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Africa Programme Meeting Summary

China and Africa: A Century of Engagement

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Ambassador David Shinn

The speaker presented his new book, *China and Africa: A Century of Engagement*, co-authored with the sinologist Joshua Eisenman. The purpose of the book is to provide a complete story of the China - Africa relationship. There are a number of books written on China - Africa relations, but only a few have looked at all aspects of the relationship, including a historical perspective.

China's interests in Africa

Access to raw materials: One third of Chinese oil imports come from Africa. China also gets a significant amount of raw materials such as minerals so that since 2000, exports to China increased eleven times over. The access to raw material also helps the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to remain in power and strengthen its position.

Access to new markets: China needs to export to new markets to sustain its industrial production. Since 2000, exports to Africa have increase nine times. It only accounts for 4% of global trade, but remains an important number while looking at the rise in a short period of time.

Political influence: China needs the support of all 54 African countries regarding its role in international institutions. It seeks allies in institutions such as the United Nations Security Council and the United Nations Human Rights Council and offers in exchange its support to African countries under World Trade Organization (WTO) disputes and negotiations.

Taiwan: China is seeking diplomatic recognition from all African countries in place of Taiwan. Trade relations with Taiwan are tolerated by the CCP, but not diplomatic recognition. The One-China Principle is a key element of Beijing foreign policy: all countries must only recognise China, and that Taiwan is part of China.

Key statements regarding Chinese relations with Africa

It is not possible to generalize the relationship between China and Africa. Africa has 54 countries so there are many different relationships. However, it is easier for China to deal with 54 countries than it is for the 54 countries to deal among themselves. There is more coherence in the Chinese approach towards African countries than there is in the African Union. For this reason,

China has a tendency to deal with individual countries rather than with the African Union.

Package deals: To access raw materials, China offers package deals wrapped into the agreement – including large amount of aid, security support, infrastructure building, etc. The very nature of the Chinese government allows this system to be efficient. It is mainly state owned companies (SOC) that implement deals that the CCP signs abroad. This allows a wider control of the Chinese government on the fulfilment of their contract and hands on role in the exploitation of raw materials.

A development model? China does not claim to offer an alternative model to development, nor a development model at all. There are elements of influence that African countries can draw from, but they are not taken as a model.

Ruling parties in Africa: Politics in Africa are different from Communist China, but there is a significant relationship between the CCP and many African ruling parties.

Historical trends: From the late 1950s to the early 1970s, China provided strong support to revolutionary movements in Africa. They countered liberal ideas and acted as an influence on African countries seeking an alternative after the independence. From the early 1990s, China's approach to Africa turned to pragmatism in order to promote economic relations with the continent. This was an important change in the Chinese behaviour towards Africa.

Ability to adapt to changing governments: China is skilful when it comes to dealing with a change of government. Compared to the West, the Chinese government quickly adjusts to political changes so as not to impact its economic relations. Libya is a recent exception to the rule, where China was struggling to define its position.

Growing security interests: There is growing interest from China to get involved in security issues in the continent. To secure the exports of raw material and access to the African market, China is deploying more naval vessels along the coast so as not to be dependent on foreign security forces. China is also getting involved in the anti-piracy fight.

The Chinese community in Africa: There are three specific groups of Chinese people in Africa. First, there are the officials, such as embassy staff, head of state owned companies, etc. They are similar to Western expatriates who stay in a country for a short period of time and then move on to the next one.

They interact in Africa the same way Westerners do. The second group is the labour force of major infrastructure projects. They originally came for 2 or 3 years, do not put any effort in learning the language, usually live in Chinese compounds and eat Chinese food. They know that eventually they will go back home. Only a few of them will remain in Africa at the end of their contract. Finally, there are the Chinese traders and small business owners. They come under their own initiative, bring Chinese products to be sold in African countries at cheaper prices and try to build a business life on the continent. They are the group that have the biggest impact on African society and economy.

Future trends

- There is a growing relationship between the CCP and the African governments as they both show continuing interest to maintain and work on the relationship.
- China will remain an alternative economic partner, but not a development model.
- The One-China policy will remain dominant.
- The Chinese will continue efforts to extend their soft power in Africa. They need this tool to tackle critics and to strengthen their projects.
- Chinese investments in Africa will continue to increase and turn to large profit.
- China will keep expending its security interests such as its naval force.
- The mutual perception of China and Africa is improving, but brings both positive and negative interpretations.

Kerry Brown

China and Africa: A Century of Engagement is a comprehensive book which provides the reader with valuable historical background. It gives a new idea of the China - Africa relationship. A few specific elements need to be pointed out:

Soft power: Soft power is an important element at the basis of their relationship and it is not new. In the 1950s and 1960s, China concentrated on revolutions abroad by supporting African initiatives such as student associations. Xinhua news agency has been highly involved in Africa and Confucius institutes are growing exponentially. These are all elements which reveal the nature of the power China can exercise on Africa. The soft power approach also provides evidence of China's future plans in Africa.

Reciprocal interest? China is working hard to promote its image in Africa and soft power is a tool to that end. However, in China there are no signs of a local interest in African cultures. There are no signs of exhibitions, research institutes on Africa, or other projects promoting Africa.

Minerals: The West was largely in control of known resources around the continent, therefore China started taking over the un-wanted areas. This led China to deal with the most difficult areas of the continent to get access to precious sources of raw materials where they are still available. There are new signs of cooperation between the West and China (eg. BP), but there remain few of these examples.

Political dynamics: Since the Arab Spring, China is facing new challenges regarding political relationships with individual countries. Hu Jintao congratulated President Mohammed Morsy for winning the Egyptian elections. On the other hand, China had a long relationship with Libya, which has not been renewed so far.

The EU: The EU does not have any leverage to engage more closely with China. China is being criticised about its environmental impact, neo-colonialist approaches, the sale of small arms and light weapons, prisoner workers, etc. China does not listen to the EU for advice because of their tragic past with Africa. For this reason, China is being seen as an alternative ally to Africa. Chinese pragmatism is being praised by African countries.

Q&A

Question:

Can China achieve its economic objectives without Africa?

Ambassador Shinn:

Looking at the current definition of economic achievement, it seems almost impossible that China can reach that without Africa. China might be able to find oil in other parts of the world, but there will not be enough mineral wealth.

Question:

What is the position of China and the West regarding human rights issues in Sudan?

Question:

Could you elaborate about the Chinese Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) in Sudan?

Ambassador Shinn:

As America had issues with the Sudanese government; China seems to be filling the void. European and American oil concessions have left the country because of the sanctions against the regime. China was therefore the perfect investor for Sudan in the late 1990s. It took over the oil industry, with the help of Malaysia and Canada. From a realist point of view, this is how the world works and China cannot be blamed for that behaviour.

The different approaches to human rights are not the only problem, but more the wider approach towards governance. China's role in Africa is not to encourage freedom of speech, free press and democratization. However, in some cases, the West and China have agreed to disagree.

The state owned enterprises (SOE) system of China allows the CCP to have an advantage over the West. When a SOE is competing against a private sector company, it has better chances of winning the race as it receives government support. It is a fair aspect of the game if you accept the Chinese system of governance.

Question:

Are there enough elements provided by China to make a sustainable development model in Africa?

Ambassador Shinn:

China's investments in large infrastructure projects allow African countries to develop strong support for its economic growth. After the civil war in Angola for example, the government did not receive support from the West but from the Chinese (\$13.5 billion) to quickly rebuild their infrastructures. Although it seems beneficial for both countries, it is more of a win-win-win situation; China getting two wins because in addition to access to Angola's resources, Chinese construction companies built the roads.

The Chinese impact on Africa is sustainable as long as African countries can repay the loan in oil. If they do not have access to raw material, it is more difficult for the country to get out of the debt trap. For example, Ethiopia received large loans from China, but only exports back goods such as sesame seeds and goat skins which do not balance the debt. Ethiopia needs to either ask other countries for financial resources to repay the Chinese loan or ask China for debt cancellation or urgently find oil. Without significant resources, the Chinese system might not be sustainable.

Question:

What can be said about agriculture?

Question:

How much does Chinese military and security involvement interact with the international community?

Ambassador Shinn:

China's involvement in the agriculture sector brought mixed results. Some projects have been successful and other less so, but China has strong knowledge in the field and will be able to share that with the continent.

China works closely with the UN in peacekeeping missions, providing mostly engineers and doctors for specific operations. On the other side, China is

selling a large amount of small arms and light weapons (SALW) to Africa. They are very un-transparent about this business, but it is known that Chinese arms are the cheapest. The Chinese navy on the other hand is growing to become a global navy. They have enough money, technology and support to build their own carriers to take care of their investments.

Question:

How much infrastructure development contributes to international investments?

Question:

There is a lack of appreciation of the Africans in everything that is being discussed. Africa is one more time being treated as 'a tart' to be divided amongst international actors. The Africans also define their interest and their priorities. Africa and the West have a long and difficult history, but China also has a long history with the continent, although more positive. Chinese contracts in a sense are more efficient than the Western solutions because it brings quick results.

Question:

The African people on the ground have an interesting perception of China as what they see are massive buildings being offered to the governments, such as the new parliament building in Lilongwe.

Ambassador Shinn:

Many infrastructure projects contribute to poverty reduction and open up new markets as it allows export products to be transported quickly. Other infrastructure projects such as dams increase people's living standards, and hence have an impact on poverty too.

The parliament building in Malawi was a gift from the CCP to help improve their relationship. In the African streets, there are mixed views about Chinese projects, a large amount of people would perceive their presence positively whereas the textile merchants will not like them for taking over their industry.

Kerry Brown:

Does Chinese investment in Africa create jobs and long-term investments impact? The Forum on China and Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) produces lots of goodwill, but where is the real impact of those meetings? Human rights reports on Chinese presence in Zambia brought negative results, but it seems that China is trying to learn from its mistake and adjust to the problems.

However, Chinese intentions remain fairly unknown and the CCP never opens to more transparency. Indications show the importance of Africa for China, for example President Hu Jintao's son and Premier Wen Jiabao's son are now doing business in Africa.

ABOUT THE SPEAKERS

Ambassador David Shinn served for 37 years in the US Foreign Service with assignments at embassies in Lebanon, Kenya, Tanzania, Mauritania, Cameroon, Sudan and as ambassador to Burkina Faso and Ethiopia. He has been an adjunct professor in the Elliott School of International Affairs at George Washington University since 2001. In addition to being the co-author of *China and Africa: A Century of Engagement*, he is the co-author of the *Historical Dictionary of Ethiopia*. He has a PhD in political science from George Washington University.

Kerry Brown is Head of the Asia Programme at Chatham House and leads the Europe China Research and Advice Network (ECRAN) funded by the European Union. Educated at Cambridge, London and Leeds Universities, he worked in Japan and the Inner Mongolian region of China, before joining the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) in London. He worked in the China Section and then served as First Secretary, Beijing, from 2000-03, and Head of the Indonesia East Timor Section at the FCO from 2003-05.