History & Identity in the Construction of China’s Africa Policy

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One of the most notable features of the forging of China’s new activist foreign policy towards Africa is its emphasis on the historical context of the relationship. These invocations of the past, stretching back to the 15th century but rife with references to events in the 19th century and the cold war period, are regular features of Chinese diplomacy in Africa. Indeed, it is the persistence of its use and the concurrent claim of a continuity of underlying purpose that marks Chinese foreign policy out from western approaches which have by and large been content to avoid discussions of the past (for obvious reasons) or insisting on any policy continuities. However, beneath the platitudes of solidarity is a reading of Chinese historical relations with Africa emanating from Beijing that is, as any student of contemporary African history will know, at times at odds with the historical record of Chinese involvement on the continent.

This article will examine the use and meaning of history in the construction of China’s Africa policy. It will do so through first, a brief discussion of the relationship between foreign policy, identity and history; second, a survey of Chinese foreign policy towards Africa from 1955 to 1996; third, an analysis of the implications of Beijing’s approach for its efforts to achieve foreign policy aims regionally and globally.

Beijing’s impulse to deliberately frame its Africa policy in historical terms could be seen as subscribing to the rhetorical requirements of an expanding engagement whose new basis is deeply commercial. Though this provides a partial explanation for Chinese actions, a focus on crude economic instrumentality does not fully capture the prevailing rationale behind Beijing’s utterances on its Africa policy. In fact, what is at stake in China’s conscious construction of an historical basis for its contemporary relationship with Africa goes beyond standard diplomatic coverage for an interest-based foreign policy, but more fundamentally an attempt to reconcile China’s self-imposed identity as a developing country with its emergence as a global power. Forging positive relations with Africa is crucial to China’s portrayal of itself as a leading state whose ‘peaceful rise’, in contrast with past power transitions, will neither jeopardise poor countries’ interests nor destabilise the international system. In this sense, a debate over China’s use of history in Africa is one which touches on core concerns regarding both China’s role and Africa’s place in a changing international system.
History, Identity & Foreign Policy

Traditional scholarship in Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) posits that a state derives its foreign policy from an assessment of spatial factors and material endowments (or their absence) in conformity with a broader set of societal values (Holsti, 1988:117-118). From this perspective, environmental constraints are seen as crucial sources of foreign policy, for instance, the proverbial rationale behind why the Swiss government has never developed a 'blue water' navy nor the accompanying strategy and bureaucratic institutions within its foreign policy machinery (Hill, 2003:169-170). The core values of a society, generally cast as variants on security and wealth creation, exercise influence in the formulation of foreign policy aims. Though spatial factors such as geographic position, resource endowments and societal values are surely crucial to setting the parameters of foreign policy choice, this traditionalist approach does not fully account for the relationship between history and identity as being at the heart of the foreign policy process. This ideational basis of foreign policy is rooted in self-conceptions about society within a particular state and subject to socially-constructed notions of national identity (Wendt, 1992:391-447). Seminal beliefs about origins of the ‘nation’, the boundaries of citizenship and physical territoriality, ideas about sovereign legitimacy and sources of threat are all products of the twin forces of history and identity as mediated through shared interpretations held by society. In this regard, national identity can be seen as a conscious construction of myths, Benedict Anderson’s ‘imagined community’, in which history plays a critical role in forging bonds that tie individuals to the state (Anderson, 1983). A feature of this process is what one scholar characterises as the ‘necessity of forgetting’, the intentional abandonment of facets of history in the service of the assembly of a national myth (Renan cited in Werbner, 1998:54). Indeed, it is national myths that set parameters as to what is deemed to be ‘objective history’ and who are its subjects as well as the particular expressions of this such as territory, symbols, a range of social activities and sites of secular pilgrimage all aimed at reinforcing national identity. The conscious management of national identity, while a feature of all societies, is perhaps more visibly recognised in newly independent states determined to break with the previous regime and in search of new sources of domestic and external legitimacy. For these governing elites, foreign policy becomes a crucial means of giving explicit content to the emerging national identity (‘us’ versus ‘them’) through public statements as to sources of regime legitimacy, declarations of intent, and ultimately through the pursuit of a diplomacy of isolation, alignment and rejection or confrontation in relation to the prevailing international order (Campbell, 1992: introduction).

Contemporary China’s self-conception of its own identity is the product of several strands including an imperial legacy, its revolutionary past and its developmental aspirations (Jenner, 1992). The ascendancy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to power in October 1949 after a long and bloody civil war was a remarkable feat which gave its leaders a solid political, military and ideological base upon which to build the new state. Despite the impulse to sweep away much of the past manifested in Chinese domestic policy from 1954 onwards, the CCP leadership nonetheless sought to retain some features of an earlier epoch in the construction of their vision of ‘New China’. For instance, the Qing dynasty’s designated territorial boundaries were retained by Beijing while Han nationalism in various forms featured in the socialisation of disparate elements under its control in the CCP’s efforts to unify the post-conflict society (Jenner, 1992). Concurrently, Maoist dialectics, building on Marxist-Leninist thought (and still influential in shaping strategic thinking within
the CCP elite), provided a complete world view that helped situate individual Chinese and their new state in relation to the international system. According to Mao, the international system was divided into progressive and reactionary forces and it was an historical imperative that the People’s Republic of China side with the former. Finally, the manifest challenges of development facing the CCP in power also exercised an important influence over the state’s forging of its identity, occupying most of its resources and attention as well as reinforcing the ideological standing of the state as being closest to other developing countries. All of these dimensions were reflected in China’s self-proclaimed foreign policy role as a leader in fomenting socialist development and revolution, a position which led to a break with Moscow, and ultimately give rise to the ‘Three Worlds Theory’ in the late 1970s which placed China as a leading developing country in contrast to the hegemonic pretensions of Moscow and Washington and their putative allies.

Throughout the tumultuous period since the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the Chinese leadership has sought to maintain the belief that, while domestic economic policies have altered dramatically from the original socialist commitment and events at home may have even spiralled out of control at times, China’s foreign policy has been steadfast and guided by principle. As Samuel Kim has pointed out: 

(1)In striking contrast with domestic policy, there persists the compulsive self-characterisation of foreign policy as one of principled constancy and continuity (Kim, 1989:4).

Informing this perspective is a world view that is both state centric and relation-oriented (Wang, 1994:492). According to Wang Jisi, the Chinese outlook holds that states are the only credible actors in the international system. The corollary of this view is that for China, as a state that has been notably weak in key areas such as the economy and military means, balancing conduct becomes a necessity of foreign policy (Wang, 1994:489). Thus, Beijing’s shift from an alliance with the Soviet Union to revolutionary autarky and finally co-operation with the United States – all within the span of a decade and a half. Far from representing a significant series of changes (as one might imagine) in Chinese foreign policy, they are in fact sober responses to uncertainty and change in the international system itself (Wang, 1994:488). Concurrently, the relational character of Chinese foreign policy has meant that it sees its own conduct as motivated by a staunch commitment to ethical principles – embodied in the ‘Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence’ – which from its perspective can form the basis of a new international order. The corollary of this view is that for China, achieving these aims is best done through the forging of consensus and moral suasion with other states rather than recourse to the punitive measures associated with the rigid application of western-dominated forms of international law. In this sense, while the prevailing state-centric structure of the international system may have been accepted, the Chinese leadership have resisted wholesale submission to the process by which international rules and norms are enforced, preferring to employ tactics that better reflect their own domestic experience.

In spite of its protestations, China’s current identity claims as belonging to the third world, formulated for the new initiatives in Africa as the pairing of the world’s ‘largest developing country with the continent with the largest number of developing countries’, sits uneasily with its contemporary international recognition as an economic superpower (He, 2007:2). While African leaders may nominally accept this formulation, the rationale that they give for co-operating with China...
more often reflects their acknowledgement of China’s status as an emerging global power with superior capital, technology and political resources. Moreover, with the economic content of these new relations echoing the classic commodity-manufacturer dynamic of old, the rhetoric of ‘South-South’ solidarity and co-operation seemingly takes on dimensions that seem to hardly differ from generations of North-South ties. For this reason, these aspects of China’s contemporary involvement with Africa pose significant challenges to the country’s self-perceptions and, with that, its foreign policy.

It is in this context that China’s promotion of history assumes a critical importance. It acts not only as a description of the foundation for past relations but also as an assurance to African leaders that, despite Chinese emerging superpower status, it will retain the outlook and interests of fellow developing countries. Unfortunately the record of Chinese engagement in Africa is more chequered than public proclamations in Beijing would have one believe. A closer examination of the empirical record is required in order to understand just how history is being mobilised to manage this acute foreign policy dilemma.

**Ebbs & Flows in China-Africa Relations**

As Beijing is adamant in pointing out, China’s current engagement with Africa is not ‘new’ but in fact has its roots in policies pursued since the mid-1950s as well as earlier historical precedents (Snow, 1988). Chinese contacts with Africa (Gao, 1984:241-250) are believed to have started during the early Han dynasty during Emperor Wuti’s reign (140-87 BC), through an expedition sent to the west in search for allies that is said to have reached Alexandria (Egypt). Certainly there is evidence of Chinese goods (silk and pottery) being traded around the Red Sea by the beginning of the Christian era though contacts were lost for four centuries due to internal turmoil of the ‘warring states’ period. During the Tang dynasty (618-907), there are records of contacts but mostly trading through Arab merchants; while during the Sung dynasty (960-1279) indirect contacts with Africa became more frequent as archaeological discoveries in eastern Africa and Chinese written records prove. In the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368), Chinese knowledge of Africa grew due to closer contacts with the Arabs, Persians and Turks. Historically the climax of Sino-African relations was reached during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) when China was at the height of shipping technology, prompting several sea ventures to the south under the command of Admiral Zheng He (1405-1433). His fleet is believed to have visited the eastern coast of Africa (Somalia and Kenya) two or three times and to have contacted local kings who then reciprocated the visits by sending official delegations to China. This flourishing relationship was however merely a short prelude. Due to an internal power struggle, the Ming Dynasty soon changed its policy and forbade any overseas contacts bringing the maritime venture to a premature end right when the Europeans were starting their incursions in Africa and Asia. The last Chinese dynasty (Qing, 1644-1911) took this closed-door policy further only to have it shattered by the Opium Wars in the mid-19th century. New China-Africa contacts were made in the early 20th century when European powers took Chinese labour to work in mines and plantations in their African colonies and where they shared the same fate of Africans as colonialism’s victims. During the Nationalist (Guomindang) government’s intermittent rule of the mainland from 1911 to 1949, relations with Africa were irrelevant mostly due to domestic upheaval and the Japanese invasion.
Throughout history and up to 1949, China-Africa contacts may thus be said to have been more a result of transnational trade flows with other merchant civilizations, namely the Arabs and Persians, and later a side effect of the international framework than a specific Chinese foreign policy endeavour. The only exception was Zheng He’s brief maritime ventures in the 15th century whereby direct contact was established with African states out of diplomatic curiosity and trading purposes. For this reason, when the People’s Republic of China was established in 1949, not only did China have no negative record on the African continent but it also benefited from an important leverage due to a common past under the hardship of western imperialism.

China & Africa During the ‘First’ Cold War (1955 - 1976)

The founding of the People’s Republic of China coincided with the dawn of Africa’s independence movement and thus provided a unique opportunity for the Chinese leadership to forge a new and thriving relationship. This prospect was initially held back as the earliest independent African states (Egypt, Ethiopia, Liberia and South Africa) were too pro-western at the time, with two of them (e.g. Ethiopia and South Africa) even participating in the United Nations (UN) military operation in Korea to fight the Chinese-backed forces in 1950-1954. Without UN membership and lacking United States recognition (which maintained the diplomatic posture that the Republic of China on the island of Taiwan was the legitimate government), Beijing realised that newly independent countries in the former colonial world were both natural allies and a potential solution to its legitimacy problems. The launching of the ‘Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence’ in 1949 appeared as a cornerstone in this quest. These principles (mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference in internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit), were particularly appealing to new states in a post-colonial setting.

Beijing embarked on establishing official contacts with African countries after the Korean War with its first diplomatic offensive taking shape at the Bandung Conference of 1955 (Gao, 1984:247-248).

In Bandung, the Chinese Foreign Minister, Zhou Enlai, met several African leaders, including Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt. In 1956 Egypt became the first African country to establish diplomatic relations with China and, for a number of years, Cairo served as the main base for Chinese operations on the continent (Yu, 1965:324). The Bandung conference represented a unique opportunity for Beijing to meet the new countries of Asia and Africa, court them with its anti-colonial credentials, present itself as a model of self-reliance (revolutionary struggle) and appeal to Asian-African unity. Indeed, China’s foreign policy towards Africa was since its inception, marked by these three mains constants: the export of the ‘Chinese model’, the struggle against the superpowers and China’s third world policy (Yu, 1977:98). China’s aim in Bandung was clearly to create a sense of union based on common past experiences under western colonialism from which to build a new international force (Yu, 1965:324). This new force, based on the mutual benefits of South-South co-operation (based on the ‘Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence’), would be better prepared to resist continuous external interference threats by neocolonialist powers. Before the end of the decade, four other African countries recognised the People’s Republic of China: Morocco and Algeria in 1958 and Sudan and Guinea in 1959. The following two decades turned out to be a lot more fertile in terms of international recognition with 14 African countries establishing diplomatic ties with China in the 1960s and 22 in the 1970s.
During this early period, China’s involvement in Africa was limited and marked by its close alliance with the Soviet Union. Its pro-liberation and anti-imperialist doctrine was developed in co-ordination with Moscow, but in this initial stage its level of direct involvement was perceived to have been relatively low, with the Afro-Asian People’s Solidarity Organisation (AAPSO), created in 1957, being the main instrument for perceiving and channelling its influence over Africa. As the decade came to an end, however, relations with Moscow deteriorated along the emerging ideological rift and the Sino-Soviet split dramatically changed Beijing’s stance in Africa in the following decade. Faced with Soviet revisionism, Mao adapted its ‘Two Camps Theory’ into a ‘Three Worlds Theory’: the first world was composed of the United States and the Soviet Union, a second world by other developed western countries (e.g. Europe) and a third one constituted by the developing countries of the three A’s (Asia, Africa and Latin-America) that refused to align with either blocs, and which China believed to share its peaceful coexistence principles, anti-hegemonic stance and its pledge for a new economic world order.

In the 1960s, China’s third world policy became much more aggressive. At the height of the cold war, Africa was seen primarily by Chinese leaders as a terrain for ideological competition not only with the United States, but also with the Soviet Union, as well as remaining European influences. This took the form of Chinese diplomatic and military support in southern Africa; for instance, liberation movements which were ideologically committed to Maoist China as opposed to the Soviet Union. Moreover, Chinese officials recognised that, with its numerical advantage in the UN General Assembly and anti-colonial perspective, independent African states held the key to removing the Republic of China from its status as occupant of the coveted permanent seat on the UN Security Council. China’s Africa policy now had to develop on two fronts: against US imperialism and Soviet revisionism, which was later ideologically theorised by Lin Biao as the revolution of the ‘rural areas of the world’ against the ‘cities’.

During this period Africa’s importance to communist China increased dramatically: not only was it important in terms of getting wider international recognition but moreover, for its quest to lead the world socialist revolution. Therefore, the Soviet Union was designated as the principal Chinese enemy on the continent in the 1960s, with China using Africa to ‘discredit the Soviet Union as a revolutionary force by identifying her with “United States imperialism”’(Yu, 1966:464). As was the case with the US and the Soviet Union, China’s Africa policy was deployed through a range of formal and informal foreign policy instruments (Yu, 1965:324-331). Among formal instruments, privilege was given to state-to-state relations and agreements in various fields, which accounted for the successful expansion of Chinese influence. Indeed, in the 1960s, China’s diplomatic exchange with Africa benefited from the mushrooming of independent states south of the Sahara, resulting in the People’s Republic of China being recognised by 14 new African states between 1960 and 1965. Official ties with China consisted of four main categories: friendship treaties based on the ‘Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence’, aiming at promoting solidarity and calling for the development of economic and cultural relations; cultural pacts endorsing exchange of students, educators, reporters and other groups; trade and payment agreements intended to promote commercial relations; and, finally, economic aid and technical assistance agreements through which China has provided financial assistance and know-how in many different fields (primarily tea planting, growing of rice, irrigation, and health care).
Indeed, in the first half of the 1960s Beijing’s activities in Africa were particularly intensive. In 1960 China established a China-African People’s Friendship Association and took part in the second AAPSO conference in Conakry (Boorman, 1961:234). The following years saw an intensification of cultural and diplomatic missions’ exchanges in both directions, culminating with Zhou Enlai’s famous Africa tour, which lasted for seven weeks, from December 1963 to February 1964. In this tour, the Chinese Foreign Minister visited ten countries accompanied by an impressive entourage of more than 50 official dignitaries (Adie, 1964:174-194). In 1964 alone, Beijing signed eight agreements with six African countries ranging from communications to all inclusive economic aid and technical assistance. In this same year China was particularly active in extending loans to African states, being responsible for 53 per cent of the loans given to that continent (Yu, 1965:325). Loans were given on an interest-free basis in the form of complete equipment and technical assistance provided by Beijing and to be repaid over an extended period of time with African exports to China, having no conditions attached – a pattern which can be easily recognised in present China-Africa loans.

Informal foreign policy instruments were also at play throughout this period. Techniques applied varied from overt to covert, aiming at creating a favourable image of communist China in Africa and, most of all, penetrating African states with which China did not have diplomatic relations. Among overt informal instruments, Chinese propaganda channelled through radio broadcasts, reading material and person to person contact were probably the most important ones. Although more modest than either US or Soviet, it played an increasing role in Beijing’s Africa penetration strategy. China expanded its weekly 70 hours radio broadcast in 1960 (Boorman, 1961:235) to almost 110 hours in 1964 (Yu, 1965:329) in Swahili, Hausa, English, French, Portuguese and Chinese. Its impact on African societies, however, seems to have been minor (Yu, 1968:1023-1025). With respect to covert techniques, they varied from monetary payments to African leaders to technical assistance to liberation movements (Yu, 1965:330) – sometimes providing for leaders’ training in guerilla warfare in China.

The most controversial aspect of China’s involvement in Africa, and curiously the least spoken of, is precisely the one under the category of ‘covert instruments deployed during this phase; particularly, its dealings with African liberation movements. China’s links to Frelimo in Mozambique, the MPLA and FLNA in Angola, the FLN in Algeria and ‘rebels’ in Congo-Kinshasa in the 1960s were also the least effective instrument in its pursuit for a long term influence over Africa, mostly because they turned out to be counterproductive. China’s support to these organisations was based on the need to increase its prestige in the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and AAPSO but also its attempt to compete with the superpowers for long term influence, particularly with the Soviet bloc. China failed to understand the regional logic in giving prevalence to its worldwide socialist struggle.

Indeed, after the Sino-Soviet split, China’s rhetoric became increasingly radical in the search for anti-Soviet groups to promote its Maoist doctrine. In the early 1960s, China was deeply involved in African rebellions and independence struggles, namely in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola, Mozambique, Ghana, Niger and Burundi. In 1964, China was implicated in one of Africa’s major crisis at the time: it helped Nkrumah to establish secret training camps in Ghana in preparation for guerillas to fight the pro-French government in the Niger Republic (Hull, 1972:49) and was providing arms and training to Congolese rebels led by Pierre
Mulele as well as to Gaston Soumialot’s group based in Burundi (El-Khawas, 1973:25).

Claims have been made that Chinese money, training and arms may have been funnelled through the OAU or the Afro-Asian Solidarity Fund of the AAPSO, while training and arms transfers are known to have been conducted by the international equipment division of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) (Jackson, 1995:393) through a guerrilla warfare training camp established in Ghana. According to one source, US$142 million worth of Chinese arms were transferred to 15 African countries between 1967 and 1976 (Le Pere and Shelton, 2007:52). Beijing’s subversive diplomatic activities and close links with revolutionary groups as part of its strategy to export revolution alarmed a good number of African leaders who became distrustful and suspicious of China, fearing that it could support extremist groups within their borders. As a consequence, by 1966 several Chinese diplomats were expelled from a number of African countries (Dahomey, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Madagascar, Senegal, Upper Volta) accused of subversive activities to overthrow the respective governments (Hull, 1972:49) or because diplomatic ties had been broken with China (Burundi, Central African Republic, Tunisia and Ghana). Additionally, a sequence of coup d’états (Congo-Leopoldville, Central African Republic, Upper Volta, Nigeria and Ghana) further damaged China’s influence in Africa as the new military rulers were highly critical of China’s activities in Africa and moved to eliminate Beijing’s influence within their borders (El-Khawas, 1973:26).

China’s involvement in Angola, currently its major trading partner in Africa at the present, is a clear example of Chinese foreign policy ebbs and flows in Africa throughout the cold war. At first China tried to keep its influence over the MPLA (Movimento para a Libertaçao de Angola), however, they turned out to be too urban-based and pro-Soviet in orientation. In 1963, following closely OAU official policy line, China switched its support to FNLA (Frente Nacional para a Libertaçao de Angola) though relations were strained by the fact that the Chinese delegates were not allowed in the Democratic Republic of Congo where the movement was based. In the following year, Beijing then supported UNITA (União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola) – a movement that had split from FNLA. Its leader, Jonas Savimbi, underwent military training in China in 1964 and 1965 before the formal establishment of UNITA in 1966. Unlike MPLA and FNLA, UNITA sought indigenous support and started building internal bases, proclaiming Maoism as its doctrine foundation. By 1967 UNITA became the only Angolan liberation movement mentioned in the Chinese press. However, in the early years of the next decade, China abandoned UNITA to approach again, first, the MPLA, and then FNLA. After the granting of formal independence in 1975, which coincided with the onset of a civil war in Angola, Beijing covertly supported FNLA and UNITA, not because of their Maoist credentials, but to preclude victory from Soviet-backed MPLA (Jackson, 1995:389-422).

However, the radical line did not last long in China’s Africa policy. Two factors, one domestic and another international, contributed to the decline of China’s subversive activities in Africa before the end of the decade. First, the Cultural Revolution in 1966 put paid to overt Chinese political activism on the continent and, second, the increased perception of the ‘Soviet menace’ led to a rapprochement towards the US that culminated with a seat at UN Security Council in 1971 and gradual diplomatic recognition by most states in the world.
China’s re-emergence into the international community was a result of the fundamental changes in its diplomatic relations. Indeed, the Chinese leadership learned much from the diplomatic debacles caused by radicalisation and realised the necessity of working with the African elites in power. Beijing stopped supporting revolutionary groups and limited its support to liberation movements still operating in southern Africa. Attempting to regain its lost prestige, China’s Africa policy from then on was based on two pillars: normalising diplomatic relations with all African countries regardless of their ideological orientation and extending economic assistance to selected African governments. This new policy was a determinant in achieving UN admission in October 1971. When the resolution was voted, seven African states changed their vote to favour China’s stance: Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Togo changed from ‘no’ to ‘yes’ and Botswana, Cameroon, Senegal and Tunisia switched from abstention to ‘yes’ (El-Khawas, 1973:27; 1972:109-118); China secured the UN seat with the support of 26 African states (34 per cent of General Assembly votes) (Yu, 1988:855). Another Chinese victory in Africa was in the battle against Taiwan. Between 1970 and 1976, China established diplomatic ties with 20 African states (an increase of almost 100 per cent). By 1976, 39 states had recognised the government in Beijing and only eight continued to maintain diplomatic ties with Taipei. Less successful, however, was its attempt to organise an African front against the Soviet Union.

Nonetheless, Chinese overseas development assistance quickly overtook subversive activities in its quest to enlarge its influence over the continent. The most notable expression of this was the construction of the TanZam railway between 1970 and 1975, linking Zambia’s rich copper belt to the coastal port of Dar es Salaam and thus breaking the dependency on white-ruled Rhodesia. Apparently the decision to build the railroad grew out of a direct request from Zambian president Kenneth Kaunda, seconded by his Tanzanian counterpart, Julius Nyerere (who greatly admired Mao’s collectivisation strategies and applied these ideas as part of the Ujamaa villagisation scheme). China assembled a US$405 million interest free loan for this project, representing then the largest single offer of economic assistance granted to an African state by a communist country (Hull, 1972:50). Total Chinese aid to 36 African countries topped US$2.5 billion between 1954 and 1977 (Le Pere and Shelton, 2007:56). Interestingly, many of the aspects of Beijing’s current approach to African relations reflect the impulses and decisions of that era. This includes the government’s responsiveness to an African priority, the use of state resources, and preference for Chinese labour to construct infrastructure projects and the signature of a high profile prestige project to mark relations. During this period, and unlike trade relations which were mostly insignificant – Chinese aid followed a very selective pattern (Yu, 1968:1026). China concentrated its aid in only a few countries: Tanzania, Algeria, Ghana, Congo-Brazzaville and Mali. A special focus was put on Tanzania, not only because it was its most constant ally, but also because of its strategic location as an Indian Ocean gateway to mineral-rich southern Africa. China decided to concentrate its development aid (Bräutigam, 1998) in fewer countries and in large projects to work as showcases, hoping to exert leverage over the rest of Africa by undertaking major infrastructure projects denied by western powers, such as the TanZam railway. Additionally, loans were given to other African countries (e.g. US$84 million to Ethiopia in 1971 and US$190 million to Sudan) (Hull, 1972:50) in very favourable terms: interest free repayment over 30 years to start after a five year period of grace with no strings attached.
From the African recipients’ perspective, Chinese financial aid was as good as any other foreign source, if not better because of its favourable terms and therefore welcomed regardless of ideological concerns. Indeed, Chinese economic and technical assistance granted in the 1970s suited African needs rather well: it had no political strings attached (beyond the criteria of diplomatic recognition of Beijing), provided training for Africans, was concentrated in vital areas and, additionally, its terms of credit and repayment were much better than those offered by the Americans or Soviets. The full potential of these aid packages was, however, curtailed by the constraints on China at the time. Although formal and informal foreign policy instruments deployed have had some success in expanding Chinese influence in Africa throughout the 1960s and 1970s, its reach was, indeed, shortened by the limited resources of China. In fact, China’s endeavours in Africa during the cold war was limited by what it had to offer in material terms as it was still a developing state and lacking proven successful expertise. Its technical and economic assistance, though valuable, could not compete with the US or the Soviet Union, which was the determining factor for failing to get influence over the continent in the long run. With the demise of Mao and the advent of economic reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping in 1978, this enterprise was postponed for another two decades.

**China’s New ‘Independent Policy’ & Africa**

With a growing need for capital and technology crucial to China’s domestic modernisation programme, much of Beijing’s diplomacy from the late 1970s was devoted to establishing formal ties with the United States and encouraging western interest in its coastal capitalist enclaves: the four ‘special economic zones’ situated near Hong Kong, Macau and across the straits from Taiwan. Other changes in Chinese foreign policy deriving from its flourishing economic reforms include the gradual normalisation of Sino-Soviet relations so that by the middle of the 1980s, Africa had no longer to choose between Beijing and Moscow (Yu, 1988:857). Faced with this rapprochement between the two hegemons and former enemies, China presented the outline of its new foreign policy at the 12th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in September 1982. This public pronouncement was meant to reaffirm its third world credentials (as an anti-imperialist developing state) by stressing the continued independence of its foreign policy (Smith, 1986:59-61) despite cordial ties with Washington and Moscow, and the enduring validity of the ‘Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence’ as its guiding doctrine.

The announcement of the new ‘independent policy’ was followed by Premier Zhao Ziyang’s Africa tour to 11 countries (20 December 1982 to 17 January 1983), aimed at launching a new African policy framed by China’s new developmental priorities and global interests. Zhao reaffirmed China’s support for African liberation struggles in Namibia and South Africa, the consolidation of African political independence, South-South co-operation and appealed to third world unity (Yu, 1988:856). But the changes brought by the new Africa policy were summarised in the ‘Four Principles on Sino-African Economic and Technical Cooperation’, announced by the Chinese Premier in Tanzania at the end of this tour. This statement differed substantially from the ‘Eight Principles for Economic and Technical Cooperation’ announced by Zhou Enlai in its 1963/64 Africa tour. Shorn of much of the ideological baggage of the past, the new emphasis on China-Africa ties was on mutual benefits, practical results and common development determined by domestic developmental priorities and its limited resources (Yu, 1988:857).
On the one hand, China was a developing nation embarking on a fast modernisation process which restricted much of its external policy enterprises because of high domestic demands; but on the other hand, it was an aspiring global power and did not want to let go of its interests in Africa. The solution was thus to scale down its aid, bringing to an end the large-scale technical assistance projects. The emphasis was now placed on low profile co-operation projects requiring smaller investments and quicker returns that would enhance mutual self reliance and create mutual economic benefit. Despite the rhetoric being closer to the third world, and therefore to Africa, the new Chinese foreign policy of the 1980s did not translate into concrete action; in practice, Beijing was more actively engaged in deepening its relations with the developed world, seen as more of a crucial priority in its quest for modernisation. Africa was thus relegated to a relatively marginal role in China’s foreign policy during this period.

After the Cold War: Africa Returns as a Priority

Structural changes – both domestically and in the international system – have brought Africa back to China’s foreign policy formulation at the end of the 20th century. The key factor for change was China’s diplomatic isolation following the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989, bringing to an end (albeit for a few years) China’s honeymoon with the developed world. Isolation was further bolstered by collapse of the Soviet Union which positioned China as the remaining communist power. Facing the unwanted perspective of becoming a pariah in the ashes of the cold war, China launched a diplomatic offensive targeting the third world, and Africa in particular, in an attempt to realign its international relations and circumvent isolation from the developed world. This consisted of dispatching Chinese officials on goodwill missions worldwide, promoting visits to China by foreign leaders, normalising relations with as many countries as possible irrespective of their ideological allegiance and moving closer to the third world countries within international institutions.

Between June 1989 and June 1992, Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen visited 14 African countries and numerous African leaders were invited to Beijing. Aid to African countries was boosted, mainly directed to states that had stood by China in the aftermath of the Tiananmen crisis. In 1990, China-Africa aid amounted to US$374.6 million spread among 43 recipients, which is significant if compared to US$60.4 million in 1988 distributed amongst 13 countries (Taylor, 2004:87). Chinese efforts to cultivate closer ties with Africa was strongly welcomed by African leaders not only because it came at the same time that American interest in the continent diminished (in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union), but also because of the self-interest and solidarity derived from their own position regarding democracy and human rights – an echo reflected in many African regimes under pressure from western donors to change their policies. And again, as in the early 1970s, Africa support proved vital in resisting western criticism of China in multilateral bodies throughout the 1990s.

Another important factor in the revitalisation of the China-Africa policy was the Taiwan issue. With the official abandonment of its claim to represent the whole of China in 1991, Taiwanese authorities began a new initiative to carve out a special status within the international community that seemed for many observers, to be a prelude to a declaration of independence. Accounting for almost one-third of votes in the UN, Africa retained its importance as a battleground for the recognition
struggle with Taiwan, reinvigorated by Hong Kong’s return to Chinese sovereignty in 1997 (Payne & Veney, 1998:871-876). This battle has been essentially played out through competitive bids of investment and development finance with Beijing and Taipei trying to supersede each others bids for diplomatic recognition. Benefiting from its image as an emerging global power, China has been gradually winning this game in Africa, particularly after South Africa’s recognition of the Beijing government in 1998, although not without periodic setbacks.

In 1996, Beijing’s fears of further damage to its relations with the west reappeared with the Taiwan missile crisis. In this setting, Africa emerged once again as an important supporting platform for China. President Jiang Zemin and Premier Li Peng’s Africa-Asia tours in 1996 and 1997, respectively, can be thus viewed as a preparatory stage for the full revival of Africa in China’s foreign policy. In fact, it was during that trip that Jiang launched the idea of creating a Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), which was held four years later in Beijing.10 The fourth leadership generation of the CCP that took over in 2002 further committed the country to revitalising the third world dimension in China’s foreign policy. This is then reflected in the surge of diplomatic exchanges with Africa since the early 2000s and further stressed by the promulgation of a white paper on China’s Africa Policy in January 2006, the same year that Beijing celebrated 50 years of diplomatic relations with Africa and when the third FOCAC summit took place. The issuing of this policy paper, coupled to the fact that there were two high level visits this same year to the African continent, the first one in April, headed by President Hu Jintao himself and the second one in June by Premier Wen Jiabao, leaves no doubts of the importance of Africa in Chinese foreign policy (Alden, 2005:148-149).

Another crucial driver in China’s renewed attention towards Africa was purely economic. The resource needs of the Chinese economy, which had experienced near double digit growth for over two decades, were expanding by the 1990s and Africa’s relatively unexploited petroleum and mineral reserves offered compelling opportunities. From this point on, trade and economic affairs gradually started to dominate China-Africa relations. Bilateral trade expanded from US$4 billion in 1996 (Payne & Veney, 1998:876) to over US$55 billion in 2006 (over 45 billion up to August 2007).11 China’s economic dealings with most African states are based on their perceived economic potential (Taylor, 1998:454) in the face of China’s economic needs or benefits. The much publicised ‘no conditions’ approach to Africa – previewed in the ‘independent foreign policy of 1982’ – facilitated access to Africa with the result that Chinese diplomacy made great strides in a short time. Politics has been generally put aside in the implementation of China’s Africa policy, even when it involves the risk of being criticised by the international community for dealing with rogue states such as Zimbabwe or Sudan. However, Chinese diplomacy has recently proved more sensitive to international pressure regarding these issues,12 which may be explained by the Olympic Games to take place in 2008 and the Shanghai Cultural Capital of the World in 2010. Nevertheless, economic pragmatism as well as selective political amnesia has been the rule guiding bilateral relations, as demonstrated by the flourishing ties with African states in which China had been involved with the ‘wrong side’.
Conclusion: China’s Africa Policy Reconsidered

China’s foreign policy towards Africa as evidenced through the previous survey has undergone shifting episodes of activism and relative neglect. Moreover, benefiting a major state, its foreign policy aims in Africa have reflected not only region-specific concerns but have been fundamentally products of wider international aims such as the Sino-Soviet rift and the cold war. All of these factors contribute to the sense that, beyond what Beijing views as the internal matter of Taiwan, strongest continuities in China’s Africa policy have been found in the rhetoric of third world solidarity and its own self-declared standing as a developing country.

The use of history by Chinese foreign policy makers is clearly aimed at drawing lines of continuity that paper over these shifts and breaks in Africa policy that have been the experience of all external powers engaged in Africa. In this context, the evocation of solidarity politics is carefully employed to suggest a shared sense of identity as fellow third world states whose interests and outlooks on the prevailing international system have remained unaltered over the last 50 years. Caution must, however, be exercised in the use of solidarity because, as Beijing knows, it could potentially raise uncomfortable questions about specific policies pursued or alliances made towards African governments or parties currently in (or out) of power. At the same time, given that contemporary ties between China and Africa are based increasingly on economic interests, history is called upon in this case to provide assurances that budding commercial ties will not result in exploitation or even some form of colonialism on the part of China. After all, so the story goes, Zheng He dealt with African leaders on the basis of equality, engaged in trade and ultimately left African states and societies alone and intact. Moreover, this commercial activism occurred all before the Europeans even touched the shores of the continent south of the Sahara. Allusions to epochs that long pre-date CCP’s rise to power thus serve a different function in that they deliberately speak to African concerns as to the long term impact of China’s deepening involvement in Africa. Nevertheless, the Chinese leadership recognises that it will need to do more to ameliorate this apprehension in some circles, hence China’s explicit commitment to embark on ‘all round co-operation’ with Africa; that is to say, an emphasis on non-commercial features of the relationship, in the aftermath of the China-Africa Summit in November 2006.

While the claims of constancy in China’s foreign policy towards Africa may not bear up well under close scrutiny, nonetheless, in certain respects the discourse emanating out of Beijing today is accurate. If one sets aside the period of Maoist revolutionary activism in Africa, who’s own impulses eventually wreaked havoc on the domestic environment in China itself, the broad framework of Chinese foreign policy has been a fairly well sustained. To a great degree this is because the barometer against which it is measured is the all-purpose vocabulary of the ‘Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence’, whose sweeping generalities are able to encompass a broad range of policies that seemingly transcend the shifts in ideology and application that characterised Chinese foreign policy. Moreover, physical distance and relatively limited contact have allowed ties to escape the close scrutiny that a more deeply involved external power might otherwise be subject to.

More challenging for China’s contemporary relationship with Africa is the changing perception of China’s identity as a developing country. While the admonition that China is a developing country was reinforced by plenty of empirical evidence in the past, this position has been harder to sustain two and a
half decades later as China’s remarkable economic growth has put it on the cusp of global economic and political leadership. Indeed, the notion of China’s ‘peaceful rise’, coined by Chinese scholars in 2003 to assuage growing concerns in the west (and substituted in rapid succession by the slogans ‘peaceful development’, ‘harmonious world’ and ‘scientific development’), captures the dynamic of a changing China without suggesting the tensions inherent in its foreign policy. And yet the challenges to Chinese identity and its implications for a successful foreign policy are as fundamental in Africa as they are in addressing western concerns as to the implications of its rise on the global stage. If China is, as it appears to be, on course to full membership at the ‘high table of powerful states’ then it stands to reason its interests will change and will be reflected in foreign policy choices. There is already some evidence of this taking place; for instance, the fact that Beijing has indicated an interest in the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative and signed the Paris Declaration on Overseas Development Assistance (OECD, 2 March 2005), suggesting that there may be significant changes in the making. In addition, Chinese actions aimed at pressuring Khartoum over the Darfur issue demonstrate a willingness to adapt itself to the western agenda. The Zheng He expedition may also be partially aimed at addressing this matter, in that 15th century Chinese technology and commercial prowess was far greater than that found in Africa at the time, but the thinness of the historical record and memory of this event makes it only of limited symbolic value. History in any case is being overshadowed by contemporary experiences and events and will have less and less saliency in shaping African reactions to China.

In fact, Africans have long memories and they are quite aware of the variations in historical experience with China. At the same time, they are conscious of the importance of China as an emerging power and keen to insure that they are able to extract benefits from Chinese engagement, especially as it appears to be poised to become Africa’s largest trading partner and investor. Like the putative ‘special relationship’ between Britain and the United States, Renan’s ‘necessity of forgetting’ is crucial to the forging of this new relationship between China and Africa so it would seem that to realise the rhetoric of mutual benefit requires some form of mutual amnesia.

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Endnotes

1. There are numerous examples of this, from the ‘Look East’ rhetoric employed by Ghana, Zimbabwe and Namibia to more prosaic statements by African leaders.

2. These principles were expounded in the first National People’s Congress in September 1949 and then again in the proclamation ceremony of the founding of the PRC the following month.

3. AAPSO was increasingly subject to the Sino-Soviet rivalries and, consequently, never fulfilled Chinese expectations. China’s inability to realise its aims for a second ‘Bandung’ conference in Algeria in 1965 were emblematic of this period.

5. Zhou Enlai had planned to visit all the African states that recognised the PRC at that time but disturbances in East Africa forced him to make the list shorter. In December 1963, he visited Egypt, Algeria, Morocco; in January 1964, Tunisia, Ghana, Mali, Guinea, Sudan and in February, Ethiopia and Somalia.

6. The Sino-Soviet border clashes in 1969 and the Brezhnev doctrine (allowing Moscow to interfere in any socialist country), which was accompanied by the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, made the Soviet Union China’s primary enemy.

7. This was seen most readily in the decision by Beijing to recognise the MPLA government in Angola.


9. When these tours took place not only was the Taiwan issue under discussion as also a resolution on China’s human rights situation was being voted in the Human Rights Commission.


12. For example, the ‘genocide Olympics’ campaign set around Chinese involvement in Sudan.

13. Perhaps one could say this was the purpose in crafting the ‘Five Principles’ as they did or maybe this is a happy coincidence inherited by the current leadership.

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