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# THE AFRICAN DIMENSION OF GLOBALIZATION

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## TAPPING INTO THE BACKLASH AGAINST THE WASHINGTON CONSENSUS: CHINESE ENGAGEMENT IN AFRICA

Viktória Orbán

*At the beginning of the twenty-first century the normative vision of the United States and her Western allies is being increasingly challenged, both through the developing world's disenchantment with the Washington Consensus and the rise of alternative powers with divergent political ideals. In Sub-Saharan Africa, China has emerged as such an alternative actor, offering a route to wealth that is grounded in the vitality of her economy and her belief in the defence of national sovereignty. She advances her interests through a set of policies that are more pragmatic and flexible, and that encourage steady innovation rather than a one-size-fits-all neoliberal vision of development. Such policies have generated a sense of encroachment in the West, illustrating the emergence of a normative conflict, which has the potential to undermine the universality the neoliberal model claims.*

**Keywords:** *international relations, Beijing Consensus, Washington Consensus, Africa, multilateralism, normative conflict.*

The United States emerged from the Cold War as the world's sole superpower, universalizing the political ideology around which they and allies constructed their international relations. In essence, this hegemonic Western vision was based on free market economies and liberal democratic politics. For North-South relations it entailed the export of these values through a nexus between development, security, human rights, and trade liberalization.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century the normative vision of the United States is being increasingly challenged, both through the developing world's disillusionment with the Washington Consensus and the rise of alternative powers with divergent political ideals.

China has significantly expanded its international presence after the end of the bipolar era, and represents such an alternative actor. It pursues an economically-oriented and pragmatic foreign policy, informed by the principles of non-interference and national sovereignty and does not seek to transform other states in its image.

Beijing's recent engagement in Africa has generated fears of encroachment in the West, and illustrates the emergence of a normative conflict, which in the longer term is likely to undermine the very universality the neoliberal model claims.

This paper explores this proposition, first by discussing the strategic concerns that drive the 'new scramble' for Africa, second by analyzing the divergent ideological frameworks through which these concerns are filtered, and third by looking at African perceptions on the increased activity on the continent.

### **The 'Scramble for Africa': A New Sense of Vulnerability for the West**

The African resources have contributed to the economic development and political success of the Western powers. As China aims at following their example in ascending to great power status, her rising demand for oil and other riches of the African continent has increasingly become the source of both academic curiosity, and the re-engagement of Europe and the USA. By the second half of the 2000s, China ranked as Africa's second largest trading partner, next to the United States and ahead of Britain and France (Lagerkvist 2009; Lumumba-Kasongo 2011).

Global trade and exchange patterns have changed little despite the emergence of new actors, reproducing the classic colonial skewed pattern: raw materials in exchange for capital and manufactured products (Melber 2008). Even though the increasing engagement of China and other BRICs offers little hope to free Africa from her resource curse, their growing presence has complicated the struggle between the United States and Europe over 'who controls Africa'.

The continent temporarily lost a strategic appeal following the demise of the Soviet empire, leading to its marginalization in the global economy (Edoho 2011), which manifests in a dramatic fall in Western foreign direct investment, trade, and financial and technical assistance, along with the diminished bargaining power of African governments. The vacuum left by the Western disengagement in the 1990s was filled by emerging powers; most notably China, who under Jiang Zemin abandoned the ideological zeal of the 1960s and 1970s in favour of a new economic pragmatism underpinned by the worldwide commodities boom (Fijalkowski 2011; Cohen 2008).

This new courtship for Africa highlighted that beyond being the least developed continent in the world, with the most external debt and the largest concentration of politically unstable, autocratic regimes, Africa has a large market with a population of over one billion people and a high concentration of natural resources, especially oil, non-ferrous metals and fisheries. Considered to be one of the main growing sources of the future global oil supply (Zhao 2007), Africa has no insignificant potential as countries seek to diversify their energy supply away from the Middle East in a post-9/11 world (Cohen 2003), and intensified resource competition is driving up prices in international markets (Cheng and Shi 2009).

Aside these not all too different strategic interests Europe, the USA and China share on the continent, the European Union is particularly concerned with maintaining its historic relations with the former colonies, and sees Africa as a potential venue to develop itself into a significant international actor through the involvement in conflict prevention and management via the CFSP and the ESDP (Olsen 2004). Formal mechanisms for engaging with the continent include the Cotonou Partnership Agreement of 2000, which facilitates sub-Saharan aid and trade co-operation; the Barcelona Process of 1995, which coordinates relations with the Mediterranean littoral states of the Maghreb and Mashriq; and the EU-Africa Summit instituted in 2000. Sufficiently concerned about encroachment in Africa, former colonial powers, Britain and France in particular,

pushed to reconcile member-state interests and create a continent-wide approach, embodied in the Joint EU-Africa Strategy of 2007 (Campbell 2008).

Counterterrorism policies and a new strategy of military deployment are an additional reason for the US re-engagement in Africa after September 11 (Shinn 2009; Nyang 2005). Accordingly the US military's new Africa Combat Command was established in 2007, to harmonize responsibilities previously scattered among various bases and commands (Pham 2008). Until the end of the decade there have been no significant attempts to design long-term political strategies toward the continent (Fulford 2009); agreements to govern US-African relations included the African Growth and Opportunity Act of 2000, aimed at facilitating Sub-Saharan aid and trade cooperation; and aid initiatives such as the Millennium Challenge Corporation. The Obama-administration unveiled a more coherent plan in the Strategy toward Sub-Saharan Africa in mid-2012.

Economic expansion rather than military supremacy is the primary goal of China's Africa safari: she needs to raise the living standards of her enormous population in order to quiet critical voices and sustain her political rhetoric in the face of burgeoning capitalism (Hofstedt 2009). She also relies on Africa for improving her diplomatic standing in the world, pushing for the recognition of the one China policy (Shinn 2009). The lynchpin of the Chinese engagement in Africa is the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, commenced in 2000, and complemented with the White Paper on China's African Policy of 2006.

Incumbent powers observed the economic expansion of the newcomer with suspicion, and responded with overwhelmingly negative campaigns; actual Chinese influence over the continent however remains limited (for an analysis on trade volumes see LaFargue 2009). Given their longstanding market connections and extensive aid programmes, the United States and the European Union have a significant advantage over China in Africa, estimated to dominate about 70 per cent of the African market (Cheng and Shi 2009).

Such analyses suggest, similar to the debate exclusively focused on China's exploitative practices in Africa, rather than the role played by a variety of emergent actors on the continent, including India, Brazil, and countries of the Persian Gulf, who all play according to the rules of the game; that the main challenge the EU and the US are facing in the 'new scramble for Africa', is not necessarily one of zero-sum economics (see Marton and Matura 2011), but one of zero-sum ideological collision, giving rise to a normative conflict that calls the hegemonic Western ideological construct of the international system into question.

### **Africa and the West: The Old Donor-Recipient Relationship**

Even though the scope of their engagement and their foreign policy goals are often at odds with each other, both the United States and the European Union build their political rhetoric around the same normative ideology (see Huber 2008), which is unambiguously focused on the promotion of democratic governance, human rights, and growth-oriented economic policies, and has come to dominate international settings after the end of the Cold War.

The post-bipolar ideological hegemony of Western values is achieved through the integration of third countries into a neoliberal international order through the export of American and European models of political and economic development, which univer-

salizes their unique historical experiences and represents them as a natural – and uncontested – process of evolution.

This model is by definition developmentalist and offers a comprehensive model for achieving economic, social and political progress toward the desired outcome. North-South interaction is premised on a hierarchy between states who have successfully integrated into the normative order and those who are ‘developing’ toward doing so. The asymmetry of these relationships is represented in those political conditionalities that facilitate exchange relations. Within this context, Africa is perceived as something to be developed (Schoeman 2008): a problematic area unable to conform to Western standards without the aid of a benevolent parent, invoking both the moral responsibility of the North for intervention and the South's duty to heed external advice. This normative model resulted in a one-sided, often charity-based approach toward the South in the foreign policies of Western states.

The transformative power of the neoliberal construct significantly increased with the conceptual merger of development and security (see Duffield 2001), enabled by the expanded room for manoeuvre of the First World both within international organizations and in her bilateral ties, following the short but glorious ‘unipolar moment’ (Krauthammer 1990) of the liberal camp in the ‘90s, that ousted the Cold War standard of non-interference’ (Wissenbach 2009).

As normative powers pursuing universalistic agendas, both the EU and the USA rely on multilateral diplomacy, filtering their policies through a variety of international organizations, and engaging with other countries on the supranational level, for instance through the African Union, despite its limited capacity. Both are concerned about their public image and advocate measures of transparency; and cultivate extensive contacts with civil society, labour unions, NGOs and local opposition parties in third countries. Another characteristic that distinguishes Western hegemonic powers' foreign policies from the Chinese vision of international politics, that rises together with the PRC, is that both the USA and the EU have, due to their political structures, a limited capacity to promote long-term strategic thinking and form broad coalitions behind policy agendas.

A look at the Chinese policies in Africa offers quite a different picture of what is desirable for the continent's future, and the broader international order it is embedded within.

### **Africa and China: A Commercially Driven and High-Profile Partnership**

The PRC has consistently rejected the Western neoliberal construct and also does so in its foreign policy rhetoric; emphasizing – rather than development, human rights and peace-building – political equality, mutual benefit, sovereignty, non-interference and win-win cooperation. In the relations with Southern countries China presents itself as the world's largest developing country and a state with no colonial past (Alden and Large 2011; Carbone 2011). China provides a model of economic growth that operates without involvement of foreign advisors and multilateral agencies; and does not require contribution to global public goods. While it has little to offer for states more democratic than the PRC, it represents an alternative route to wealth that is very appealing for semi-authoritarian regimes of the Third World.

Some observers have labelled this alternative project of economic pragmatism as the ‘Beijing Consensus’ (see Ramo 2004), the reality, however, is that the PRC has no global vision to offer comparable to the Washington system, but pursues a rather nar-

row nationalist agenda, based on re-unification and the unobstructed rise of China, emphasizing particularity and encouraging no one to emulate its behaviour (see Wei 2012). That is to say, China's vision is one of interstate power politics that could transplant international relations back to what they used to be before the Fourteen Wilsonian Points were proclaimed.

As the continuity of its rule depends on the CPC's ability to impose social order domestically, Beijing emphasizes the principle of non-interference in the foreign relations, and regards national sovereignty as pre-empting individual human rights (Hofstedt 2009), a position warmly welcomed by a host of African governments criticized by the EU and the USA for their unwillingness to comply with the Western democratic standards. China's veto power in the Security Council makes this promise even more attractive, and the only conditionality its political and economic support is subject to is the acceptance of its one China policy (Carbone 2011). Unlike Western powers, China makes little effort to establish close ties with members of civil society in the host country, rather exclusively aims at maintaining relationships with ruling elites, resulting in a less sophisticated and less pervasive political presence in Africa than its economic prowess would allow (Shinn 2009; Hofstedt 2009).

China aims at strengthening its positions in Africa without committing to the ideological nexus between security, good governance, human rights and development; the alternative practices it employs were therefore perceived by the Western actors as undermining the normative basis of their engagement.

Chinese assistance to Africa for instance has attracted widespread criticism for eroding prevailing debt management regimes (Carbone 2011; Shinn 2009). Western aid mostly comes in the form of grants and is used for democratization efforts, public health initiatives, and the improvement of regulatory systems. Beijing, on the other hand, offers low-interest loans tied to large infrastructure projects executed by the Chinese companies, often on the basis of repayment through natural resource exports. It provides new loans to debt relieved countries; and underbids international institutions without any of the usual terms imposed by the IMF and the World Bank, weakening Western leverage over African economies (Campbell 2008). Angola's government, for example, turned to the IMF after the civil war for reconstruction funds, but discontinued negotiations after it received a US\$2 billion counter-offer from China's export-credit agency, Exim Bank. Rather than humiliating anti-corruption measures, the deal came with a 1.5 per cent interest rate and a repayment period of over 17 years, tied to an agreement to export crude oil to the PRC, as well as the award of substantial construction contracts (Taylor 2007).

The USA and the EU have also been concerned about Beijing's non-interference policy that clashes with their human rights agenda, accusing the PRC of supporting rogue states. China supplied fighter aircrafts, air-defence systems, military vehicles and electronic surveillance gear to Zimbabwe under sanctions imposed by both entities; it provided assistance to the Sudanese government in establishing three weapons factories thereby undermining the effectiveness of the UN arms embargo; and traded arms to both parties in the conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea (see Hofstedt 2009; Edoho 2011).

The Chinese way of engagement on the African continent is uncomfortable for Western powers as it operates from a different ideological platform than the development-security paradigm. Western governments view Chinese actions with suspicion, somewhat hypocritically portraying them as a 'bad influence' that has the potential to

undermine 'years of international efforts to link aid to better governance', or as a prop for 'dangerous regimes, producing a new cycle of unsustainable debt' (Schoeman 2008); in short, presenting the Chinese disregard for Western human rights standards as an anomaly within the international system, rather than a competing ideological claim.

However, as long as autocratic regimes are eager to walk the alternative Chinese path to wealth, which privileges economic growth over political freedoms, the erosion of universalistic Western norms is likely to continue.

### **'The Choice between the Pest and the Cholera'**

Regardless of the Western concerns over the breakdown of the Washington Consensus, and Europe's and the United States' new sense of encroachment, African leaders almost universally welcomed China's expanded engagement on the continent. They see in Beijing an alternative source of financial assistance and political support, as well as a success story in that it has risen from backwardness to fabulous economic growth, without submitting to the prescriptions of the West (Kopinski, Polus, and Taylor 2011). China has no heavy colonial baggage like the Europeans, and did not make itself unpopular with a war on terror as the United States. It has not been identified with structural adjustment programmes, high trade barriers and agriculture subsidies. Western diplomacy is perceived as uncompromising and dogmatic, and the PRC does not have to exert itself to attract partners in Africa (Campbell 2008; Wissenbach 2009).

President Museveni of Uganda, for example, remarked that 'the Western ruling groups are conceited, full of themselves, ignorant of our conditions, and they make other people's business their business. Whereas the Chinese just deal with you, you represent your country, they represent their own interests, and you do business' (Akaki 2008). President Mogae of Botswana also said that 'I find that the Chinese treat us as equals. The West treats us as former subjects (read slaves). Which is a reality. I prefer the attitude of the Chinese to that of the West' (Akaki 2008).

The disjuncture between elite and popular perceptions, however, has been profound (Shinn 2009; Wissenbach 2009): members of civil society, labour unions, NGOs and opposition parties are far more skeptical about the PRC's engagement on the continent. China is accused of maltreating African workers, loose safety regulations, poor environmental standards, and the import of unqualified Chinese labour destroying local employment opportunities. President Hu had to cancel a visit to the Zambian Copperbelt in 2006 for fears that the workers would revolt (Hitchens 2008). Local traders and manufacturers had to close down businesses because of the Chinese competition. In 2004, for example, Senegalese shopkeepers protested against Chinese enterprises, setting several shops on fire and demanding the government to suspend the issuance of visas to Chinese people. The suspension of uncompetitive local textile mills has provoked demonstrations in South Africa, prompting President Mbeki to warn that the continent 'may become a Chinese colony' (Hofstedt 2009).

The alternative choice China represents does not necessarily improve governance (Melber 2008). Beijing has avoided calls for transparency and accountability that Western governments demand. The Chinese position is appealing for autocratic regimes and oligarchies (Taylor 2007), turning the PRC into a 'lesser evil' and a preferred partner for many African governments. Sudan and Zimbabwe, two countries perceived as rogue states by the West are good examples. Angola, Algeria, the DRC, the Republic of the Congo, Niger, Zambia, Mauritania, Eritrea, Guinea-Bissau and the Comoro Islands also

maintain warm relations with the PRC, and even traditional allies of the United States, such as Ethiopia and Kenya, are opening up to the newcomer (Shinn 2009).

In order to supervise the Chinese penetration of the African continent Western powers have attempted to engage Beijing in co-operative multilateral frameworks. President Obama said the two countries should seek to find common ground upon which they can better contribute to Africa's development (Shinn 2009). The European Commission went further, and proposed trilateral development cooperation with China and the AU in 2008 (see European Commission 2008). Neither China nor Africa responded with the same enthusiasm: China saw the proposal as a vehicle for the promotion of the EU's normative agenda and had a preference for bilateralism in its foreign relations, while African leaders felt it would complicate their pragmatic relationship with Beijing and decrease their ability to play out donors against each other (Wissenbach 2009; Carbone 2011).

Despite their efforts, Western powers have failed to make China accept their normative ideology, and as Beijing found a new constituency in the neopatrimonial regimes of Africa, are even less likely to do so in the future. Diverging conceptual frameworks between the West and China effectively undermine any attempt for serious cooperation intended to improve the livelihood of the peoples of Africa.

### **The End of the New World Order and the Beginning of a New Multilateralism**

What is new is the prospect of a rising China undermining the hegemony of Western normative frameworks in shaping the future of the African continent. Beijing's political ideology is incompatible with Western democracy. It offers an alternative route to wealth, grounded in the vitality of its economy and the belief in the defence of national sovereignty. China advances its interests through a set of policies that are more pragmatic and flexible, and that encourage steady innovation rather than a one-size-fits-all neoliberal vision of development. China uses its seat in international organizations to defend and indebt its client states, such as Sudan, and the diplomatic support it receives in return from African countries provides with further leverage on the world political scene. China constructs a sphere of influence within the global periphery, and extracts its raw materials to fuel its own economic expansion. The rhetoric of South-South cooperation disguises the power asymmetries between Beijing and African states, even though the PRC's per capita GDP is far below that of some of its partners.

Unlike in the West, here China's authoritarian model of rapid growth has its appeal, aligning non-democratic regimes closer with the PRC. The beneficiaries of her engagement are primarily local elites, while African people are shouldering the burden of the corrupt practices Chinese pragmatism creates.

Owing to China's new interest in the region, Western powers have discovered that Africa is not merely a continent of poverty and desolation, but a collective of one billion potential business partners. The European Union and the United States have increased their activities in the area since the beginning of the twenty-first century in a 'new scramble' for influence over Africa. In an attempt to isolate the PRC from their traditional partners, they have portrayed Chinese behaviour as an anomaly within the existing international system.

It might, however, be the case that we are about to witness a new aspect of multilateralism, a political framework that instead of being based on the cooperative order of states embracing the same neoliberal creed, breaks up the universalistic ideology which

underpins the position of the United States as a hegemonic power. Multilateralism then would imply a political construct in which competing normative systems co-exist, structuring international interactions in more particularistic ways, as global influence is diffused between different actors of comparable strength. The purpose is not necessarily to re-cast the West's normative ideology into another shape, but to escape its universalistic demands. Whether this attempt is to succeed remains to be seen, it is, however, conditional upon Chinese ascendancy to hegemonic status.

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