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Sino-African Relations: An Analytical Overview of China's Natural Resources Policy in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

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ABSTRACT This paper focuses on China's role on the African continent. As will be revealed in the sections below, the dynamics of Sino-African relations have drawn attention from academics, private Western corporations and states as well as policy analysts. Of key concern is the nature of China's aid and development policies as employed in various African countries in addition to the implications of China's unwavering influence on Africa's political governance. China's foreign policy and outlook on international relations, of which its African strategy represents the most illuminating case, have been strongly influenced by the country's path to economic development. Beijing's unique brand of resource acquisition strategies and trade and investment policies towards the African continent present a divergence from the norm set by Western corporations and adherents of the 'Washington Consensus', and China's distinctive approach presents a series of critical opportunities and challenges for Africa which are deserving of academic scrutiny. This paper observed that China's 'Beijing Consensus' as driven by 'soft power' and the 'win-win' principle, with the application of copper acquisition from the Democratic Republic of Congo.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Sino-African Relations

This paper focuses on China's role on the African continent for a number of reasons. The relationship between China and Africa presents a range of distinctive features, which distinguish the continent from other regions in which the People's Republic of China (PRC) has economic interests. The core interest of this investigation is the nature of China's resource acquisition strategy on the continent. Unlike most Western investors, the PRC's raw material extraction seemingly offers far-reaching benefits to African countries, which extend beyond monetary value, as they are complemented with direct investments and infrastructure loans (Sautman and Hairong 2007: 78). The *win-win* characteristics of China's approach are apparently suited to allow resource-rich African countries to provide the former with vital raw materials, in direct exchange for much-needed infrastructural development. Essentially, China invests "in long neglected infrastructure projects" including roads and railway, and offers loans with little or no interest, which are often paid off in natural resources (New Era 2006; Brautigam 2007: 79). This point is reiterated by Naidu and Davies who mention that China's interest in Africa's resources is different from the European's 19th Century 'scramble' due to the reason that the PRC's involvement is complemented with the direct improvement of infrastructure and transport, which are essential to attracting further foreign investment and development (Naidu and Davies 2007: 70).

The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs maintained the same point in the *'World Economic Situation and Prospects'* report of 2007 in citing Africa's interest in China's economic participation in the continent as it provides infrastructure and assistance services for development, which Africa's own governments have not been able to provide (Sautman and Hairong 2007: 80). For instance, in Angola, China proposed and delivered a USD 2 billion infrastructural development scheme in 2004, in which Beijing secured a stake in particular oil blocks in return, and further payment in a specified quantity of oil barrels per day. In Nigeria, the PRC pledged a USD 7 billion investment project for the rehabilitation of a power station, which the latter sought to acquire. Lastly, in Gabon, the Republic was able to win a USD 3 billion tender over Brazilian and French multinationals for an iron ore plant after the latter promised the additional construction of a railway, a dam and a deep water port. Moreover, as mentioned above, unlike most continents, Africa is a resource-rich region, which possesses large supplies of every primary product required in industry in largely unexploited reserves as listed above (Sautman and Hairong 2007: 78-80).

Furthermore, China's foreign investment strategy offers a viable alternative to the 'Washington Consensus', as the PRC's policy is exclusive of "strictures imposed by multilateral and bilateral financiers" (Sautman and Hairlong 2007: 81). In addition, China's need for natural resources, which Africa maintains to a large extent, has overridden the risky nature of venturing into the continent's extractive trade, implying that the Republic offers the continent investment, which other countries have been more reluctant to provide (Naidu and Davies 2007: 69). The lack of infrastructural development and political unrest in Africa undermine the viability of foreign investment, the continent offers the world's highest Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) returns, with an average of twenty-nine percent in the 1990s and forty percent in 2005 (Sautman and Hairlong 2007: 78-79).

In particular, the paper is centered on the Democratic Republic of Congo for various reasons, which are parallel to the above-mentioned factors. Firstly, the DRC is one of the poorest countries in the world, and it is graded third from the bottom in the United Nations global rankings, with an annual output of USD 174 per head representing a nation in critical need of the trade, investment, infrastructural development and economic development that China's activities could bring (McBride 2008: 9). In this regard, scholars such as Reyntjens (2001: 310) have referred to the DRC as one of the poorest countries, 'geological scandal' which has the potential of becoming a rich country (which funds its own development) if the financial capacity of the state is rebuilt through the efficient and scrupulous exploitation of the abundant resources. Secondly, the DRC has been cited as one of the richest in terms of natural resources, containing all of the valuable minerals listed in the periodic table of elements, in addition to gas, oil and hydro-power and standing as the fifth largest producer of copper globally, the country holds resources, which are vital to key industries around the world, hence providing a distinctive opportunity for trade and investment (The Guardian, June/July 2006). Lastly, as a war-ravaged country on the path of reconstruction and economic development, the DRC has been offered a deal by China, which presents the African country with an opportunity for growth unlike that provided by most foreign investors. For instance, in September 2007, the Export-Import Bank extended a deal to the Congolese state to provide funding of USD 6.5 million for upgrading the country's infrastructure, in addition to a USD 2 billion agreement for the building and restoration of mines (McBride 2008: 10)

These characteristic features of the chosen area of investigation make it valuable to academic inquiry, as it provides a rich, multifaceted and explorative setting, which will ultimately make for an illuminating and useful contribution on Africa and PRC to the International Relations field. A nuanced and in-depth investigation of the nature of China's influence on the DRC's economic development as an African state with which the former has developed close relations will be important in alluding to, and in gaining a thorough understanding of the role that the PRC has played in the African continent thus far, the position Republic continues to play, as well as the likely future direction of the Republics role.

In addition, the paper is motivated by the PRC's policy reorientation and increased interest in economic engagement with the African continent in recent years. As will be shown in the literature review below, the current policy and engagement strategies adopted by the PRC towards the African continent differ markedly from those of the post-War order, the Cold War, as well as the post-Cold War era. This paper has shown that China's policy focus towards the continent has shifted from assistance and mutual support for revolutionary and independence movements, to non-alignment and consolidation of mutual interests and support amongst Third World states, the strengthening of political and economic ties encouraged by the need to counter imperialism from Washington and Moscow, aid and economic assistance in light of the weak unstable economies and a lack of economic development, investment and trade mainly generated from private Chinese enterprise, as well as interest in mineral resource acquisition economic growth during each of the above-mentioned periods (Anshan 2007: 70-80). However, towards the end of the 1990s, increased level of commitment in the PRC's policy has been notable in the economic sphere.

Although the Republic has not entirely abandoned the above-mentioned policy objectives, a relatively recent and more profound economic policy orientation has taken precedence, that is, China's foreign policy towards Africa has recently been dominated by rigorous economic concerns, in which resource and security access to foreign markets form central constituents (Satman and Hairong 2007: 78-79). Investigating this recent re-orientation of policy towards Africa will be vital in understanding the economic role and significance of the PRC to the African continent, the rationale and key strategic considerations governing the Republic's interests in the continent, as well as the extent to which the country will extend its influence on the continent. This paper will explore the interests and strategies adopted by Beijing towards copper acquisition in the Congo in order to understand the influence the Republic has thus far exerted on the DRC in the given paper period, as well as the likely impact in future.

Objective of the Paper

Most importantly, the rationale for the paper rests on the lack of academic paper, which focuses specific attention to the PRC's acquisition of essential resources from the DRC. As will be revealed in the literature review section below, much papers on Sino-African relations have focused on the historical foundations of the interaction, China's aid and development policies in various African countries, implications of China's influence on African governance, trade and investment, as well as the resource strategies towards the acquisition of energy resources, which are also indispensable to the PRC's economic growth. Although research publications devoted to copper acquisition do exist, much of this has been dedicated towards the case of Zambia. Other key areas of Sino-Africa paper have focused on the sale of military weapons as well as China's growing role in the construction industry in various African countries.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

China Foreign Policy Directives: The Beijing Consensus

China's foreign policy and outlook on international relations have been strongly influenced by the country's path to economic development. By and large, the PRC has adopted a successful model of development, which is distinct from that which is common for most advanced Western nations. Unlike the pervasive blueprint approach to development, which has been advocated by Western states as well as financial institutions, the Republic has eagerly endorsed national and foreign policy, an outlook on development, which is appropriate to the distinctive historic, socioeconomic and political conditions in the country. This model of development has been termed the Beijing Consensus (BC). The Beijing Consensus has exerted a significant influence on the strategies employed by the PRC in its Sino-African relations.

The concept of the BC was first developed in academia by Joshua Cooper Ramo, who stands as the leading author and proponent to elaborate the notion of the idea. Ramo, who is a senior advisor to Goldman Sachs (a leading investment company and a professor at a Chinese university, initially proposed the term in a paper titled *Beijing Consensus* published in 2004 by the Foreign Policy Centre in Britain (Cho and Jeong 2008: 461). According to Ramo, the Beijing Consensus essentially refers to the paradigm of China's perspective of development, which emphasizes the advancement of nations in a manner, which allows them to make independent choices in order to safeguard their cultures and political direction (Ramo 2004: 6). The BC is fundamentally juxtaposed with the Washington Consensus (WC), which can be described as a paternalistic paradigm of (an ideology) development, which emerged in the 1990s as a prescriptive measure imposed on developing nations by Washington-based international financial institutions, namely the IMF, the WTO and the World Bank. The WC is the underlying ideology, which governed the sanctioning austere methods of development, which were not suited to the local political economic conditions in developing nations, hence leaving their national financial systems crippled. Ramo believes that the BC is rapidly replacing the dated WC framework, particularly the developing world (Ramo 2004: 6). Other scholars, such as Barry Sautman, who is the associate professor in the Division of Social Science at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, eagerly believes that the BC is succeeding the WC especially in developing countries. The author believes that although the BC functions within the confines of neo-liberalism, its influence is principally due to the openness of the ideology to the specific developmental concerns of such nations. Essentially, Sautman is adamant that the failure of the WC is its unyielding one-size-fits-all neo-liberal orthodoxy (Sautman 2006: 15).

It is strongly believed that the reason for the BC's appeal is that it does not prescribe inflexible means to development, which are not suited to varying political, socioeconomic and cultural conditions in the different countries (Sautman 2004: 7). Rather, the ideology is based on innovation, the respect for national sovereignty, change, newness and innovation, as well as the effective use of economics and governance for the advancement of society at large (Ramo 2004: 8). The foundations of the BC have been succinctly explained by Ramo, when he states that:

The Beijing Consensus…consists of three theorems: the first states that China's development model is based on innovation, the second states that China's development model considers sustainability and equality as top priorities, the third states that China strives for self-determination in foreign policy (Ramo 2004: 3-4).

Other academics such as Michael Dauderstadt and Jurgen Stetten in their 2005 paper titled *China and Globalization*, view the BC as the endorsement of a strong state responsibility in economic development, maintaining prudence with regard to liberalization and deregulation, which are the two central tenets of the opposing WC (Dauderstadt and Stetten 2005: 5). The intensification of the BC since its development has been lauded especially by Chinese scholars. For example, Wu Shuqing, who is former head of Beijing University and now an advisor in the Ministry of Education, as well as Cheng Enfu, who is the head of the Academy of Marxism in Beijing, have commended the BC's "theoretical scientificity and practical superiority", as well as its "growing influence in the world, particularly among developing countries" in opposition to the WC (Shiqing and Enfu 2007: 7-8).

As mentioned above, the BC as a model of development, significantly influences the foreign policy of the PRC. The Consensus informs the Republic's approach to international relations and foreign strategy in terms of investments, aid and trade, infrastructure loans, all without conditions. In this regard, it is important to note that the Consensus has played a central role in the development of foreign strategy towards the African continent. The underlying components of the BC with regard to Sino-African relations have played a key role in making the ideology particularly attractive to the continent. Within the BC, China's foreign policy is viewed as an adaptable development model that advocates industrialization in a manner, which is less detrimental to the economies of underdeveloped nations, free from the strictures and conditions of the WC (Sautman 2006: 14).

In line with the Washington Consensus for example, unlike the BC, Western international financial institutions such as the IMF have in the past significantly undermined the sovereignty of African country's by imposing stringent conditions, which came in the form of Structural Adjustment Programs of the 1980s and 1990s, and set democratic reform as a condition for aid (Tull 2006: 467). The appeal of the BC to African states, in light of the failure and incompatibility of WC measures has been recapitulate in a paper of the Renmin Ribao, the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party. The paper states that:

"*Owing to the general failure in the West's political and economic behavior in Africa, African nations, which were only suspicious at first, are now negating Western-style democracy and have reinitiated 'Afro-Asianism' and proposed 'going towards the Orient'. This has opened up new opportunities for further enriching the content and elevating the quality of China-Africa cooperation*" (Tull 2006: 467).

To this extent, the BC is increasingly being viewed in Africa (as well as the developing world at large) as a viable alternative to the WC for economic development. Another key area of foreign policy that has been employed by the PRC, which can be viewed as serving an auxiliary function to the advancement of the Republic's global position, is a foreign policy mechanism termed 'soft power'.

China's Soft Power

Soft power is a term, which delineates the manner in which a state may exert influence in the global system of states. The phrase can be defined as the use of non-military means by a state to gain leverage in the international community. Soft power has been defined by Joseph Nye, a leading international relations scholar, simply as "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments" (Nye 2004: 7). (This method of acquiring international power has been contrasted with hard power, which refers to the use of military and economic might for the achievement of a specified end). The absence of direct force and monetary disbursements to acquire influence have been linked to three main areas of international relations, namely culture, political values and ideas, as well as foreign policies (Cho and Jeong 2008: 461).

China has adopted this strategy into its foreign policy as an agency through which to advance the Republic from an important regional player to a major force within the broader political economy. It has been stated that the burgeoning position of the PRC is closely linked to the progress in its soft power strategy, which has been exemplified by the Republic's emphasis on language, culture, and political values and diplomacy in her foreign relations (Wenping 2007: 29-30). The African continent has been, by and large, the prime experimental zone in which the PRC has sanctioned this mechanism. For instance, the Republic has pledged to extend human resource training in the continent in various fields, including economic management, military practice, politics and government affairs, in which African experts from these areas have been invited to the PRC to acquire experience, in addition to its own specialists to the continent. In terms of culture, as of 2005, China had provided educational institutions the capacity to teach up to 8,000 African students the Chinese language, in addition to an exchange program, which increased the state sponsorship of an additional 2,000 students from the continent to study in the Republic between 2007-2009 (Wenping 2007: 30).

The foreign policy imperatives discussed above are fundamental to understanding the policy employed towards the continent. It has been stated that although the notions of soft power and the Beijing Consensus emerged as academic constructs, their inclusion in state-led diplomatic initiatives has signaled the eagerness of the Republic to endorse the ideas as a central component in foreign strategy. In this regard, the BC as well as soft power will be vital in understanding the evolution of China's approach towards Africa, and the DRC in particular, specifically during the given research period.

The Importance of Copper in the DRC's Trajectory of Economic Development

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), formerly known as Zaire is a country in the central equatorial region of the African continent. During the colonial era, which officially began in 1885, the territory was known as the Congo Free State under the personal rule of King Leopold II. In 1908 when administration was officially transferred from Leopold II to the Belgian government the name of the country became the Belgian Congo, a name which remained until independence was granted on 30th June 1960, after which it was called Zaire (Wenping 2007: 7). The Belgian regime, in a similar manner to most colonial administrators, governed the African territory on the basis of a guiding principle, which the scholar labels "the triple mission" entailing economic exploitation, political repression and cultural oppression (Ntalaja 2002: 27). The Belgian government's inheritance of the legacy of the *Leopoldian rule* was not accompanied by any concrete official administrative policy, as it has been stated that the Belgian leadership lacked clear political objectives and guidelines on how to run the colony (Wigny 1951: 312). A concise description of the colonial system in the Belgian Congo is succinctly articulated by Roger Anstey in a historical account of the transfer of administrative authority from King Leopold II to the Belgian government:

Belgium inherited not only a colony, but also a colony possessed of a certain structure. The elements of that structure were a sparse population and a battered customary society; a vast territory which had not been properly administered; a system of direct economic exploitation, or an unfettered variant of the concessionaire system, and as a consequence at a further remove, abuse and atrocity. Thirdly, the fact that the DR Congo was a legacy meant that Belgium had no relevant tradition of poli-

cy to invoke, no positive aims regarding it (Anstey 1966: 261).

Notwithstanding the largely detrimental impact of Belgian colonial rule on the socioeconomic advancement of Congolese society, the administration endeavored to augment the productive capacity of the export sector. By the end of the *Ten Year Plan,* which the Belgian administration initiated from 1950 to 1960, the volume of foreign trade had increased to towering levels, with minerals and agricultural produce making up the majority of the core exports (Huge 1955: 63). In a publication on the 'Economic Planning and Development in the Belgian Congo' issued during the fifth year of the *Ten Year Plan*, it was already apparent that copper proffered the highest value in US dollar terms relative to other minerals. The importance of this mineral has transcended the Mobuto post-independence era, well into the current era in which copper represents a highly sought after resource by China.

For the most part, in relation to the economic growth and the capacity to exploit natural resources, the Belgian Congo was widely viewed as a 'model' colony, which exhibited higher levels of development than other outposts (Vanthemsche 2006: 91). However, the post-independence administration was ill-prepared for the task of continuing the path of economic development, coupled with the overwhelming task of alleviating a majority of the native population from the structural socioeconomic dejection endorsed by the colonial government. Therefore, while the colonial administration had laid the foundations for enabling the Congo to exploit its mineral wealth, capacity for economic development in the post-independence Zaire was marred by a process of intensified self-aggrandizement, clientelism and rampant kleptocracy (Lecmerchand 2001: 6-7). The nature of the state which was inherited by Laurent Kabila (latter succeeded by his son Joseph) following Mobutu's demise presented a richly-endowed territory with immense capacity for economic development, albeit lacking the relevant skills, expertise, investment and infrastructural capacity. To this extent, the admission of China's rigorous resource security diplomacy may be perceived as a welcome redeemer to an economy abounding with natural resources, although lacking the capacity to exploit this wealth for the wellbeing of the citizenry.

China-DR Congo Relations: Beijing's Mineral Acquisition Strategy

The policy adopted by China towards the acquisition of copper from the DRC coincides with the Beijing's core foreign relations principles as elaborated above. The most illustrative exemplification of the PRC's strategy towards minerals lies in the *'aid-for-minerals'* agreement proposed by Beijing in September 2007. The deal involved the large-scale development of infrastructure in the DR Congo, in return for preferential access to the latter's relatively untapped mineral reserves, namely copper and cobalt (Vandaele 2008: 1). Essentially this accord involved the high-level involvement of Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOE's) in various infrastructural development projects in the DR Congo. The Chinese Export-Import Bank (Exim Bank), which finances the Republic's foreign investments, approved USD 6.5 billion for DR Congo's infrastructure, as well as USD 2 billion for the construction and overhaul of dilapidated transportation and communication networks (McBride 2008: 10). The importance of this deal to the DR Congo was in the commitment of China to agree to focus on the five priority areas set by President Kabila, including water, electricity, health, education and transport (Vandaele 2008: 1).

As such, the Sino-Congolese deal will play a critical role in the political economy of the Africa state, primarily due to the dire need for socioeconomic development as an imperative. The importance of this newfound relationship is of consequential value in a country in which the political elite have historically undermined the countries core developmental concerns, despite the vast resource wealth, which the DRC possesses. As part of the agreement, a joint venture corporation was established by the two states, including Congolese and Chinese SOE's to found a new company named Socomin, which is tasked with overseeing the copper mining operations (Vandaele 2008: 1). The DRC's state-owned Gecamines will form part of this venture, as it controls thirty-two percent, while China owns sixty-seven percent (Thompkins 2008: 2). Soccomin is slated to have invested USD 3 billion in the mining areas of the DR Congo, while the proceeds of the investments will be used in the repayment for the proposed infrastructural developments.

As stated by Victor Kasongo, the DRC's Deputy Minister of Mines, the total worth of the *aid-for-minerals* accord could be approximately USD 14 million, a figure which surpasses the value of 3.5 million tonnes of copper the DR Congo government has pledged to repay Beijing with (McBride 2008: 10). According to an IMF official, the enormity of the investment is predicted to have a widely beneficial long-term impact on the DRC's economy, which was forecasted to grow at a rate of 6.5 percent in 2007 (Bridge 2007: 1). In addition, the ever-increasing rise in the prices of commodities including gold, copper, silver, zinc, tin, platinum, oil and coal among others, which has been spurred partly by Beijing's intensifying demand for the resources, is likely to see the value of the DRC's reserves increasing over the agreed period, leading to much higher profits than initially predicted (http://en.chinaelections.org/newsinfo.asp?).

CONCLUSION

The long-term implications of China's *'aid-for-minerals'* policy as employed in the DR Congo are yet to materialize. While it may still be early to deduce the actual impact of Beijing's strategy, there is some evidence that points towards a somewhat positive impact. While Beijing has been widely criticized by adherents of the 'Washington Consensus' and other proponents of FDI in the manner of private investment from Western companies, in principle, China's approach offers a highly beneficial deal to the DR Congo. In the following excerpt by Thompkins, the author reflects the distinct pragmatism, and mutually beneficial nature of the agreement between Beijing and the DRC:

"China needs copper and cobalt for construction projects at home and Congo needs the wherewithal to build a transportation network. Each has what the other wants...the Congolese expect to get more investment in their country from China than they have received from any single Western interest in years"

The nature of the *'aid-for-minerals'* deal has also been lauded by the chief executive of the Gecamines, which is the Congolese mining company with shareholding rights in Socomin. According to Paul Fortin, the deal put forward by China offers a distinct opportunity to the DRC to attain the benefits of infrastructural development without an array of stringencies as would be imposed by leading International Financial Institutions. To this extent, among other advantages, the benefit of this deal, according to Fortin is that Congo does not have to wait for funding guarantees for infrastructure, and building can proceed as soon as the contracts are signed, with copper reserves used as surety for payment to Beijing. Moreover, in revealing the outline of the deal, Fortin alluded to the notion that by strictly receiving payment for infrastructural services rendered through copper extraction, the general likelihood that the resource-laden relationship may yield undesirable economic implications for the DR Congo is limited.

Notwithstanding the potentially beneficial aspects of the deal, it is however important to view the *'aid-for-minerals'* transaction from the perspective of the DR Congo's longstanding record of kleptocracy, corruption and clientelism. From this perspective, other commentators have been less optimistic about the offering presented by Beijing. In a statement from the Global Witness, the director of the organization cited the rushed manner of the contract process on the part of the DR Congo government, as well as the lack of public engagement and consultation as major causes for concern. According to Palley, the abrupt mode in which the DR Congo officials have handled the contractual elements of the transaction may open the way for limited "thoroughness and objectivity of the exercise," hence calling into question the level of "transparency, fairness, and trust". With such statements, it is important to explore the governance of the DRC in retrospect: could Beijing be using the Congo's weak economic status and governance capacity to its advantage to acquire copper in a manner which is detrimental to the latter?

RECOMMENDATIONS

The existence of relatively weak institutions in the DR Congo, coupled with the historical prevalence of poor governance, which includes rampant corruption, a lack of public accountability, clientelism and cronyism may represent the most formidable obstacles to the accrual of positive gains from the transactions. These maladies, among several others, have been characteristic of governing the DR Congo's ruling elite from Mobutu's era, through to the current Kabila era, albeit to a less publicized degree. Such structural inefficiencies may increase the undesirable likelihood of the DRC to follow a path of continued underdevelopment. A further issue of contention among resource and foreign policy scholars is that relating to Beijing's lack of concern for the internal political dealings of the states with which it maintains *'aid-for-minerals'* transactions. Some scholars have alerted that this outright negligence for political governance issues may imply that the PRC is resolute in overlooking the likely unfavorable political and socio-economic impacts of their dealings in countries such as the DR Congo. However, as a state marred with the governance quandary mentioned above, the PRC represents a much-needed and mutually beneficial transaction, which is not implicit with rigorous checks from Washington Consensus institutions, which may have rejected the DRC's applications.

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