China-Africa Relations: Cooperation or Exploitation?

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The increasingly pronounced presence of China on the African continent and the new global geopolitics cannot fail to interest the African scientific community. Clearly, Africa holds an important or even central place in this new strategy, whose direction seems to have been taken since the liberalization of the Chinese economy. This presence is indicative of the ambition and overall strategic vision aimed at making this country, in a short or medium term, the undisputed world leader, by combining political authoritarianism and economic pragmatism.

The idea is to go beyond China's desire to access African resources that it actually needs to sustain its economic development and reflect on wider implications of this engagement. It should be noted that trade between Africa and China increased by 45 per cent between 2007 and 2008 due to the mineral and energy resources. This trend should not be encouraged because it is certainly unsustainable and dangerous, the overexploitation of resources is detrimental to Africa's future generations.

China-Africa cooperation versus cooperation with the European Union

President Kohler's comments, in response to President Museveni on a visit to Germany, which were reported by *The New Vision* newspaper (18 June 2009), are instructive: 'We need a meeting with a few African Presidents to discuss the implementation of this new cooperation. We do not want to make the same mistakes Europe made during the colonial period.' By investing heavily in infrastructure, is China redirecting cooperation with Africa? How will the European Union and North America preserve their presence and influence in Africa and the world in light of China's engagement? How can Africa benefit from this new geopolitical and economic situation by emphasizing infrastructure financing? How should Africa regard itself in the world?

It is probably at this level that an alternative vision should be found. If there is any change in global leadership with the emergence of new powers such as China, Africa needs to reposition itself and abandon lack of awareness of the potential it represents. Africa needs a new quality of political leadership with a clear awareness of the challenges of the future. What does China's behaviour demonstrated through bypassing Africa's structures such as the African Union mean? Is it banking on Africa's known weaknesses essentially its fragmentation or lack of unity? How should African countries respond to this approach that is likely to play one country against the other?

The impact of China on governance in Africa

Do cooperation agreements that underpin and provide a framework for the presence of China in Africa contribute to good governance, transparency and accountability? Does China's aggressive presence rely on a lack of transparency in contracts that favours foreign interests to the detriment of national interests as evidenced by the case of Assane Diouf stadium in Dakar, Senegal? Should we see in this new order the danger to weaken the African civil society organizations, embolden bad governance, disconnect the political and state powers from populations, from their interests, and simply from the national interest? Is there a possible danger to the democratization process since what were generally thought to be conventional conditionalities from the West (respect for human rights, democracy) does not seem to be an obstacle to China?

Who benefits from cooperation with China?

The impact on political governance is not unrelated to economic governance. Will the opening of African markets to Chinese power, in a short or medium term, be accompanied by a disintegration of African economies, hampered by the inability to sustain the competition? Will the craft sector, small and medium enterprises be able to cope in the face of the Asian giant that sells what poor people in Africa can purchase? How do relations between China and Africa include or exclude the private sector? What kind of relationship exists between the state and the private sector against China? What kind of economic intelligence is developed by African states in the face of such a situation? How is the reality of the fragmentation of Africa's national interest by the presence of China to be mitigated?

A lesson to learn: The role of the State

However, the Chinese experience includes a lesson: the market cannot substitute for the State to ensure the development of a country. This lesson is reinforced by the consequences of the global financial crisis which put states on the front line to save national economies. The visible and front line actor in Africa seems to be the Chinese government, which is unfolding its strategic plan for effective leadership! What can we learn from the Chinese experience? How can we document it and use it to Africa's advantage?

Such issues are crucial for the future of the continent and the place of Africa in the world, because they involve in one way or another the quality of leadership, governance, the ability of our societies to cope with constraints, to adjust and to project over time. CODESRIA should help to tackle such issues.