichen (2005, 200) put it, ‘it was … our African friends who stood by us and extended a helping hand in the difficult times following the political turmoil in Beijing, when Western countries imposed sanctions on China’. Indeed, Angola’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, for example, expressed support for the suppression of the ‘counter-revolutionary rebellion’, while Namibia’s Sam Nujoma sent a telegram of congratulations to the Chinese army. As one commentator noted, ‘the events of June 1989 … did not affect the PRC’s relations with the Third World as it did with the Western world … what changed [was] the PRC’s attitude towards the Third World countries, which … turned from one of benign neglect to one of renewed emphasis’ (Gu, W. 1995, 125).

As a result, the developing world was ostensibly elevated in Chinese thinking to become a cornerstone of the Chinese government’s foreign policy. Post-1989 the 1970s rhetoric of China being an ‘all-weather friend’ (quan tianhou pengyou) of Africa was dusted off and deployed with vigour, and this has remained the case today (Taylor 2004). This posture is a reaffirmation of the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence discussed by Wang Zhengyi in this volume. Thus, Chinese policy-makers have returned to their roots in reasserting what is in fact an old theme in China’s foreign policy.

The two macro-processes were, first, that, as Africa’s economic reform programmes gained momentum in the 1990s, the Chinese government began to believe that the macroeconomic situation in Africa was taking a favourable turn, with resultant opportunities for Chinese commerce. This analysis was based on the belief that African countries have adopted a set of active measures to push forward the pace of privatization, open up international trade and carry out reform based on bilateral and multilateral trade agreements. An implicit proposition is that African economies have begun to copy China in its open-door policy.
China has sought to take advantage of these developments in Africa and has officially encouraged joint ventures and economic co-operation at multiple levels. This is coupled with the belief held by many Chinese manufacturers and entrepreneurs that the types of goods (household appliances, garments, and other domestic products) that Chinese producers make and sell have immense potential in Africa, where the economy is not yet as developed as in Western nations and where consumers are perceived to be more receptive to the type of inexpensive products that Chinese manufacturers typically produce. That the domestic markets of many African countries are relatively small and that there is relatively little competition means that market share can be large almost from day one of operations. Additionally, Africa is perceived by both the Chinese government and by Chinese companies to be rich in natural resources, particularly in crude petroleum, non-ferrous metals and fisheries.

The above then links up with the second macro-process, namely that China’s rapidly developing economy in itself propels Sino-African trade. China’s growth in recent years has been extraordinary and needs no rehearsing here. However, what is often overlooked in discussions of Sino-African ties is that the significance of China to Africa has to be appreciated in terms of China’s own development trajectory. China’s real economic growth—on average just under 9% annually for the last 30 years—has been grounded in growth in exports averaging over 17%. This commerce is based on Chinese factories processing and assembling parts and materials that originate from outside China. China’s leadership is dependent on this high-speed growth continuing, as, with the effective abandonment of Marxist ideology, the only thing that legitimates continuing Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rule is economic growth. However, growing saturation of China’s existing export markets as well as a rapid increase in the price of imported raw materials (due in the main to Chinese demand increasing prices) makes Africa more and more important to China’s economy. Indeed, as the growth in the worth of Chinese exports decelerates, China has to maintain the growth of its economy by adding more Chinese ‘content’ to its exports. Getting hold of sources of raw materials is integral to this strategy and requirement, and this is where Africa fits squarely into Chinese foreign policy and domestic necessities. Indeed, it might be avowed that the importance of Africa to China’s own development cannot be overstated.

**Fight the power**

Although maintaining good links with the US Administration in Washington, DC is fundamental to Chinese foreign policy, the developing world is becoming more and more important in Chinese policy calculations. The Chinese government has often expressed concern about the rise of an unchallenged hegemon, maintaining the opinion that in the current international system it is imperative that China and the developing world support each other and work together to prevent the over-domination by this new hegemon. Asserting that respect for each other’s affairs and non-interference should be the basis of any new international order is fundamental to this stance, as is a policy of accommodating, and hedging risks with, the USA when deemed appropriate (Foot 2006).

With regard to Sino-African relations, this feeds into China’s long-held stance that it is the leader of the developing world (formerly, the ‘Third World’). China’s leaders often repeat the twin phrases of ‘Africa is the continent with the largest number of developing countries’ and ‘China is the biggest developing country’. Another frequent refrain in Sino-African diplomacy is ‘Western powers, not China, colonized Africa and historically looted resources there’—or some variety of the basic idea. Similarly, as former Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs Qian Qichen put it, ‘as developing regions that … once suffered the oppression and
exploitation of imperialism and colonialism, China and the African countries … easily understand each other’s pursuit of independence and freedom and … have a natural feeling of intimacy’ (Qian 2005, 200). Such sentiments are utilized to argue that China and Africa basically have the same interests and no conflicts—of course, whether there are in fact ‘interest conflicts’ has animated a growing number of analysts of Sino-African relations.

Paradoxically, as China’s leaders increasingly integrate themselves into the global economy and start tentatively to play by essentially Western rules, as exemplified by China’s membership of the World Trade Organization (WTO), they have sought to strengthen political ties with various African countries, arguably as, in part, a defence mechanism, to be deployed against these very same impulses if and when they threaten influential domestic interests. This irony reflects the overall tension in China’s diplomatic policy of pursuing both engagement and a certain distant coolness vis-à-vis the global order (Breslin 2007; Lanteigne 2008). This, and the notion that China seeks to ‘restore’ its ‘rightful place’ in world politics (Mosher 2000; Scott 2007) by being seen as some sort of leader of the developing world, while casting itself as a ‘responsible power’ (fuzeren de daguo), is seen by many to be important rationales influencing policy. Certainly, such coalition-building can help to explain the recent diplomatic developments in Chinese links to Africa, so graphically exemplified by the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) meetings, held in 2000, 2003, 2006 and 2009.

**FOCAC**

The first Forum met in October 2000 in Beijing and was attended by nearly 80 ministers from 44 African countries. The second ministerial conference was held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in December 2003 and passed the Addis Ababa Action Plan (2004–06). The FOCAC Summit and the third ministerial conference were held in Beijing from November 2006.

The initial meeting essentially had three main objectives. First, the Forum was part of the Chinese government’s overall strategy in its foreign policy to declare, even if only rhetorically, its aim of overhauling the global order and to show traditional hostility to ‘hegemony’ (Blum 2003). This domination, dressed up as ‘globalization’ (qianqiuhua), is at times seen as detrimental to the autonomy and sovereignty of China and needs careful management (Breslin 2006). By extension, this applies to the developing world. As the then Chinese Premier, Zhu Rongji, said at the Forum, Sino-African ties help ‘build up our capacity against possible risks, which will put us in a better position to participate in economic globalization and safeguard our economic interests and economic security’. They also ‘improve the standing of the developing countries in North-South dialogue so as to facilitate the establishment of a fair and rational new international political and economic order’ (Zhu, R. 2000).

Such a position is based on the belief, according to the then Minister of Foreign Trade and Economic Co-operation, Shi Guangsheng, at the Sino-Africa Forum, that, ‘when the new international economic order has not been established and countries differ considerably in economic development, the benefits of economic globalization are not enjoyed in a balanced way’. Consequently, ‘developed countries are benefiting most from economic globalization; but the large number of developing countries are facing more risks and challenges, and some countries are even endangered by marginalization’. As a result, the global community should ‘give more considerations to the will and demands of developing countries so as to promote the establishment of a fair and rational new international economic order’. This can be advanced by developing countries building ‘a sense of self-protection’ (Zhu, R. 2000).

Crucially, China’s leadership is intensely suspicious of the West’s promotion of human rights and regards such calls as a Trojan horse through which the West might undermine China.
Importantly, the perceived Western strategy of ‘peaceful evolution’ (heping yanbian) being exercised on China’s political security has been cast—not unreasonably—as being analogous to regime change (Ong 2007). Chinese policy in this regard has then been consistently to cast talk of liberal democracy and liberal conceptions of human rights (and, occasionally, the environment) as a tool of neo-imperialism being practised towards both China and the developing world. This falls on many receptive ears in Africa at the élite level, and China’s policy-makers are not unaware of this. This posture has been fairly long-standing, and the Chinese government has long managed to ride piggyback on the developing world’s power of numbers to evade international condemnation.

As part of this, FOCAC serves as a means by which China can advance a position of moral relativism regarding human rights to a mostly sympathetic audience, consolidating its standing within African élite circles. Hence the Beijing Declaration of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, released at the end of the meeting, asserted that ‘countries, that vary from one another in social system, stages of development, historical and cultural background and values, have the right to choose their own approaches and models in promoting and protecting human rights in their own countries’ (FMPRC 2000). Going further, the declaration made the claim that ‘the politicization of human rights and the imposition of human rights conditionalities’ themselves ‘constitute a violation of human rights’ and that conditionalities for development assistance which are based on good governance and respect for human rights ‘should be vigorously opposed’. All this was music to the ears of many African leaders seated in the hall in Beijing, no doubt, and all arguably crafted as a means to promote an ‘alternative’ global order.

The products of FOCAC reflect the increased priority that China’s leadership places on Africa. The summit in late 2006 approved a three-year action plan to forge a ‘new type of strategic partnership’ with the following tangible features:

- doubling of aid to Africa by 2009 (to about US $1,000m.)
- a $5,000m. China-Africa development fund to encourage Chinese companies to invest in Africa
- $3,000m. in preferential loans and $2,000m. in preferential buyer’s credits to African countries
- cancelling of all debt stemming from Chinese interest-free government loans that matured by the end of 2005 for the 31 highly indebted and least developed countries in Africa
- further opening of China’s markets to exports from least developed African countries by increasing the number of products receiving zero-tariff treatment from 190 to 440
- training for 15,000 African professionals, doubling of the number of Chinese government scholarships given annually to Africans (to 4,000) and sending of 100 senior agricultural experts and 300 youth volunteers to the continent
- construction of 30 hospitals, 30 malaria treatment centres and 100 rural schools.

Symbolic diplomacy and rhetorical flourishes combined with some actual headline-grabbing initiatives are, like all other countries’ foreign policies, integral to Chinese engagement with Africa. But what is important in recognizing the impact of FOCAC are the growing economic imperatives underpinning Sino-African linkages.

**Economic relations**

As suggested, the legitimacy of the CCP’s political system is today based upon the Party’s ability to sustain economic growth. Intimately linked to this, China is faced with a long-term decline
in domestic oil production (Taylor 2006b). China’s policy-makers are actively encouraging national companies aggressively to pursue oil and other natural resources in Africa. China is currently the world’s second largest oil importer and the second largest consumer of African resources. The abundance of natural resources in Africa has thus led Chinese corporations to seek long-term deals with African governments in order to ensure continued access to all varieties of raw materials and energy in Africa. As China’s national oil companies are largely excluded from the majority of Middle Eastern oil supplies, and as the Chinese government wishes to limit vulnerability to the international oil market, there is a policy to encourage investment in Africa, courting states that the West have overlooked. Consequently, this approach towards securing access to African resources is what David Zweig and Bi Jianhai (2005, 31) have dubbed a resource-based foreign policy, which, by its very nature, has ‘little room for morality’. The potential fall-out in terms of China’s reputation on the continent that stems from such a milieu has at times damaged China’s overall reputation and promoted a growing maturity in policy calculations.

The interest in ensuring its resource security and economic growth through involvement in Africa is by no means restricted to oil, and encompasses all natural resources. From investment in copper in Zambia, and platinum interests in Zimbabwe, to supporting fishing ventures in Gabon and Namibia, Chinese corporations have vigorously courted and pursued the political and business elite in Africa so as to guarantee continued access—often lubricated with ‘sweetener’ deals provided by central government. One of the benefits of Chinese interest in African resources is that it has dramatically increased demand and has revitalized industries such as Zambia’s copper industry. However, the influx of capital into weak and authoritarian governments also has potential for long-term consequences in Africa, as leaders may be tempted to neglect necessary reforms, bolstered by newly perceived economic security from Chinese receipts. Yet this is not a problem that can be specifically associated with Chinese engagement with Africa and is in fact intimately linked to the nature of the state in much of Africa. Indeed, in this regard there is a real danger that China is being constructed (particularly within government and political circles in Washington DC, but also in some African capitals) as some sort of scapegoat for failures that have very little to do with it.

Indeed, on the one hand, one must note that, with the exception of oil exports to China, Sino-African trade is generally lopsided in favour of Chinese exporters, who are penetrating African markets with cheap household products. Such imports into Africa have been criticized as doing little to encourage indigenous African manufacturing. Yet, on the other hand, it is the failure of African economies to industrialize and to develop post-independence that means that they produce very few processed goods and are a natural target for Chinese exporters.

However, Chinese trade figures with Africa need to be treated with caution. The part played by Hong Kong as a transit point for Chinese imports and exports makes bilateral figures very dubious when estimating the levels of Chinese trade. A huge proportion of Chinese exports are routed through Hong Kong. This is important in calculating bilateral trade figures, because whether or not an export is counted as a Chinese re-export or not obviously has an enormous bearing on trade statistics. In addition, firms invested with foreign capital account for just over half of all Chinese trade, i.e., much of Chinese trade is not actually Chinese at all, and, if domestic Chinese producers who produce under contract for export using foreign components are included, the figure goes upwards. In actual fact, the majority of Chinese exports are produced by foreign-funded enterprises, often joint ventures, but increasingly wholly foreign owned (Breslin 2007, 107). Any visitor to an African market
these days will observe huge amounts of Chinese-made products on sale—that is not in dispute. However, the specific (and colossal) figures regarding Sino-African trade provided by the Chinese government do need to be taken with due caution.

Complicating this whole issue is the fact that many of the products manufactured in China, but sold in African markets, are not actually brought to the continent by Chinese, but by African, traders. There are now quite elaborate trading networks linking China and Africa, and much of this is centred in the southern province of Guangdong, where a relatively large population of African entrepreneurs now live and make deals. Indeed, in Guangzhou city there are an estimated 20,000 Nigerians living and working in the city. Other African traders have long been established in Hong Kong, primarily based at Chungking Mansions in Tsim Sha Tsui, while Yiwu in Zhejiang Province is now a growing centre for export trading to Africa and elsewhere. In fact, Yiwu is perhaps the key place where products from China are sold in wholesale quantities to traders from across Africa. African entrepreneurs generally buy in bulk, utilizing Chinese-owned cargo companies, and products are shipped direct to the continent.

The point of the above is crucial: Chinese traders are not ‘flooding’ the African market with cheap Chinese goods. Rather, Africans are actively facilitating the penetration of Africa by Chinese-made products. Figures do not exist on what proportion of goods sold in Africa’s markets were brought in by Chinese entrepreneurs or by African traders, but information gleaned in various interviews and from observations in a variety of African marketplaces suggests that a large percentage was sourced and shipped by Africans. This is somewhat ironic, given that condemnation by many African trade unions and civil society organizations of the ‘Asian tsunami’ in cheap products lays the blame squarely on the Chinese. If the trade pattern between Africa and China is becoming ‘colonial’ in character, it is with the active connivance of many Africans themselves. And as the activities of African entrepreneurs in Hong Kong, Yiwu, and Guangzhou demonstrate, ‘processes of globalization generate both localised and internationalised networks of relationships that need to be considered alongside the bilateral to gain a full understanding of how best to theorise contemporary Chinese international relations’ (Breslin 2007, 25).

A Chinese model?

Politically, as well as economically, China’s presence in Africa has been based on the premise of providing an alternate development model for African states and leaders. According to Naidu and Davies (2006, 80), China is seen as ‘a refreshing alternative to the traditional engagement models of the West … African governments see China’s engagement as a point of departure from Western neo-colonialism and political conditions’. Yet the absolute emphasis that China places on respect for state sovereignty, with non-interference being an article of faith for the Chinese leadership, as well as China’s willingness to deal with states ostracized by the West, may appear promising to some African leaders, but this profoundly challenges the Western vision of a flourishing Africa governed by democracies that respect human rights and the rule of law and embrace free markets. A common bond in their desire to overcome and shake off the legacy of colonialism has further united Chinese and African political interests, with the former colonial powers portrayed as a common enemy.

In countering the Western promotion of neo-liberal reforms in Africa, China has argued that this imposition of Western ideology on African states is a form of neo-imperialism. Moreover, China’s state-directed model of development provides an appealing alternative to leaders when neo-liberal economic reforms have not, for a variety of reasons, delivered their
promised economic revival. A strong state also of course serves as a shield for authoritarian leaders to maintain tight control over economic policy and continue their patronage networks.

Through political and business summits, such as the various Sino-African forums, as well as state visits by high-ranking Chinese political officials, China symbolically accords Africa equal diplomatic status with the dominant powers. For instance, as an emblematic gesture, it has become a tradition that the first overseas visit that China’s Minister of Foreign Affairs undertakes each year is to Africa. Equally, the African élite are deeply appreciative of being given the red carpet treatment whenever they turn up in Beijing. A research trip to Beijing in September 2007 coincided with the visit of Chad’s President, and it was quite revealing the way in which the visit was covered (with top billing on Chinese television and in the newspapers) and how the Chadian flag was prominently displayed around Tiananmen Square.

In contrast, when an African leader visits London, United Kingdom or Washington, unless they are from South Africa or Egypt or one of the few states deemed important, they are barely afforded a few minutes of government time and even then they are more likely to be belaboured for their numerous chronic failures in governance, than they are to be toasted as ‘dear friends’ and importantly, credible statesmen. China’s leadership realizes this and thus expends energy on massaging the egos of Africa’s leaders. This pays off. China has been successful in gaining African support at institutions such as the UN, where the vote of the African bloc has allowed China to block resolutions on domestic human rights abuses. African support also of course helped Beijing in its campaign to host the 2008 Olympics.

Symbolic diplomacy, defined as the promotion of national representation abroad, has become an increasingly important component of Chinese foreign policy in Africa and elsewhere (see Kurlantzick 2007). For a developing nation, China’s policy-makers in Beijing are very much aware of the importance of prestige projects in asserting the power of state leaders and thus have been involved in large-scale projects of this nature, such as building national stadiums, all over Africa. This approach has proven beneficial to both the ruling élite in Africa, who view these as projections of regime legitimacy and power (and suitably impressive to the local population) and to the Chinese government, as it demonstrates China’s rising prominence and presence. Through these kinds of project, combined with aid packages and the notion that China may be a ‘model’ for Africa, China is very much asserting itself as an equal of Western powers as well as appealing to the African élite classes. Indeed, Dirlik (2006) notes that the ‘Beijing Consensus’ draws its meaning and appeal not from some coherent set of economic or political ideas à la Ramo (2004), but from its intimation of an alternative pole, from which those opposed to the USA and, by extension, the West can draw inspiration. As Breslin (2007, 2) notes, ‘China’s alternative path is partly attractive because of the apparent success of the experience of economic reform. Other developing states might also lean towards the Chinese way not just because China’s leaders don’t attach democratizing and liberalizing conditions to bilateral relations, but also because China is coming to provide alternative sources of economic opportunities (with non-democratizing strings attached)’.

However, Africa’s intellectuals must approach with caution the notion that China offers up an alternative model of development. Firstly, conceptions of Chinese ‘soft power’ built on ‘the appeal of China as an economic model’ (Kurlantzick 2006, 5) overstate the ability of China to project and promote an alternative economic type (Yan, 2006). It is true that economically liberalizing while preserving an authoritarian political system might be appealing to some African autocrats, but this surely has its limits, not least to the Chinese themselves in promoting such a message, given that supporting the authoritarian élite in Zimbabwe and Sudan has already stimulated anti-Chinese feelings among African civil society leaders.
Furthermore, China’s sustained growth has taken place not only with no reference to democracy or transparency, but has also generally shunned policy reforms promoted from outside. This must seem attractive for those African leaders who have no real legitimacy or who are tired of having to fend off criticisms from the international financial institutions and the wider donor community.

Yet, China’s extraordinary economic growth has come about, certainly initially, within the broader context of a capable state and in a region that is itself economically dynamic. Rapid economic growth without democratization as per the East Asian model often required a strong developmental state. Analysis of China within this vein generally confirms such a proposition (Ming Xia 2000), though with certain caveats (Breslin 1996). Contrast this with Africa. Granted even the relative declining reach of the Chinese state as liberalization progresses (Wang, H. 2003), the type of comparative internal strength and concomitant stability that China is able to draw on is beyond the ambition of most—if not all—current African leaders.

Furthermore, the irony is that those who applaud alternatives to Western-dominated global institutions often—sometimes perhaps without realizing—end up in a position where they not only support the authoritarian status quo in some African states, but also the emerging leadership of China. Opposition to neo-liberalism—something that has considerable appeal—can result in the promotion, not of social democracy, nor even Keynesian liberalism, but of illiberal authoritarianism. As Zha Daojiong notes (2005d), within China itself there is a debate as to whether or not the Latin American fate of social polarization, international dependency and economic stagnation is China’s future fate unless appropriate policies are implemented. These debates often question the capitalist direction of the Chinese government’s current course, again destabilizing the notion of a ‘model’ (see Wang, C. 2003; Wang, H. 2003). Even if we disagree with Gordon Chang’s forecast (2002), such analyses of the so-called ‘China miracle’ (Wu, Y. 2003), which offer up less sanguine interpretations, seem to have been missed by those advocating the Chinese model. Ironically, it is quite noticeable these days how touchy many African intellectuals are to any criticism of China or the suggestion that China is possibly not the saviour of Africa, often defending China’s record on human rights within the African context.

**Human rights**

Perhaps the aspect of Chinese engagement with Africa that is most controversial is the issue of human rights. It is certainly true that China’s relations with some of the more egregious regimes in Africa cannot be seen as typical of Sino-African relations as a whole. But, conversely, it is precisely because of the negative attention that China’s ties with such regimes has generated, as well as the very real and destructive nature of such administrations, that a discussion of China’s stance on human rights in its Sino-African relations is justified. Equally, the notion that it is not China’s business or duty to promote good governance or broad human rights (something that official Chinese statements have inferred) and that China’s non-interference principle is valid in all cases and at all times contrasts with the growing norms of international accountability.

Obviously, the notion of human rights is an essentially contested concept, and the Chinese state and outside critics invariably speak past one another when engaging on this issue. China’s discourse on rights is long-standing and has characteristic concerns that need to be taken seriously by anyone who seeks to engage with the Chinese state. It is also important to note that struggles about human rights have long been a way in which power plays
between countries that adhere to different political or economic models can be acted out. In this way, the persistent demand from Western governments to universalize ‘international human rights’, which, when boiled down to its essence, is arguably about universalizing specifically Western capitalist values, can be flagged by China and its African allies as reflecting neo-colonial impulses (Breslin and Taylor 2008). In addition, China’s leadership may be seeking ways to rationalize its policies on human rights in a way that universalizes China’s post-Mao developmental trajectories (Sullivan 1999, 24). This is arguably a feature of the so-called ‘Beijing Consensus’ touted by some commentators, as well as a product of anti-hegemonism, the five principles, and statist development thinking.

But as Weatherley (1999) notes, some of the most egregious violations of human rights in Africa with which China is arguably held to be complicit (on account of its active support for the offending regimes), cannot be justified even in terms of the Chinese discourse on human rights. This is particularly so when the Chinese position on human rights intimately links social development and welfare to the concept. This is a perfectly respectable position to take, but the Chinese government’s own coherence on the issue is arguably undermined by its diplomacy in practice, if and when Chinese policy supports regimes that are anti-developmental. It is evident that some states that enjoy close Chinese support, such as Sudan and Zimbabwe, not only crush the civil and political rights of their citizens, but also threaten the economic and social rights of the population. The Union of Myanmar could also be seen as an example of China trying and failing to maintain the sharp separation between trade and human rights.

Given that the economic and social rights of people are held by China to be central in its discourse on human rights, this is surely problematic. As noted in a number of chapters in this collection, most notably Carlson’s, China deploys a particular stance on state sovereignty i.e., that sovereignty is the ultimate guarantor of human rights and that it is therefore the choice of each sovereign state to institute its own understandings of the rights of its people. This is all very well, and of course state sovereignty is the cornerstone of the international system, without which anarchy might reign. Yet the reification of states and the amalgamation of sovereignty and rights into a single principle of non-interference arguably loses much of its meaning in a milieu dominated by quasi-states, neo-patrimonial regimes and even warlordism.

Yet as Li Xing (1996, 40) notes, the difficulty facing China’s rulers is that, on the one hand, they have sought national independence from Western political influence and, on the other hand, they have sought to ‘catch up’ with the West and modernize the economy through ever-deeper integration with the capitalist world market. This contradiction is often played out around human rights issues and, in fact, taking the analysis further, it might be argued that infringing some human rights in China itself (poor labour conditions, for instance) is a pre-condition for China’s reintegration into the global political economy, something which is actively encouraged by the West and its profit-seeking corporations. Indeed, it is a fact that ‘human rights abuses under the banner of “preserving order” are aimed at maintaining the position of the ruling elements [in China]. But it is also undeniable that the state sees the necessity to maintain long-term stability and predictability of the system in order to attract much-needed foreign investment and technology’ (Li, X. 1996, 34). In this light, critiquing China’s human rights stance when it is played out in Africa, while selectively overlooking the abuses that underpin much of the consumer boom in the developed world, driven in part by cheap Chinese imports, lacks coherence, as does ignoring continued Western support for assorted dictators and corrupt regimes across Africa.

However, such analysis does not help the average Zimbabwean or Sudanese labouring under an autocratic and oppressive government and casting a weary eye at Chinese support for her oppressor. We can pontificate about hypocrisy and selectivity, but Zimbabwe is still
collapsing, and women are still being raped in Darfur, Sudan. Here, the Chinese government’s thinking on non-interference and its hands-off attitude vis-à-vis human rights and governance needs to modify if it is to avoid being cast by critics as a friend of despot. There is actually some evidence that a rethink is occurring, and Chinese thinking on human rights and sovereignty ‘is less a static concept than an idea in flux’ (Gill and Reilly 2000, 42). Indeed:

Beijing’s recent handling of the situation in Sudan shows that it is learning the limitations of non-interference, however much that principle remains part of its official rhetoric. The concept may have been useful when China was relatively weak and trying to protect itself from foreign interference. But China has found non-interference increasingly unhelpful as it learns the perils of tacitly entrusting its business interests to repressive governments.

(Kleine-Ahlbrandt and Small 2008, 47)

It is true that at the moment there appears to be some divergence between Western and Chinese policy aims regarding governance and that this then at times suggests a convergence between China and certain types of African leader. However, this can only ever be temporary in nature if China wishes to have a long-running and stable relationship with Africa. China is like all other actors in Africa—it needs stability and security in order for its investments to flourish and for its connections with the continent to be coherent. As Obiorah (2007, 40) notes, ‘After an initial phase of snapping up resource extraction concessions, it is almost conceivable that China will be compelled by instability and conflict in Africa to realize that its long term economic interests are best served by promoting peace in Africa and that this is most likely to come about by encouraging representative government in Africa rather than supporting dictators.’

Thus, while in the current period there sometimes appears to be divergence, there can ultimately only be growing convergence with Western policy aims—maybe not with regard to democracy (though China is itself evolving in interesting directions), but certainly with regard to governance and security and, by implication, a greater connection to the downside of supporting regimes that undermine development and China’s own notions of human rights.

Furthermore, China’s integration into the global economy and the concomitant responsibilities that have come with this greater incorporation necessitate structural and systemic reforms, particularly through increasing membership of multilateral bodies. In the long term these could conceivably have an impression on China in the development of a regime that incorporates increased respect for the rule of law and better safeguarding of universal human rights.

For instance, the Chinese government’s key commitments pertaining to its membership of the WTO comprise responsibility to advance the transparency, consistency and standardization of China’s legal system. And it is more than obvious that, over the past 20 years or so, the Chinese government has signed up to and ratified a growing number of international instruments pertaining to human rights and labour as it embeds itself in various multilateral regimes (Lanteigne 2005). Recognizing that different interpretations of human rights may exist, but working to ensure that the sorts of abuses seen in Sudan or Zimbabwe are not repeated, is in the interest of both China and the West if stability and long-term relationships with Africa’s economies are desired. On the basis of the evidence, it appears that the Chinese leadership is beginning to realize this.
Conclusions

Chinese foreign policy in Africa has been based on several key aims. The Chinese government has focused on assuring its regime of security through access to crucial resources. By portraying itself as an advocate for the developing world and emphasizing the rhetoric of South-South co-operation, China has arguably sought to offer itself up as an alternative model to Western dominance. However, to achieve its policy goals, China has equally been prepared to defend autocratic regimes, some of which commit gross human rights abuses, such as in Sudan. As a repressive government in its own right, the Chinese leadership has little sympathy with civil society in Africa if and when it challenges perceived Chinese interests and, too often, China has sided with authoritarian regimes. In this way, China’s interactions with the continent fit the pattern of most external actors’ intercourse with Africa: beneficial to the ruling elite, but to the long-term disadvantage of Africa’s peoples.

However, it must be emphasized that China’s policies towards Africa are evolving and maturing, and China is going through a steep learning curve. Recent developments suggest that China is starting to realize that, like all other actors in Africa, it needs stability and security in order for its investments to flourish and for its connections with the continent to be coherent. The history and development of Sino-African relations thus far suggest certain patterns, but the relationship is fluid and ever changing. Indeed, it has to be said that, in relative terms, the exponential increase in Chinese trade with Africa from the start of this century means that we are in the very early stages of a solidified Sino-African relationship, even though formal ties between China and Africa go back decades. Thus far the repercussions of this sustained and in-depth political and economic involvement by the Chinese in broad-based development in Africa has yet to be ascertained.

What can be stated is that Sino-African relations are processes not of colonization, but of globalization and the reintegration of China into the global economy—a project that has enjoyed the hitherto enthusiastic support of Western capitalism. At present the picture appears mixed—there are instances where the Chinese role in Africa is clearly positive and appreciated. Equally, there are issues where the Chinese government is, at present at least, playing an equivocal role, which arguably threatens to unravel some of the progress made in Africa in recent times on issues of good governance and accountability. China’s current role in Africa is, like all other external actors, diverse, and its effect in the continent varies widely depending on local economic and political circumstance. A balanced appraisal of the various themes of China’s engagement in Africa is needed. The diversity of both China and Africa, as well as the nature of the individual African states where Chinese interests operate, is of central importance, if we are to have a coherent picture of what is going on.

Where there is coherence in Sino-African relations, a key intention is to encourage Chinese corporations to ‘go global’ (zouchuqu), which encourages Chinese corporations to invest overseas, play a role in international capital markets (see Hong and Sun 2006) and help towards the policy of ensuring regime security through gaining access to crucial resources. A Chinese Ministry of Commerce statement has in fact averred that Africa is ‘one of the most important regions for carrying out our “go outward” strategy’ (quoted in Gu, X. 2005, 8). The resulting hike in commodity prices has been potentially good for much of Africa’s economies, although the income from this phenomenon is obviously uneven and dependent upon a country’s resource attributes. Certainly, in terms of receipts for such commodities, benefits are skewed to only certain economies. South Africa provides iron ore and platinum, while the Democratic Republic of Congo and Zambia supply copper and cobalt. Timber is sourced from Gabon, Cameroon, Congo-Brazzaville and Liberia, while various
west and central African nations supply raw cotton to Chinese textile factories. However, it is oil that remains China’s biggest commercial interest in Africa—between 1996 and 2005, nearly 71% of the total composition of sub-Saharan Africa’s exports to China were mineral fuels (Mwega 2007, 4). Given the nature of the oil industry globally—but particularly in Africa—this has attracted criticism.

Until relatively recently there was an arguable complacency within the Chinese government about its policies in Africa. The attitude seemed to be that third party criticism (or even internal African condemnation) was motivated by ‘China-bashing’ and could be safely disregarded. However, a flurry of extremely negative articles in the international media about Sino-African ties, as well as incidents on the ground in Africa, have stimulated a rethink in China. Although the Chinese government bristles at being singled out for criticism for its policies in Africa, it can be argued that since China is a rising power and arguably a great one, it has to accept the fact that it can no longer hide behind the idea of being a developing state—the fact that, once a state becomes a great power (or at least is perceived by many to be such), its policies will be placed much more directly under the microscope, especially by other great powers jockeying for influence. The USA and the USSR had to learn this during the last century, and China is facing this fact today, albeit reluctantly. In fact, it is now acknowledged within the Chinese government that there is a desperate need to promote the positive side of Chinese diplomacy in Africa, and this facet of China’s links with African states is receiving more and more attention. It will be interesting to see how China accommodates Africa’s intricacies as its involvement in Africa broadens and deepens.