

Raising the red lantern in Africa



Later this year African and Chinese leaders will gather in Egypt for the fourth China-Africa summit. The previous one, in 2006, paved the way for China to become Africa's largest single trading partner by 2010. **Chris Alden** sets the scene for the next summit and explores how this burgeoning relationship will fare in more turbulent times.

Three years ago the Chinese embraced the first China-Africa summit with unbridled enthusiasm. The streets of Beijing were festooned with posters of giraffes and elephants as 48 African leaders descended on the city. Within two days the Chinese government had committed itself to US\$5 billion in loans and credits.

Although the China-Africa summit this winter will take place in a very different financial climate, it still holds true that nowhere is China's rapid rise to power more evident than in Africa. And no relationship is more closely scrutinised for what it says about the new face of China – and Africa.

When critics characterise China's engagement in Africa as nothing other than a scramble for resources that disguises a more nefarious agenda, Beijing counters with the fact that its relationship with Africa is bound by a common historical experience and a set of mutual interests as developing regions. It is an argument meant to assure Africans that deepening economic engagement will not devolve into Western style neo-colonialism.

China's urgent desire to distance itself from Western approaches and from charges of imperialism is not only significant for Africa but also for wider claims that Beijing makes about the unique features of its global rise.

In a decade that has seen Chinese-African trade and investment soar to unprecedented levels, with multi-billion dollar investments in oil and minerals, China's economic and political reach is redefining

Africa's traditional ties with the international community. Beijing's economic activism has been mirrored by the deliberate shedding of its traditional temerity in foreign policy towards the region. It has boldly stepped out of the international shadows to take a constructive stance in UN peacekeeping; in exercising quiet influence in the Darfur crisis and, through the diplomatic triumph of the China-Africa Summit in 2006, it has laid a solid foundation for claiming the position as Africa's closest ally.

The past, however, is prologue and for authorities in Beijing the global economic meltdown poses serious challenges for the consolidation of these gains.

With commodity prices falling, puncturing the economic confidence that was just gathering momentum in Africa, the costs to African development ambitions are palpable. While the economic incentives for Chinese involvement remain, this situation comes at a point when China is recognising for the first time the political risks of its broader exposure to the African environment. In the energy sector, its oil interests in Sudan are threatened not by Darfur but by disturbing undercurrents suggesting the possible renewal of conflict between north and south.

There is also the emergence of debate in Africa, echoed in if not fuelled by Western circles, as to whether China is a new imperialist power on the continent. Proponents of this view focus on three dimensions of the relationship, one primarily economic in nature, a second political, and a third related to (depending on one's view) either misperceptions and



Beijing, China: A paramilitary policeman patrols in front of a billboard promoting the 2006 Beijing Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation

xenophobia or deeper social challenges posed by China's growing presence in Africa.

In South Africa, Nigeria, Botswana, Mozambique and other states, African voices from primarily local business and trade unions are raising the alarm as to the dire impact they have felt from Chinese imports and businesses. Indeed, within the most important diplomatic and trade relationship, China and South Africa, this concern has led to a reconsideration of whether to embark upon Free Trade Agreements with China. Reflecting this new wariness, Adebayo Adedji, the former head of the Economic Commission for Africa, has noted that the trade links with Asian economies, where Africa supplies primary commodities and Asia supplies manufactured goods, merely replicate the structural inequities found with traditional Western trading partners.

A second array of concerns surrounds the 'no political strings' approach that has accompanied, or indeed has facilitated, China's breaking into African markets. The norms and values articulated as part of the NEPAD (the New Partnership for Africa's Development) agenda, and incorporated in the African Union's founding constitution, support accountability, human rights and democratic practice. They are crucially dependent on Africans – in partnership with Western states, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and co-operating multinational corporations – implementing them through a range of incentives. The Beijing Consensus challenges this formula and may embolden states, even those not recognised

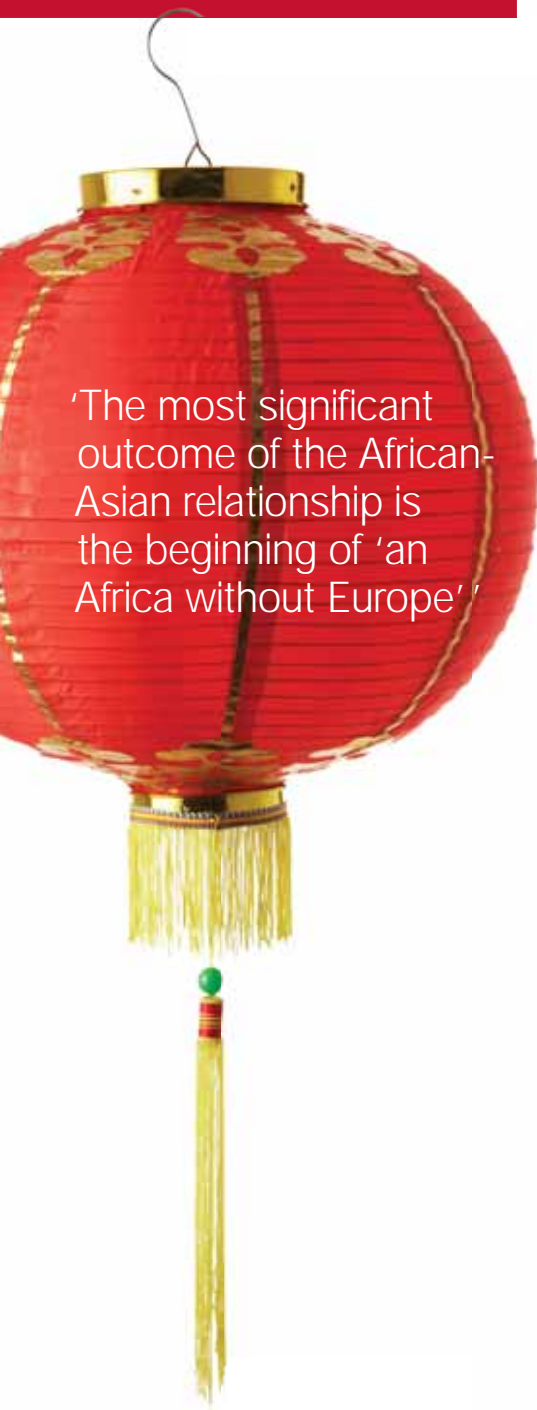
as pariahs, to opt out of the complexities that this introduces to their respective economic and political programmes.

The last concern, murmured more than directly articulated, is that the growing physical presence of Chinese in Africa is merely a prelude to widespread immigration. This is a contemporary version of what used to be called the 'yellow peril' and is based on a fear that Chinese numbers, industriousness and ingenuity will swamp Africa. The Sudanese government, for example, despite its close ties to Beijing, has expressed concern at the failure of thousands of Chinese labourers to renew their work permits and has jointly set up with the Chinese embassy a bureau devoted to handling this problem.

In Nigeria, though much is made of the targeting of Chinese oil workers in the Delta, the more disturbing dimension is how the election of Umaru Yar'Adua inspired a review of existing agreements with Beijing. Though opposition candidate Michael Sata moderated his xenophobic rhetoric in his (unsuccessful) 2008 election campaign, the damage to China's standing within Zambia may be harder to undo. Recalcitrant behaviour of its alleged allies in Khartoum and Harare seems to suggest the limits of Chinese influence and with it the soft power that Beijing claims to be the basis of its actions. And, behind all of this is the violence and instability that is once again engulfing eastern Congo, a country that China has enormous financial stakes in.



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More than anything, it is the rise of China that has introduced new dimensions into relations between the two regions and that is itself indicative of a fundamental change in the pattern of international relations. Linking the foreign policies of all of the major Asia powers – Japan, India and China – is an explicit commitment to multilateralism as well as an insatiable drive for resources to fuel the industrialisation that has sustained their rapid economic growth. The quiet diplomacy of Japan is in contrast to the exuberance with which China has proclaimed its interests and to the flourishing presence of Indian trade and settlement on the continent. For all three, Africa represents a place where their global ambitions can be given expression at the same time as their economic needs are being fulfilled.

Africans, as agents of their own destiny to an extent not seen before, are increasingly deciding the shape that relations with Asian states will take rather than allowing these to be experienced and understood through Western eyes. Relations with China certainly provide an attractive alternative to African governments weary of Western interference and conditionalities. The wholesale adoption of such a position would spell an end to the universalistic ambitions contained within the post Cold War project of challenging the prerogatives of sovereignty through recourse to humanitarianism.

The most significant outcome of the African-Asian relationship is the beginning of 'an Africa without Europe' as a cardinal point of reference for the continent's international relations. With the age of imperialism well and truly gone, a new set of relations can take hold and a new order is emerging in which Europe and the United States are merely bystanders. This impotence is felt perhaps most acutely by Western NGOs, in some ways the contemporary version of imperialism's salvation merchants, for whom the loss of influence over African lives is deeply troubling.

Will the newly acquired economic prowess of Asia and its accompanying political dimensions result in a kind of proxy conflict in Africa, echoing the European conflicts of the 19th and 20th centuries? There are signs that this could be the case, for example, the stiff competition between Japanese, Chinese and Indian companies for commercial rights to oil in Sudan and Angola. Does this indeed mean that Western interests are in decline in Africa? Possibly, but the selective engagement of the United States and the residual presence of European interests will remain a feature of external relations for African states. The much vaunted 'Pacific Century' is at last upon us and it is in Africa, the once forgotten continent, that the dynamics of Asia's rise may be seen most clearly.

For China-Africa relations, the current global economic crisis is a tipping point every bit as important as the financial crisis was to Southeast Asia in 1997. At a time when Western investors are effectively prostrate, maintaining the solid track record of investment in key sectors and expanding support for African development can definitively transform China's ties with Africa, and as it did amongst sceptics within the developing countries of Southeast Asia, can consolidate its standing within the continent and beyond. China has raised the red lantern over Africa and now, to realise its promise of partnership, it must act decisively. ■

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Dr Chris Alden

is a reader in international relations at LSE. He is author of *China in Africa* (Zed 2007) and co-editor of *China Returns to Africa* (Hurst 2008).



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