
China's Priorities in Africa: Enhancing Engagements

Speaker: Ambassador Zhong Jianhua

China's Special Representative for African Affairs

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Introduction

This document provides a summary of a meeting and questions-and-answers session held at Chatham House on 13 June 2014 on China's new relationship with Africa.

The speaker discussed his role in South Sudan as China's Special Representative for African Affairs, and described how China is taking a more active role in issues like South Sudan on the continent. China has national interests in the conflict as the country's oil fields are managed by a Chinese company, but the speaker clarified that China would only intervene more deeply if it was in the interests of the South Sudanese, and never against the country's will. China supports the Intergovernmental Authority on Development's role and welcomes the interim government.

China's relationship with Africa has developed from a political relationship in the 1970s to a broader economic- and trade-based engagement. With this widening of the relationship, problems arise, and the speaker discussed challenges such as the issues facing Chinese government and businesses abroad, immigration, and, more specifically, China's challenges in Angola. While China and Africa have a warm relationship, it will be necessary for both sides to ensure this positive cooperation is maintained.

The meeting was held on the record. The following summary is intended to serve as an *aide-mémoire* for those who took part and to provide a general summary of discussions for those who did not.

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Zhong Jianhua

The speaker began by examining his role as China's Special Representative to Africa. He noted that there is often some confusion over what room there is for his job, given that China has ambassadors in almost all African countries. He described how the Special Representative works on the most important issues in the African continent, particularly those pertaining to Chinese interests, and he highlighted the example of Darfur. China's public image had been damaged by its involvement in Darfur, following reports that it supported Sudanese massacres, and this caused problems with China's hosting of the Olympic Games in Beijing. The problems in the region have expanded to also include the conflicts involving South Sudan, and the speaker highlighted the issues regarding the shutdown of South Sudan's oil. Oil production in South Sudan makes up 98 per cent of the country's economy. China also has a national interest in this aspect of the conflict as the oil fields are operated by the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), and the challenges that China faces in the region were exacerbated by a lack of preparation for the oil shutdown. The speaker described how he had travelled to South Sudan more than ten times, and an almost equal amount to Sudan, and met with the presidents, foreign ministers and other country's envoys. He noted that he had worked particularly closely with the US ambassador on the issue. Oil production was resumed in March last year, but problems remain in the country. The speaker highlighted how South Sudanese troops salaries remained unpaid for half a year, and he stressed that this is a matter of great concern. Alongside his involvement in South Sudan, the speaker explained that he also concentrates on areas such as Somalia, the DR Congo, the Central African Republic and Mali.

Zhong Jianhua stated that China's relations with Africa are warm, and this is a sentimental relationship, not just political. He explained that China will never forget how much it owes African countries, who helped pave the way for China's return to the United Nations. This is very important for Chinese leaders, and the country is proud of the important role it now plays in global politics and promoting peace through

the UN. Likewise, African countries have a positive view of China, which they see as one of them. He highlighted the example of the celebration of China's National Day that he held in Pretoria in 2008, after the end of the Beijing Olympic Games. He described how he noted a difference in the reactions to the reception's success from the attending ambassadors. While a lot of ambassadors congratulated him on his success, and stated that they had not anticipated China being capable of hosting such an event, the African ambassadors saw China's success as their own. He emphasized that this relationship is positive, but that it also presents a challenge for China. China must ensure that the relationship remains warm, and that Africa and China maintain their healthy partnership.

Summary of questions and answers

Questions

Does the speaker get a sense that China's relationship with Africa is worsening?

What is the speaker's opinion on the recent announcement of an interim South Sudanese government, and to what extent does he anticipate China interacting with this new government?

A large number of African goods flow into China, but the trade channels are exposed to a lot of crime, particularly piracy. Does the speaker see China playing a greater role in ensuring the security of the lines of trade out of Africa?

Zhong Jianhua

Zhong Jianhua stated that he was reluctant to label China's relations with Africa as either entirely good or bad. He detailed how some Chinese scholars report that the country is doing very well in Africa and relations are improving because they visit a particular country where they were received well. These reports are contrasted by opposing scholars who argue that the relationship is terrible, and describe how China is being criticized and pushed away. The speaker indicated that neither of these positions represents the complete picture, and he emphasized the necessity for Chinese scholars to develop a broader view of the relationship. Unless the entire image can be appreciated, everyone will develop different opinions. The speaker admitted that he is uncertain himself as to how the bigger picture looks, but he clarified that, even in the face of this uncertainty, it is necessary to deal with each of the individual problems that China faces in Africa. He acknowledged that there has been a change in the relationship, though he stressed that this is true of both sides. China and Africa's relations were originally based on politics in the 1970s. However, the connections between the two have widened since then, and there is now a much higher level of trade and investment, and economic engagement. The extension of the relationship has resulted in challenges for both parties, and the speaker emphasized the need to adjust so as to better overcome these issues and further extend the cooperation. It is very clear that there has been a change in the relationship, and China must change the nature of its engagement alongside this.

The North-South oil issues were resolved at the beginning of last September, and relations between Sudan and South Sudan stabilized. The presidents had developed closer connections and were talking to each other almost daily, and the speaker explained that he shifted his attention to other problems on the continent. However, when the fighting re-commenced and began to escalate, he was sent back to focus on South Sudan again. The speaker described how he has spoken to all parties involved, as well as neighboring countries, and he stated that he was happy to see the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) playing an important and constructive role. The situation in South Sudan poses new challenges for the Chinese. The speaker explained how China is being pushed to intervene by other

countries, particularly the IGAD countries and Ethiopia. China normally has a rigid attitude towards intervention and the need for consent, but this conflict presents a very difficult situation. The speaker stated that the government is aware of this, and noted how China's leaders declared in 2012 that China needs to play a greater role in Africa's peace and security. He described how instability in Africa affects the continent's development, so if China claims to support Africa's development it cannot turn away from such conflicts. However, while China needs to increase its engagement in this area, the speaker highlighted how there is a need for caution. He explained that China is new to this greater involvement, and while the country has good intentions, it cannot afford to make mistakes. There are two guidelines for China's involvement. First, although China may have its own interests in the country, it will not do anything against the interests of the country. Chinese interests will not be prioritized. Second, China will not act against the will of the country either. The speaker acknowledged that China does have interests in South Sudan, particularly its oil, but emphasized that this is now South Sudan's oil field. As oil constitutes 98 per cent of the country's economy, he stressed the need to ensure that the oil supplies are protected. It is important that South Sudanese stakeholders do not attack the country's own resources if they wish to play a role in the political future of the country. China also provides humanitarian support to South Sudan, and the speaker described how part of his role is ensuring both sides understand that this is simply humanitarian aid. China is working together with IGAD to help resolve the conflict. IGAD countries have been helping resolve regional conflicts long before any international engagement began. The speaker described how individuals from these countries understand the tribal and ethnic conflicts far better than outsiders, have connections with groups like the Nuer and Dinka and have traditional reconciliation methods that should be relied upon to resolve issues. He emphasized that China's role must be in support of IGAD countries. As such, the speaker explained that he did not broach the subject of a transitional government until IGAD and the South Sudanese began to discuss the possibility of this. He stated that China is happy with the transitional government and will continue to support negotiations and push for a peaceful settlement. There have been improvements to the situation, and the speaker expressed his hope that peace will remain after the rainy season ends. China has sent representatives to participate in the monitoring team, as the government sees this as a good opportunity to restore peace.

Almost half of Africa's trade is either sent to, or made in China, and the speaker clarified that China sends its own defense forces to protect the shipments. He indicated that this is also a good opportunity for the Chinese military to practice far away from China. He stated that the defense strategy has been very successful. The troops have both been effective in their role and they have learnt a lot. The speaker noted how there have been a number of friendship visits to African countries as well, as the military is attempting to learn about the continent.

Questions

Can the speaker give any advice to British and foreign companies who are working with Chinese companies, such as CNPC, in Africa?

Given some of the difficulties in China's economic relationship with Africa, will there be a change in Chinese policy on how the Chinese government and Chinese companies will participate in economic cooperation with their African counterparts?

Could the speaker comment on the public relations issues that China faced in Angola, and what are the biggest challenges that China encounters in Angola?

Zhong Jianhua

The speaker stated that British companies should teach CNPC how to conduct business in Africa. He described how CNPC never considered the regional political situation, despite operating oil fields in South Sudan for over ten years. The only research that the company conducted was regarding the best methods for extracting oil, and the political environment was never examined. He acknowledged that CNPC had attempted to develop good relations with the local people by setting up schools and clinics, but the company failed to realize that there was an imminent political crisis that would lead to South Sudan's oil fields being shut down until it was forced to do so at gunpoint. He stressed that qualified multinational corporations cannot afford to be unaware of such situations. The company had simply followed the pattern of their operations in China, without adjusting this to the new local environment, and he explained that CNPC still has a lot to learn about operating internationally. He stated that he always pushes the company to learn from the example of other international companies. He noted that CNPC does learn quickly, and highlighted how the company donated 10 million yuan to expand a refugee camp in Juba. The company needs to do more such work, and cannot simply rely on the government to develop humanitarian projects. Unlike the government, it is not hampered by bureaucratic processes.

While Chinese policy is very effective domestically, Zhong Jianhua acknowledged that the government's policy is sometimes inefficient abroad. Companies will ignore the Chinese government, focusing on the local government's decisions and structures instead. In fact, he described how companies sometimes hide their action from the Chinese embassies, as they are aware that the embassies would attempt to stop their activities. The only Chinese policy with which the businesses are concerned is how much the government will support them, and whether they can receive any loans from the government. Chinese embassies are working hard to find out what is taking place with these companies. The Chinese government has also developed a new strategy of sending high-level diplomats to work in local Chinese government. The speaker explained that local government officials are very efficient in dealing with small to medium-sized enterprises within China, and it is these types of enterprises that are expanding their businesses internationally. By sending diplomats to postings within China's provinces, the diplomats can gain experience of working with Chinese businessmen before meeting the same type of individuals abroad.

Chinese citizens in Angola report that Angola has improved greatly and that it is a good place for making money, but it is difficult to bring the money out. Zhong Jianhua stated that the Chinese government faces problems in Angola with Chinese businesses operating outside of the control of the Chinese government and choosing to engage with the Angolan government instead. Businesses only interact with the Chinese embassies when they have difficulties. This makes it difficult to ascertain what is taking place. He clarified that problems in Angola with the Chinese mafia led to a public relations crisis in China. The Chinese public claimed that the government was not doing enough to protect its own citizens in Angola. Last year, China's Foreign Ministry had to work with the Ministry of Public Security to resolve issues pertaining to the Chinese mafia in Angola. A special police force was sent to the country, and the government worked with the Angolan police to prosecute the culprits. He stressed that there are a lot of challenges for Chinese government, businessmen and scholars when going abroad, and there are constantly new problems that require solving.

Questions

Does the speaker believe that China's model of brotherhood should be encouraged, instead of an interventionist model?

How closely does the government work with the diaspora in Africa, and how important will the diaspora be for future China-Africa relations?

As an influential external party, will China use diplomatic or economic measures to help ease tensions between ethnic groups and aid reconciliation in South Sudan?

Zhong Jinhua

The speaker clarified that the concept of a model is always controversial, and it is debatable as to whether there even is a China model. He stated that it is necessary for all countries to find their own path of development, and this may be completely different to that of China's. This is especially true for African countries, given the huge cultural differences between China and Africa. The speaker gave the example of a delegation group from South Africa who visited a Chinese model village where the same architectural design was used throughout the village. He explained that, having fought for their autonomy, the South Africans could not see any of this freedom in the model village's design. The speaker emphasized that the government has no intention of pushing the China model onto other countries. It understands that, while the model may be effective in China, it could be a disaster for other countries. It is beneficial for African countries to visit China and see how the country has achieved its economic prosperity, but the speaker highlighted two important considerations for countries looking at the China model. First, even if something is working in China, it cannot be guaranteed that the same success can be repeated elsewhere. The exact model is unique to China. Second, it is important to recognize that China has its own development problems. The China model is not entirely successful even within China, and issues such as Beijing's high levels of air pollution have put a lot of political pressure on the government. It is important for African countries to not repeat these mistakes.

The speaker explained that when he was the minister who worked on immigration in 1999 he was responsible for dealing with the challenge of illegal immigrants. Other countries were concerned that illegal immigration from China could result in a lot of problems given the size of China's population. However, the speaker clarified that the one million Chinese in Africa is not a very big proportion of the entire Chinese population. He stated that 99 percent of Chinese would never leave China and move to Africa. Those that do leave will return back to China, because according to Chinese traditions, one should die at home near one's ancestors. Additionally, there is a lot of prestige when returning to Chinese villages from Africa. The speaker indicated that this can be seen in the impact of the British colonial contract labour system in East Africa. In this system, Chinese and Asian labourers were brought to East Africa to work in sectors such as mining. While a lot of the labourers' descendants remained in Africa, the majority of the Chinese returned after finishing their contracts. On the other hand, millions of Indians have remained in East Africa, and they have a lot more influence as a result.

Dealing with issues of ethnicity is not easy for any country, and the speaker noted that China is no exception here. He described how the challenge is to respect ethnic differences and cultural traditions. This is a very big issue, and is a task that must be worked on by all stakeholders to find the best solution. The speaker explained that China is sometimes behind other countries in terms of social development of Chinese society, and there is a lot for China to still learn. He stated that it is important to support the uniqueness of ethnic cultures, at the same time as providing different groups equal opportunities to participate in, and benefit from, economic development.