China's presence and influence on the African continent is rapidly increasing and other foreign powers in Africa are following this trend with suspicion. The growing influence of Chinese actors in Africa offers possibilities as well as challenges similar to those of the other foreign powers. The intense popularity of Chinese projects in Africa is largely due to the alternatives offered to Africa by the official foreign policy of Beijing; alternatives to the approaches of the so-called 'West' and their influential international financial institutions, previously virtually the only sources of funding for Africa's economic development.

Sanne van der Lugt

The Chinese development model

The basis of Beijing's focus on independent economic development can be found in China's recent history. After the Second World War, China evolved as a communist country and became involved in the worldwide struggle for alliances on an ideological basis. When China realised that the United States was about to win the Cold War and become the sole global superpower, China and the Soviet Union signed an agreement to promote a multi-polar world order as opposed to hegemonism. Since that moment, the Chinese government has actively promoted diversity and an inclusive world system. In line with this argument, the Chinese government realised the roots not only to impose an alternative development model, but instead encourages countries to choose their own. Furthermore, and importantly, the Chinese government will not accept any interventions regarding its own national issues and is therefore a staunch supporter of sovereignty in general.

Another important reason for the Chinese government to take a different approach towards international development cooperation, than the more traditional donors, is to distance itself from the latter. In so doing, it is also distancing itself from the practice of colonialism and stressing that China shares the experience of having been colonised; the Chinese have herewith won much credit in Africa. Furthermore, the Chinese government is also distancing itself from traditional donors, and emphasising its own position as a developing country. As a world power the Chinese government does not only to impose a development model on other developing countries, is that it is the intention of the Chinese government to develop long-term economic and political relations with these countries. It is believed that this can best be achieved by showing mutual respect, rather than by imposing.

Ironically, the fact that the Chinese approach advocates independent development paths based on the specific national situations, creates the impression that the Chinese offer a new model for development as an alternative to the Washington Consensus. Besides offering a different approach to international development cooperation, it is the very success of China's own economic development, based on choosing its own development path, that aroused interest in the Chinese model for development. However, Chinese government officials deny the existence of a Chinese development model and emphasise that China's development should be regarded as an example for other developing countries, the best possible way to choose your own development path and be successful.

Balancing between Chinese and African economic interests

Chinese development cooperation in Africa is especially focused on the agricultural and infrastructural sector; the two areas that were neglected by the Chinese in its own economic development. When China needed to modernise its resource base and infrastructure, it used Japan's interest in their oil to build infrastructure for transport, energy and export capacity. The Chinese government now uses this experience to construct similar resources-for-infrastructure for African countries. This suggests that China is willing to share its own experiences, combined with its own economic interests, with African countries (sannevdlugt@operamail.com).

Conclusion

The term 'no-strings attached' means that the Chinese government does not wish to intervene in national issues of other countries. The Chinese government does not have a predetermined plan to impose a certain model on African countries, like the West and its liberal democracy model. However, China needs Africa to further realise the economic development. When African trade unions and/or international NGOs have demands that might obstruct the progress of a Chinese project in Africa, Chinese government officials and investors could advise the respective African government strongly to follow the Chinese example and ignore these requests, arguing that China made the same sacrifices in order to achieve their impressive economic growth. The main argument for this advice, however, seems to be selfish economic interests.

The Chinese do not differ, in this respect, that much from the West, whose efforts to develop Africa are not primarily altruistic either. However, an important difference between the Chinese approach and that of the West is that the Chinese are much more open about their economic interests. For African government officials it is important to realise that the advice given by their Chinese partners is based on a combination of their experiences and economic interests, and that each is carrying the responsibility for their own citizens. The Chinese approach aims to build partnerships with their own responsibilities, might lead in the most optimistic case to a greater awareness of these responsibilities among African leaders.

In order to strengthen their negotiation position, it is important for African leaders to study the motives of foreign investors. When weak regulations are the most important factors for attracting foreign investment, strengthening these regulations might result in fewer investments and the advice from their Chinese partners should be taken seriously. However, when other factors are more important for attracting foreign investment, strict laws and regulations might be enforced by the Chinese investors without jeopardising potential investment. The attraction of power of African countries towards foreign investors differs per country and per foreign investor. Since the factors that attract foreign investors to African countries are not exactly the same as for China, the lessons learned in China, are not automatically applicable to Africa. This is acknowledged by Chinese government officials, as can be derived from the official Chinese sentiment that each country has the right to choose its own path. However, the request from Africa to share their experiences, combined with China's own economic interests, sometimes tempts these same officials to promote what has worked for China. This applies even more to Chinese investors in Africa whose main interests are economic. It is up to African leaders to take the advice of foreign actors into account, without letting them interfere in national issues, in order to guarantee the interests of their citizens.

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