

S I D

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Nachlese

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China's Policies towards Africa

Gespräch mit Prof. Dr. Guang Yang, Beijing

Mr. Thiel welcomed Mr. Yang, pointing out that he had attracted a huge audience, and asked Mr. Messner to introduce the Chinese guest.

Mr. Messner said that Prof. Dr. Yang is a social scientist and the director of the Institute of West-Asian and African Studies in Beijing. At present, Mr. Yang is a Visiting Scholar at the DIE. The topic of this night's discussion, he added, was one of the "hot issues" of our days. Before passing the word to Mr. Yang he gave a brief overview about positive aspects of China's policies towards Africa. China is treating Africa not just as a lost continent or a recipient of aid but as an economic partner. China also invests money in infrastructure and helps to reduce African debt. On the other hand, the undermining of social, environmental and good-governance initiatives in Africa by China are negative aspects. Also, China could do more to help solve the conflict in Sudan. It would be interesting to see what kind of impact China's policies towards Africa would have on international development cooperation.

Mr. Yang started his lecture with a historical overview of Chinese-African relations. The first direct contacts with Africa had been by a Chinese traveller back in the 8th century and one in the 13th century, both of which wrote books on their voyages. Early in the 15th century the admiral Zheng He undertook his famous trade expeditions to the West with a large fleet, which took as far as the Red Sea and the African coast. After that, there were no more far-reaching Chinese expeditions, and the Indian Ocean became the field of European seafaring.

The resurgence of Chinese-African relations did not happen before the mid-20th century in the context of national liberalisation movements in Africa. In 1949 People's Republic of China had been founded but it had been isolated between the western world and the Soviet block. Mao Zedong considered Africa as part of the "intermediate zone" where China could seek strategic cooperation. The Bandung Conference in 1955 was used by China to establish relations with African national liberation movements. In 1963/64 Prime Minister Zhou Enlai set off on his voyage to 16 African countries, and China took up diplomatic relations with African countries as they were decolonized. It was largely thanks to the votes of African countries that China could replace Taiwan in the United Nations in 1971.

Starting from this period, the cooperation was strategic and based on national interest on both sides. Since the 1980s the economic dimension of mutual interest became more and more important. While Africa had not seemed to be of too much importance in the beginning of this period, China's interest in Africa had increased with the growing demand for raw materials. For

the newly independent African states, the focus had moved from political struggle to economic development. In their endeavour to improve their economic performance they placed their hope on more economic assistance and expertise from China. On a political level, their need for each other was still mutual. China needed Africa to support the country's policy towards Taiwan. Africa needed China as a counterweight to the West, stop marginalisation and end conflicts in many of its countries.

As can be seen in this enumeration, Mr. Yang resumed, the basis for strategic cooperation between China and Africa had extended. China had taken a more active role towards Africa. Since the 1990s the economic relations developed rapidly. Last year, the trade value between China and Africa added up to 55 billion dollars. The forms of assistance diversified. Since the 1950s China had sent medical teams to Africa. The country had also sponsored African students for studies in China. Apart from this China had reduced debt for Africa, lowered custom tariffs for African goods, promoted training programs and subsidised investors. The strategic cooperation was gradually institutionalized in the framework of the China-Africa Cooperation Forum since 2000. In general, China's policies towards Africa were based on a strategic partnership and mutual interest, concluded Mr. Yang his lecture.

One participant started the discussion by referring to a TV report on copper mining in Zambia which threw a bad light on the Chinese enterprise involved. He asked whether there were any defined ethical principles in Chinese Development Policies. Mr. Yang admitted that his knowledge of this special case was limited, but said that in general Chinese enterprises are very welcome in African countries. Also, the Chinese government attaches great importance to the reputation of Chinese enterprises which are advised to respect the national laws and conditions.

Another attendee pointed out that China had not been the initiator of the Bandung Conference and that cooperation with the Third World was Mao Zedong's only real choice. Mr. Yang answered that the shared experience of being colonized helped Mao to break China's international isolation by cooperating with Africa. Even if most African countries had been only on their way to independence at the time of Bandung, 29 leaders of national liberation movements had been participants of the conference.

To the question whether China's assistance to African development is tied to conditions, e.g. a supportive vote in UN decisions, Mr. Yang pointed out, that China's historical relationship with Africa is different from Europe's. It is formed between equal partners and based on mutual benefits and needs; there is always a win-win-situation.. In addition China's assistance to Africa is mostly project assistance under the control of the donor, unlike Europe's budget assistance to African governments. To his best knowledge, he added, China never imposes pressure on African countries to vote in its favour at UN meetings. China has no interest in forcing her political or economical system on other countries. The country only provides assistance to help countries find their own way of development. Industrialisation still plays a very important role in development. China helps Africa to achieve a certain level of industrialisation. Environmental protection is an important new factor that has to be taken into account.

Another participant wanted a more precise look at the alleged win-win-situation; he felt that the Chinese focus on supporting the energy sector does not lead to a development in other sectors. Mr. Yang admitted that China is interested in Africa's resources - just like the USA or European countries are. Nevertheless, the trade with raw materials is an important source of capital accumulation for African countries. They need to make use of their resources and to develop linked industries, he continued his argumentation. He gave the example of Sudan where China had invested for oil development and then invested in infrastructure and pipelines. This shows how, little by little, development is spreading.

An African participant articulated worries that the Chinese could play a similar role as the white colonialists had played for Africa. Mr. Yang referred to the South African president Mbeki who saw Chinese-African cooperation as a win-win-cooperation and said he didn't believe that China would copy former European colonial behaviour. In the context of globalisation it was no longer possible to apply any colonial practices, he emphasized. Some negative comments on China's performance in Africa in western countries were due to a lack of information. China's rapid growth had raised some worries in the West which were unfounded. Evaluations from African countries showed that the cooperation between China and Africa is seen as a win-win-situation, from the African side, as well.

When a participant raised the question whether too much investment from Chinese and international countries could mean a crowding out of African enterprises and have negative consequences for the development of the local economy, Mr. Yang answered, the more investors came, the more happy the Africans were.

One participant made it clear that China was highly dependant on raw material. He asked how strong this dependence would be in 20 years and how China proposed to prevent resource-based conflicts with other countries then. Mr. Yang replied that China's dependence on African resources is not so unparalleled. 1/3 of Africa's oil production went to the USA, 1/3 to the EU and less than 10% to China. We all depend on Africa's resources, he said. In his opinion, this dependence would not lead to conflicts with other countries. There is no shortage in oil in the world. The reasons for the high price of oil are the tensions between the West and the major oil producing countries, and the decline of spare production capacity. China invests in more oil production capacity and thus acts for the benefit of all oil importing countries.

Addressing an attendee's question about Africa's productive capacity, Mr. Yang mentioned South Africa as a typical example for countries that can provide not only raw materials but also technologies for export to China (in this case the technology of coal liquifying). He had to admit, however, that this is not so for most African countries. But China helps African countries to industrialize; Chinese enterprises invest not only in the oil industry but also in car assemblage, textiles and food processing.

One member of the audience showed his concern about the political consequences of China's development cooperation. He put forward that the West had changed the principles of its development cooperation based on forty years of experience and lessons learnt. The concerns about China undermining the western aid might well be justified. He asked how close China followed the Paris Declaration and the lessons learnt. Another participant added the question, if Mr. Yang saw any possibilities for coordination between Chinese and Western aid policies. The speaker answered that China is still a developing country herself, not disposing of the means to provide general government assistance in Africa. All that China can give is project assistance which is very well received in the African countries. He gave the example of a Chinese textile factory which was handed over to an African country in the 70s. When it faced difficulties in the 90s, China came back in, participating in the management of the company and thus making it a success. In addition to the project approach, Mr. Yang continued, China had also started cooperation with regional organisations. China was planning a free-trade area with some African countries in the near future. For the first time, China's civil society was also getting involved through a volunteer program.

One participant said, he wanted to speak for Africa in order to make it clear that China's aid was a unique chance for Africa. All the criticism articulated here was based on the topic of human

rights but, as an interview with Jacques Chirac showed, other countries didn't focus on human rights either when doing business.

To answer the question whether China's investments in Sudan had led to a win-win-situation, Mr. Yang explained that the Chinese oil company that found oil in Sudan had made the poor country a major oil producer. The country's budget is now a lot better off than before. Money from the oil sales has increased the government's income and supports the country's industrial development. According to the peace agreement between the North and the South of Sudan it is also the poor in the South who benefit from the oil. In addition to that, Chinese enterprises help the country e.g. by building hospitals. Regarding China's role in Darfur, Mr. Yang made it clear that this conflict is a conflict between tribes in the area. The problem has been there for more than 100 years and has aggravated since 2003. China with its significant interest in the region is, like other countries, highly interested in solving the problem. China uses negotiations and diplomacy to achieve a solution. The situation in Darfur is now tending to be relaxed. The government and the tribes have reached a peace agreement in Nigeria in 2006 and a ceasefire between the tribes. Very recently, China sent the Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs to Sudan to see the results of the peace agreement. He got the impression that the situation in Darfur is calm and relaxed. The improvement of the situation is not the result of the UN embargo, Mr. Yang made clear. China has used her influence on the Sudanese government, and the current success is a result of these peaceful negotiations.

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