

The road to El Dorado: China discovers Africa

O caminho para o El Dorado: a China descobre África

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Boletim Meridiano 47 vol. 13, n. 131, mai.-jun. 2012 [p. 23 a 30]

Introduction

In this article we will analyze the various aspects of the Chinese strategy and presence in Africa. Why this topic? It should be noted that the emergence of a world power (we focus, for this purpose, on the case of China) requires access to a range of resources and services, without which its rise would hardly be possible in the chessboard of world power. It is clear that China needs – to be able to domestically operate its huge economic and industrial growth – to have access to a wide range of raw materials and energy resources, which it does not have. In addition to suppliers, the Middle Kingdom also needs partners and consumers that may absorb the Chinese production of goods and services, but also Chinese ideology, or in other words Chinese soft power.¹ That said, the African continent, due to its dimensions, abundance in energy resources and raw materials, but also due to the sympathy that many political regimes manifest towards the ideas of the Beijing Consensus², occupies, unquestionably, a privileged place in the strategy of consolidation and assertiveness of China's great power in the world.

Much has been written and said about the Chinese presence in Africa, but much remains unsaid. Aware of this hiatus, this article seeks to address the other side, perhaps less known, of a partnership between Africans and Chinese, which accuses tensions and problems of various kinds. We also intend to explain the game of seduction that China pursues in Africa in order to isolate Taiwan politically or, for example, to win African votes within the framework of the United Nations.

In order to achieve the objectives of this study we will use a multidisciplinary approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods, which are, for many authors, regarded as complementary (Mingers, 2001). We, therefore, believe that the use of one method would be oversimplifying the issue. For example, in the case of the quantification of the Sino-African trade, reference to figures is indispensable. Despite its mixed character, one must acknowledge, however, that the chosen methodological approach reveals an essentially qualitative tendency.

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1 Soft power is a term developed by Joseph Nye (2004: 6), which means “the ability of a state to get what it wants by the attractiveness of its culture, its ideas, its domestic policy and diplomacy”. However, one must be very careful not to confuse soft power with influence. Although similar, ‘soft power’ is not restricted to the meaning of influence. According to Nye (2004: 6), “soft power is more than just persuasion or the ability to encourage people through the art of reasoning; it is also the ability to attract, and attraction often leads to a certain submission; in conclusion, soft power is a power of attraction”.

2 Contrary to the ‘Washington Consensus’, which holds that economic development results from the combination of economic, political and financial liberalization and the respect for human rights, the ‘Beijing Consensus’ focuses mainly on “innovation and growth through a market driven economy, without insisting on the need to adopt a democratic regime” (TREMBLAY, 2007). As J. Nye says (2005), “in Asia, Africa and Latin America, the ‘Beijing Consensus’ (related to the coexistence of an authoritarian model with a market economy) has become more popular than the once dominant ‘Washington Consensus’ (concerning the coexistence of a market economy with a democratic government)”.

The qualitative method seems to thus complement the quantitative method since according to Duffy (1987: 132), “a qualitative approach is used as a vehicle for the study of the empirical world from the perspective of the subject, not of the researcher”.

By addressing the several topics aforementioned, this article will try to demonstrate that China’s African strategy is a coherent and multidimensional strategy, composed of several factors (economic, political, military – in which soft and hard power are also included) that contribute to a harmonious whole, underlining the importance of Africa to China and vice versa.

Chinese presence in Africa: the contours of a partnership

The symbiosis could not be more perfect. As Serge Michel noted, “a growing country that is looking for markets and influence meets a continent rich in resources but with a lack of investors” (Michel, 2008: 39). It is not surprising, therefore, that Africa appears as a good option in the eyes of Chinese leaders. Moreover, it is not surprising that Chinese workers wish to embark on the African dream, because, as the author explains, “with wages, often less than 150 dollars per month in the farms and factories, and with excess manpower in the coastal cities of China, Africa seems to be the land of dreams” (Michel, 2008: 41). In turn, the African continent seems to have every interest in diversifying cooperation with other regions throughout the world (Jaffrelot, 2008).

Currently, we have witnessed a remarkable and rapid conquest of Africa by China, which surprises the West (mainly Europeans and Americans), which used to consider the African continent more like a “charity case”, than “an investment opportunity” (Michel, 2008: 40). As Tanguy Struye (2010: 15) states “the continent is also at the heart of an increasingly aggressive game of influence and, quite often, to the detriment of African countries themselves”. According to this author, “the African chessboard has become a real game of *Go*, considering that every great power strives to gain a foothold there, including China” (Struye, 2010: 15).

The Economic issues

The figures witness the strength of trade between China and Africa: from 2000 to 2007, trade volume increased from 10 to 70 trillion dollars, with China becoming Africa’s second largest trading partner, after the United States. Among the sectors in which the Chinese are investing more in Africa, black gold is the main issue. Since the African continent provides about a third of the oil consumed by China, it is therefore natural that the large Chinese companies are well represented there. In addition to the contracts, production and exploration agreements concluded between Beijing and the African oil producers, it is certainly important to emphasize the construction of a 1500km pipeline in Sudan. As a result of Beijing’s Initiative, whose energy needs continue to grow, this pipeline carries oil from southern Sudan to the port of Marsa al-Bashair (on the bank of the Red Sea). If the diversification of energy partners is an essential factor for a rising power, it is mostly the way Beijing pays some of its State suppliers which arouses the indignation of the Western powers. If we think of the specific case of Sudan – rogue state – the international community is concerned with the fact that in exchange for imported oil, China “sells weapons (mainly combat aircrafts), to the Khartoum regime and defends it in the United Nations Security Council” (Struye, 2010: 16).

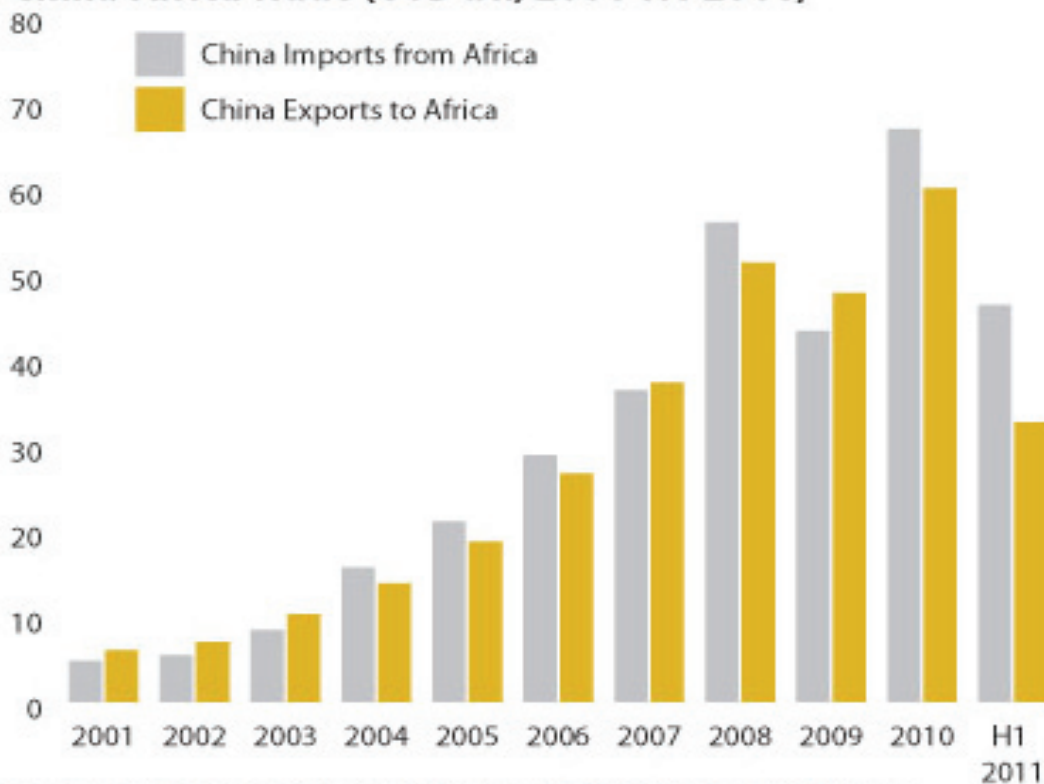
As stated by Valerie Niquet (2006: 5), “China has become, since 2004, the second largest importer of African oil after the USA and before Japan”. In addition to the importance of countries such as Sudan, Angola and Nigeria (the largest oil exporters to China), we note that Gabon and Equatorial Guinea are also, increasingly privileged places in the Chinese offensive in Africa, especially in relation to the production of black gold.

In addition to investment in oil and gas, China's African strategy is highly concentrated in the exploitation of raw materials and minerals extremely necessary for its growth. Uranium, gold, iron, phosphate, lead, cobalt, copper, bauxite, cotton, are, among others, some of the materials that China can find in Africa. Some African countries are obviously more endowed than others in these areas. That is why China strives to judiciously diversify its sources and partnerships in a continent so vast and rich in natural resources. For instance, 85% of the imported cobalt from the Middle Kingdom comes from the Democratic Republic of Congo, and almost all of Zimbabwe's tobacco production is exported to China (which has 350 million smokers) (Jornal de Notícias, 2009).

Why can the Chinese presence in Africa be seen as 'win-win' for both partners? According to Serge Michel, China gains access to raw material which are, in essence, the basis for the great economic revolution that the country is experiencing today. On the other hand, Africa takes advantage of the Chinese interest in the natural wealth of the continent to improve and/or create infrastructures, such as roads, schools and railways which it sorely needs (Michel, 2008:41). This means that the Chinese have the tools, the technology, the ability to mobilize thousands of workers as well as the "opportunity to achieve a leading position in Africa and to deeply transform the continent" (Michel, 2008:41). The Chinese seem to actually harvest the potential to succeed where others had not been effective before.

Among the traditional sectors where Chinese cooperation is felt in Africa, let us stress the building of great infrastructures – such as football stadiums, sports complexes, cement works, buildings, hotels, Palaces of Culture and of the Senate, National Assemblies, housing, roads, railways, air terminals, airports, ports, dams, power stations, and even an experimental nuclear reactor, and also (albeit to a less extent) civil aviation.³ As regards academic cooperation "if Chinese teachers are not present in Africa, several Africans undertake their studies in China, especially in medicine, training that is quite popular in the majority of hospitals in Africa" (Tchuente, 2005: 2).

China-Africa Trade (USD bn, 2001-H1 2011)



Source: China National Bureau of Statistics; CEIC; The Beijing Axis Analysis

³ For example, it is worth noting that China has provided Zimbabwe with civil transport aircraft (model Xinzhou 60, built in Xian).

The reactions in Africa: from enthusiasm to suspicion

There is an increasing number of visits at a ministerial and presidential level among Chinese leaders and leaders of several African countries. Although President Hu Jintao, during the speech he delivered on 16 February 2009 in Dar es Salaam, has ensured that China “will be a good brother and a good partner (of Africa) forever”, recent experiences have witnessed some tensions (CRI online, 2009). Of course, even if African governments are able to benefit from the fact that Chinese competition breaks the monopoly of the former colonizers and that, “compared with Americans and Europeans, Beijing does not concern itself with ‘internal affairs’ (good governance, human rights, democracy...)”, feelings in Africa oscillate, however, between enthusiasm and distrust (Struye, 2010: 22).

In fact, as noted by Serge Michel “China is currently experiencing the same obstacles which the Westerners had to face for a long time” (Michel, 2008: 41). What are they? The social instability, the serious problem of corruption that undermines politics, the economy and society, and lack of interest of the population, mixed with its resistance to Beijing’s projects in the region. The Chinese are seen as foreigners who take jobs from local people, or that present negligent behavior towards the rights of African workers who are subordinated to them. In this regard, we note that “in the past, there have been tensions between Chinese and African countries, mainly in Senegal, Zambia and South Africa” (Struye, 2010: 23). An anti-China feeling has been growing: “from Congo to Angola, taxi drivers, street vendors and even Africans who work with the Chinese criticize such an invasion” (Michel, 2008: 45). But they are also seen as responsible for loss of profit of a local trade unable to challenge the Chinese competition. As T. Struye(2010: 23) notes, “Chinese companies are accused of flooding local markets with counterfeit or poor quality products, especially in the field of textile and mopeds, thereby causing harm to the companies of the continent”.

For all these reasons, Jean Servant raises a pertinent issue. The author questions whether the Chinese model of *win-win* (for Africa and China) does not eventually prove to be a new form of neocolonialism disguised as the illusions of a South-South development (Servant, 2005). Anyway, the author expresses concern with regard to the limits of Asia’s direct competition (ranging, for example, from textiles to steel) on the African economy. The case of South Africa (the first African partner of China) is quite symptomatic. According to Mbeki, (from the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg), South Africa must cope simultaneously with a “desirable collaboration and a terrible threat given that in exchange for raw materials that we sell to the Chinese, we buy manufactured products from them” (Struye, 2011: 12).

In almost all of Africa dissatisfaction and criticism against the Chinese presence has been increasing. Although China has promised to be a ‘good brother’ in its partnership with Africa, the African trade unions (in Dakar or in Lesotho, for example) threaten to boycott the sales of Chinese products that contribute to the growth of unemployment. The complaints manifest themselves, among other ways, through murder and/or kidnapping of Chinese that work in Africa. Furthermore, many of the contracts signed with Beijing are canceled or cannot even get signed. But it also happens that African leaders announce spectacular contracts with Beijing just “to scare the Western partners and, thus, encourage them to make higher bids “ (Michel, 2008: 45). It is also worth noting that “many Chinese contracts are accompanied by a requirement that 70% of the work be accomplished by Chinese workers (usually prisoners or conscripts), who practically live in closed camps, which reduces interaction and, therefore, trade with local people” (Struye, 2011: 23). However, there are also environmental issues that we must not overlook. In fact, Africa has been witnessing a repetition of very similar problems to those that occur frequently in China: deforestation, contamination of land and water, lack of respect for the environment, resulting from a search for unbridled productivity.

The other side of the partnership: the invisible strategy of China in Africa

In addition to economic issues, the 'Beijing Consensus' imposes itself smoothly: China boasts itself of presenting an alternative to the 'Washington Consensus' (Jaffrelot, 2008). But if the 'Chinese model' refrains from subjecting its partnership with Africa to any conditioning vis a vis 'problematic' states, it involves, at the same time, a game of seduction to isolate Taiwan. Africa could not escape such a game, naturally. It is not surprising, therefore, that in 1998 South Africa recognized the People's Republic of China, severing diplomatic ties with Taiwan (although maintaining close trade ties with the island). Likewise, Liberia and Senegal restored their diplomatic relations with China recently. In general, we see that the strategy of China in diplomatically marginalizing Taipei in the African continent has worked well so far. In fact, "currently only six countries (of a total of 53) – of which Chad is the most important, and with which, exceptionally, China has developed informal relationships due to its potential in terms of energy reserves – still recognize Taiwan diplomatically" (Niquet, 2006: 1).

The African continent is also an important chess piece with respect to the United Nations issue. African countries represent, by themselves, more than a third of the members of the United Nations, which means therefore that the African votes have an extraordinary importance for the People's Republic of China. In fact, we have been witnessing a "real diplomatic battle between Beijing and Tokyo, with Africa as scenario" (Niquet, 2006: 2). As an example, Beijing is striving to gain the support of African countries at the United Nations concerning the definition of exclusive economic zones (an issue that puts it in conflict with Tokyo in the China Sea) (Lafarge, 2005). In turn, as stated by Pierre-Antoine Braud, China offers a "package of diplomatic, military and economic support to African regimes which are not seen in a positive light by the international community due to internal conflicts or bad governance" (Braud, 2005: 1). In this context, V. Niquet mentions that "China makes use of its dual status as a developing country and a great power able to influence the major strategic directions of world politics – the example of resolution 1567 on Darfur, adopted in 2004, but strongly 'sweetened' thanks to China, is a good example" (Niquet, 2006: 2).

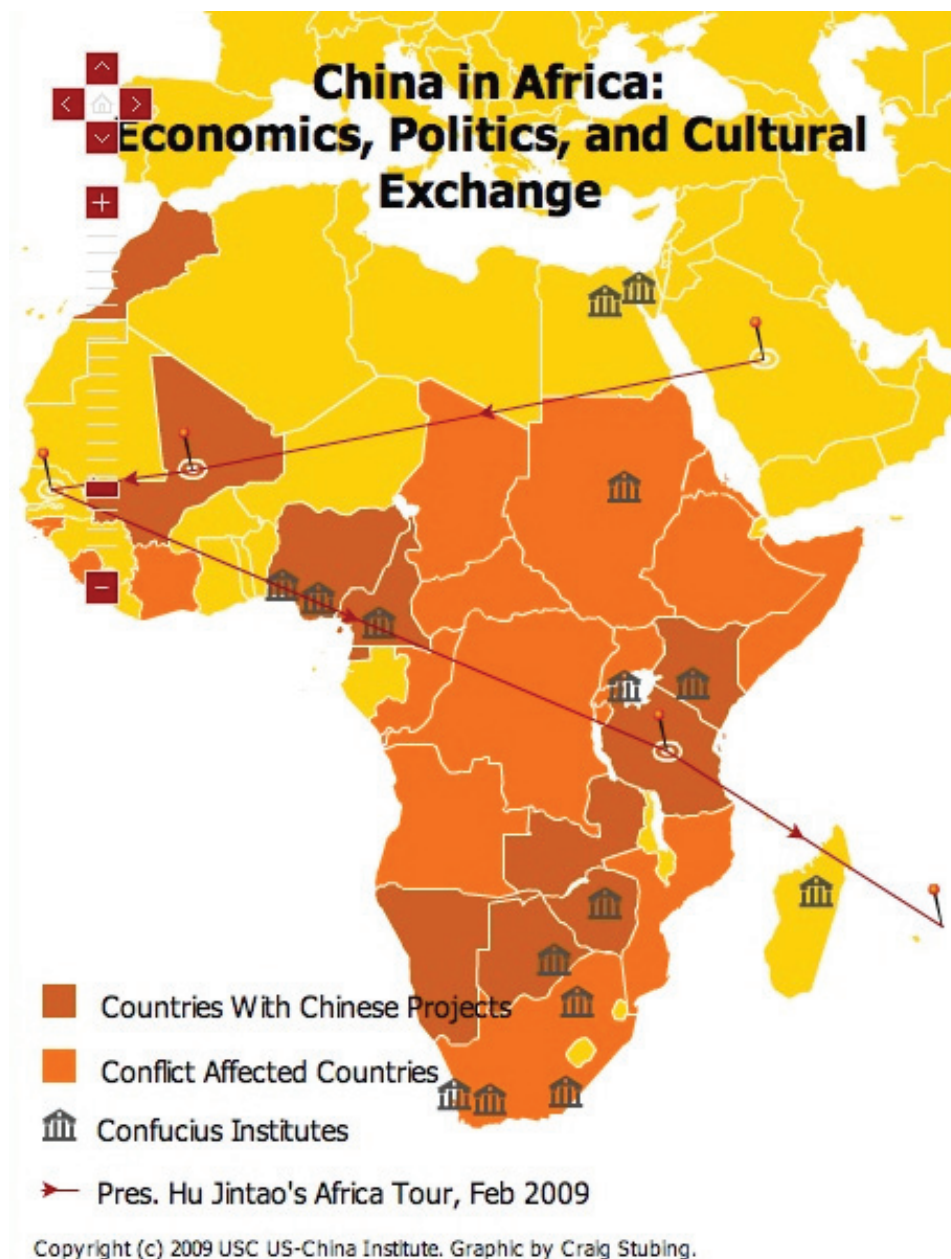
All this diplomatic, tactical, subtle and invisible game falls entirely within the sphere of *soft power*. Moreover, China seems to have all the time it needs. And, on the other hand, if it does not seek hegemony, this does not mean however that China would not hesitate in using the economic (resources, energy) and political potential (African votes at the UN) of the African countries in its favor.

What relationship can be established between these two strategies and the Chinese offensive in Africa? Besides the issue of Taiwan (whose claims of independence are known), or the issue of Japan and India (who aspire to the category of permanent members of the Security Council of the United Nations), China's African policy covers another important dimension. It involves, in fact, the attempt to circumvent or weaken Western powers, primarily the United States and its partners, in all circumstances where the interests of Beijing are at risk (Niquet, 1996). It involves, moreover, the resurrection of the 'South-South dialogue' "advocated by China with regard to the Third World, which dates back to the 1960s. The Middle Kingdom seeks to, thus, maintain its status of spokes person for developing countries, as can be inferred from the White Paper on China's policy for Africa: "China is working to establish and develop a new type of strategic partnership characterized by equality and mutual trust in terms of politics and *win-win* cooperation in the economic sphere" (Lafarge, 2005:6). In practice, this is expressed by the multiplication of high level visits, the intensification of trade, the assistance to rogue states, and the defense of the role of Africa in the international arena. The idea of maintaining a constructive dialogue with Africa is, for example, visible through the *Forum on China-Africa Cooperation* (FOCAC), which is organized every three years.

Moreover, the fact that Beijing committed, in the last forum (in 2006), to creating a development fund for Africa and to forgive African debt of 1.4 billion dollars, attest to the vigor of its soft power, as well as the importance China attaches to its partnership with Africa. In this context, the significance that the *Beijing Action Plan* (2007-2009) has for both sides (China and Africa) is undeniable, since it highlights the methods, as well as the consultation and

cooperation levels (economic, legal, regional and sub-regional organizations, education, infrastructure development, relations between peoples, health...) (Alden, 2008).

Other examples of soft power are present, in particular, via the existing Confucius institutes in Africa, as well as through courses in Mandarin, increasingly organized by African universities through scholarships awarded to African students for them to undertake their studies in China. In addition, “more than 130,000 Chinese are currently living in Africa, mainly in Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Angola and the Republic of Guinea”, and it is also worth mentioning that “direct air links were established between Angola and the People’s Republic of China, as well as between Zimbabwe and China”(Niquet, 2006: 1).



Alongside this soft power (independent of any political condition, as aforementioned), it is also important to talk about hard power. How does it manifest itself in the case of the Sino-African partnership? We can observe that economic issues have enabled Beijing to become a major arms supplier to Africa. China has signed agreements to supply military equipment to several African countries and opened, on the other hand, munitions and armaments factories (Servant, 2005). The “relative lack of competition” explains that China may make use of Africa in order

to “test a material that remains rudimentary” (Niquet, 2006: 3). Beijing offers its training planes ‘K8’, helicopters, light artillery, armored vehicles, military trucks, uniforms, communication equipment, speedboats, air defense batteries... But the Middle Kingdom offers, on the other hand, military training programs in China, or locally, in Africa, resorting for this purpose to Chinese instructors.

Such military cooperation is based around sensitive issues such as organized crime, terrorism, drug trafficking, intelligence, light arms... One should also not forget the growing contribution of the Chinese army to peacekeeping operations (even if, indeed, Beijing is still very hesitant regarding the need to take sides), which take place primarily on African soil. For example, China sent troops to Sudan, to Western Sahara, to the Ivory Coast, to Ethiopia-Eritrea, Liberia and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Conclusion

Africa seems to be the land of opportunities for China. In turn, the African continent has a strong interest in diversifying its partners. In practice, the Middle Kingdom has established economic (in which the energy field is, of course, included) military and cultural synergies with Africa. The Beijing Consensus seems to capture the attention of various political regimes in Africa, sometimes marginalized by Western powers, which catalogue them as ‘rogue states’. For China, on the contrary, this classification makes no sense, since the Chinese are mainly interested in doing business, exploiting energy resources and raw materials available, instead of worrying about the human rights discourse or the issue of democracy. Does all this mean, however, that the Chinese presence is welcomed in the various African countries? This article sought to demonstrate that throughout the entire continent, local people have been expressing some discontent and discomfort relative to the side effects of a partnership in which China does not respect, for example, local trade, by flooding the African markets with poor quality products at relatively affordable prices. There is also a malaise in environmental matters, as Africa seems to also be faced with the same kind of environmental negligence that is felt in China.

It follows from all of this that the future of the Chinese presence in Africa seems to depend not so much on the economic potential of the Sino-African partnership (since, as we have seen, this is extraordinary), but more on the issue of adapting Chinese behaviour and attitude to Africa in environmental terms, of course, but also with regard to greater respect for local populations. And why not rethink Chinese Soft Power, since, as we have seen, several African countries actually like the ideas of the Beijing Consensus, in spite of China being able to significantly further improve its ‘charm strategy’?

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Abstract

This article analyzes the various dimensions, opportunities and challenges of the Chinese presence in Africa, seeking to demonstrate that China's African strategy is a multidimensional strategy, composed of several factors (economic, political, military – in which soft and hard power are also included) that contribute to a harmonious whole, underlining the importance of Africa to China and vice versa.

Resumo

Este artigo analisa as várias dimensões, oportunidades e desafios da presença chinesa em África, procurando demonstrar que a estratégia africana da China é uma estratégia multidimensional, composta por vários fatores (económicos, políticos, militares – nos quais o soft e o hard power também estão incluídos), os quais contribuem para um todo harmonioso, sublinhando a importância de África para a China e vice-versa.

Key words: China-Africa Relations; Economic Issues; Reactions to Chinese Presence

Palavras-chave: Relações Sino-Africanas; Questões Económicas; Reações à Presença Chinesa

Received March 29, 2012

Accepted June 07, 2012