

Is China Africa's new imperialist power?

Will China replace Britain as South Africa's imperialist power?

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Revolutionaries in Anglophone Africa have always seen Britain and France as the dominant imperialist powers on the continent, but other forces are emerging from the shadows to challenge their continued post-colonial dominance — and it's not just the United States.

Southern African anarchist-communists would normally see the former British colony of South Africa as acting as a sub-imperialist power on behalf of the big capitalist powers and its own capitalist ruling class in the region, a sort of regional policeman as it were: if British interests in Swaziland are threatened by the democracy movement, we are sure that South African military might will intervene (as it did against Lesotho in 1998) to shore up the Swazi elite.

But the international scene is changing and today we can chart the rise of the People's Republic of China as one of Africa's most powerful kingmakers, whether backing the genocidal regime in Khartoum, or embarking on large-scale building projects including the new Luanda airport (in exchange for 10,000 barrels of crude oil a day) and the Number One Stadium in Kinshasa, a city that with its giant gold statue of a fat, Mao-like Laurent-Desire Kabila is looking like a city on the Yangtze River instead of the Congo (the DRC's mimicry of the Chinese national flag, before adopting a new flag this year, was too obvious to miss).

STATE CAPITALISM

Unlike the old Soviet Union, China has managed to engineer a successful transition from closed State-capitalism (the Maoist era) towards an export-orientated neo-liberal model. Its rapid economic growth and cheap goods — overseen by the Chinese Communist Party, the CCP — may see the country overtake the US as the largest manufacturing power worldwide by 2010.

This capitalist boom has been built on the back of a brutal suppression of the working class and peasantry. Strikes are illegal, dissidents are murdered, and the top 20% of households earn 42% of total urban incomes while the poorest 20% receive just 6%.

There has been a sharp rise in class struggle, with strikes rising from 8,150 in 1992 to 120,000 in 1999. Last year residents of the village of Huaxi, Zhejiang province, battled the police and local officials in hand-to-hand combat in April and drove them off. In December, hundreds of villagers armed with dynamite and petrol-bombs attacked police in Dongzhou, Guangdong province, after police killed 20 villagers who had protested against land seized to build a power plant. A source close to the CCP central committee revealed last year that some 3-million workers took part in protests last year.

This is a country where the official monthly minimum wage is US\$63 (compare that to US\$45 to US\$55 in rural and urban Vietnam, respectively, levels won by Vietnamese workers last year by embarking on wildcat strikes against their communist bosses), which has probably the worst mining fatality record in the world (the official Xinhua News Agency figure is 5,986 dead in coal mines alone in 2005, resulting in some cases in miners armed with dynamite attacking their bosses), and multinational sweat-shop operations such as Nike and McDonalds setting up operations in special "economic exclusion zones".

While terror and repression fuel China's economy, the country's capitalist ruling class looks outwards for cheap labour, raw materials and fuel supplies. Africa, economically sidelined in the world economic crisis starting in the 1970s, has suddenly become hot property. In 2005, the overall African economy grew at 5% — it's fastest in decades — as demand for African raw materials

shot up, with Chinese demand playing a key role. The 1980s and 1990s saw Africa fall off the investment map, with Africa getting less than 1% of all private direct investment to “third world” countries in 1995. Chinese (and South African) capitalists have increasingly taken the gap, and the trend is reversing.

CHINA IN AFRICA

China clandestinely traded with apartheid South Africa despite its funding of liberation movements in the country and in neighbouring countries like Zimbabwe. Formal relations with South Africa were re-established in 1998.

According to Martin Davies, the director for the Centre for Chinese Studies at Stellenbosch University (and a businessman with interests in Shanghai), last year, trade between China and Africa soared to US\$35-million, with Chinese investment primarily centred on the oil industry, especially in Nigeria, Angola, Sudan and Equatorial Guinea.

Grim conditions in these countries have hardly worried the Chinese dictatorship: whether it is the total lack of democracy in Equatorial Guinea, the state-driven race-war in Sudan, or the fact that the blatant theft of oil wealth by the ruling cliques in Angola and Nigeria has fuelled conflict, with UNITA and the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta, respectively trying to win back a slice of the pie.

So it will come as no surprise that Chinese helicopter gunships have been used against civilians in Darfur, according to human rights activists. China — which maintains an electronic listening post on the Comores — gave Sudan massive military aid between 1996 and 2003, including jet fighter aircraft, shipped tons of arms to Ethiopia and Eritrea prior to the outbreak of their border war in 1998, and has sold jets, military aircraft and radio-jamming equipment (to prevent outside broadcasts being heard inside the country) to the Zimbabwean regime.

SOUTH AFRICA

China has greased its imperialist wheels in Africa by scrapping over US\$1-billion in debt owed by 32 African countries and the SABC reported this year that South Africa’s trade with China is growing at 26% annually.

South Africa is China’s largest trade partner in Africa, with trade growing 400% over the last six years. South Africa supplies iron ore and other raw materials, and receives manufactured goods — and a new trade agreement will see China limit textile exports but strengthen co-operation in areas like nuclear energy. Meanwhile, South Africa’s trade with traditional partners like Britain is shrinking.

However, the importance of relations with China is relatively limited, given the strength and diversity of South African capitalism. On the other hand, Chinese investment looms very large in weak economies like those of Equatorial Guinea. China’s interest in securing direct raw material supplies — for example, oil outside the OPEC cartel — means we can expect these relations to intensify, and African elites to solidify their links with the East Asian power. Africa now provides around 30% of China’s oil imports.

SOLIDARITY OR XENOPHOBIA

But what does all this investment in guns, ore and oil mean? COSATU has reacted with alarm to a deal struck between the South African and Chinese governments, warning that with the country flooded with cheap imported Chinese clothing (a 480% increase since 2003), the already-fragile domestic textile industry (62,000 jobs lost in the same period) could collapse.

COSATU leaders were embarrassed last year when members of their affiliated SA Clothing and Textile Workers' Union demonstrated against the fact that the congress' red T-shirts were made in China. Many mainland Chinese textile operations have relocated to Africa in order to by-pass European and American quotas on Chinese imports, but they have often brought with them brutal working conditions. At the same time, COSATU and its ally, the SACP continue to praise China as a socialist country.

Neither position is correct. COSATU's "Buy South Africa" campaign will do nothing to stop cheap Chinese imports. It promotes anti-Chinese racism and feeds into the poisonous xenophobia that afflicts the local working class. It also suggests that all South Africans, capitalists and workers alike, have a common interest. Nothing is further from the truth: South African capitalists are not the friends of South African workers.

Further, the ANC's GEAR policy promotes free trade, so there is no prospect of the wave of imports subsiding in meaningful terms. COSATU is left with making futile appeals to the morals and patriotism of the South African ruling class — appeals that will achieve nothing. South African capitalists are developing a pact with Chinese capitalists: if these rivals can unite, why can't the working class learn the lesson, and defend Chinese labour?

THE "CORE OF ENTERPRISES"

As we have noted in these pages before, both GEAR and NEPAD aim at attracting more trade and more foreign investment, and China fits both bills. Meanwhile, Intelligence Minister (and ageing Young Communist League politburo member) Ronnie Kasrils enthused in a glossy book *China Through the Third Eye: South African Perspectives* — funded by the China Chamber of Commerce and Industry in SA — that China's building boom, including the controversial Three Dams project on the Yangtze that will displace 1-million people, "is a construction engineers' dream". This is a good thing, it seems: "If China is to remain a sustainable economy, it has to speed the transition from a rural to an urban society, from an agricultural to an industrial economy."

Chief state spin-doctor Joel Netshitenzhe claimed in the same book that "South Africa and China share mutual goals as both countries are committed to ensuring a better life for all their citizens. Both aim to lower the levels of poverty." Given the state-enforced poverty of the Chinese people, one wonders what Netshitenzhe has in mind when he praised the role of the Chinese state propaganda machine for "the rigour and focus with which China uses information to mobilise people around common objectives and a shared vision..."

A chill settles in one's bones when one reads him hailing the "diversity of voices" in the Chinese media, while studiously ignoring state censorship and the complicity of Western search engines such as Yahoo in helping China jail political dissidents.

The view of SACP deputy secretary general and one-man think-tank Jeremy Cronin is even more revealing. The SACP, terrified that the bubble of "real, existing socialism" was washing

down the drain with the restructuring of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in China, sent a delegation there in 2001 to check things out.

Cronin and his delegation were clearly wowed by their CCP hosts: he quotes a 1999 central committee document that “The public-ownership economy, which includes the State-owned economy, is the economic basis of China’s socialist system... China must always rely on and bring into full play the important role of the SOEs to develop the productive forces of the socialist society and realise the country’s industrialisation and modernisation...” China, it seems, is socialist as well as capitalist! What are we to make of such confused thinking?

“To manage SOEs well in general, efforts must be made to establish a leadership system and organisational and managerial systems in them that conform to the law of the market economy and China’s actual situation, to strengthen the building of their leadership, to give play to the Party organisations as the political core of enterprises, and to adhere to the principle of relying on the working class wholeheartedly...” And “rely” they do, for China’s miracle is built “wholeheartedly” on exploitation and terror!

A CHANGING OF THE GUARD?

So, Chinese communism is finally revealed as nothing more than a modernisation programme guided by authoritarian marketing and management gurus who double as Party bosses! And the Party itself is revealed as a clique of commissars that rides on the working class!

Cronin admits that the delegation “did not have sufficient time to gauge the degree to which” the central committee’s stated commitment to workers’ “democratic decision-making” and “status as masters of their own enterprises” — capitalist enterprises steered by the party — but he thought it significant that these cheap words had been put on paper.

Cronin lauds the regime for the “fairly clear socialist agenda [that] shines through...” “There is no reason,” he huffs, “why markets should not exist under socialism” — a liberal interpretation that allows for the coexistence of “the emergent small and medium privately owned service sector”. Where exactly “socialism” “shines” is not clear.

From such mixed economic thinking arises a confused politics, based on industrial and market requirements rather than people’s needs, where in Cronin’s view, wage increases in the public sector, adopted purely to stimulate market demand qualify as “socialist”.

So what we have is an ANC/SACP government that is not only increasingly trading with, but ideologically inclining itself towards, the world’s last large totalitarian state, a state that is so blatantly capitalist and simultaneously anti-labour that Cronin’s skill as a poet fails to gild the brutal reality. The SACP’s state-capitalist thinking has finally manage to find, in the Chinese example, a happy marriage with neo-liberalism.

PROTECTIONISM OR CLASS STRUGGLE

Chinese goods are cheap because Chinese labour is cheap. If COSATU wants to protect local jobs — and show its commitment to the international working class struggle — it should support trade union organising in China, and step up the class struggle at home and in southern Africa. Neo-liberal capitalism thrives on pitting cheap labour in one country against even cheaper labour

in another, in a race to the bottom. The only way out is international solidarity and class struggle, starting with a struggle for an international minimum wage and universal union rights.

China has a proud tradition of class struggle — and this does not mean the CCP and Mao! Back in 1913, anarcho-syndicalists built the first trade unions in Canton, rising to challenge reformist and communist unionism in all the big industrial centres such as Shanghai in the 1920s. Armed anarchist peasant movements controlled huge swathes of territory in Fukien province and in Kirin province, Manchuria, in the 1930s and anarchist guerrillas fought alongside communists in the resistance to Japanese imperialism in the 1940s.

But after the Maoist coup d'état of 1949, China's estimated 10,000 anarchist trade unionist militants were driven underground and Makhnovist-styled guerrillas such as Chu Cha Pei were forced to retreat into the hills in Yunnan province from where they continued to harry the new ruling class headed by Mao and his entourage of warlords and state-capitalists.

As Africa increasingly becomes the back-yard of China's oil-driven imperialism, one has to ask firstly, whether the government will try to mimic the worst aspects of China's enforced civil peace, a development that would prove a serious challenge to our own working class.

ANARCHISM OR MARXISM?

We have no interest on following those leftists who hope for an end to “capitalist restoration” in China: China has been capitalist since Mao took power, and any Chinese revolutionary movement must jettison Marxism and its Maoist variant. Nor can we agree that China is — in fact — “socialist,” despite what SACP leaders may think.

Capitalism is a class system, and a class system means class struggles. Sooner or later China's working class will rediscover its proud fighting tradition and take charge of its own affairs to the exclusion of parasitic Party leaders and capitalists — what is called in Chinese wuzhengfugu gonchan, or common production without government, in a word, anarchist-communism — and bury the CCP.

But until that day, there is a more serious question we have to ask, one with implications beyond our borders: will China replace Britain as South Africa's imperialist power, a changing of the guard, so to speak — leading to South Africa embarking on military expeditions in Africa to protect Chinese capitalist interests? All serious anti-imperialists must consider and plan for the possibility of Africa becoming the future battle-ground between US-backed Western and Chinese expansionist interests, and unite the continent's people in a battle against the oil barons.

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