



Any volume on what has become a controversial subject is to be welcomed. But it is especially so when it reflects the “voice of independent African analysts and activists”. There is growing consternation and anxiety about China’s growing footprint across Africa and what this portends for the continent’s growth and development. However, as a cautionary note and as is implicit in the sub-text of this book, we must guard against caricature and demonisation of China, since this can become an easy substitute for serious debate, research and analysis. As a matter of fact, the threat perception and phobia about China in Africa are largely products of Western inspired hypocrisy and arrogance, which is increasingly finding echoes among Africans themselves. The historical record will show that European and American policies in Africa were characterised by a mixture of exploitation, aggression, hubris and injustice, organised mostly for economic gain and buttressed by political expediency rather than ethical restraint. Whether China will repeat this folly and whether it represents a “new imperialism” in Africa are issues which this book sets out to consider and explore from an African perspective.

Stephen Marks provides a very useful introduction by mapping the key themes

China in Africa

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that animate this debate. He does so in the context of the formal framework of the Forum of China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) inaugurated in 2000 in Beijing. Subsequent strategic summits were held under its banner in Addis Ababa in 2003 and again in Beijing in 2006, which represented the largest gathering of African leaders with their Chinese counterparts and where substantial new commitments were made in increasing development assistance, preferential loans, the quantum of exports, training of African professionals and signing new agreements in communications, energy and resource development, finance and insurance. This forms a basis for posing the critical policy questions that the book’s contributors consider, such as the appropriateness of China’s development

model, and whether China’s permissive non-interference policy provides succour for undemocratic and repressive regimes and egregious human rights violations.

John Rocha’s chapter is a good assessment of China’s increasing sectoral penetration of Africa’s natural resources and the implications this has for the continent’s development prospects. The assessment is made all the richer because of the careful empirical detail which assists an understanding of the parameters of China’s natural resource demand, especially in the oil and natural gas sectors. (China imports 25 per cent of its oil from Africa and oil producing countries such as Nigeria and Angola have been the main beneficiaries of Chinese oil investments.) However, the rent-seeking dynamics unleashed by revenue windfalls have the potential to

undermine commitments to good governance and combating corruption. This is compounded by the poor legal, regulatory and administrative environment prevalent in much of Africa. Rocha correctly points out that how these are addressed and improved must be the responsibility of Africans themselves, with civil society vigilance being an important facilitating factor.

The opportunities and challenges for enhanced civil society engagement are well considered by Ndubisi Obiorah. His balanced review of the main historical markers and ideological guideposts of China’s engagement in Africa is refreshing. China is not only an alternate development model to Washington’s neo-liberal orthodoxy but, given its geo-strategic importance as an emerging global power, China also provides an impetus for a “...return to global multi-polarity in which milieu Africa and the developing countries will have a greater role on the global stage than they currently do” (p. 40). Nevertheless, the salutary developmental, commercial and political gains that flow from China’s emergence should not mask problematic dimensions of the engagement. Obiorah highlights challenges for democratisation, human rights, trade, security, and development policy as warranting calls for greater civil society

activism, monitoring and oversight. This is *a fortiori* more of an imperative since civil society is the last bulwark of protection against their erosion and compromise: “A common African response is more likely at the civil society level where there is often more mutuality of concerns about human rights, democracy, and labour and trade issues” (p. 49).

Anabela Lemos and Daniel Robero open a window on local business practices in Mozambique by highlighting the damaging effects which unsustainable logging has had in the Zambezia province. Deforestation has become known as “the Chinese takeaway”! (p. 65). And despite high economic, environmental and social risks, China’s Ex-Im Bank has agreed to underwrite construction of the Mpanda Nkuwa dam which will “...undermine years of restoration work in the Zambezi delta” (p. 67). Similar concerns inform Ali Askouri’s critical analysis of China’s complex engagement matrix in Sudan, where it has filled a strategic void left by prolonged Western sanctions. Besides massive infrastructure development worth US\$20 billion (p. 75) to secure its oil interests, it is argued that “...Chinese economic aid to the Sudanese junta has come at an extremely high human cost in Southern Sudan and

Darfur...” (p. 74). And with Sudan’s Merowe dam project, which is a Chinese joint venture, more than 50,000 small farmers will be displaced from the fertile Nile valley to more arid locations.

Although the chapter by Michelle Chan-Fishel on environmental impact comes much later, it could usefully have been clustered with these case studies. She provides a broad overview of the environment-sector-country nexus by examining oil and gas exploration, minerals extraction and trade in timber. On the basis of this evidence, she comes to the conclusion that “Chinese companies are quickly generating the same kind of environmental damage and community opposition that Western companies have spawned around the world” (p. 148). In the tragic case of Zimbabwe, John Blessing Karumbidza is concerned with the contradictory dynamics of a “Look East” policy in an environment of institutional paralysis, political repression and political decay. Chinese investment is important since, for Mugabe, it reduces “Zimbabwe’s vulnerability to the pressure and political manipulation of the West” (p. 95), but yet the country “lacks the institutional and strategic infrastructure to effect requisite economic transformation and will have

difficulty putting Chinese development loans to good use” (p. 96).

The normative challenges and imperatives of ensuring mutual benefit, equity and partnership will be the anvil on which Africa’s relations with China continue to be forged. Thus, as Moreblessing Chidaushe argues, the calculus of costs and benefits of Western vs Chinese development aid and trade must be carefully weighed and, moreover, in a manner that is not prejudicial to Africa’s interests. Horace Campbell provides an illuminating and insightful tour of the geo-political landscape that has defined China’s relations with Africa. In his view, “Africans everywhere are seeking to make the break with the iterations of war and plunder and have instinctively reached out to China” (p. 121). This is especially of concern to the United States, since its global hegemony will increasingly be contested by the establishment of new Chinese alliances across a broad spectrum of countries and regions but particularly with Africa and Latin America. Crucially, for Campbell, “African peoples and governments are not passive bystanders in the global struggles for a multipolar world” (p. 134), and over the long run, “...it will be their task to ensure that the relations between Africa and China

do not repeat relations, but broader and coinciding Goethe centuries of underdevelopment and exploitation” (p. 136).

China matters to Africa because in the words of Daniel Large, in the final chapter, “...it is there to stay. China’s engagement with Africa will persist and deepen...” (p. 157). African resources, trade, development and investment will continue to be important vectors in determining future strategic interests that demand reshaping and reforming the asymmetric topography of international relations are also important normative underpinnings in the Sino-African interface.

This book thus stands as an important and timely contribution to the China-in-Africa debate for two main reasons. Firstly, it brings together thoughtful, reflective and thematically rich commentary and perspectives on a very complex subject by an informed cross-section of authors. Secondly, this is done in a measured, critical, and well-balanced manner.

