



China's Vulnerability in Africa and Options for Security Cooperation with Europe

Jonathan Holslag

11 December 2009

For the last three years the European Union has been trying to wheedle China into a trilateral partnership with Africa. But Beijing is still reluctant to accept proposals for coordinating development aid or joining forces to pull the African economy out of its commodity trap. If anything will persuade the People's Republic of China to take the European Union more seriously, it is China's enormous vulnerability to Africa's endemic political instability and violence. In the long run, China cannot maintain its presence without solid security cooperation. Europe should therefore demonstrate that it is not only an important economic actor, but also an inevitable partner in tackling Africa's many security challenges.

The Overlooked Security Dimension

As last month's China–Africa Summit showed, China and Africa are maintaining the impressive pace with which their relations are consolidating. Their partnership remains essentially economic, but it also has growing significance in international politics. Both sides are becoming vociferous about influencing the agenda with regard to major issues such as climate change and the reform of international organizations.

Security cooperation has so far been one of the least eye-catching dimensions of the evolving Sino–African relationship. Numerous studies have pored over the impact of China's charm offensive on the mining industry, the financial health of African states, and development cooperation, etc. But apart from a small number of humanitarian crises like those in Darfur and Zimbabwe, we know very little about how China is influencing regional security, and even less about how it is considering responding to new security challenges. Yet the bigger China's economic stakes, the more it will seek to safeguard its position. How will it do so?

In the past five years, armed factions have killed at least 30 Chinese workers in Africa. In eight African countries, rebel groups have threatened to target Chinese companies for their alleged support to discriminatory regimes. Sinophobia is growing, not only because of China's visibility, but also because of the gap between local African people's expectations on the one hand and tangible results in improving their lives on the other. Tumbling commodity prices have added grist to the mill of those who claim that Africa will once more fail to get sufficient value out of its natural resources.

Beijing's Holistic Approach to Security

Beijing has so far emphasized that African countries themselves are responsible for maintaining stability. At the summit in Egypt, the Chinese government expressed its support for the concept and practice of 'Africans solving African problems'. It therefore vowed to increase support for the African Union and other regional organizations, as well as to intensify cooperation with African countries in terms of peacekeeping. Indeed, China seems to have grasped the importance of African organizations in security issues. China has posted representatives to the main regional and sub-regional forums for the past few years. It set up a strategic dialogue mechanism with the African Union that is expected to

monitor the security situation on the African continent, and China now has frequent interaction with the African Union's Peace and Security Council. China has granted about four million US dollars to the African Union for facilitating peace in Sudan and Somalia since 2004, and it contributed almost 300,000 US dollars to the Peace Fund of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

It thus appears that regional multilateralism is Beijing's preferred option for securing its interests. This would be a plausible choice. African solutions for African problems are in line with the traditional dictums of non-interference. Even though the African Union's Peace and Security Council has the mandate to intervene if an African state severely fails to maintain security, China considers this an internal African affair and supports addressing security threats collectively on the basis of 'equal consultation'. Second, by passing the responsibility to Africa, China could avoid the high costs of protecting vital interests. China's financial contribution to the peacekeeping operations of the African Union and the United Nations are modest in comparison to what the United States or even France spend on their own military presence in the region. Third, Beijing is still well aware that if it wants to temper fears about China's rise, it needs to position itself as a responsible power.

In spite of these motivations, there is growing concern that shared 'ownership' of security interests will not be sufficient to secure Chinese economic positions in Africa in the long run. Beijing understands that many smouldering conflicts can rekindle at any time, with national governments often part of the problem rather than the solution. Officials and experts also lamented the poor performance of regional organizations as a consequence of rivalry between members and a lack of means. Should serious violence erupt and threaten vital economic interests, China could also lobby for deploying a UN mission. To some extent, it has already done so with regard to Somalia, but in this case its efforts ran into resistance from the United States. In 2006, China's Permanent Representative to the UN, Wang Guangya, scolded other diplomats for neglecting Somalia and urged them to support the deployment of peacekeepers.

This vulnerability has led several conservatives in the Chinese strategic elite to argue that the People's Republic of China should reduce its presence in Africa. Instead, they say, China would do better to focus on the vast natural resources in its immediate neighbourhood. But this is easier said than done. China already relies on African suppliers for one-third of its oil imports and a lot of the mineral ores in Asia are controlled by tough negotiators like India and Russia. As a consequence, Beijing is moving more and more towards a holistic strategy that combines supporting African regional organizations with active posturing within the UN Security Council, more robust security cooperation with African governments and the development of the required military capabilities to protect citizens and assets overseas. Not only has China's People's Liberation Army developed various new platforms for long-range air and sea lift, but specialized Chinese military units have been trained to evacuate or protect citizens in violent circumstances.

The development of China's strategy in the future will depend on how its desire to keep security costs as low as possible interacts with growing domestic pressure to gain access to new natural resources. It is therefore vital to observe changes in Chinese security thinking and China's perceptions of the security situation on the African continent. It is necessary to examine closely which policies Beijing pursues beyond its constructive discourse of 'African ownership', how its military cooperation with African states develops, how it is building capabilities for long-range power projection, what role its growing number of peacekeepers will play in keeping an eye on Chinese interests and how its relations evolve with third parties like the European Union or the United States. This is not a matter of being alarmist. There is plenty of scope for cooperation between the European Union and China. Both sides are equally dependent on stability. In the same way that proximity exposes Europe to the numerous perils in Africa, distance renders China more vulnerable. This generates strong interdependence.

Cooperation between the EU and China

But interdependence does not automatically lead to cooperation. Referring to the need for 'African ownership', China has turned down proposals from the European Union to join forces. The dialogue on Africa with the European Commission has merely produced new synergies. Collaboration has also been impeded by Beijing's reluctance to accept effective governance and transparency as

preconditions for stability in Africa. But the European Union has also squandered opportunities for synergy by showing a lack of coherence in its Africa policy. Collaboration can only be effective if individual EU member states closely coordinate their policies towards Beijing.

A first priority should be to exchange the lessons learned. The future External Action Service of the European Union has therefore to develop a pool of experts from EU member states that can be mobilized in programmes with Chinese counterparts. Together with the European Military Staff, it has to stimulate and oversee the dispatch of military instructors to China's National Defence University and peacekeeping training centres. Civilian experts should share insights with colleagues from think tanks and civilian universities.

A second condition is that information and assessments are shared at the official level. This can be realized at the level of the EU's delegations in Africa, at the level of the European Military Staff, the headquarters of relevant EU operations, and certainly within the framework of the EU's new External Action Service.

A third challenge will be to build effective policies, implying the coordination of preventive diplomacy, joint planning for peacekeeping, and post-conflict rehabilitation, among other things. It is therefore essential to include interaction with countries like China as an objective in the planning of future EU operations. There should also be frequent meetings between European and Chinese special representatives.

Finally, the European Union's External Action Service will have to gain internal support for strengthening African security initiatives. More effort should be made to help bodies like the African Union become inclusive platforms for security cooperation with non-African players. Bilateral collaboration between China and Europe should not circumvent African projects, but should strengthen them.

The coincidence of growing Chinese apprehension about the security of China's compatriots in Africa and the development of a more capable European foreign policy forms a window of opportunity. It is now up to the European Union to demonstrate leadership and to bend China's concern into an opportunity for genuine strategic cooperation.

Jonathan Holslag is a Research Fellow and Coordinator of Research at the Brussels Institute of Contemporary China Studies (BICCS).

© 2009 Clingendael Asia Forum

The forum welcomes unsolicited contributions by scholars and practitioners.

For information on how to contribute an article, please visit <http://www.clingendael.nl/asia/forum/>

To subscribe to, or unsubscribe from, the email distribution list, please contact Mrs Ragnhild Drange
RDrange@Clingendael.nl