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**The Best of Both Worlds:
Some Lessons the European Union Should
Learn From China in Africa**

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1. Introduction

China's strong recent appearance in Africa has awakened skepticism, but also hope for a new potential for African development among Western analysts.¹ Contrary to the bulk of literature asking whether or how to introduce China into the Western community of donors, this paper argues that it is instead the EU that will have to seriously rethink its traditional approach towards Africa in order to qualify for the title of "responsible stakeholder,"² so that Africa can gain most from the emergence of Europe and China on the international scene. The challenge presented by China in Africa bears testimony to the urgent need to embark on a more credible European approach, at the same time offering a pragmatic opportunity to do so. This necessitates overcoming prevailing shortcomings in EU relations with Africa: the preference for words over actions, the lack of honest and open debate on EU Africa policies, and European arrogance towards African partners. A comparison of EU and Chinese Africa policies, followed by a measurement of EU conduct against its own standards, calls for a re-evaluation of EU interests and strategies towards Africa and a reformulation of its Africa policy that is more effective, less hypocritical, and—taking the EU by its word when it sees its mission in working towards multilateral cooperation in a "partnership of equals" (Lisbon Declaration 2007)—more genuinely European. To improve its policy in Africa's favor, the EU would do well in emulating some elements from the Chinese approach.

2. Two agendas for Africa

The first China-Africa Summit, held in Beijing in November 2006, which was accompanied by the third Forum on China-Africa-Cooperation (FOCAC), presented a wake-up call for the traditional development partners of Africa, mainly the US and the EU. Following the attempt to initiate a more equal and in-depth partnership between Europe and Africa at the Cairo Summit in 2000, a meeting at the level of heads of state and government of the two continents had repeatedly been postponed, mainly due to disagreements on how to deal with the leadership of Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe (The Times 2007). The flamboyant Chinese-African fair in Beijing thus demonstrated that while the fruitless struggle over principles had blocked closer cooperation between European and African governments, China had swept over the continent, building strong economic, political, and cultural ties with a large number of African countries.

The rather quick expansion of Sino-African relations led to reactions of shock and awe on the side of European observers, since close relations to Africa, as a part of the African, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) group of countries, had for decades been a strong domain of the EU and previously the European Community (EC). During the Cold War, Euro-African ties were regulated largely by the Lomé Conventions, which focused mainly on trade and development assistance, but also had some political implications (Grimm 2003: 58-60). At the end of the century, however, Africa had lost much of its strategic and economic importance, and Europeans were frustrated by the lack of progress in economic, social, and democratic development in many African countries. The successor of Lomé, the Cotonou Partnership Agreement, therefore put a strong emphasis on values and principles such as respect for human rights, the protection of basic civil and political rights, democratic principles, good governance, and the rule of law, which were consi-

¹ See, for instance, Alden (2007), Asche & Schüller (2008), Wild & Mephram (eds.) (2006).

² The expression was used in reference to China by US Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick in his Statement of Conclusion on the Second US-China Senior Dialogue. See Zoellick (2005).

dered as indispensable for long-term development (European Commission 2003: 10-13). In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, Africa was brought back on the agenda for international security. According to the European Security Strategy (ESS 2003), helping Africa to overcome poverty and to establish stable state institutions is crucial to securing international stability and peace. To that effect, the EU engaged in several military and peacekeeping missions and mapped out several concepts and strategies on African peace and development.³ All of these papers and strategies employ a broad definition of both security and development, and both aspects are considered as being highly interdependent.

As African development ranks high on the agenda, the current relations between the EU and Africa are widely perceived as asymmetric in favor of the Northern donor as opposed to the Southern recipient. The European commitment to Africa can be explained by the historical legacy of the former colonial powers, moral obligation, and—to a rather negligible extent—economic interests (Nugent 2003: 433). The latter might increase in the future since the EU attempts to diversify its energy imports, but to this date, Africa accounts for less than ten per cent of overall EU external trade, with Sub-Sahara Africa making up less than five per cent (Eurostat 2009: 32-39). Beyond that, the EU has a vital self-interest in African peace and development, since civil war and poverty increase streams of illegal migration to the EU and create breeding grounds for international crime and terrorism (ESS 2003; Lalou 2007: 55-56). Moreover, the export of a “European model” to Africa serves both as a means and an end in the EU strategy. Africa presents “a showcase in North-South relations and a cornerstone in the claim for a European foreign policy role” (Grimm 2008: 14), providing a chance for the EU to prove its qualities as a power to be reckoned with in global affairs. To achieve its development goals for Africa, the EU employs a wide range of hard and soft power tools, and its military missions are accompanied by large fundings and experience-sharing for institutions of regional integration, both economic and political, fostering democracy and good governance. Based on its own experience, European values of democratic principles and multilateral cooperation are shining through its development strategies (European Commission 2007; Council of the European Union 2009a).

Contrary to the depiction of Chinese engagement in Africa as a new phenomenon, modern Sino-African relations have also existed for more than half a century. Their establishment dates back to the Bandung Conference in 1955, and they were further deepened by Zhou Enlai’s visits to Africa in the 60s and 70s, which were accompanied by Chinese medical and technical aid as well as large infrastructure projects (de Beule & van den Bulcke, 2009: 44). Since then, Chinese-Africa relations have been based on the principles of non-interference⁴ for future partnership cooperation. These principles are still of central importance today, while relations have greatly intensified over the past years.

Varying from the European approach, the recent Chinese embrace of Africa is motivated mainly economically, but political and diplomatic interests also play a significant role. In regard to economic and commercial goals, Africa is an important part of the Chinese “Going Out” strategy. In this context, achieving access to raw materials and energy supplies, creating markets for Chinese products and services, and gaining land for agricultural purposes are pivotal. Another objective for China is to channel Chinese migration to Africa (van Dijk 2009: 11-13). Since the initiation of

³ Most importantly, the Common Position on Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution in Africa (Council of the European Union 2004), the EU Strategy for Africa (European Commission 2005), and the Africa-EU Strategic Partnership (2007).

⁴ For an overview on the principles of non-interference, see Berger & Wissenbach (2007, 6).

FOCAC in 2000, trade with Africa and Chinese Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) to Africa has rapidly increased, and China has recently surpassed the US as Africa's main trading partner. Here, trade is concentrated primarily, but not solely, on export of African natural resources and imports of consumer goods from China (Broadman 2007: 91-100).

Beyond economic goals, China is seeking political and diplomatic support from African countries, which are encouraged to take a common stand of South-South solidarity in international institutions and fora on issues of global development. As put forward in its Africa Strategy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Peoples' Republic of China 2006), China sees itself as "the largest developing country in the world, follow[ing] the path of peaceful development and pursu[ing] an independent foreign policy of peace" with the African continent, "which encompasses the largest number of developing countries." Presenting itself as a leader of the Third World, China can count on substantial support against the perceived hegemony by Western powers on the international level. On the African continent, China has over the past decade become a virtually omnipresent actor with strong diplomatic and political ties to African governments and significant influence on African future development (Alden 2007: 8-36).

Third World solidarity and "mutual benefit" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Peoples' Republic of China 2006) are also central guidelines of Chinese development aid to Africa. In line with the principles of non-interference and peaceful co-existence, Chinese development assistance is donated to Africa on a non-political and non-conditional basis, and China emphasizes that it respects African countries' independent choice of development paths (Davis 2007: 40). Although a feeling of solidarity may also play a role in Chinese development assistance, this approach serves the goal of setting China apart from the aid practices of other donor countries, mainly the former colonial powers and the US. Instead of demanding domestic reforms and imposing governance concepts, the Chinese principle of non-interference pays more value to political stability. Similar to the EU, China derives this development model from its own historic experience, since stable political conditions and economic growth are crucial for China, and the Peoples' Republic forbids any interference into its own domestic affairs (van Dijk 2009: *ibid.*). The quest for political influence inside and outside Africa, and its strong commitment to African development on a path different from the Western donors' approach has to be seen in the light of another major objective of China: Not unlike the EU, China wishes to show to the rest of the world that it is a global actor in its own right, shaping world politics to its liking. By emphasizing solidarity among developing countries and taking a strong stance on non-interference, China clearly contradicts the notion of global Western hegemony and takes up a position as a leading global power. Good relations with Africa are central for China's aspirations to regain its "rightful place" in the world (Taylor 2004: 83-88).

3. Colliding worlds

Standing by themselves, these interests lead to little friction or conflict with the EU agenda for Africa. Trade relations between the EU and Africa are only of marginal importance to the EU. Even the EU's increasing demand for African fuels is not yet threatened by the Chinese quest for resources, since as a latecomer to global resource markets, China has so far mainly concentrated on African regions that were widely neglected by the EU. After all, such competition for markets, resources, and also political influence would not be any different with China than with any other large economic player, like Russia or the US. Neither does closer political cooperation between

China and African nations in international fora per se pose a threat to the EU. On the contrary, the EU welcomes closer Chinese-African relations as an opportunity for Africa to rise from poverty and to play a greater role in global politics. In line with its stance on effective multilateralism, the EU has repeatedly endorsed bi- and trilateral cooperation between Africa, China, and itself (European Commission 2008; Council of the European Union 2009b: 4-5).

However, what is being harshly criticized as averse to African development—and, consequently, to the European agenda for Africa—are some of the means China employs to achieve its aims, and central principles underlying the Chinese approach. Firstly, China has been accused of impeding sustainable economic growth and development in African countries. Although China has invested in sectors European enterprises have shown little interest in, such as apparel, power generation, road construction, and telecommunications, its concentration lies primarily on investing in the extractive industries and importing raw materials, thus keeping African economies in the risk of running into patterns of Dutch Disease (Broadman 2008). In addition, Chinese practices of bringing their own labor force, and with that their low labor and environmental standards to Africa, paralleled by the export of Chinese manufactured consumer goods, have led to widespread criticism also from African governments. Such trade policies contribute to African unemployment and impede the establishment of African manufacturing industries. These trade policies have earned China the reputation of a neo-colonialist and neo-imperialist power (Rupp 2008: 68-73). Also, China's lending practices have been attacked for leading African countries into unsustainable debt, undermining the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative of the G-8.⁵ Secondly, China has become alleged with aggressively promoting its interests by unfairly employing its “competitive political advantage,” “comparative economic advantage,” and “symbolic and economic diplomacy” (Alden & Davies 2006: 90). The Chinese government uses both diplomatic influence and financial support to boost Chinese-African trade relations and Chinese FDI to Africa and thus outbids European Multinational Corporations (Obiorah 2006: 51). Such unfair competition may also affect development projects, as despite its claim of providing unconditional aid on the principle of South-South solidarity, China often ties its aid into so-called package deals, connecting aid, trade, and diplomatic issues. China speaks of its partnership with Africa as a “win-win relationship,” and, accordingly, Chinese aid is mostly given in the form of loans and projects in which China usually provides the main part of material and expertise, and which are mostly agreed upon in the context of wide-scoped trade and investment deals favoring Chinese enterprises and investment (Gill & Reilly 2007: 41-49; Guimei 2008: 49).

Thirdly, China further interferes into European-African economic and development relations because the unconditional character of its aid and trade presses some African countries and companies to prefer agreements with China over those offered by the EU. It is particularly China's official stance on the principles of non-intervention and the respect for state sovereignty that can be considered the main bone of contention between the EU and the Chinese approach, as most Chinese policies which are perceived as faulty by the Europeans are based and legitimized on these principles. While China claims to foster peace and stability through its commitment to Africa, Western critics argue that it does quite the opposite by applying its concept of non-intervention, as it neglects the importance of strengthening human rights, good governance, and sustainable development (European Parliament 2007: 10-12). China maintains close political and

⁵ Except for the case of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, this claim has been refuted in recent research. See Chaponnière (2009).

economic relations with autocratic regimes regardless of their governance conduct or allegiances of corruption or human rights abuses; it also provides military assistance and arm sales to such governments. China is therefore accused of disregarding the root causes of African conflicts and securing only the political status quo on an unstable basis (Shinn 2008; Taylor 2007: 10-11). Furthermore, by giving financial aid and economic cooperation at conditions more favorable to African countries than those offered by the World Bank or other Western donor institutions, China undermines the need for reform, as entailed in Western donors' strategies (Alden & Davies 2006: 91-92). Likewise, maintaining trade with states shunned by EU sanctions, or blocking international sanctions at the United Nations, undercuts international pressure on such states (Vines 2006: 67).

4. European criticism towards China: Throwing stones in a glasshouse

Whether such criticism towards China meets the facts is very much a matter of perspective.⁶ The debate can be summarized as revealing both negative and positive aspects of Chinese Africa policy. Its strong stance on non-interference and its resource and trade agenda, allowing close political and economic ties with African governments regardless of their governance and human rights record, plus its trade and investment policies, at times having a negative impact on social and environmental standards, bear the risk of undermining African development. However, China has proven to be sensitive to criticism, especially when uttered by its African partners instead of other external powers, and shown a willingness to compromise and adjust its policies to each partner country's needs (Rupp 2008: 68-73; Chaponnière 2009: 76-78). Moreover, some African countries have benefitted greatly from Chinese investments and have welcomed the un-bureaucratic and pragmatic implementation of its aid projects as an alternative to the often long-lasting and paper-intensive projects offered by the EU.⁷ But while it is absolutely legitimate for Africans to express serious concern over the effects of the Chinese African policy and understandable that the EU is deeply worried about losing influence in what has traditionally been considered its backyard, it is definitely not up to the European powers to cast the first stone in China's direction, given their own long list of sins in regard to the ongoing misery on the African continent. Considering the first two arguments put forward in criticizing China, a look at EU conduct towards Africa reveals similar patterns of weakening African development through reckless, if not aggressive, pursuit of self-interested strategies; and, in contrast to China, these faults are worsened by half-heartedness. Despite all rhetoric of altruistic partnership, EU interests in Africa, EU interests in African development, and African interests in African development are not as congruent as they are depicted. This becomes manifest, first of all, in EU trade with Africa. Already under the Lomé and Cotonou Agreements, EU trade policies, and the respective aid-for-trade concepts, turned out to be ineffective at best or even counterproductive (Grimm 2003: 103-105). Yet together with other Western donor institutions such as the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund, the EU has repeatedly enforced its agenda on market liberation on African countries, an approach that is widely contested as ignoring African needs and undermining African ownership. The example of current negotiations on Economic Partnership Agreements

⁶ Among many others, see Junbo (2007); Manji & Marks (eds.) (2007); van Dijk (ed.) (2009); Ampiah & Naidu (eds.) (2008).

⁷ Speech by the Ambassador of the Kingdom of Lesotho to Germany Makase Nyaphisi at the International Conference on The Rise of Africa, Berlin, 23.01.2010 (author's notes).

(EPAs) between the EU and Africa is a case in point: The EU approach is accused of exploiting Africans' weak bargaining position in the negotiation process, of increasing the vulnerability of weak African economies through enforced market opening, and of impeding African regional integration rather than strengthening it.⁸ African economic growth is further severely hurt by EU protective subsidies, especially in the agricultural sector (Gillson 2004; Oxfam 2006). Second, the disparity between rhetoric and reality in EU Africa policy is shown by a clear lack of commitment. Although the EU and its members are still the largest donors of aid to Africa, they lag behind their promises of increasing aid to the levels necessary for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The implementation of principle-based policies in all sectors, outlined in various strategies, policy papers and conclusions, is marred by severe shortcomings and broken promises, which has cost the EU much credibility and respect as a development partner (Smith 2006; Kohnert 2008: 10).

Criticism of China's principle of non-interference and its respect for the sovereignty of African states can evenly be turned against the EU on two grounds. On the one hand, claiming that China weakens African long-term peace and stability by dealing with corrupt and autocratic governments eclipses the history of European-African relations, where, over many decades, European powers have maintained ties with often worse autocrats for geostrategic reasons and contributed their share to violent conflict and proxy wars. In this context, recent military commitment of EU members in support of African governments is highly questionable (*Le Monde Diplomatique*, 2008). The EU further employs double standards in that it seems more reluctant to criticize African governments of economically important, large African states than those of weak African economies for their poor governance and human rights conduct. Quite ironically, some African observers see these double standards exemplified in EU complaints about close relations between China in Africa, while the EU itself does not consider cutting down its trade with China as a response to Chinese human rights violations (Tegulle 2008: 46). On the other hand, the EU's counter-model to Chinese non-interference, that is, its use of economic incentives, conditionalities and sanctions to encourage democratic reforms in Africa, has in the past neither proven more fruitful than the Chinese approach nor particularly democratic in itself. Pressurizing elected governments into reform tends to impair African state institutions rather than strengthen them, and the asymmetry in EU-Africa relations counteracts the notions of equal partnership, African ownership, and mutual respect as outlined in the Africa-EU Strategic Partnership (2007).

Thus, while China's growing presence means both chances and challenges for Africa, the latter prevail for the EU. If the EU is truly interested in African development, it has many reasons to praise the Chinese commitment to the continent—despite some justified criticism of Chinese practices. In the end, it must be left to Africans to deal with China as they deem right. But the EU finds itself challenged by China not only in regard to its objectives concerning Africa. China offers an alternative to the previously undisputed supremacy and dominance of Western industrialized countries. It gives African leaders a choice of political and economic partners, raising their bargaining power vis-à-vis their European partners above their inferior role imposed on them in an unequal donor-recipient relationship. China's emphasis of equality in South-South cooperation, being hailed enthusiastically by African leaders, painfully hints at the European colonial past and the still-existing power asymmetries between the EU and Africa. By exposing Europeans to hard competition for influence, resources, and markets in Africa, China forces the EU

⁸ For a detailed critical discussion of EPAs, see contributions to Faber & Orbie (eds.) (2009); Oxfam (2006).

to grapple with its own myopic self-interests, otherwise disguised by the rhetoric of equal partnership and hidden beneath the call for democracy and good governance principles. China further represents a model for development far different from the EU experience and opens the debate on whether African development must necessarily follow the European paths of regional integration and market deregulation. As China offers Africans the opportunity to turn elsewhere for business and support, it questions the EU's right to dictate to Africans the terms of partnership, to control African behavior through the use of conditionalities, and to punish African governments with the use of sanctions. Regardless of whether the Chinese Africa policy is considered better or worse in regard to ethics and effect, it forbids a continuation of the hitherto vastly fruitless business-as-usual-with-values-added⁹ approach of the EU, if the EU wishes to gain and uphold its credibility as a global actor. In short, China's presence in Africa demands that the EU dare a look in the mirror, investigating self-critically its norms, interests, and actions towards Africa.

5. Conclusion: An agenda for the EU

Neither the Chinese nor the European Africa policy is without faults. Yet, against the background of its claimed commitment to effective multilateralism, the EU cannot rest on pointing fingers at China. Following both this self-imposed role as global actor and its historic responsibility, the EU must live up to its own standards in its relations towards Africa. Ironically, in order to do so, it can learn from the Chinese. This is not to say that the EU should abandon its values and principles and engage in a race to the bottom just to outbid China. On the contrary, the EU must build on its major strengths and offer Africans what it can give best: its long-term experience in providing development aid, its striving for sustainability, its respect for human rights, democratic participation, and its expertise in regional integration. These principles and values are shared by Africans, as declared in the African Union Constitutive Act (AU 2002). What the EU can learn from China, on the other hand, are some lessons in straightforwardness, pragmatism, and equality.

Less phrases, more substance: The reasons for the discrepancy between EU rhetoric and reality are only partly to be found in the often denounced "expectation-capability gap" (Hill 1993) of the EU, due to its structural and institutional weaknesses as a multinational and multilevel actor. Incoherence and inconsistencies in the EU's Africa policy also stem from the absence of an honest public debate on whether, why, and how the EU should engage in Africa, on the impact of certain European policies on African development (for instance, energy security or agricultural policies), and on European interests and responsibility. China makes no attempt to conceal what it considers its legitimate economic or political interests in Africa, just tries to wrap them into packages of win-win character. This makes it easy to blame China, but also gives China the chance to react and adapt to criticism. If the EU admitted that its Africa policy is not solely driven by charity but also legitimate self-interests, this would be less shameful than being rightly accused of vesting them. Openly addressing these interests, and the potential for conflict that comes with them, is necessary for European, African, and international actors, in order to find constructive solutions for such conflicts. An open debate could also allow a sober assessment of what an European-African development partnership can likely achieve.

⁹ Introducing the Africa-European Union Strategic Partnership, EU High Representative Javier Solana stated that „we do not want to do business as usual any more.” See Council of the European Union General Secretariat (2008, 3).

Less talk, more action: China has already had a positive effect on EU policy, since its arrival on the African stage and the FOCAC celebrations seem to have kicked the EU out of its armchair. Competition is good for business, and once again, Africa has become important for the EU beyond its role as a beneficiary of aid. Yet, the Africa-EU Summit in Lisbon and its Action Plan are a first step in the right direction; implementation has to follow. China is well on its way toward fulfilling the pledges of debt cancellation and increases in aid, trade, and investment made on the last FOCAC meetings and Hu Jintao's high-level visits to Africa. The EU still lags behind meeting its obligations for the MDGs and living up to the promises of Gleanegles and the European Consensus on Development. African leaders have good reasons to praise Chinese development projects, which are being implemented without much talk on governance principles and paper work for months. If the EU thinks it can offer projects more sustainable than that, it must ensure that they even get off the ground. A more pragmatic—and more credible—approach towards African development thus also demands a re-evaluation of the EU's stand on principles. Human rights, the rule of law, good governance and democracy are crucial for sustainable development and pro-poor growth, and Africans might indeed favor the EU over China because of these principles (Kohnert 2008: 21). However, the wish by Africa's poor for stability and economic growth also has to be respected, and development programs should be tailored less to match development paradigms, but rather the partner countries' practical needs.

Less hubris, more respect: An essential problem of the EU approach towards Africa does not lie in its self-interests, but in the lack thereof. Its acclaimed altruism and solidarity with its poor Southern neighbor perpetuate the paternalistic patterns that have legitimized African exploitation and dependence for more than a century. Among such unequal players, especially given the European colonial past as well as the carrot-and-stick tactics of incentives and conditionalities, the notion of solidarity rather captures the picture of the EU as a benevolent colonizer than a partner. Unlike China, the EU cannot refer to Third World or South-South solidarity, and the gap between the EU and Africa in terms of economic might and political influence is all too obvious. Yet, what the EU can learn from China is to acknowledge Africa as an opportunity instead of a burden (Berger 2007). China's concept of a win-win relationship implies not only that Africans can gain in the bargain, but also admits some Chinese dependence on Africa. If the EU were to come down from its pedestal and discuss its goals in and for the continent on par with Africans, it is very likely that Africans would be happy to give the EU much of what it wants, knowing the EU is willing to make concessions in return. Also, European demands on governance and human rights issues may fall on more fertile soil in Africa when uttered on eye-level instead of in a donor-recipient relationship. Again, the Africa-EU Strategic Partnership of Lisbon is a good start, but there is still a long way to go for European thinking of Africa to change. If the EU is serious in its commitment to Africa, and to effective multilateralism, it must listen to Africans, as well as to some ideas presented by other partners of Africa, mainly the Chinese. Any improvements in EU Africa policies will not only benefit Africa, it will also improve the EU's standing in Africa as a reliable development partner. Serving as a role model, after all, is likely to have a bigger effect on African development than blaming dubious Chinese policies.

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