Commercially based cooperation

The main and directaim to develop a common strategic approach to client countries via the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), but China has declined to join this Committee and is therefore not bound by its rules. The Chinese government also opposed central tenets of the policies hammered out within the Development Assistance Committee, it openly offers bribes to already corrupt governments of state in Africa, it pays no heed to debt reduction schemes painstakingly negotiated over months or years; it cheerfully admits that its main interest is business rather than the rule of law, an attitude that offends no prerequisites for democracy and human rights.

While offering aid against so many of the dogmas of development that have evolved among OECD countries, China has itself made a strong pitch for the moral high ground. China is itself a developing country, as its government reminds anyone who cares to listen. It is itself a historic victim of Western imperialism. When, in the fifteenth century, the Chinese admiral Zheng He established a fleet at the head of an imperial fleet, he did not attempt to colonise the region, but simply returned home. His voyage marked the end of official Chinese interest in Africa, until after the Communist revolution in 1949, when the Beijing government took quite a close interest in Africa during its age of decolonisation. Eclipse by internal wrangles during the Cultural Revolution, China’s Africa policy was then dormant until quite recent times. Nowadays, Beijing’s professed aim is no longer the export of revolution, but commercially based cooperation among moral equals. Today’s Africans, tired of receiving lectures from Western politicians whose moral credentials are not always beyond question, this comes as a breath of fresh air.

The newcomers are here to stay

At the same time, many Africans are now beginning to see a genuine Chinese interest in our countries. Somewhere between a quarter of a million and a million Chinese nationals now live in Africa, most of them entrepreneurs from the private sector, or to a lesser extent, employees of parastatal companies. Many are involved in retail trade. It has become quite common, in all parts of Africa, to find a Chinese “mum and pop” store selling general goods, and the family serving behind the counter more likely to be learning whatever African language is spoken by their customers than the old colonial languages. English, French and Portuguese. In Senegal and Malawi there have been public signs of resentment by local market-sellers annoyed by competition from these foreign importers. More often, there is anger that in many construction projects, the Chinese government established a privileged lateral bodies came to play a key role in their development. The notorious partition of Africa that resulted from a con- ference held in Berlin in 1884-1885 was the work of a collective known as the Concert of Powers. The European states of that time were conscious of forming an international family of nations that is as yet included only a few members from outside the European continent. Britain, France and the other colonial powers secured recognition of their spheres of influence in Africa by negotiation within this international club. When Germany was deemed unworthy of colonies after its defeat in 1918, some of its former possessions were assigned as mandate territories to the new League of Nations and its successor, the United Nations. When African colonial territories gained their independence in the 1950s and 1960s, the UN, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and other multi- lateral bodies came to play a key role in their development.

Partitioning Africa

Centrally publicly debated is the likely impact of China’s interest in Africa in the fields of international politics and diplomacy. Everyone knows that Africa was colonised by a handful of European powers, and these countries have subsequently had a tendency to regard the continent as their own backyard. Less often appreciated is the fact that Asia has had, and continues to have, a unique relationship with the divisive entity known as the international community. The Chinese government has an ideology of non-interference, a mark of difference between China and its traditional partners.

China’s irruption into Africa has come as a great, and largely unwelcome, shock to people working in the development sector. Moreover, it comes at a time when development budgets in most donor countries are under pressure from domestic constituencies. What offends so many development experts in Europe and North America is China’s refusal to play by the rules they have made over the years.

Stephen Ellis

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