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China in Africa: From capitalism to colonialism?

By Jian Junbo

During a trip to Nigeria last February, Britain's then foreign secretary, Jack Straw, remarked that what China was doing in Africa now was much the same as Britain had done 150 years before. Like Straw, some Western scholars and politicians maintain that China is a new colonizing power, exploiting Africa's natural resources and harming its quest for democracy and human rights.

Conversely, on June 18, Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao said in Egypt, where he started a visit in Africa, that the cap of neo-colonialism could never adorn the head of China. It's clear there exist two contradictory opinions on China's image and actions in Africa: colonizing power or capitalist benefactor?

Classic colonialism beginning from the 15th century commonly consisted of foreigners occupying distant lands, controlling their economic and political affairs and exploiting their material resources through unfair or one-sided trade practices or simply by force. By that definition European states acted as colonizing powers in Africa and Asia, but they went far beyond colonialism through the slave trade, proxy wars and imposing cultural norms.

After World War II, de-colonization movements blossomed in Africa and Asia, which finally overthrew and buried the colonial system. Unfortunately, a new colonialism paradigm subsequently emerged and quickly grew in 1960s as some Western nations became new colonizing powers through capital investments and high-tech production.

This neo-colonialism embraces all aspects of classic colonialism except for occupying foreign lands, since all states in Africa remain technically independent. In this neo-colonialism, the exploiting power controls weaker states' economic resources and political systems and exploits their wealth under name of liberal capitalism.

So where does China fall? Is it a colonizing power or not when it engages Africa, especially as more and more Chinese began to arrive on the continent from the beginning of the 21st century?

Obviously, China hasn't occupied any African country. And as a country with a deep historical memory of being colonized by Western powers, China doesn't want to control Africa's economic and political systems. The Chinese government neither appoints military consultants to African governments nor constructs military bases on the continent.

Moreover, China hasn't used deceitful means to steal and exploit African resources. Relations between China and African countries are grounded on reciprocal benefits, which is not just a slogan but a fact. Financial aid and other investments from China without political conditions are very helpful for African economies. For instance in 2005, the rate of China's contribution to Africa's total economic growth was at least 5%. Simultaneously, China buys African resources at a fair price to fuel its rapid economic growth.

Though China is not a colonialist, it is a successful capitalist in Africa. The path it has taken on

that continent is consistent with the logic of market capitalism - liberal trade based on fair contracts.

Of course, we cannot be blind to the possibility of China becoming a colonizing power some day. The day might come when African national economic systems have become so dependent on Chinese investments and export commodities that their domestic and foreign policies would in effect be decided by Beijing.

With its increasing investments in Africa, there is the possibility that Chinese business people will push African national industries aside and bankrupt national economic systems; meanwhile, more and more companies from China enter Africa, but they simply focus on profits regardless of their harmful influences on African societies, such as environmental pollution, excessive development, and exploitation of local labor.

However, this worry should not be taken too seriously. Africa's economic development heavily depends on Chinese investments or exports, but we should not forget that China will also depend on Africa's resources and economic growth. This interdependence indicates that both can still benefit from each other, which is not the same as what those old and new colonizing powers did in Africa, where the benefits went disproportionately to the colonizing powers.

It may be that individual states come to rely on China more than China relies on them, but if Beijing keeps to the principle of non-interference in domestic affairs, the political systems of the individual states whose economies heavily depend on China will not end up being controlled by Beijing. China cannot be recognized as a colonizing power but only as a hegemonic power if it can influence African countries' domestic affairs without undue interference.

In practice, China not only buys natural resources from Africa but helps the continent construct infrastructure such as schools and hospitals, and provides it with technology. And, most important, China cannot escape from trade regulations as a member of World Trade Organization.

Although capitalism implies exploitation to many, China's capitalists have to limit their exploitation within the framework of WTO and abide by local laws. If Chinese business people are intent on destroying local national economic systems (for example, the local textile industry), African governments have the power to stop them, because all these states are sovereign.

To some degree, Chinese business people's influences on African society may include environmental pollution, excessive development of resources and collusion between them and local officials. But these phenomena can be removed by rule of law. Anyway, one bad example does make a power a colonialist.

Thus it can be seen that China is not now and will not likely become a colonizing power. China can demonstrate that by strictly keeping the promise written into the Beijing Declaration of 2006, which declares that Sino-African relations are based on political equality and economic cooperation, it will restrain itself from any harmful societal and political influences while engaging Africa, the last virgin land of capitalism.

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