China in Africa: Challenges and Opportunities

Barbara Onnis

Abstract China's current economic presence in Africa dates back to the early 1990s, and has increased exponentially since the start of the new century, becoming one of the most debated chapters on PRC's foreign policy agenda. While the mainstream trends to point at the asymmetric nature of the bilateral China-Africa relationship and considers China's activities in the continent the emblem of a new neo-colonial attitude, the Chinese presence in Africa presents both risks and challenges for China and opportunities for Africa. On the one hand, the growing instability that characterizes most of the countries where Chinese economic interests are concentrated represents a crucial challenge for Beijing, which requires a rethinking of some of the key pillars of its foreign policy. On the other hand, Africa's inclusion in the maritime branch of China's *New Silk Road Initiative*, named the *21st Century Maritime Silk Road*, can become an opportunity for African economic growth and development.

1 Introduction

Chinese current economic presence in Africa is a relatively recent phenomenon that begins in the course of the 1990s and increases dramatically with the beginning of the new century, becoming one of the most debated chapters on Beijing's foreign policy agenda. Its co-occurrence with the emergence of what French scholar Bergère (2000) has called the People's Republic of China (PRC)'s *glorious decade* that has seen the country re-emerge as a great power—not only in economic, but also in political and diplomatic terms—contributing to feed the notorious 'China threat' theory (*Zhongguo weixie lun*), is useful to explain the doubts raised within the international community over the nature of China's engagement in Africa. In fact, since the onset, China's interests in Africa seem to be entirely conditioned by

B. Onnis (✉)
Department of Social Sciences and Institutions,
University of Cagliari, Cagliari, Italy
e-mail: bonnis@unica.it

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the country's pressing need for crude oil and raw materials—a type of engagement free from any political or moral conditioning. Indeed, China's economic presence in Africa is often described with a strong negative connotation, since it is seen as emblematic of its selfish quest for natural resources, and considered responsible for the failures of the fragile efforts made by the continent to improve its governance and build a sustainable future. Unsurprisingly, one of the most controversially discussed aspects continues to be the asymmetric nature of the bilateral relationship. China is described as a 'hungry giant', a devourer of raw materials, and painted as a new colonizing power, putting its own interests at the centre of its policies. To be sure, such behaviour should not be so surprising, since a nation's foreign policy always serves its national interests, and China is no exception. According to Luo and Zhang (2014), both eminent experts of China–Africa relations, Beijing has never denied that its African policy has its own strategic interests, but argue that "One of the most outstanding features of the PRC's African policy from the very beginning is its aspiration to promote the South–South cooperation and achieve the renaissance of Asia and Africa". While admitting that there exist some problems in the bilateral cooperation—trade imbalances, the lack of corporate social responsibility of some Chinese enterprises—the two authors argue that China's engagement in Africa provides the continent with new development opportunities and helps Africa's integration into the global economic and trade system. It is no coincidence that, while African perceptions of China include a mix of both approval and disdain, African citizens and governments hold overall positive views of Beijing's engagement in the continent (Hanauer and Lyle 2014, p. xii). Being aware of the criticism by both specific segments of African society (such as labour unions and civil society groups) and the majority of Western governments, China has tried to adjust its approach to the continent by promoting sustainable economic development through what Beijing refers to as 'win-win' commercial deals, that are able to generate tangible, long-term economic benefits for African nations in the form of jobs, training, and technology. At the same time, it has increasingly worked to shape broader Sino–African relations through people-to-people ties, cultural and educational exchanges, Mandarin language training, and a robust public diplomacy campaign (Ibid.). To cope with the increasing accusations of neo-colonialism, Beijing has initiated a major strategy of diversification of its investments in Africa, concentrating less on the extractive sector and supporting more investments in the large infrastructure sectors, which contribute to promoting intra-African and regional development, as well as in social projects for the local population in sectors ranging from manufacturing to information technology, health aid, rural development, education and culture in general (Ibid., Chapter "Russia and China: Partners or Competitors? Views from Russia"). Hence, while it is undeniable that China's interests in Africa are many and varied, going far beyond the obvious economic or political sphere, and extending to ideological and safety-related considerations, it should be acknowledged that China's engagement also creates opportunities for Africa.

However, the Chinese economic presence in Africa is not without risks and challenges for Beijing. The most important of such risks is related to the necessity

to protect the country's economic interests and safeguard the security of its Chinese citizens, considering that the countries where China operates in Africa are in most cases very unstable, upset by bloody civil wars, and prone to terrorist attacks. Equally pressing is the need to revise the PRC's non-interfering posture that appears to be increasingly inappropriate for a rising power with growing global interests.

The first three sections of this chapter will analyse the Sino–African relations since the early 1950, which is necessary to better understand the factors that initially led to the consolidation of Sino–African ties during the Maoist era. This is followed by an analysis of bilateral relations in the aftermath of the launch of the reformist policy by Deng Xiaoping, and an analysis of relations as one of important pillars of Beijing's post-1989 foreign policy. After that, the analysis will focus on two specific related aspects. Firstly, an analysis of the opportunities for both China and Africa by Africa's inclusion in Beijing's 'New Silk Road' initiative (*yi dao, yi lu*), the so called *21st Century Maritime Silk Road* (*21 shiji haishang sichou zhilu*). Secondly, the challenges for Beijing created by the growing instability in areas with Chinese investment and the presence of Chinese citizens are examined. It will be concluded that the challenges in particular require a profound rethinking of the PRC's low-profile and so-called *non-interference* policy. It is a crucial issue that has been animating an academic/intellectual/political debate over the last decade between those who would like a more assertive China, with a bigger say in the international affairs, and those who prefer a more secluded China focused on the solving of its internal problems first (Onnis 2013).

2 The Historical Roots of Chinese Presence in Africa

To better understand the nature and extent of the PRC's current involvement in Africa, it is useful to go back to the origins of Sino–African relations. In fact, while the current Chinese presence in Africa has its roots in relatively recent times, we must recall that the first contacts between China and the African continent date back to the times of the first Silk Road (between the second century BC and the second century AD), even if it was Admiral Zheng He, at the beginning of the 15th century, during his seven epic exploratory journeys across the globe, to inaugurate the beginning of the Sino–African relations, landing on African soil. These first contacts, however, were followed by an enormous hiatus that would last until the mid-twentieth century. Apart from the geographical distance and difficulties related to language and communication, it was mainly the colonial or pseudo-colonial events experienced by both China and Africa, during the 19th century, to determine this state of affairs (Kwaa Prah 2006). On the one hand, the signing of the *Treaty of Nanking* on 29 August 1842, which marked the end of the first Opium War (1839–1942) between the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and the Qing dynasty of China inaugurated the notorious *Unequal Treaties* (*bu pingdeng de tiaoyue*) era that would mark the beginning of the erosion of the Chinese empire's

independence, followed by China becoming an exceptional experimental field of colonial policy, hosting in its territory a form of imperialism in modern history (even if China was never colonized in a strict sense) (Osterhammel 1992, pp. 590–3). Africa on the other hand was sliced-up at the table between the distant European powers at the Berlin Conference (1884), later becoming the theatre of confrontation between direct French colonial and indirect British rule. Interestingly, despite all the differences, it would be precisely their common experience of colonial rule to lay the basis for the relationship that the newly formed People's Republic of China and the 'new' Africa would start from the middle of the 20th century. In fact, those that would restart a dialogue after centuries of interruption were two completely different realities: on the one side, a new statehood emerged victorious from the civil war that had pitted the communists headed by Mao Zedong and the nationalists of Chiang Kai-shek. This put not only an end to the experience of the Republic of China, born in 1912 from the ashes of the two-thousand-year-old Chinese empire but also with it the long period of subjection of China to foreign domination.[1] On the other side, there was a very intricate reality represented by Africa at the beginning of its decolonization process, which had just started with the withdrawal of the French and the British from Libya in 1951, and would find its climax in 1960 —dubbed *the year of Africa* with the access to independence by 17 countries—even if it would have to wait a long time before it could be considered concluded (Wilson 1994).

The relations between the two sides were further cemented during the Bandung Conference, a meeting of most newly independent 29 Asian and African states, which took place in April 1955 in Indonesia, with the stated aims to promote Afro-Asian economic and cultural cooperation and to oppose colonialism or neo-colonialism by any nation. In this sense, the conference was an important step toward the founding of the *Non-Aligned Movement*. With the skilful diplomatic leadership of Zhou Enlai, China intended to take over the direction of that historical process, introducing its own experience of a country that had freed itself from the domination of foreign powers. After the Bandung Conference, relations between China and African countries grew ever stronger, and the exchange of visits between Chinese and African leaders became more and more frequent. However only five years later, Sino–African relations suffered the repercussions of the Sino–Soviet rivalry, which, after a decade of a 'forced' alliance, met its breaking point in 1960. Since then, Moscow and Beijing become competitors in the underdeveloped countries of the Third World, and primarily in Africa, by providing economic and military aid in return for support of their respective ideologies. Consequently, while until then Beijing's goal had been to create a diplomatic space disconnected to some extent from its Soviet ally, with the breaking of relations with Moscow, those spaces became crucial to avoid total international isolation when the global bipolar structures entailed an ever greater

[1]The notorious *bainian chiru* ('century of shame and humiliation') began in 1842 with the signing of the *Treaty of Nanking*, and officially ended in 1949. The *Unequal treaties* had already been formally abrogated in 1943.

engagement on the part of the two superpowers towards developing countries in general and during those years toward Africa in particular.

Under those circumstances, Maoist China performed countless efforts and achieved promising results, mainly thanks to the capable diplomat Zhou Enlai, who travelled throughout the continent, establishing the principles that were supposed to regulate relations between China and Africa, starting with the *Five principles guiding China's relations with the Arab and African countries* and the *Eight principles for China's aid to foreign countries*.[2] These principles both stood for the concrete application of the *Five Principles of Peaceful Co-Existence* (*heping gongchu wuxiang yuanze*),[3] and the development of the Bandung spirit.

The radicalization of the revolutionary ideology in the years of the *Cultural Revolution* (1966–1976) had inevitable repercussions for the PRC's foreign posture. In the wake of the ideological thrust of those years, in fact, China would provide a massive quantity of aid to Africa, despite its own economic difficulties: one of the most outstanding examples was the construction—between 1970 and 1976—of the famous Tanzania-Zambia Railway (*Tanzan Tielu*), funded by a Chinese interest-free loan of 988 million yuan—which remains one of the largest foreign aid projects to date provided by China to Africa (Yun 2014, p. 4).

The combination of aid and ideology would prove successful in the long run, (after a phase of retreat of the Chinese influence in the continent in the late 1960s). In fact, the years of the *Cultural Revolution* coincided with the establishment of diplomatic relations with nineteen African countries, greatly contributing to the most important diplomatic success obtained by the PRC since its foundation. In 1971, Beijing finally obtained a seat at the United Nations Security Council at the expense of the seat of Republic of China (ROC), through the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2758 (*Restoration of the lawful rights of the People's Republic of China in the United Nations*). That resolution was passed also thanks also to the votes of several African countries. 26 of the 76 total votes in favour were expressed by African UN members, which led Mao Zedong to declare that "It is our African brothers who have carried us into the UN" (Qi 2012).

3 The Policies of Reform and Opening and the Reshaping of China–Africa Ties

Deng Xiaoping's choice to give the highest priority to the economy in relation to the modernization of the country had inevitable implications for the conduct of Beijing's foreign policy too.

[2] http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/ziliao_665539/3602_665543/3604_665547/t18001.shtml.

[3] "Mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty; mutual non-aggression; non-interference in each other's internal affairs; equality and mutual benefit; and peaceful coexistence".

Foreign policy became totally subservient to the objective of economic development and modernization. While China's economic relations with African countries had previously been accompanied by a strong ideological connotation and primarily guided by the provision of aid in order to facilitate the obtainment of political results, Deng's de-Maoization process led to the adoption of more pragmatic policies towards Africa under China's new leadership. Aiming at achieving concrete results was at the core of that new policy approach, within the context of Sino–African relations. In practice, this resulted in a reduction of the aid provided by China to more sustainable levels in favour of the adoption of new economic relations based on equality and mutual benefits, stressing practical results, diversity in quality; and common progress, as stated by then Chinese Premier Zhao Ziyang during a press conference in Dar es Salaam, in December of 1982, where he was paying an official visit, as part of a much wider African tour, which lasted four weeks and involved 11 countries (Brautigam 2010, pp. 53–4).

To be sure, China did not loose sight of its political interests in Africa. In 1981, the PRC was the only major power to support the African and *Third World* candidate for the post of UN Secretary General (namely, Salim Salim of Tanzania). And in 1982–3 Zhao Ziyang's tour to Africa was launched with the declaration that China was a socialist country and part of the *Third World* (Snow 1994, p. 310) even if China had by then become a country that had begun to base part of its legitimacy on economic performance- a development that would lead China's political leaders on several occasions to sacrifice ideology for the achievement of specific economic results in China's relations with China.

Under these circumstances, trade relations with Africa were gradually marginalized and Chinese aid to the continent was scaled back significantly. The downgrading of Africa's significance for Beijing also emerged from the significant reduction of high-profile visits to the continent in the mid-1980s. This was in stark contrast to the early years of the decade (Lin 1989, pp 87–88). However, it is also by the attitude of Chinese leaders towards Africa, sheltered but unusually critical, which pushed them to admonish their African counterparts for the way they uncritically embraced socialism as a development model. While talking with the Vice-President of Tanzania, during a visit to China in April 1985, Deng Xiaoping declared that "Socialism [did] not mean poverty", and went on to say that "without developing the productive forces and improving people's living standards you cannot say you are building socialism" (Quoted in Taylor 2001, p. 93). Furthermore, the reasons for the Chinese disengagement were closely related to the contemporary transformations of the international scenario, which saw Beijing and Moscow in a historical moment of improving their relations. From a geopolitical point of view, this implied that Africa became less important as it was no longer the theatre of clashes between the two socialist giants.

4 Africa on China's Post-1989 Foreign Policy Agenda

China's relations with Africa experienced a drastic reversal in the aftermath of the events of June 4, 1989, after which Beijing embarked on a major process of revaluation of its foreign policy towards Africa, giving rise to a new era in relations with the continent. For the first time since the death of Mao China had become a target of strong criticism from the West because of its human rights abuses. In that particular context, where Beijing entrenched itself in strong defence of the 'principle of non-interference', China received support from the African continent and, from that moment, the developing countries were re-elevated to a level of what Beijing referred to as 'fundamental pillar' of the Chinese post-1989 foreign policy.

Understandably, reactions in the face of the repression of the Tiananmen protests were much more contained in Africa-in essence, no protests and no accusations. On the contrary, in some cases there were even words of praise for the Chinese government's conduct. Many African leaders in fact shared with China the suspicions that Western criticism constituted an attempt to destabilize the country, rather than being motivated by the violation of human rights (Taylor 1988, p. 448). The decision to support Beijing was therefore a fairly spontaneous choice motivated not only by the spirit of the *Third World* solidarity, but also by resentment towards what in Beijing was described as the continuous 'neo-imperialist interference' by the Western world. The fact that most of the African elites were subjected to the same Western accusations further strengthened African support for the Chinese leadership at the time. At the same time, Africa's support was also influenced by pragmatic considerations. African leaders feared that open criticism of Beijing could mean the end of the development aid from the PRC—from 1956 to 1987 Africa had been the recipient of more than 60% of the total value of Chinese aid and assistance programs abroad (Ibid., p. 449).

The first-ever visits by foreign dignitaries in China after the Tiananmen events had as protagonists the foreign minister of Sao Tome and Principe and the President of Burkina Faso, Blaise Compaoré, who were also a constant target of criticism for human rights abuses on the part of the Western world. They both wanted to show the whole world the African continent's wavering friendship with China in its most difficult times, and Beijing's response was one of great gratitude, as shown by the resumption of lavish state visits of China's top leadership to Africa, starting with the one by then Foreign Minister Qian Qichen, who travelled to eight countries between August and September 1989 (Qian 2006, pp 201–2). Qian's visit was followed by visits by Chinese president Yang Shangkun's visit to Egypt, in December 1989 (Liu 2011, p. 83). From 1991 onwards, it seemed to become a routine practice for the Chinese foreign minister to visit Africa at the beginning of every year, thereby contributing to the creation of the foundation for the intense diplomatic Chinese–African partnerships that continue today (Qian 2006, p. 202).

In that critical juncture, Africa was useful for Beijing in the context of the construction of a new post-Cold War multipolar world order, which both countries envisioned as being more equitable and respectful of political and ideological

differences. At the same time, Africa could be a useful instrument through which China could project its prestige and its international reputation, and strengthen its credentials as a 'responsible great power' (*fuzeren daguo*), through e.g. a growing participation in peace missions under the aegis of the UN[4] and a skilful exercise of soft power.

Chinese foreign policy in the post-1989 era assigned new importance to the African continent, leading Beijing to expand economic and business relations with a number of African countries. During a visit of President Jiang Zemin in 1996 at the headquarters of the Organization of African Unity in Addis Ababa, he referred to the Chinese will to strive for more political and economic cooperation on the African continent (Chen 2008). The announcement to increase Chinese economic engagement in Africa was part of what would then become part of China's so-called *Going Out Strategy* (*zou chuqu*), which was formally adopted by the Political Bureau in 2000 as a *national strategy* intended to encourage Chinese companies, and the country's State Owned Enterprises (SOEs) in particular, to invest overseas. That strategy was aimed at of putting Chinese companies into the position to compete with foreign and Western counterparts and consolidate China's international prestige and global economic influence. The government's call to invest abroad was met with enthusiasm by Chinese companies and Africa became the strategy's main target for a number of reasons, related to both the presence of rich natural resources and the friendship and brotherhood ties cultivated over previous decades (Wang 2013). Since the launch of the *Going Out Strategy*, Chinese overseas investments have increased significantly especially those of *SOEs*. Statistics indicate that Chinese Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) rose from US$ 3 billion in 1991 to US$ 35 billion in 2003 ('UN report: China becoming major investor abroad' 2004). In 2007, Chinese FDI reached US$ 92 billion ('China's direct investments abroad top $92b by 2007' 2007), even if China's FDI to Africa remained marginal in terms of China's total outward FDI flows (0.2% in 1991, 3.2% in 2005, with a peak of 9.28% in 2000) (Kaplinsky and Mike 2009, p. 554).[5] Nonetheless, the simultaneous creation of an institutional platform for Sino-African dialogue, the so-called *Forum for China–Africa Cooperation*, *FOCAC* (*Zhongfei*

[4]China started in the early 1990s, after a period of non-involvement in the United Nations, to become one of the major contributors to UN peacekeeping operations. As of September 2015, the PRC was the ninth largest contributor to the UN, and by far the biggest contributor of peacekeeping forces among five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council, with a total of 3084 troops deployed to ten UN missions, seven of which are in Africa ('UN Mission's Summary detailed by Country' 2015).

[5]While China continues to generate controversy with its rapidly growing investments in Africa, new research reveals that some of the West's biggest concerns over Chinese investment—its true size, its focus on natural resources, and its disregard for good governance—are not always well-grounded. Remaining on the scale of China's direct investment in Africa, Chinese statistics on what they refer to as *overseas direct investment* (*ODI*) show a stock of $26 billion in Africa as of the end of 2013. This number would amount to about 3% of total foreign direct investment (FDI) on the continent (Chen et al. 2015). The same can be said for Sino-African trade, which constitutes only 5% of China's overall global trade (Yun 2014, p. 14).

hezuo luntan) started a new period as regards the definition of common policy objectives and mutual development aspirations, discussed on a bilateral basis. China's economic involvement in Africa it was announced, were based on mutual benefits, and the so-called principle of 'non-interference.' *FOCAC* summit meetings —six of them held to date, with the most recent having taken place in Johannesburg in December 2015—have always been an important occasion to sign agreements worth billions of dollars, grant aid and loans, erase debts, and to launch important messages on the importance China assigned to its economic ties with African countries. Indeed, *FOCAC* summits have always provided China with an important platform to pay respect to African leaders on the world stage. "It is Beijing's way of giving face to African governments" and the African leaders in turn appreciate the respect and lavish treatment granted by their Chinese counterparts (Hanauer and Lyle 2014, p. 20).

As a result of the renewed importance attached to the African continent in China's post-1989 foreign policy, in January 2006—on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the first official diplomatic relations between the PRC and an African country (Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt) Beijing published a policy paper outlining the Chinese strategy towards Africa.[6] The most important points of the document, entitled *China's African Policy* (*Zhongguo dui Feizhou zhengce wenjian*), underlined the importance of Beijing treating its African partner countries on the basis of equality. The document states that China wants equal relationships for mutual benefits, relations based on friendship and respect promoting development and world peace. It mentions the intention to continue economic cooperation for a common goal, which is to the benefit of both parties. Finally, the document stresses the absence of constraints, both economically and politically, except for the acceptance of the *One-China Principle* ('*Yige Zhongguo*' *yuanze*). Abiding by the *One-China Principle* is not problematic for the vast majority of African countries as African countries with few exceptions maintain diplomatic ties with the PRC and not the ROC. Currently, there are 21 countries worldwide that recognize Taiwan, only two of which are in Africa (Burkina Faso and Swaziland, which until 1997 recognized the PRC). Interestingly, the break in relations of the Gambian government with Taipei, in November 2012 was not followed by the establishment of relations with Mainland China. This was in compliance with the so-called *diplomatic truce* agreed between Beijing and Taipei in 2008 (Drun 2014). However, things changed following the crushing victory of the Democratic Progressive Party's candidate in the presidential election in March 2016. In fact, China and Gambia renewed diplomatic ties in the aftermath of Tsai Ing-wen's election, in a clear message to the ROC's new president not to reverse the predecessor's shift towards warmer relations with the Mainland (Wong 2016).

[6]To date the PRC has published four policy papers (excluding their updated versions) dedicated to its foreign partners. Besides the one dedicated to Africa, the others are: *China's EU Policy Paper* (*Zhongguo dui Ouzhou zhengce wenjian*); *China's Policy Paper on Latin America and the Caribbean States* (*Zhongguo dui Lading Meizhou he Jialebi zhengce wenjian*); and *China's Arab Policy Paper* (*Zhongguo dui Alabo guojia zhengce wenjian*).

5 The *New Silk Road* Initiative—Opportunities for Africa

There is no doubt that the PRC's economic development benefits from China–Africa economic and trade cooperation. According to statistics, bilateral trade skyrocketed from US$10.6 billion in 2000 to US$220 billion at the end of 2014,[7] surpassing both the United States and the European Union (which totaled US $73 billion and US$177 billion respectively). The prospects for further growth of bilateral trade are good (Castagnoli 2016), especially in view of the fact that Sub-Saharan Africa has the fastest growing population in the world (+30 million per year) while the workforce is gradually reduced elsewhere ('Africa's growth potential—and its 'Next 10' biggest cities' 2014).

Beyond the statistical data, it is also interesting to focus the attention on the opportunities deriving for Africa from its inclusion in the *New Silk Road* initiative, in particular in its maritime branch, named the *21st Century Maritime Silk Road*, as unveiled for the first time by Chinese President Xi Jinping during a speech to the Indonesian Parliament in October 2013. The *New Silk Road* strategy is an essential part of a policy vision and concept Xi named the *Chinese Dream* (*Zhongguo meng*). Policies embedded in the *Chinese Dream* are aimed at turning China into a global geopolitical powerhouse by 2049, the year the PRC will celebrate its 100th birthday.

Xi first propagated the idea of the *New Silk Road* during two state visits to Kazakhstan and Indonesia in September and October 2013 respectively. Back then, Xi explained that the project included not one but two roads, a concept that became the '*One Belt, One Road*', i.e. a land route between China and Europe—the *Silk Road Economic Belt*, and a maritime trade route linking Chinese ports with the African coast and Europe's Mediterranean nations, called *Maritime Silk Road* or 21st *Century Maritime Silk Road* (Swaine 2015). This is an enormously huge project and "The most significant and far-reaching initiative that China has ever put forward" according to the former president of China's Foreign Affairs University (which is affiliated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) (Wu 2015). The project and the trade routes encompass more than 60 emerging markets and developing countries in Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Europe, with a total population of over 4 billion and an economic aggregate of about US$21 trillion, accounting for about 65 and 30% of the global total of land-based and maritime-based economic production values respectively (Swaine 2015). For its realization, Beijing has established a $40 billion so-called *Silk Road Infrastructure Fund* (Ren and Ng 2015), and furthermore set-up the *Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank* (*AIIB*), which was officially inaugurated on January 16, 2016. The AIIB's objective is to provide finance for infrastructure *Silk Road*-related projects with a special focus on strengthening links across Asia, the Middle East, and Europe (Zhang 2016). By building much-needed infrastructure across the *Silk Road* routes (from roads and

[7]As mentioned above, while in absolute terms China's investment and trade with Africa has grown significantly, its share of the total remains negligible.

rail links to ports and resource pipelines), China hopes to build a "Community of common interest, destiny, and responsibility" (Lin 2016). To demonstrate how China intended to materialize the project, Xi Jinping proposed the so-called *three togethers*: 1. concerned parties identifying projects of cooperation for mutual benefit 2. working together to realize the projects on the basis of common interest and 3. jointly enjoying the benefits deriving from joint project. In other words, China is, as Beijing argues, not looking for unilateral gains, but is working instead for common prosperity, since China's development is inseparable from the world and the world's stability and prosperity are inseparable from China (Wu 2015). Scott Kennedy, director of the Project on Chinese Business and Political Economy at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington agrees that the envisioned infrastructure projects bring benefits: "By improving infrastructure, China could help lift growth in poor nations—and the entire global economy, since The construction projects will potentially create business for engineering and other companies from the West too" (Schuman 2015).

Arguably no country appears to be better suited than China to lead the way forward on infrastructure. In fact, the PRC is not a newcomer to so-called *infrastructure diplomacy* initiatives, even if the one China is building around the *New Silk Road* is geographically very vast. The African case is emblematic in this sense. During a meeting held on the side lines of the 24th African Union (AU) Summit in Addis Ababa (23–31 January 2015) between the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and the AU Commission's President, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, Wang announced a Chinese investment plan of US$3.8 billion for the construction of logistics links between the port city of Mombasa and the Kenyan capital Nairobi (Kenya's capital is the only African port on the new route of the *Maritime Silk Road*, but is over four hundred kilometres away from the coast). Additionally, China signed a *Memorandum of Intent* for the construction of infrastructure across the continent. According to Zuma—who had often declared that her own dream was to connect African capitals with high-speed trains—it was a project with no precedent in the history of the AU. Deputy Chinese Foreign Minister Zhang Ming too defined it the *deal of the century* (Le Belzic 2015).

Beijing has a long experience in so-called *cement diplomacy* in Africa, having already participated in the construction of more than two thousand kilometres of railway in Ethiopia, Kenya, Angola, and especially Nigeria—where the opening of the railway lines along the coast became instrumental for the realization of major Chinese infrastructural works. Furthermore, Beijing has funded 5,000 km of roads in Africa and has also provided funding for numerous so-called *vanity projects*, which include soccer stadiums, parliament buildings, presidential palaces, and airports (Yomi 2013). Against this background Wang Yi promised the beginning of a 'new phase in Sino–African relations' (Coltrane 2015). Currently, the projects in the pipelines are numerous, beginning with the construction of seven new ports in Djibouti, Tanzania, Mozambique, Gabon, Ghana, Senegal, and Tunisia (Léautier et al. 2015). Let us take the case of the Bagamoyo Port in Tanzania, as an example. At the end of 2015, the Tanzania Ports Authority announced its approval for a US $10 billion project to develop a port at Bagamoyo, located about 60 km north of

Dar es Salaam. This was to be financed by both China and Oman. Once completed, the port is expected to become the biggest in Africa, handling 20 times more cargo than the Dar es Salaam port. According to the original plan, the project will link Bagamoyo port to the central corridor railway and the TAZARA Railway through an extended link. A parallel highway linking Bagamoyo to the Uhuru Highway going to Zambia will also be built. An integral part of the Bagamoyo project will be a so-called *Export Development Zone* (EDZ), which will include the construction of an industrial city as well as upgrades to road and railway infrastructure. Bagamoyo will therefore become a strategic pillar and connect the *Maritime Silk Road* with other East African countries, including Mozambique, Malawi, Zambia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda, Kenya, South Sudan, Comoros, Madagascar, and Seychelles (Ibid.).

Politicians and experts have agreed that 2015 was the year when China–Africa relations reached new highs. As mentioned above, the year started with the AU and the PRC signing a *Memorandum of Understanding* on the improvement of Africa's transport system and the enhancement of industrialization infrastructure, and finished with Chinese President Xi opening the 6th *FOCAC* summit in South Africa by telling African political leaders that together they would "Open a new era of China–Africa win-win cooperation and common development" (Rotberg 2016).

It must be pointed out that within the *FOCAC* framework China has completed numerous projects in Africa, which contributed directly or indirectly to its economic development (Shelton 2015). In this sense, the Chinese government promises to follow-up on an earlier trends of Chinese involvement in Africa. During the VI *FOCAC* summit, Xi Jinping unveiled a US$60 billion aid package for Africa—exactly three times the figure promised at the 2012 *FOCAC*—for the following three years. The funds are aimed at helping Africa to industrialize and modernize its agricultural production, boost the skills of its workers, build infrastructure, and improve its health care systems (Kuo 2015). In particular, China took specific commitments for specific problems. To battle poverty, one of the most compelling African needs, Xi promised to launch 200 so-called *Happy Life* projects focusing on the improvement of the lives of women and children. In order to reduce budget constraints that would hinder growth in the poorest of the African countries, he proposed to cancel the outstanding debt Africa's poorest countries owed to China. China also offered US$60 million to the African Union to support the operation of the new African Standby Force (in training in 2015), and pledged to continue to participate in UN peacekeeping missions on the African continent, where it already constitutes a significance presence, especially in South Sudan (Rotberg 2016). Once again *FOCAC* offered a unique diplomatic mechanism to promote dialogue between China and Africa, while at the same time facilitating a common political and economic process, which advances constructive South-South co-operation. Against this background it is highly plausible that the *21st Century Maritime Silk Road*' will herald prosperity and renewal in Sub-Saharian Africa. At the same time, while fuelling industrialization on the African continent, it will also spur socio-economic benefits for the whole African population ('Kenyan scholar says China's Silk Road to power Africa's industrial progress' 2015a).

6 Interfering or Non-Interference: Beijing's Growing Dilemma

In the aftermath of the killing of a Chinese hostage, Fan Jinghui, by ISIS militants in Syria and the bloody terrorist attack at the Radisson Blue Hotel in Bamako, in Mali, during which three managers of the China Overseas Engineering Group were killed, numerous articles appeared in the Chinese media that reopened the debate on the safety of Chinese citizens and Chinese investments in highly unstable areas (Gong 2015; Zhou 2015). The debate had begun in 2011 during the 'epic' evacuation of 36,000 Chinese nationals from Libya, jointly carried out by the Chinese army, some governmental departments, and Chinese companies operating on African territory. China's official media referred to that event as 'the largest and most complicated overseas evacuation ever conducted by the Chinese government since 1949' (Wang 2011).

Indeed, this is part of a wider debate that has emerged in China in recent years over the continued importance of the strong defence of the principle of *non-interference*, and more in general of Deng Xiaoping's main dictum of China *keeping a low profile* (Onnis 2014, pp 48–51) in light of the growing challenges that are facing Chinese economic interests abroad, as well as the growing component of Chinese citizens traveling and living abroad (about 130 million). Africa is hosting more than one million Chinese citizens, constituting an almost 'second Chinese mainland', according to the American journalist French (2014). Currently, the expansion of China's foreign investment, starting from the supply of natural resources from Africa, has increased the possibility that international crisis might affect the safety of Chinese citizens and Chinese economic interests. A major cause for alarmism are recurring 'hostage crises' which in recent years affected a growing number of Chinese workers residing abroad. Although the number of Chinese citizens kidnapped abroad is not significant—it is nonetheless a worrying trend (Zhou 2015), and an unprecedented challenge to the Beijing government,[8] which is undeniably connected to both the growing number of Chinese people going abroad to work and to the *modus operandi* of the Chinese government, which, in most cases, develops relations only with the ruling parties, while neglecting to foster ties with the opposition forces or rebel groups and, more generally with the civil society as a whole (Zenn 2012). Another relevant factor pertains to the relatively low levels of security, which increases the possibility for Chinese workers to become an easy target for ransom and thus an alluring target for kidnappers. In fact, in order to limit costs, Chinese SOEs usually require workers to live in special encampments where their security staff is often inexperienced and underequipped (Ibid.).

[8]Terrorism is not new to either the Chinese people or the Chinese government, insomuch as the majority of the terrorist attacks within the country in recent history were carried out by the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) (Gong 2015).

Confronted with these circumstances, the doctrine of *non-interference* is perceived as a growing dilemma by the Chinese leadership, given the lack of consensus on how to balance the respect for this traditional dogma with the growing Chinese overseas interests and the growing international responsibilities they entail. On the one hand, there is the concern about how the above-mentioned Chinese interests can be protected in the event of political and economic instability (Arduino 2015). On the other hand the Chinese leadership is facing a lot of pressure to re-evaluate the *principle of non-interference* because it does not appear to be an appropriate policy for a global power with growing international responsibilities. In this sense, many scholars and analysts believe that non-interference is becoming a growing burden that can damage China's national interests, since, in order to satisfy Chinese economic needs, the Beijing government is forced to deal with the countries, regardless of their political nature and/or level of stability.

We must acknowledge that Xi Jinping's administration became the protagonist of substantive changes as regards the priorities of Chinese foreign policies in general and Chinese strategies towards Africa in particular. This clearly emerges from an analysis of the PRC's conduct on the African continent in the first three years of Xi's government. The most significant change is related to Beijing's progressive involvement in African security issues, which attests to a growing sense of Chinese responsibility in the management of international crises ('Spotlight: China's peacekeeping contribution to UN missions in Africa shows growing sense of responsibility' 2015b). In June 2013, in an unprecedented move, China publicly committed combat troops (or 'security forces' according to Beijing) to a UN peacekeeping mission (the MINURSO in Mali), marking a major shift in the PRC's foreign policy (Hille 2013). A move that is all the more significant given the limited presence in the region of Chinese direct economic interests, unlike other contexts where China is present with its own peacekeepers (Lanteigne 2014). Even more important was the decision approved by China's *Central Military Commission* to deploy China's first infantry battalion to South Sudan, China's first infantry unit to participate in a United Nations peacekeeping mission. Previous Chinese peacekeepers were mainly conducting engineering, transportation, medical service, and security guard corps activities. The 700-strong infantry battalion consisted of 121 officers and 579 soldiers (including a squad composed of 13 females), equipped with drones, armoured infantry carriers, anti-tank missiles, mortars, light self-defence weapons, bulletproof uniforms and helmets. Weapons, Commander Wang Zhen declared, would serve "exclusively for self-defence purposes", ('China sends first infantry battalion for UN peacekeeping' 2014). Some analysts pointed out that the importance of South Sudan's oil reserves, exploited also by the *China National Petroleum Corp* (Ngor and Gridneff 2014) influenced China's decision to deploy troops to South Sudan. This is also to be understood in the context of unprecedented move by the Chinese government to openly intervene in the conflict

in South Sudan through a direct work of mediation carried out in 2013 by the Ambassador Zhong Jianhua, special envoy of the Chinese government on the continent (Jorgic 2014), and a rare public intervention of the Foreign Minister Wang Yi, in January 2014, who called for an immediate cessation of hostilities in the country (Raghavan 2014). Equally significant has been the decision to set up China's first overseas military base in Djibouti, in the Horn of Africa, the confirmation of which came in late November 2015, in the aftermath of the two abovementioned dramatic episodes which occurred in Syria and in Mali, and following the terrorist attacks in Paris at the beginning of November 2015. According to Wu Qian, spokesperson for the Chinese Defence Ministry, the Djibouti base[9] will "Provide better logistics and safeguard Chinese peacekeeping forces in the Gulf of Aden, offshore Somalia and other humanitarian assistance tasks of the UN" (Wang 2015c). At the same time, Wu added "helping China to better perform its international obligations and maintain international and regional peace and stability".[10] When necessary, Djibouti might act as a springboard to allow China to play a more active role in combating terrorism, given the fact that Beijing has already demonstrated its willingness to support a more robust approach against the so-called *Islamic State*, (or *Daesh*) by voting in favour of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2249, which was unanimously adopted on 20 November, 2015 (Ghiselli 2016, p. 9). Not to mention the fact that, according to China's 2015 defence white paper, the *People's Liberation Army's* (*PLA*) strategic tasks include safeguarding China's overseas interests, world peace, and counterterrorism (China's Military Strategy 2015, Sect. 2). That said, it is not easy to predict how an increased military presence abroad can effectively improve the safety of overseas Chinese. According to Wang (2015a), China has a duty to protect its citizens and its national interests from dangers and threats overseas, but the foothold of no military interference will nonetheless not be easily abandoned.

Either way, there are other factors that make re-visiting the principle of non-interference problematic as it has over decades been a fundamental the pillar Chinese foreign policy. *Non-interference* has been a important tool to build good relationships with African countries and other developing countries since the Cold War era and would go on to become one of the most appreciated pillars of the so-called Beijing Consensus (*Beijing gongshi*). Nor should we neglect the concerns related to a possible re-emergence of the notorious 'China threat' theory.

[9]The PRC has been very careful to avoid describing its facility in Djibouti as a 'military' or 'naval' base, preferring the use of more neutral terms, such as 'support facilities' or 'logistical facilities', or even 'protective facility' (*baozhang sheshi*), as defined by the People's Daily in an article published on 26 November, 2015 (*Renmin Ribao* 2015).

[10]Another demonstration in this sense was last spring, when China evacuated hundreds of Chinese and foreign nationals from the troubled cost of Yemen (Wang 2015b).

7 Conclusions

This chapter has examined the implications of the Chinese presence in Africa, both in terms of challenges and opportunities. Generally speaking, Chinese activities in Africa are often described with a strong negative connotation and China is depicted as a new colonizer and exploiter of African row materials. But the reality is more complex than that. While it cannot be denied that the PRC's interests in Africa are many and varied—pertaining not only to the economic or political sphere, but also to ideological and safety-related considerations—it should also be acknowledged that the opportunities have also turned out to be numerous for the African continent. Politicians and experts agree to point to 2015 as the year in which bilateral ties further improved significantly. 2015 started in fact with the African Union and PRC signing a *Memorandum of Understanding* on the improvement of Africa's transport system and the enhancement of industrialization infrastructure (whose deficiencies have always been considered one of the major factors of underdevelopment of the African continent), and ended with the Chinese paramount leader opening the 6th *FOCAC* summit in South Africa by unveiling a very generous aid package (exactly three times the figure promised at the previous FOCAC) for the following three years, aimed to help Africa to industrialize, modernize its agricultural production, boost the skills of its workers, build infrastructure, and improve its health care system. Currently, Xi Jinping's promises follow a well-established trend: within the *FOCAC* framework, China has completed numerous projects in Africa that contributed directly or indirectly to its economic development. Beijing has a long experience in what is referred to as *cement diplomacy* or *infrastructure diplomacy* on the African continent, having contributed to the construction of several thousand kilometers of railways, thousands of roads, not to mention Chinese contribution to the so-called *vanity projects*, which include soccer stadiums, parliament buildings, presidential palaces, and airports. The inclusion of Africa in the maritime branch of China *New Silk Road* can become another crucial opportunity for the continent's economic growth and development. It is plausible that, while fueling industrialization in the African continent, it will also spur socio-economic benefits for the entire African population.

At the same time, however, it is important to underline that the Chinese presence in Africa is not without challenges for Beijing, the most crucial one being related to the compelling necessity to protect its economic interests and safeguard the security of its compatriots, in consideration of the fact that the countries where China invests and operates are in most cases upset by bloody civil wars, that the recent wave of terrorist attacks only contributed to exacerbate. Equally pressing is the need to revise the PRC's *non-interference* posture that appears to be increasingly inadequate for a rising power with growing global interests. These arguments are part of an ongoing controversial debate in China for the last decade between those who press for a more assertive China and those who prefer a more secluded China focused on the solution of its impelling internal problems. Apparently, Xi Jinping's administration became the protagonist of a real change in the priorities and in the

Chinese strategies as well. The most significant change is related to Beijing's progressive involvement in African security-related issues, which attests a growing sense of the Chinese responsibility in the management of international crises.

Equally important has been the decision to set up the PRC's first overseas military base in Djibouti, in the Horn of Africa, aimed at providing better logistics, safeguarding Chinese peacekeepers forces present in the area, and helping China to better perform its international obligations and maintaining international and regional peace and stability. However, it is not easy to predict how an increased military presence abroad can effectively improve the safety of overseas Chinese. It is likely that the foothold of no military interference will not be easily abandoned. We should not forget that the above-mentioned *non-interference* doctrine has always been one of the pillars of the PRC's foreign policy. In particular, for China *non-interference* has been an important tool to build good relations with all the developing countries during the Cold War, and more recently one of the most appreciated aspects of the so-called *Beijing Consensus*.

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