China’s Geo-Political Penetration in Africa

In the twenty first century Africa rich with energy resources has become the center of geo-political competition of the major powers. For this reason that the relevance of Africa in the strategic planning of most countries has notably increased lately. Where the US and EU have long been attempting to dominate it and revive the old colonial pattern of relationship, there China’s emergence as a major competitor has increased the significance of this continent, resulting in Africa’s becoming a new arena of the geo-political contest.

What has made Africa geo-politically a significant landscape for them is its rapid economic growth as well as vast reserves of natural resources. For example, in terms of energy, the continent has 10 per cent of the world’s proven oil reserves and has also become the fastest-growing oil producing region worldwide. Not only does it produce oil that is easily refined, but many experts also believe that there are still large undiscovered oil fields with immense potential.

And since China has recently embarked on a major quest for natural resources, it has been hard at work establishing a strategic partnership with Africa since 1996. In recent years, Sino-African trade has been growing with breathtaking speed. In exchange for energy and raw material supplies, China provides African countries with generous aid packages, trade deals, and assistance to build key infrastructures such as roads and power plants. At the 2006 China-Africa summit, Beijing vowed to double the development aid to Africa until 2009 and to the extent of 3 billion dollars in soft loans and up 2 more billion in export credits. The presence of 43 countries at that summit indicated that China’s growing engagement in Africa was being regarded as a welcome development by the African leaders.

What makes China a particularly attractive partner is the fact that Beijing works with the African states, unlike the West, without demanding political and economic reforms, and tends to accommodate their interests as well. For example, Chinese aid and investment in Africa is rendered with no strings attached and usually spent on infrastructure projects that raise grassroots living standards. The most frequently cited example is Sinopec, China’s state oil company, which has acquired oil concessions in Angola and is rebuilding the country’s transport infrastructure, hospitals, and state buildings.

That’s why China is now being regarded by the majority of the Dark Continent states as a more attractive partner than the U.S. or any other Western country; for, the US and its allies have traditionally focused on establishing or rather imposing its friendship in the form of the U.S. African Command (AFRICOM) alliance.

This imperial strategy towards Africa has devastated the continent. It has only enabled the US to create an unstable, war-wracked, poverty-stricken continent in order to ensure a stable and prosperous West. The U.S. has concentrated on extracting the maximum amount of wealth from Africa at the lowest cost. This has been achieved through the perpetration of a virtual holocaust created by the fomentation of 14 wars, and through World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) structural adjustment programs (SAPs) imposed on 36 countries. The wars have killed more than 8.5 million Africans and the SAPs have been demolishing African economies and services systematically. This military and economic assault has exposed Africa to the looting of its resources by the Western multinational
On the other hand, unlike the U.S. and European States’ policies, China has inflicted no such horrors on Africa and has usually compensated African countries fairly for their raw materials. A particular case in point is the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The U.S. instigated the invasion of the DRC by Rwanda and Uganda in 1998 which resulted in the slaughter of more than six million Congolese, while the subsequent SAPs imposed on the DRC impoverished the country. Congo is the richest country in Africa in terms of mineral resources, and the invasion ‘successfully’ opened it to looting by the Western mining companies. In contrast, China signed a deal with the government of the DRC in 2007 committing $20 billion for desperately needed infrastructure and development projects in exchange for access to Congo’s resources. This is the biggest single Chinese investment in Africa.

Devastating results of the Western approach have thus directly paved the way for increasing Chinese penetration in Africa. For example, in 2003, the total value of the transactions between the two amounted for 18.5 billion dollars, and in it grew to the staggering 166.3 billion dollars in 2012. This has alarmed the US and its Western allies greatly; for, China is being regarded as a country able to outmanoeuvre and out-space the West. David Shinn, the former US ambassador to Ethiopia and Burkina Faso, echoing the Chinese penetration in Africa, said recently that Beijing or Beijing-backed companies have signed 32 bilateral investment agreements, formed trade cooperation zones with six countries, and have made foreign direct investments of over $50 billion. As a result, China has recently replaced the United States as the Africa's largest trading partner.

China seeks African support in two matters of crucial importance: blocking Taiwan’s entry as an independent and Sovereign State, and thwarting criticism of China’s human rights record. And Beijing has had some major success with its African partners, which is again a cause of concern for the US and its allies. As a matter of fact, China now has more diplomatic offices in Africa than does the U.S., and it shows. This fact was recently acknowledged by the current US secretary of state, John Kerry in a Congressional hearing. To quote him, “Now with respect to China and Africa, China is all over Africa — I mean, all over Africa. And they’re buying up long-term contracts.”

Such developments have led to some significant policy shifts in the West towards Africa—hence, a new era of direct Western interventionism. For example, the French-led Western intervention in Mali was not merely triggered by the presence of Al-Qaeda in Africa and had little to do with terrorism in general; rather it had a much larger and long term aim to achieve—prevent China from growing its influence. As He Wenping of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences warns, “French forces’ involvement in Mali will provide the case for legalization of a new period of interventionism in Africa.” And indeed it will, just as the West’s Libyan romp, costing China $20 billion in investments, helped set the stage for the current intervention in Mali.

African countries on their part, too, are getting many political advantages out of Chinese-African partnership. China is not deterred from investments and other activities in countries accused of major human rights violations, such as Sudan and Zimbabwe, limiting the potential for UN sanctions and other international pressures on those regimes. And, as a result of such ‘mutual benefits’, China enjoys more consistent support from the African bloc in the international fora than does the U.S.

It is obvious that the geo-political competition between China and the US in Africa has taken on two different dimensions. Where the US in relying on AFRICOM, a military tool of expansion in Africa, China has relied on ‘soft’ aspects of power which is why Africans have started interpreting them as ‘predators’ and ‘partners’ respectively. China has managed to establish successful political relations with almost all of Africa’s sovereign states and convinced them to support its policy of ‘One China’ in the United Nations. It has done this through a thoughtful and well- conceived policy that offers non-interference in the domestic affairs of other countries along with generous aid and loan packages and aggressive commercial activities that tie China to the local African economies. In cases where poverty and slow growth have inhibited the ability of African states to repay loans or aid, China has been generous in forgiving loans or making outright grants. Its oft-stated policy in dealing with African states is to lay stress on the notion of ‘mutual benefits’; and, it has long promoted itself as a partner in solidarity with African states which is in stark opposition to the Western colonialism and economic domination.

*Salman Rafi Sheikh is a research-analyst of International Relations and Pakistan’s foreign and domestic affairs. Exclusively for the online magazine New Eastern Outlook.*