

CARMEN AMADO MENDES

EUROPE AND THE CHINESE PRESENCE  
IN AFRICA

Separata da

*Revista "Temas de Integração"*

1.º e 2.º SEMESTRE DE 2009 • N.ºs 27 e 28

## EUROPE AND THE CHINESE PRESENCE IN AFRICA

por *Carmen Amado Mendes\**

*Resumo:* A postura chinesa em África baseia-se numa nova abordagem que substitui as normas ditas ocidentais por outras “com características chinesas”, usando o slogan da cooperação Sul-Sul e de relações mutuamente benéficas. A diplomacia chinesa, mais activa e sofisticada que nunca, legitima a sua presença em África assumindo-se como um parceiro no seu desenvolvimento. O modelo de desenvolvimento chinês, em que o progresso económico não está ligado à democratização política, é apresentado como uma alternativa válida em países onde o modelo ocidental não deu os resultados esperados. Visto como um parceiro mais conveniente, Pequim desafia os interesses europeus em África. Os documentos oficiais da União Europeia e discursos dos seus líderes pedem à China que adopte uma postura mais responsável no sentido do desenvolvimento sustentado do continente africano.

*Palavras-chave:* China, África, União Europeia, Consenso de Pequim.

*Abstract:* The Chinese approach to Africa fosters a new concept of aid with “no strings attached”, replacing the so-called Western norms

---

\* Professor and head of the International Relations Group at the School of Economics, University of Coimbra, and member of the Boards of the European Association for Chinese Studies and of the Portuguese Political Science Association. She received her Ph.D. from the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, and her Master degree from the *Institut des Hautes Etudes Européennes, Université Robert Schuman*, Strasbourg. Her fields of research focus on China's foreign policy, EU-China relations and Macau. She was a Visiting Professor of the University of Macau and a founder of the consulting company Chinalink and of the Observatory of China in Portugal.

by others with “Chinese characteristics”, using the slogan of South-South cooperation and win-win relationships. China’s diplomacy, more active and sophisticated than never, legitimates its presence in Africa as a partner towards African development. The Chinese development model, in which economic progress is not linked with political democratization, is presented as a valuable alternative in countries where the Western model did not give the expected results. Seen as a more convenient partner, Beijing challenges European interests in Africa, which Europe has long considered its backyard. In the official documents of the European Union and speeches of its leaders, China is required to have a proactive approach towards sustainable development and security in Africa.

*Keywords:* China, Africa, European Union, Beijing Consensus.

The Chinese presence in Africa since the end of the Cold War evolved from an ideological to a pragmatic approach. The two main goals of China’s foreign policy in Africa reflect its domestic priorities: to maintain economic growth and political stability. First of all, the need for natural resources to sustain its economy urges the signature of contracts with African leaders to guarantee those resources (namely oil, coal and gas). Secondly, in order to maintain stability at home, the Chinese Communist Party relies on nationalism, which explains Beijing’s assertiveness regarding the principles of territorial integrity and assumption of being a major player in the international arena. Through its presence in Africa, China tries to avoid the recognition of Taiwan as a sovereign state by African countries and gets allies in international organizations, such as the United Nations.<sup>1</sup>

Beijing achieves these goals through a combination of soft power,<sup>2</sup> mainly thanks to the attractiveness of its economic development, and

<sup>1</sup> See MENDES, Carmen A., “National Motives, Approaches and Goals of China’s Foreign Policy”, in Tomé, Luís, ed., *East Asia Today*, EDHUAL, Prefácio, Lisbon, 2008, pp. 107-118.

<sup>2</sup> Soft power implies the ability to influence through persuasion rather than through coercion, i.e., using all activities which are not within the scope of security, whether it is humanitarian aid, culture, bilateral and multilateral diplomacy and economic investment. In KURLANTZICK, Joshua, “Beijing’s Safari: China’s Move into Africa and its Implications for Aid, Development, and Governance”, Carnegie Endowment, 2006, [http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/kurlantzick\\_outlook\\_africa2.pdf](http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/kurlantzick_outlook_africa2.pdf), p. 1.

specific diplomatic principles, which include the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, such as the non-interference in internal affairs.<sup>3</sup> This reinforces China’s position in the international forums of avoiding coercive interference in the Tibet and Xinjiang. For some African leaders, the Chinese posture is particularly welcomed, working as a way of escaping Western sanctions, getting credit and infrastructures in exchange of natural resources. Beijing is seen as the perfect partner in their strategies to overcome the new European development agenda, focused on good governance and Human Rights issues.

Therefore, the Chinese “unconditional trade” approach to Africa fosters a new concept of aid with “no strings attached”, replacing the so-called Western norms by others with “Chinese characteristics”, using the slogan of South-South cooperation and win-win relationships. The growing trade and financial and technical aid is politically unconditional,<sup>4</sup> apart from requiring the recognition of the one-China policy, which implies the absence of diplomatic relations with Taiwan. The Chinese development model, in which economic progress is not linked with political democratization, is presented as a valuable alternative in countries where the Western model – moralizing, bureaucratic and conditioned<sup>5</sup> – did not give the expected results. The Chinese diplomacy, more active and sophisticated than never, legitimates its presence in Africa as a partner towards African development, as suggested by the China’s African Policy paper, made public in 2006:

Sincerity, equality and mutual benefit, solidarity and common development—these are the principles guiding China-Africa exchange and cooperation and the driving force to lasting China-Africa relations. China seeks to establish and develop a new time of strategic partnership with Africa, featuring political equality and mutual trust, economic win-win cooperation, and cultural exchange.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, which arguably guide China’s foreign policy, also include: mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence.

<sup>4</sup> The Chinese policy of “no-strings attached” means that financial and technical aid is unconditional and given without any kind of interference in the other states internal affairs. THOMAS, Drew, “China’s Soft Power in Africa: From the ‘Beijing Consensus’ to Health Diplomacy”, *China Brief*, V (21), 2005, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> GILL, Bates and HUANG, Chin-Hao, “Les relations de China con África: implicaciones para Europa”, *Vanguardia*, No. 26, March 2008, p. 51.

<sup>6</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Africa Policy”, white paper, 2006.

The effect that these principles “with Chinese characteristics” have outside of China is known as the “Beijing Consensus”<sup>7</sup>, as Beijing introduces to other countries a different path towards development than the one proposed by the “Washington Consensus.” The limited success of the Bretton Woods’ institutions in Africa and of the “Washington-knows-best approach to telling other nations how to run themselves”<sup>8</sup> contributes to the general acceptance of China’s development approach, which praises the truly independence, sovereignty and equality of the developing world. Contrary to the Western aid, linked to a moral agenda of poverty’s reduction, transparency and human rights,<sup>9</sup> the Beijing Consensus shows respect for the African nations’ sovereignty, not interfering in their internal affairs:

Business is business. We try to separate politics from business... You [the West] have tried to impose a market economy and multiparty democracy on these [African] countries which are not ready for it. We are also against embargoes, which you have tried to use against us.<sup>10</sup>

Beijing has combined the policy of non interference in internal affairs, very convenient to dictators, with other soft power instruments, such as high-level visits, trade and foreign direct investment.<sup>11</sup> Although this may be considered a more open approach than the European one, the fact that the African countries may accede to credit lines outside the international financial institutions offers to the corrupt elites an

<sup>7</sup> The “Beijing Consensus” defends a development model that contradicts the idea of political liberalization or economic reforms as fundamental pre-conditions for longer-term development. Instead, economic growth is stimulated through trade and investment in infrastructure and social institutions. THOMPSON, Drew, “Economic Growth and Soft Power: China’s Africa Strategy”, in Andrew Waldron (Ed.), *China in Africa*, Washington, The Jamestown Foundation, 2008, p. 15.

<sup>8</sup> RAMO, Joshua Cooper, “The Beijing Consensus”, The Foreign Policy Centre, London, 2004, <http://fpcc.org.uk/files/10/244.pdf>, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> TULL, Denis, “China’s Engagement in Africa: Scope, Significance and Consequences”, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 44 (3), 2006, p. 467.

<sup>10</sup> ZHOU, Wenzhong, Chinese Vice-Foreign Minister, quoted by French, Howard, “China in Africa: All Trade, With No Political Baggage”, *New York Times*, 8 August 2004.

<sup>11</sup> COKER, Christopher, “Strangers at the Gate: Africa, the Challenge of China and the Eclipse of the West” in Franco, Manuela (coord.), *Estratégia e Seguranga na África Austral*, Fundação Lusó-Americana e Instituto Português de Relações Internacionais, Lisbon, July 2007, p. 29.

alternative to complying with the Washington Consensus.<sup>12</sup> The Chinese development model, which refuses any interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states, causes a tremendous concern to the European Union, which tries to stimulate and promote transparency and human rights in developing countries.<sup>13</sup>

Seen as a more convenient partner, Beijing challenges European interests in Africa, which Europe has long considered her backyard. Despite the fact that African exports to China are increasing, the EU is still by far the main trading partner of the continent. Thus, Africa became the most sensitive issue in Sino-European relations.<sup>14</sup> Former colonial powers fear not only the Chinese ability to link economic presence to political influence<sup>15</sup> but also the end of their capability to export a trans-national model based on their values, or what may be called as a “cosmopolitan democratic view” – Western principles of liberalism, democracy and the free market.<sup>16</sup> This hurts the essence of the EU, as her foreign policy is based in normative guidelines, shaping what is considered “normal” in International Relations.<sup>17</sup>

As these guidelines are largely a creation of Western governments, Beijing is not interested in following them, creating its own rules, thus threatening the Western dominance in the international arena.<sup>18</sup> China may already been replacing Europe as *the* soft power in Africa, presenting herself as a partner rather than a guide and offering a more attractive model than the European one, which exchanges aid for the respect of so-called “universal” norms.<sup>19</sup> The African leaders may be tempted to develop a specific African model, inspired by the Chinese success of building modernization based on ancient

<sup>12</sup> STEAD, Steve, “China and Southern Africa: Old Story, New Strategies?”, in Franco, *op. cit.*, pp. 147 and 151.

<sup>13</sup> See TULL, *op. cit.*, p. 467.

<sup>14</sup> FOX, John, and GODEMENT, François, *A Power Audit of EU-China Relations*, European Council on Foreign Relations, London, April 2009, p. 41.

<sup>15</sup> HOLSLAG, Jonathan, “The EU and China: The Great Disillusion”, Asia Paper, Brussels Institute of Contemporary China Studies, Vol. 1 (3), 5 November 2006, p. 11.

<sup>16</sup> COKER, *op. cit.*, pp. 30 and 33.

<sup>17</sup> BURTON, Benjamin, “EU-China-Africa Trichotomy: The EU, China and the Normative Power Concept on the African Continent”, *EU-China Observer*, Issue 3, College of Europe, 2009, p. 12.

<sup>18</sup> COKER, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

<sup>19</sup> BURTON, *op. cit.*, pp. 12-14.

traditions, blending authoritarian political leadership and strong concepts of sovereignty with state-guided capitalism.<sup>20</sup>

In the official documents of the European Union and speeches of its leaders, China is required to have a proactive approach towards sustainable development and security in Africa. In 2007 the EU finally established a dialogue with China on Africa and Javier Solana, High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, identified Africa as a focal point of the EU-China strategic partnership, reflecting the intention of engaging China on Africa.<sup>21</sup> In 2008 the European Parliament presented a "Report on China's policy and its effects on Africa", urging China to respect the standards of international financial institutions; calling for the maintenance of the arms embargo on China as long as it continues its arms export policy; and calling for the end of human rights abuses and military cooperation with Kenya, Zimbabwe, Sudan, Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia. The report also stresses sustainable development, criticizes the non-interference policy and the Chinese "bulimia" for natural resources.<sup>22</sup>

The principle of non-interference in other states' domestic affairs is, indeed, a diplomatic tool – China knows that she does interfere. The non-interference rhetoric is outdated, with the globalization of issues that surpass the states' sovereignty. However, the European accusations regarding the Chinese quest for resources are perceived as paternalistic towards Africa, this time trying to save it from China. According to the Chinese leaders, the EU has nothing to do with the continent's resources and should not impose clauses of conditionality: it is up to the Africans to impose them, as Africa should not be ruled by Europe. The European leaders criticise China for linking aid to trade, but Europe has a long tradition of doing that... and the results of the EU Africa policy are dubious. Europe should probably be more humble as it is not the best example: the European commitments to official development aid (ODA) towards Africa have been constantly infringed; social responsibility of European companies is basically marketing and does not include Africa; Europe also sells arms to

Africa; and the Common Agricultural Policy has a very negative impact in the developing world.

Ana Gomes, a Portuguese member of the European Parliament and the rapporteur of the "Report on China's policy and its effects on Africa", declared that:

the aim is to implement a China-EU-Africa triangular dialogue, to support Africa and perceive its own interests. We tried to be objective: include the negative and the positive impact [of the Chinese presence in Africa] that also exists. The EU cannot claim to be perfect in its relationship with Africa. Much of the criticism that can be made to China today could also be made to the Europeans, namely the coherence of our politics for the development of Africa, the promises regarding the amount of the ODA, specifically within the Millennium Development Goals.<sup>23</sup>

This is indeed an important message well transmitted by the report of the European Parliament, showing an important shift in perceptions within the European Union: "The EU should also stop romanticising its relationship with Africa, based on historic or cultural links and common languages".<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the report admits the existence of double standards in the European Africa policy: declaratory policy and action often do not match. The oil sector, for instance, tends to ignore the moral dimension usually present in the European policies.<sup>25</sup> On the contrary, China is very pragmatic and direct, offering quick decisions to negotiate and execute without requiring political conditions, while the EU spends long time drafting and approving documents before doing anything.

The moral dimension of the EU Africa policy is rejected by China, which recalls the immoral colonial past of some European countries. Although pressing China towards sustainable development in Africa and to stop selling arms to morally objectionable government and rebels, and to favour intervention against corrupt elites, the EU does not have the power to frame the Chinese Africa policy with Western

<sup>20</sup> GOWES, Ana, Public Audition on "The Chinese Policy and its Impact in Africa", European Parliament Headquarters in Lisbon, 18 April 2008.

<sup>21</sup> European Parliament, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>22</sup> OLIVEIRA, Ricardo, "The Geopolitics of Chinese Oil Investment in Africa", in Franco, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

<sup>20</sup> COKER, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

<sup>21</sup> GILL and HUANG, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

<sup>22</sup> European Parliament, "Report on China's policy and its effects on Africa", 29 March 2008.

norms, as Beijing argues that it is not up to the European governments to decide what happens in other sovereign states.<sup>26</sup>

In conclusion, many countries in Africa share positive images of China, tending to see it as a friendlier partner than Europe, as it gives aid without requiring the fulfilment of norms. Thus, the EU has blaming the Chinese policy of "no-strings attached" for ignoring the human rights abuses of governments that supply natural resources to China. However, Beijing assumes itself as a responsible country that respects sovereignty and refuses to impose political conditions for trade and interference in other states internal affairs. The Chinese presence in the continent endangers the European influence in Africa, tempting some EU countries to become more pragmatic and relentless as well.<sup>27</sup> However, the EU must transform the weakness of lack of coordination among its member states in the strength of creative diversity, assuring coherence in foreign policy and grabbing the existing opportunities for bigger collaboration with Africa and China. Some forms of cooperation may prove very useful, such as inviting Beijing to the debates of African donors in order to harmonize criteria and promote responsible aid.<sup>28</sup> China has already understood that instable countries are not good to invest in terms of oil and mines exploration, so she is increasingly more interested in cooperating with the EU on Africa when her interests are at stake.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, Beijing does not necessarily insist on the principle of non interference in domestic affairs when international consensus is legitimated by the UN and the African Union. As the above mentioned report admits, "The EU should avoid generalisations about China's role, should regard it with an open and constructive attitude, and should not try to impose European models and views"<sup>30</sup>. This does not mean that Europe has to renounce its values: it should continue to defend the same values but in a more effective way.

<sup>26</sup> FOX and GODEMENT, *op. cit.*, pp. 41-42.

<sup>27</sup> HOLSLAG, *op. cit.*, p.11.

<sup>28</sup> GILL and HUANG, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

<sup>29</sup> FOX and GODEMENT, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

<sup>30</sup> European Parliament, *op. cit.*, (paragraph 9, p. 12).

## References

- BURTON, Benjamin, "EU-China-Africa Trichotomy: The EU, China and the Normative Power Concept on the African Continent", *EU-China Observer*, Issue 3, College of Europe, 2009, pp. 12-17.
- European Parliament, "Report on China's policy and its effects on Africa", 28 March 2008.
- FOX, John, and GODEMENT, François, *A Power Audit of EU-China Relations*, European Council on Foreign Relations, London, April 2009.
- FRANCO, Manuela (coord.), *Estratégia e Segurança na África Austral*, Fundação Luso-Americana e Instituto Português de Relações Internacionais, Lisbon, July 2007.
- FRENCH, Howard, "China in Africa: All Trade, With No Political Baggage," *New York Times*, 8 August 2004.
- GILL, Bates and HUANG, Chin-Hao, "Les relaciones de China con África: implicaciones para Europa", *Vanguardia*, No. 26, March 2008, pp. 50-55.
- GOMES, Ana, Public Audition on "The Chinese Policy and its Impact in Africa", European Parliament Headquarters in Lisbon, 18 April 2008.
- HOLSLAG, Jonathan, "The EU and China: The Great Disillusion", Asia Paper, Brussels Institute of Contemporary China Studies, Vol. 1 (3), 5 November 2006.
- KURLANTZICK, Joshua, "Beijing's Safari: China's Move into Africa and its Implications for Aid, Development, and Governance", Carnegie Endowment, 2006, [http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/kurlantzick\\_outlook\\_africa2.pdf](http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/kurlantzick_outlook_africa2.pdf).
- MENDES, Carmen A., "National Motives, Approaches and Goals of China's Foreign Policy", in Tomé, Luis, ed., *East Asia Today*, EDITUAL, Prefácio, Lisbon, 2008, pp. 107-118.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Africa Policy", white paper, 2006.
- RAMO, Joshua Cooper, "The Beijing Consensus", The Foreign Policy Centre, London, 2004, <http://fpc.org.uk/fsblob/244.pdf>, p. 4.
- THOMPSON, Drew, "Economic Growth and Soft Power: China's Africa Strategy", in Andrew Waldron (Ed.), *China in Africa*, Washington, The Jamestown Foundation, 2008.
- THOMPSON, Drew, "China's Soft Power in Africa: From the 'Beijing Consensus' to Health Diplomacy", *China Brief*, V (21), 2005, pp. 1-4.
- TULL, Denis M., "China's Engagement in Africa: Scope, Significance and Consequences", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 44 (3), 2006, pp. 459-479.