

China in Africa: 'New' South-South cooperation and the issue of state sovereignty

JOHAN LAGERKVIST¹

1. The research design

China's expanding and deepening economic and political relations with African countries, illustrated by trade soaring from \$5.5 billion in 1998 to \$106.8 billion in 2008, have received much attention from media and policy-makers in recent years. New forms of Sino-African partnerships are redrawing the geopolitical map of Africa. These changes have far-reaching implications for energy security and the existing foreign aid and development paradigm, all of which have impacts on North-South relations in the international system. Yet, what this interaction actually means for South-South cooperation and power distribution between developing countries remains poorly understood. Spanning the issue of state sovereignty at both ends of the Sino-African bilateral spectrum, this project's research problem concerns China's longstanding policy of state sovereignty arguably undergoing erosion, and implications of "new" South-South cooperation for the already fragile sovereignty of many African states. The purpose is to critically investigate the impact of Sino-African relations on transformations of Chinese and African conceptions and practices of state

sovereignty; on South-South cooperation; and on aspects of the foreign policy process in China. For China, its African engagement is faced with difficulties as the Chinese government, broader foreign policy establishment, and companies may have underestimated simmering conflicts, security threats, and weaknesses of political systems in African countries. They have become exposed to, and entangled in, local conflicts to an extent not fully anticipated. The hypothesis is that China's position on non-interference in other countries' affairs is bound to change due to deeper involvement in African economies and societies, and that the hitherto positive discourse in Africa on China as an alternative partner, strengthening rather than reducing state sovereignty (when compared to the IMF, the World Bank and OECD countries) will shift toward more negative views. There are emerging realizations among African civil society organizations, echoed in statements by some leaders of government, that China is in Africa first and foremost to enhance its own national interests (Kitissou 2007; Manji and Marks 2007). Most analyses of Sino-African relations are still at the aggregate level, hiding country-level specifics. Therefore, testing the hypothesis in greater granularity requires going beyond statistics and government policy papers conducting in-depth fieldwork in both China and Africa. In this project, Zambia and Sudan are chosen as case studies as they have particularly strong economic ties and complex relations with China. The differences between Zambia and Sudan allow for a valuable comparative analysis, as the former is a fledgling democracy where China must adapt to a vocal civil society and local politics, whereas the latter is an unstable autocracy where the crux is intrastate violence, potential regional

¹ Johan Lagerkvist är fil. dr i kinesiska och seniorforskarare vid Utrikespolitiska institutet.

succession, and international condemnation.

2. The research questions

Following the research problem and hypothesis, the questions guiding the fieldwork to be conducted in China, Zambia, and Sudan are:

- How do Chinese officials at the State Council and provincial level, analysts at the Foreign Ministry, and executives of banks and resource extracting companies evaluate the benefits and risks of operations in Zambia and Sudan – particularly regarding the issue of local rule and state sovereignty?
- What are Chinese, Zambian and Sudanese officials, and civil society leaders' views on “new” South-South cooperation and its consequences for state sovereignty?
- How is public opinion in China, Zambia, and Sudan perceiving China's presence in Africa?

With China's increasing trade with African countries, of which some, such as Sudan, are international pariah states, Western governments, development agencies, NGOs, and financial institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank have worried about China's impact on sustainable development and human rights. In both Zambia and Sudan, local sovereign prerogatives over farmland, natural resources, and multi-facility economic zones are leased and traded for infrastructure, investment, foreign aid and manufactured goods. Answering these research questions is particularly important, as it is likely that the dangers posed by a China that is not interfering in other countries is a lesser problem for African societies, than the increasing temptation for various Chinese

actors to interfere in local politics to protect their interests.

3. The research field

During the much-highlighted 2006 Beijing meeting of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) between 48 African heads of state and government leaders together with Chinese top leaders, China promised to double aid, provide interest-free and preferential loans worth \$3 billion to develop infrastructure, and sign debt relief agreements with 33 African countries. The proceedings and the outcome of the FOCAC summit meetings give credence to the view that the South-South dimension in world affairs is growing. As already the first FOCAC declaration of 2000 articulated, in line with previous statements from developing world forums such as the meetings of G-77 and the non-aligned movement, there was among the parties “a common understanding on the establishment of a new international political and economic order” (Liu 2007). After the 2006 FOCAC meeting, China-Africa relations caught scholarly attention, yet with a few exceptions the field remains understudied, particularly regarding the issue of sovereignty. Interest has mostly focused on natural resource trade, foreign aid, soft power diplomacy and related strategic geopolitical issues. Overall, perspectives on Chinese-African relations can roughly be divided into three kinds. First, is the nuanced kind that can be characterized as cautiously optimistic (Alden et al 2008; Melber and Southall 2009). These scholars think it is yet too early to issue a verdict, although the potential deficiencies of China's state-centered engagement with African countries are singled out. Accountability and transparency are viewed as particularly

problematic, far from being “core values” in Sino-African co-operation (Melber 2007). Second, there are analysts harboring a normatively skeptical perspective (Eisenman et al 2007; Kleine-Ahlbrandt and Small 2007), pointing to China naturally not being prepared to support civil liberties and rights in Africa beyond those it provides to its own citizens. This category of observers argues that China, therefore, is exporting some of its most dysfunctional domestic practices, including corruption, bad lending, and disregard for labor rights. Third, is a more optimistic perspective (Mahmoud 2007; Sautman and Yan 2009; Brautigam 2010) that wants to highlight Chinese successes in Africa and dispel sensationalist press reports about Chinese “neo-colonialism.” Some researchers and observers have noticed that Chinese experts are invited to developing countries to lecture about China’s experience. It is, however, debatable and probably premature to declare that China’s soft power diplomacy has scored massive success among all social strata in sub-Saharan Africa. And arguments about the success of Chinese soft power in Africa are questionable unless a lucid methodological fieldwork design is used to seriously probe the issue if China should be viewed as a long-term new model and savior for the developing world. There are too many discrepancies between results from research using either qualitative or quantitative methods to render that particular conclusion valid. The extensive empirical evidence, primarily in the form of unique interview data, from China, Zambia, and Sudan collected in this project will be of high value, as there exist few in-depth detailed studies of these particular bilateral relationships in the research field. Regarding the issue of state sovereignty even more so. This will reveal

both the national dynamic of China’s presence in two very different African settings, and more broadly the Chinese government’s responsiveness toward domestic Chinese, Zambian, Sudanese, and international public opinion regarding China’s engagement with Africa.

4. Theoretical framework

This project is informed by, and will in descending order contribute to, three theoretical debates. First, the overarching debate focuses the issue of state sovereignty in world politics. By way of empirically analyzing the evolving Chinese and African conceptions of state sovereignty, the study will connect a real world problem to the theoretical literature of eroded, or enduring state sovereignty when the locus of political power shifts due to globalization and new political authorities (Krasner 1999; Bartelson 2008; Walker 2010). China’s evolving stance on Westphalian near absolute sovereignty, first outlined in 1954 in the Five Principles of Co-existence is under-researched, sorely lacking in empirical evidence. On the relationship between China’s longstanding notion on sovereignty and foreign policy, one scholar argues: “...we should understand China’s developing world policies in essentially domestic terms – that is to say as a source of support for China’s sovereignty and internal security” (Gurtov 2010). In this project I contest that view, as to the contrary it is the “going out strategy” and Chinese investments in developing countries that undermines China’s principle on sovereignty. This principle is increasingly challenged both by China’s behavior overseas in poor countries, and by parts of the Chinese foreign policy establishment, as well as from both domestic and international public opinion. Actually, it

was due to these factors that China's position on non-interference during the 1990s differed between rhetoric and practice (Carson 2002). Likewise, the fragility of African state sovereignty impacted by globalization has been given scant scholarly attention (Mangala 2008). Some scholars have even called African countries "quasi-states" (Jackson 1990), which testifies to their weak state capacities and difficulties to control cross-border flows of narcotics, arms and people, build their nations, and protect their citizens. Second, the project will generate input into the still normative debate on the conditions of South-South cooperation as inherently good for developing countries. Contrary to "old" ideological South-South cooperation, which focused on ideas of dependency, anti-imperialism, and equal sovereignty between states (Frank 1979; Vivekananda and Abegunrin 1998), "new" South-South relations are becoming more complex (Melber and Southall 2009). They have transformed from advocating socialist solidarity and the establishment of a new international economic order (NIEO), to instead incorporate pragmatic notions of capitalist efficiency, "win-win," whereby the investments of rapidly emerging Southern investors and donors such as China, India, and Brazil are actively sought. Beyond the rhetoric of having mutual interests, there has now for decades been a growing asymmetry between big developing countries and small nations trapped by the resource curse (Lowell and Dittmer 2010), only accelerating in recent years. Even after the death of the prospect to set up the NIEO, documents released from UN conferences continue to profess the particular virtues of South-South cooperation. It has been argued, though, that the grand sloganeering synonymous with the NIEO

should be avoided if South-South cooperation is to be meaningful, and a more concrete agenda articulated (Alden and Vieira 2005). Although China's African Policy Paper of 2006 mentions the NIEO in positive wordings, the document displays tension between South-South cooperation and the "pragmatic cooperation" emphasized by the FOCAC meetings. For a global economic powerhouse like China, holding \$2.4 Trillions in foreign currency reserves, being the world's biggest exporter of goods and services, and the number two economy in the world after the United States, maintaining an image as a poor developing country committed to speaking for the world's poor rings hollow. In worst-case scenarios, increased South-South investment from East Asian countries and India may lead to dependency and delayed African industrialization (OECD 2006). A more positive outlook points to how Chinese designed multi-facility economic zones will become havens for local growth and rising employment leading to a take-off for African industry (Brautigam 2010). These conflicting arguments make it important to critically analyze African and Chinese government rhetoric and some Western donor agencies' views of South-South cooperation – as inherently of mutual benefit, small-scale, and sustainable (DFID 2006; Pupa-vac 2010) – against practices on the ground. Third, albeit to a lesser extent than the abovementioned debates, the project will also uncover aspects of the evolving foreign policy process in China. It will assess the dynamics of the evolving change, such as the pluralization of the bureaucracy (Shambaugh and Robinson 1994; Kim 1998; Lu 1997; Lampton 2002/2008; Ross and Johnston 2006). Although China's foreign policy continues to be strongly determined by the domestic

agenda of the Chinese Communist Party (Yahuda 2007), the ideas formulated among China's foreign policymaking elites are to a greater degree than ever before informed by international discourses transferred to China by both traditional and new foreign policy actors (Shambaugh 2008). Analyzing Chinese policy-thinking on state sovereignty, as reflected in Zambia and Sudan, will yield knowledge about the nature and quality of input and the conditions under which different and new elite actors and forces in China, such as provincial governments, state-owned companies, and public opinion are included in policy formulation. This assessment will add significant insights to the debate on China's adaptation to international norms (Johnston 1996; Kent 2007). Chinese academic discourse articulated at think tanks and universities are also becoming more important, insofar as they reveal ongoing debates within the larger Chinese foreign policy community. A recent example regarding the issue of state sovereignty and what amounts as China's core national interest at this critical juncture of China's rise to world power status, was illustrated by the challenge to this community from philosopher Zhao Tingyang's book *The Tianxia system: A Philosophy for the World Institution* (2005). Zhao proposed the ancient Confucian concept of Tianxia as a way to imagine a better world order than the present one. In stark contrast with the dominating realist worldview among Chinese scholars, the utopian vision of Tianxia sparked an intense debate on state sovereignty and China's national interest.

5. Methodology and collection of data

The 2007 Pew Institute study of African countries showed that populations across

the continent were overwhelmingly positive toward Chinese investments and the increasing presence of Chinese companies. Likewise, a survey by Sautman and Yan (2009) also showed positive results among university students. Ethnographic studies, however, points in the opposite direction (Lee 2009). In my own pilot study conducted in 2008, evidence from interviews with NGO representatives and state officials in Tanzania and Zambia countered the Pew Institute's quantitative opinion studies as well as sensationalist writings in Western mass media about supposedly naive African officials and intellectuals. Divergence of perspectives in the research field is partly a result of lack of empirical evidence, partly from using different methodologies. Therefore it is paramount to collect first-hand data directly in the field. In this project, I will use qualitative method, in the tradition of doing "thick description" (Geertz 1973). In the fieldwork that will be undertaken this means a contextualization of actors and their intents in a matrix of national governments, ministries and other parts of the bureaucracy, provincial governments, state-owned companies in the resource-extracting sector of the economy, NGO's, and public opinion. It is quite difficult to measure the extent of independence of state-owned companies in the Chinese authoritarian context where high-ranking Communist Party cadres are sitting as board members. Moreover, the legal framework is yeasty, suffering from many informal regulations and lack of accountability. This suggests that when examining the mind-sets and views of the Chinese business elite on Sino-African trade relations impacting on politics, conducting in-depth ethnographic interviews is a useful approach to acquire valid answers to the research questions. The same

logic goes for interviews with analysts at the foreign ministry, and foreign policy think tanks in China. Having previous successful experiences of getting access to informants and conduct ethnographic in-depth interviews to decode official jargon in China, I choose to employ this methodology in encounters with Chinese and Zambian/Sudanese officials, analysts, company and NGO leaders. Fluent in Chinese, I will interview some already identified interlocutors, whom usually point to other knowledgeable informants. To get access to Chinese business executives, I will work through personal networks that I have generated over a long time. The 2008 pilot study in Zambia also generated valuable personal contacts with state officials and leaders of non-governmental organizations in Lusaka. In this significantly expanded project I will make full use of these informants who will be valuable for seeking out more informants and views of the build-up of the Chinese designed multi-facility economic zones in Lusaka and Chambishi. Those identified in China include analysts in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with expertise on African countries, managers of state-owned companies and banks, the Ministry of Commerce, the Ministry of Land and Resources, and the People's Bank of China. The China Export-Import Bank is of particular importance with regard to the issue of state sovereignty, as its buyer credits to African countries increased rapidly between 2007 and 2010. Informants identified in Zambia include officials in the Ministry of Labor, Zambia Development Agency, leaders of civil society organizations such as Saccord and Jubilee. Sudan is a challenge, given the tense political situation. Organizations targeted for interviews there are the Ministry of Energy

and Mining, and leaders of civil society organizations and news organizations. Nonetheless, as I have contacts within both China's state bureaucracy and with managerial staff of oil companies operating in Sudan, such as China National Petroleum Corporation, through them access will be gained to both managers in the field and their partner officials in the Sudanese government. Given the complexities of researching politics in China, information retrieved from government institutions, the business world, and different segments of civil society, means that interviews must be complemented by analysis of government policy documents, academic journals such as *International Relations and West Asia and Africa*, and recent research monographs. It is expected that the combined use of methods in this project will yield balanced and representative results. Regarding the ethical considerations, as qualitative in-depth interviews will be conducted in authoritarian ruled countries such as China and Sudan, I will assure all informants that they participate under conditions of full anonymity.

References

- Alden, C, Large, D, Soares De Oliveira, R. (eds), (2008), *China Returns to Africa: A Rising Power and a Continent Embrace*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Ampiah, K. (2008). "Japan in Africa: A distant partnership," Available at <http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/japan-in-africa-paths-to-partnership>.
- Bartelson, J, (2008), "Sovereignty before and after the linguistic turn," in *Instrumentalizing State Sovereignty in Europe and Beyond*, Rebecca Adler-Nissen and Thomas Gammeltoft-Hansen (eds).
- Brautigam, D, (2010), *The Dragon's Gift*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Carson, A. (2002), "Protecting sovereignty, accepting intervention: The dilemma of Chinese foreign relations in the 1990s," *National Committee on United States-China Relations, China Policy Series*, No.18, September.
- China's African Policy*, January 2006, Ministry of Foreign Affairs,
<http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx/t230615.htm>.
- Davies, P. (2007), *China and the end of poverty in Africa: Towards mutual benefit?*. Sundbyberg: Dia-konia.
- DFID, (2006), *How to provide technical cooperation personnel*, <http://www.dfid.gov.uk/Documents/publications/tc-how-to-note.pdf>.
- Dittmer, L. and Yu, G.T. (2010), *China, the Developing World, and the New Global Dynamic*, London: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Eisenman, J. (ed.) (2007), *China and the Developing World*, New York: M.E. Sharpe.
- Frank, A.G. (1979), *Dependent accumulation and underdevelopment*, New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Gat, A. (2010), *Victorious and Vulnerable: Why Democracy Won in the 20th Century and How it Is Still Imperiled*, Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Geertz, C. (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic Books.
- Gurtov, M. (2010), "Changing Perspectives and Policies." in Dittmer, L. and Yu, G.T. (2010), *China, the Developing World, and the New Global Dynamic*, London: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Jackson, R. (1990), *Quasi-States: Sovereignty, International Relations and the Third World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kent, A. (2007), *Beyond Compliance: China, International Organizations, and Global Security*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Kitissou, M. "Globalisation and Fragmentation: the New Era of Africa-China Cooperation," in *Africa in China's Global Strategy*, London: Adonis & Abbey Publishers.
- Krasner, S. (1999), *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Kleine-Ahlbrandt, S. and A. Small. (2007). China jumps in. *International Herald Tribune*, 1 February. Available at <http://www.iht.com/bin/print.php?id?4431580>.
- Kragelund, P. (2008). The return of non-DAC (Development Assistance Committee) donors to Africa: New prospects for African development? *Development Policy Review*, 26, no. 5: 555-84.
- Kurlantzick, J. (2007), *Charm Offensive*. Binghampton: Caravan Books.
- Kurlantzick, J. (2009), "China's Soft power in Africa," in *Soft Power: China's Emerging Strategy in International Relations*, Li M. (ed.), Lanham: Lexington books.
- Lagerkvist, J. (2005), "The Rise of Online Public Opinion in the PRC", in *China: An International Journal*, Vol.3, No.1.
- Lagerkvist, J. (2009), "Chinese eyes on Africa: Authoritarian flexibility versus democratic governance," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, Vol.27, No.2 April, pp. 119-134.
- Lagerkvist, J. (2008), "Chinese Views on Africa s Development and Sino-African Cooperation," *Contemporary Chinese Thought*, Fall.
- Lagerkvist, J. (2010 forthcoming), "Chinese and African Views on Chinese Aid and Trade in Africa," in *Challenging the Aid Paradigm: Western Currents and Asian Alternatives*, Jens Sørensen (ed.), Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lampton, D. (ed.), (2001), *The making of Chinese foreign and security policy in the era of reform, 1978-2000*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Large, D. (2008), "From Non-interference to Constructive Engagement? China's Evolving Relations with Sudan, in Alden, C, Large, D, De Oliveira, R.S. (2008) *China Returns to Africa: A Rising Power and a Continent Embrace*, London: Hurst and Company.
- Liu, G. (2007), "The history of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation," in Kitissou, M. in *Africa in China's Global Strategy*, London: Adonis & Abbey Publishers.
- Lynch, D. (2009). Chinese Thinking on the Future of International Relations: Realism as the *Ti*, Rationalism as the *Yong*? *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 197, March, pp 87-107
- Mahmoud, Y.M. (2007). *Chinese Development Assistance and West African Agriculture: A Shifting Approach to Foreign Aid?*, Lund: Mediatryck.
- Mangala, J. (2008), "State Sovereignty and the New Globalization in Africa," in *Africa and the*

- new Globalization* (George Klay Kieh ed.), London: Ashgate.
- Mawdsley, E. (2007), "China and Africa: Emerging challenges to the geographies of power." *Geography Compass*, nos. 1/3: 405-21.
- Mearsheimer, J. (2006), "China's unpeaceful rise," *Current History*, April.
- Melber, H, and Southall, R, (2009), *A New Scramble for Africa?: Imperialism, Investment and Development*, University of Kwazulu Natal Press
- Naidu, S. (2008), India's growing African strategy. *Review of African Political Economy*, 35, no. 1: 116-28.
- OECD Development Centre, (2006), Dilek Aykut and Andrea Goldstein, Working Paper No. 257, "Developing Country Multinationals: South-South Investment Comes of Age."
- Peerenboom, R. (2007). *China modernizes: Threat to the West or model for the rest?*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Polgreen, L. and H. French. (2007), "In Africa, China is both benefactor and competitor," *The New York Times*, 20 August.
- Pupovac, V, (2010), "From Materialism to Non-Materialism in International Development: Revisiting Rostow's Stages of Growth and Schumacher's Small is Beautiful," in *Challenging the Aid Paradigm: Western Currents and Asian Alternatives*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Qiu Y, (2010), "Zuijin ji nian de Zhong-Fei Guanxi," (Sino-African relations in recent years), *Xiandai guoji guanxi (Contemporary International Relations)*, No.12, 2009.
- Ramo, J. (2004), *The Beijing consensus*. London: Foreign Policy Centre.
- Ross, R, and Johnston, A.I. (1999), *Engaging China: The Management of an Emerging Power*, London: Routledge.
- Sautman, B, and Yan H, (2009), "African Perspectives on China-Africa Links," *The China Quarterly*, Volume 199, September 2009, pp 728-759.
- Vivekananda, F, and Abegunrin, O, (1998), *The Political Economy of South-South Cooperation: Towards a New International Economic Order: Self-reliance and Economic Development-Why and How?* Stockholm: Bethany Books.
- Zhao T. (2005), *Tianxia tixi: Shijie zhidu zhexue daolun [The Tianxia system: A Philosophy for the World Institution]*. Nanjing: Jiangsu jiaoyu chubanshe.