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CONTEMPORARY SINO-NIGERIA RELATIONS: WHY THE GENESIS MATTERS

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ABSTRACT

China's engagement with Nigeria predates Nigeria's independence in 1960 and the formalisation of diplomatic relations in the early 1970s. Studies have tried to analyse China's early contact with Africa to the South-South connection formally established in the Bandung Conference of 1955. Nevertheless, this paper's aim is to establish a link between China's increasing engagements with Africa and the past experiences/events that surrounded its early relations with Africa. The argument of the paper is that China's increasing consolidation of its interests in Nigeria have connections with past events and experiences in China's early relations with African countries.

KEYWORDS: world market, China's engagement, businesses, economic cooperation.

INTRODUCTION

The first recorded contact between Chinese state and Africa is commonly believed to have occurred around the 15th century when Ming Dynasty admiral, Zheng He, "discovered" the African continent during one of his epic voyages (Kobus and Kotze, 2006). However, the Bandung Conference of 18-24th April, 1955 was where China made the first formal contact with Africa (El-Khawas, 1973), after the Communist ascension to power in October 1, 1949. Following the 'Bandung Spirit' China began to make contacts with African countries and assisted some of the African countries to achieve independence. For example, in the spirit of Bandung, China disbursed aid to Africa. One of the landmark Chinese aid project in Africa was the building of 1860.5 km long Tanzania-Zambia railway; completed in 1975 (Wu, 2006). For China, undertaking that huge project was in the spirit of South-South Solidarity and to counter African dependence on the

Western powers, who were the first that such assistance was demanded from. The Chinese government only agreed to assist after the West has refused, 'by providing interest free loans and dispatching over 50 thousand persons- engineers and technicians (Wu, 2006).

Although China practiced a closed planned economy after the Communist Party ascension into power, China maintained relations (limited) with Africa. The fact remained that Chinese economy at the time of Mao Tse Tung's leadership was in a very bad, until the coming into power of Deng Xiaoping in 1976. As cited in Cable and Ferdinand (1994) when Deng assumed Chinese leadership, China's role in the world market was insignificant; its share of world trade was barely half of 1 percent, much lower than in the 1920s, or even in the 1950s, and ranked 30th in the league table of exporters. Due to the backward state of China's economy, Deng started economic reform in 1978. Since

the early 1990s, China has been witnessing positive results in its economic reform and has been making greater inroads into Africa, and other parts of the world, primarily for business investments and economic cooperation.

With the positive result of China's economic reform and subsequent opening-up of Chinese economy to the world, China-Africa relations assumed a new dimension. Today, China is increasingly engaging African countries and is striving to ensure that its interests are consolidated and protected in Africa. Africa, on the other hand, has found in China an alternative partner 'to do businesses' with. The changing nature and patterns of China's engagement with Nigeria prompted this research, which sets to analyse some past issues driving China's increasing engagements with Nigeria. The argument of the paper is that there are significant historical events that play great roles in China's increasing 'bonding' with Africa, particularly Africa's most populous country: Nigeria. With the Introduction as Section 1, Section 2 examines the genesis of Sino-Nigeria relations. Section 3 analyses China's increasing engagements with Nigeria and the past issues and experiences driving the engagement. Section 4 concludes.

SINO-NIGERIA RELATIONS: THE GENESIS

According to archaeological data, indirect trade between China and Egypt dates back to around the 10th century; even though certain upheavals which occurred between the 10th and 19th century scuttled the steady growth in relations between China and Africa, they were never terminated (Chibundu, 2000). Another recorded contact between Chinese state and Africa is commonly believed to have occurred around the 15th century when Ming Dynasty admiral, Zheng He, "discovered" the African continent during one of his epic voyages (Kobus and Kotze, 2006). This 'voyage' ended in 1433, when Chinese authorities, horrified by the spiraling costs of Zheng He's voyages, called it to a halt. It was not until the end of World War II, especially after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, that China and Africa were able to resume their relationship. When the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) ascended into power in 1949, only few African countries like Egypt, Liberia, Ethiopia and Libya had won independence.

However, the birth of the new China kindled hope among Africa's progressive people, who were eager to draw on the successful experiences of China's revolution. At the Bandung Conference of 18-24th April, 1955, China made the first formal contact with Africa after the Communist ascension to power. Issues of liberation of Asian and African countries still under colonial rule dominated the deliberation during the Conference. As Qiutian (2005) noted, 'it was one such

conference that was held 'without the participation of any Western colonial power.'

The Bandung Conference was attended by only six African States, Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, Liberia, Libya, and the Gold Coast (now Ghana). Nigeria was not represented at the Conference because it was still under colonial rule. Nonetheless, the Bandung Conference turned out to be a milestone in China's foreign policy towards the countries in Africa (El-Khawas, 1973). It paved a way for the South-South Solidarity campaign in China's relations with Africa

With the initial contact China made with Gamal Abdul Nasser of Egypt in Bandung, China in 1956 established diplomatic relations with Egypt (the first African country to establish diplomatic relations with China). From its embassy in Cairo, Chinese diplomats began to make commercial contacts with some African countries like Tunisia, Libya, Nigeria, Ghana, Ethiopia and Tanzania (Ogunsanwo, 1974:37). China made the first informal contact (commercial) with Nigeria in 1957 when it established a trade post in the country. This was followed by Chinese export of goods to Nigeria in 1958. Ogunsanwo (1974) stated that, in 1958, Nigeria bought 1.4m Euro worth of goods from China and this increased to 1.8m euro in 1959, although selling nothing in return to China.

The year 1960 marked a significant period as 17 African States gained independence that year. African countries as they gained their independence established diplomatic relations with China. Countries like Nigeria did not recognize China at its independence. The then Chinese Premier, Zhou Enlai visited Africa three times from December 1963 to June 1965. Ten African independent countries were visited by Chinese leader, excluding Nigeria. This was because Nigeria at its independence (being a Western colony) consistently opposed communism. Chinese communist ideology was not at par with Nigerian ruling political elites, and that actually resulted in delay in formal recognition, until 1971 after Nigeria's Civil War. Nigeria, among other countries like Ivory Coast, Niger Republic consistently opposed Communist China in Africa (Tareq, 1971).

Following the hard lessons Nigeria learnt during its Civil War, when it was abandoned by the West and it only got support from Soviet Union, a Communist country, Nigeria had to review its foreign policy to embrace all countries of the world regardless of political ideology. At the same time, China was also scouting for vote from African countries to regain its seat at the United Nations Security Council from Taiwan. China, having learnt its own lessons the hard way when some African countries accorded diplomatic relations to Taiwan, China had to revisit its foreign policy in order to win Africans' favour, more importantly to counter Taiwan (an importance foreign policy objective for China), and to gain Africans' votes

at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). African countries later supported China's re-admission to the United Nations. Out of the 76 votes at the UN, 26 came from Africa alone. Nigeria's vote also counted for China to regain her seat from Taiwan in 1971 and established diplomatic relations with Nigeria after the latter's Civil War. After establishment of diplomatic relations, China was the first to open its embassy in Nigeria on 6th April, 1971 and Nigeria later in October did the same in China. Nigeria Head of State, Gen. Yakubu Gowon visited China in 1974 and Vice Premier Geng Biao came to Nigeria four years later, in 1978.

Due to China's economic 'meltdown' at the early time and having won the political tussle with Taiwan in the UNSC in 1971, China's interest shifted to its domestic issue -how to reform its economy. China has made huge progress in achieving high rates of economic growth, developing its manufacturing sector and building export growth. China's share of world exports has risen from 1.1% in 1981 to 6.8% in 2005 (Hale, 2006), making China the world's largest exporting nation. Given the positive result of China's economic reform, its rapid economic growth and subsequent opening-up of Chinese economy to the world, Sino-Nigeria relations have assumed a new dimension.

CHINA'S INCREASING ENGAGEMENT WITH NIGERIA: PAST ISSUES DRIVING THE ENGAGEMENT

No doubt, China has become more open to the world and transformed from centrally planned economy to market oriented economy, which China called a 'Second Revolution' (Ke and Jun, 2004). The First Revolution is the Chinese Communist Party ascension into power in 1949. China is now one of world's major economies with greatest development potentials (Duncan and Mingjie, 2006). Its rapid economic growth and transformation have become unparalleled in history. China has become the El Dorado of the world, and its economic expansion is witnessed all over the world, Africa inclusive.

Africa's market and natural resources become of great importance to China to sell the goods churned out by its industries and to sustain its economic growth, through importation of such resources as oil. Although African countries, Nigeria inclusive, have also found in China an attractive partner and have been seeking for partnership and assistance from China, China's renewed African policy and increasing 'bonding' with Africa are not unconnected to some past experiences and issues that surrounded its early relations with Africa.

It must be recalled that after the Chinese Communist Party defeated the nationalist Kuomintang-Taiwan government (referred to as the Republic of

China), and came into power in 1949, Taiwan retreated to the mainland and maintains its independent government, which China frowns at. China has always maintained that Taiwan is an inalienable part of China and would not want Taiwan to gain diplomatic recognition from any country. Taiwan's case made China to expound the 'One China Policy' in its foreign relations.

In this period of China's economic transformation, China wants to make sure that African countries do not recognise Taiwan as an independent country. This is because some African countries accorded diplomatic relations to Taiwan at independence (two still do today) and some severed diplomatic relations with China (at some time), which China struggled to win those countries back. Thus, China is increasingly 'bonding' with Africa to ensure that they do not switch diplomatic relations back to Taiwan; thus, it is a game of survival and winner-takes-it-all. For instance, prior to the turn of the 21st century, not less than 15 African countries (including Senegal, Liberia, Malawi etc.) maintained diplomatic relations with Taiwan, but today, only two African countries remained (Burkina Faso and Swaziland) with Taiwan. Malawi, for example, in 2008 switched diplomatic recognition to China after more than three decades of diplomatic relations with Taiwan. Although Nigeria never recognised Taiwan at independence, Taiwan was Nigeria's major trading partner at independence, and not China.

Hence, China saw it as an important foreign policy objective to make sure it overtakes Taiwan both economically and politically in Nigeria, and China has gained these feats. Now, Nigeria ranks second, behind South Africa as China's leading trade partner in Africa. China is increasingly engaging Nigeria and has been employing such strategies such as unconditional aid tied to investments and high-level official visits to win Nigeria to its side. Recently in 2016, for instance, China gave Nigeria an interests free loan of 5 billion US dollars for development of its infrastructure- railway upgrade, satellite telecommunication construction, construction of boreholes, hydropower and rural telephone services, among others. Since 2006, Nigeria has received loans from China for different types of assistance for projects concerning infrastructure and agricultural development. China's interests and increasing engagement with Nigeria is implicitly linked to the explicit struggle with Taiwan.

In addition, China's increasing engagements with Nigeria has a link in its desire to maintain the tempo of the cordial it enjoys with Nigeria since the two countries established diplomatic relations in 1971. At independence, Nigeria had a lukewarm attitude towards the communist bloc (Bukarambe, 2005:234). This lukewarm attitude towards the communist states manifested clearly in the leaders as neither Chief

Obafemi Awolowo nor Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe visited a Communist country during their time (Ogunsanwo, 2007). This Communist opposition was also shown during late Mrs. Ransom Kuti's visit to Berlin and Beijing in the late 50s to attend the "All- World Assembly of peace" and "Women International Democratic Federation" where the Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa was quoted to have said:

I must tell you quite clearly that I and my colleagues are determined that while we are responsible for the government of the Federation of Nigeria and for the welfare of its people, we shall use every means in our power to prevent the infiltration of communism and communistic ideas into Nigeria. In order to carry our policy, we shall seek to prevent Nigerians from visiting communist-controlled countries, especially if we have reason to believe that they are traveling for the purpose of indulging in communist activities (Cited in Ogunsawo, 2007).

Nigeria's consistent opposition of Communist China led to the delay of the two countries establishment of diplomatic relations after Nigeria's independence in 1960. When Nigeria's civil war broke out in 1967; the issue of establishing diplomatic relations was stretched further. China came under suspicion during the Nigerian Civil War. China was alleged to be supporting Biafra's secession bid by supplying arms and weapons to Biafra through Tanzania. With former Soviet Union supplying weapons to Nigeria, China had to supply to Biafra though not openly (Bukarambe 2005:235). This support is plausible because of Sino-Soviet rivalry at the time. At the advent of Sino-Soviet rift, China became more interested in subduing the Soviet's influence in Africa. Throughout that period, the Chinese were acting largely as a force supplementary to the Soviet Union's activities (Tareq, 1971). The burnishing of China's credentials as the main revolutionary power depended on winning more support in the developing world than in the Soviet Union (Segal, 1992). All the same, the Sino-Soviet rift that ensued in the 1960s made some other African countries to sever diplomatic relations with China. The Common Organisation for Africa and Malagasy states (OCAM) had to hold a meeting on how to deal with Chinese threat as they felt that China was interfering in their internal affairs in its activities to win more allies than the Soviet Union. At the end of the meeting, 'Chinese Diplomats were declared persona non grata in ten states of the OCAM (El-Khawas, 1973). Diplomatic relations were severed.

On the side of Nigeria, the fact that Nigeria consistently opposed communist ideology at independence (China has not ceased to be a communist country), becomes a good reason for Chinese leaders to attach more importance to Nigeria, which is evident in its 21st century relations with Nigeria. It was observed

that prior to the 21st century, Chinese official visits to Nigeria did not go beyond that of the Premier of State Council, equivalent of Governor or Minister in Nigeria (Chibundu 2000); Nigeria was not among the ten African countries visited by Premier Zhou Enlai in the 1960s. The first ever visit by a Chinese President to Nigeria was only in 2002 (31 years after establishment of diplomatic relations). The visit was by former Chinese President, Jiang Zemin (Chibundu 2000). Two years later, specifically in 2004, President Hu Jintao visited Nigeria. In 2006, there was another visit by President Hu Jintao.

What was never witnessed in a period of 31 years, Nigeria in a space of four years played host to Chinese presidents at three different times. Obviously, these visits are not courtesy calls and are not for meetings or summits. Inherent in these visits is China's quest for closer economic partnerships and exchange. China is consolidating its presence in Nigeria and the nature and patterns of China's engagement with Nigeria have changed dramatically in the 21st century. Moreover, it is important for China to establish its presence in Nigeria and win Nigeria from its traditional allies in Europe and the West. In the game of international politics and the global governance and leadership struggles, China would want to be the principal actor in Africa.

China's increasing engagements with Nigeria also has its root in the South-South Solidarity established at Bandung Conference. As developing countries, China has often maintained that Africa and China are brothers that shared the same colonial baggage and, thus must strive for common development. The Meeting of Asian and African countries in Bandung, from 18-24 April, 1955 formalised the South-South Cooperation campaign. Knowing fully well that the countries in these two continents are all part of third world nations, still developing, the idea South-South Solidarity became a way reminding themselves where they all belong and the need to cooperate for their common development. No doubt, the 'Bandung Conference was held without the participation any Western colonial power' (Qiutian, 2005). Being a participant at the Conference and at the same time independent, the 'Spirit of Bandung' was carried on by China to Africa as most African countries were still under colonial rule at the time of the Conference. China's closer partnership has its root in the South-South connection established from the time of Bandung, and China's desire for the developing world to form a 'voice' independent of the developed world.

China has insisted on non-interference in internal affairs of Africa and Asian states. China since 1954 in its trade agreement with India enunciated the five principles of peaceful co-existence in its foreign relations, of which the principle of non-interference

was one of them. The ten-point declarations formulated at the Bandung built upon the Chinese five principles of peaceful coexistence. As Qiutian (2005) noted, the well-known ten principles of Bandung are the most important agreement reached by the Bandung Conference as an elaboration and development of the five principles of peaceful coexistence. In 1963 when Premier Zhou Enlai led China's first high-level delegation to Africa, He carried the message that China and Africa shared a common experience and could build a new pattern of what would be later known as South-South cooperation, with non-interference principle being a recurrent theme.

With this principle, China establishes relations with all kinds of government, whether democratic or autocratic. China also abstains from any decision to impose sanctions on African and Asian countries when human rights issues are brought to the United Nations. In Africa, this was seen in the case Sudan and Zimbabwe. Maintaining the principles with Africa dating to the Bandung Conference of 1955, Beijing staunchly supports the inviolability of African state sovereignty, noninterference in internal affairs, and the need for postcolonial nations to stand up to outside "bullying" and "hegemonism" (Gill, Huang and Morrison, 2007). China disentangles itself from African human rights violations and this won China Africa's favour. Over the past decade, human rights proposals against China were defeated 11 times at the United Nations, which Anshan (2007) noted that 'without African nations' support, China could not have defeated those proposals (cited in Osondu-Oti, 2016). China's increasing penetration into Africa, and the acceptance it receives from Africa, has a lot do with its non-interference principle that has guided its foreign policies from the 'beginning' of the relations. As discussed above, there are past events and experiences that drive China's increasing engagement with Nigeria in the 21st century, beyond the South-South solidarity and its economic growth.

CONCLUSIONS

There are some past issues and experiences in China's early relations with Africa that play great roles in China's increasing engagements with Nigeria such as Taiwan issue, Nigeria's anti-communist ideology, non-interference policy and Bandung Conference. For instance, China want to make sure that the 'past' never resurfaced, where African countries had to accord diplomatic relations to Taiwan. To China, Taiwan is an inalienable part of China and would want all countries not to accord Taiwan recognition as a sovereign state, and to achieve this, China has to strengthen its external relations, especially with the most populous country in Africa. In addition, the fact that Nigeria had lukewarm attitude towards the Communist blocs at independence means that China would want to consolidate the

relations with the two countries, and possibly overtake its rivals in the West. Hence, in China's 21st century increasing engagements with Nigeria, China is driving by certain historical events and experiences that China would not want to 'resurface' in its relations with Africa.

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